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## **Faith as the Personal Growth of Selfhood before God: In and through the Three Stages of Kierkegaard's Existential Dialectic**

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**Abstract:** Having recognized that it was intellect that legitimized the age of disintegration in his society in and through the social and religious institutions which promoted homogeneity rather than individuality in passionless reflection, Kierkegaard develops his existential dialectic with its three stages in and through which an ethico-religious individual grows into a faith which is nothing but growing into selfhood in relationship with God. Thus, he saw himself as a corrective force not only to his society but also to any

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society which faces disintegration at any given point of history. In this paper, an attempt is made to see the faith development of an individual in and through the three spheres of the existential dialectic of Kierkegaard.

**Keywords:** Faith as Authentic Selfhood, Existential dialectic, The Aesthetic Stage, The Ethical Stage, The Religious Stage, Teleological Suspension, Faith Development.

## Introduction

Søren Aabye Kierkegaard (1813-1855) saw himself as a corrective force to his society which faced disintegration because of emphasizing the crowd over the individual. Societal and religious institutions of his time cultivated homogeneity rather than individuality. He argued that Hegelianism provided the philosophical foundation for these institutions. Everything was explained rationally and collectively at the cost of the singularity of human existence which was considered irrational. He thought that Hegel had watered down the meaning of human existence by approaching the realities of life through abstractions (Allen, 2007: 188). He recognized that the age of disintegration is not only on the moral front, but it was the intellect that legitimized the disintegration. Hence, Kierkegaard rationally deconstructs the absolute monopoly of reason in the existential realm of an existing individual and restores the authority of faith in the ethico-religious existence. For him, faith is the highest virtue and personal growth of selfhood in relationship with the Absolute in uncertainty, hence it is beyond objective reason. The starting point of Kierkegaard's religious epistemology is that truth is appropriated in the realm of subjectivity. Therefore, the crucial concern of the knower about the truth is the knower's relationship to truth. Since subjective truths cannot be directly communicated, he uses

‘indirect communication’ through his various writings and develops the existential dialectic with its three spheres of existence namely the aesthetic stage, the ethical stage, and the religious stage. Progression from the aesthetic stage to the religious stage is the invitation that Kierkegaard extends to anyone who wants to grow in faith which is growing in individual selfhood before God.

### The Aesthetic Stage

The aesthetic stage is the stage of the lone individual. It points to the personal dimension over the other. It is the first stage in Kierkegaard’s existential

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dialectic which is the level of sensations and feelings. It is a sensuous and fragmentary one. Kierkegaard analyses this stage by the illustration of three characters: Don Juan, Faust, and Ahasuerus, the wandering Jew. The aesthetic enjoys all forms of pleasure, even he can appreciate Christ as a tragic hero in an aesthetic sense. He focuses on what interests him at that moment, enjoying possibilities, not actualities.

For Kierkegaard, the first characteristic of aesthetic life is immediacy. “The aesthetical in man is that by which he is immediately what he is” (Kierkegaard, 1987: 182). The aesthetic mode of existence is the life of pure ‘immediacy.’ According to Kierkegaard, the falsest and the truest things are equally true in immediacy. The question of what is true and what is false does not arise in immediacy, as it belongs to the realm above immediacy. Immediacy is not yet mediated through reflection. The man of the aesthetic sphere of existence represents a life without reflective or moral principle having only pleasure as his goal. It is the life of immediate satisfaction and gratification. According to the aesthetic man, there is no good and evil, but there is only satisfaction or

dissatisfaction, fulfilment or frustration, pleasure and pain, happiness and suffering, and ecstasy and despair (Bhadra, 2004: 189). The example of this type is captured by Kierkegaard in his characteristic portrayal of Don Juan of Bryon. Don Juan seduces many women and is interested in sensual faithless love with them for the moment and he repeats it endlessly. For him, every woman is simply a woman in the abstract. There may be a sensual difference between them, but not a personal difference. His principle is satisfaction with the immediate. Whatever is arbitrarily chosen is an object of immediate concern. By choosing something arbitrarily, one transforms something accidental into absolute.

The aesthetics' life may be unreflective, but it need not be unintelligent. It is because, one may find enjoyment even in music, or poetry or philosophy if one enjoys these things purely for their immediate satisfaction. But there may be a pleasure, but there may be also suffering and pain frustration and finally boredom. The more frustrating thing for the aesthete is boredom or the recognition of the life of the immediate. Kierkegaard gives an analysis of how the aesthetic stage comes to termination. Now, the finite is mistrusted as the source of happiness and reflection is intensified. The aesthetic stage slowly progresses from the sensual immediacy. The aesthetic may reflect on his life and the significance of his actions. The immediate loses its value because of reflection and the life of enjoyment for the moment is seen as mere emptiness. It is a series of repetitions that are ultimately meaningless. An aesthetic dialect begins because of reflection. The aesthetic becomes sceptical about all gratifications and desires. To escape from this meaninglessness of life in the face of despair, the aesthetic now stops all forms of self-appraisal and to lose oneself in the crowd and the humdrum of

everyday collective life (Kierkegaard, 1985:113). By doing that, he wants to escape the despair. We are faced with the question at this juncture whether the ethical stage gives one meaning which the aesthetic stage cannot provide.

### **The Ethical Stage**

The ethical sphere is the stage of the individual in society. It involves duty over the personal. Kierkegaard's existential analysis of the ethical sphere is not a formulation of systematic ethics. In systematic ethics, the fundamental features of the ethical life are supposed to the employment of universal rational principles. When Socrates said that the unexamined life is not worth living, his idea was that one can live a good life only when one knows what "good" and "evil," and these "good" and "evil" are not relative, but they are absolutes that can be found by a process of questioning and reasoning. Thus, for Socrates, morality and knowledge are bound together, and an unquestioning life is one of ignorance without morality (Bhadra, 2004: 116). Plato's forms which are eternal and absolute universals are known by the mind through thought. Even ideas, such as beauty, truth, and justice, had forms. For Plato. If particulars are to have meaning, there must be universals. Hence the idea of connecting rationality and universal morality is prevalent in the Western philosophical enquiry which culminated in Hegel when he applied the rational principles which swallow the individuals to raise them to universals collectively accepted by the society.

According to Kierkegaard, the difference between the aesthetic and the ethical is this: "If an individual throws himself away to grasp something great, he is aesthetically inspired; if he gives up everything to save himself, he is ethically inspired. The ethical life is the life of man in society as part of it. Such a man lives according to the norms of society and his self-interest is subsumed under moral duty. The characteristics of ethical life

are universality, rationality, and duty. According to Kierkegaard, the ethical sphere consists of living for the welfare of a man in a community. Personal interests are always to be considered lower concerning the duties laid by moral laws. The basic feature of ethical life is universality. Kierkegaard does not deny that ethical life has value for the community. Such a life does not imply anti-individuality or unquestioning obedience to society. Kierkegaard agrees with Kant that moral life is autonomous. But Kierkegaard denies that reason can give us justification of ultimate moral principles. He also denies Kant that the principles of morality can be autonomously derived by every rational creature. Kierkegaard's ethical sphere can accept categorical imperative as ultimate values. But the acceptance of these moral principles as absolutes are not ultimately justifiable (Bhadra, 2004:182). Kierkegaard also does not provide the origin of these principles. Therefore, for him, the highest truth is attained not in the ethical stage, but in the religious stage through the leap of faith from the ethical to the religious sphere of the existential dialectic.

### The Religious Stage

The final stage is the religious which is the stage of the individual before God. This stage involves God over the personal. Doing God's will is the guiding force of entering into the religious stage. In *Fear and Trembling*, the theme of religious transcending the ethical is captured through the Biblical story of Abraham sacrificing Isaac. Thus, one matures from the perspective of a lifetime duty to an eternal perspective. The man who initially respects the moral law begins to respect the moral lawgiver. This progression to the religious stage is a progression from the objective to the subjective, from the propositional to the

personal, from the rational to the relational. It is a movement from essential truth to existential truth, which is a passionate, inner commitment to something that is objectively and theoretically indeterminate. Existential truth is the highest truth attainable by an existing individual. In this 'teleological suspension of the ethical' Abraham's faith

One arrives at the religious stage only by a "leap of faith" and not by merging or collapsing one into another. Because the stages are separated by despair and the chasm cannot be bridged.

transcended his reason. (Kierkegaard, 1985: 55) His existential decision superseded his ethical obligation. Kierkegaard understands that truth according to his definition is equivalent to faith.

One arrives at this stage only by a "leap of faith" and not by merging or collapsing one into another. Because the stages are separated by despair and the chasm cannot be bridged. However, Kierkegaard does not mean that every individual begins as an aesthete and climbs up the ladder leaving the previous stage behind. They are better understood as spheres of existence where in the journey one sphere overlaps onto another, although overlapping cannot happen without the damage it entails. The different stages represent different perspectives or worldviews and demand a total commitment by the individual. Therefore, for Kierkegaard "The point is continually to keep the spheres sharply separate from each other by means of the qualitative dialectic, lest everything become one" (Bhadra, 2004: 185). Each stage is so different from the other, that although we can think of them together, we could never live them together.

Through the spheres of existence, Kierkegaard makes us clear in the progression of his thoughts that the facts of our being

can be understood through objective truth, whereas our way of being can be understood only within the context of unfolding process of our life in terms of our choices and decisions. It is also impossible to experience the existing individual objectively because the existing individual is the source of subjective truths and he or she cannot separate himself from himself and observe his existing from a vantage point that is outside of him.

### **The Teleological Suspension of the Ethical**

In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard focused on the impossibility of understanding Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his own son Isaac. Is Abraham, the father of Faith, a murderer or God's servant? "Rational or ethical expression for what Abraham did was that "He would murder Isaac." The religious expression is that "He would sacrifice Isaac." But precisely in this contradiction consists of the dread which makes a man sleepless, and yet Abraham is not what he is without this dread. The justification is purely religious or existential, not ethical, or rational. The contrasting categories are, the Universal (Social morality), and the Particular (The existing individual who must make choices). The universal cannot be in a direct, personal relationship with God, only the individuals can. The existing individual is the position Abraham occupies by his choice to sacrifice Isaac. Thus, Abraham is the Knight of faith and not a "tragic hero" who makes sacrifices in the service of societal norms. His willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac represents "a teleological suspension of the ethical" rather than an outright abandonment of it (Kierkegaard, 1987: 55). It is a leap of faith which was the movement towards the third stage.



## Kierkegaardian Dialectic in the Faith Development in Mary, Martha and Lazarus in John 11

In the episode of Jesus raising Lazarus, we are presented with the pattern in faith development which can be placed in parallel with the three stages of Kierkegaardian dialectic. When Mary saw Jesus, she had just surrendered herself at the feet of him in loving devotion. Mary is led in her faith by emotions and gestures through loving devotion. (Jn 11:28-37). We also see Mary sitting at the feet of the Lord in loving devotion, listening to His message. This can be equivalent to *Bhakti Maarga* in our Indian tradition. It is to reach God through loving devotion. Faithful of this sort will be busy with reciting prayers, saying novenas, and involving themselves with liturgical and Church activities. These practices are certainly good, but not enough. One can place such faith in the aesthetic stage of Kierkegaardian dialectic. We should realize that Mary's faith is another form of faith that is also yet to develop. It is understood in the Resurrection narratives in which Jesus tells Mary, "Mary! Do not cling on to me" and moves her beyond emotion to the mission.

Secondly, Martha believes in the precepts of faith rather than the person of Jesus. She did not believe that Jesus could raise Lazarus from the dead, rather she believes in the concept of the Resurrection (Jn 11:17-27). Martha is led in her faith traditionally, demonstrating cognitive, verbal limitation of faith through theological terminology. This can be equivalent to *Jnana Maarga* in our Indian tradition. That is to attain salvation through knowledge about God. This type of persons believes only if they understand some faith claims. People of this sort will be kept busy themselves with the study of the Scriptures, indulging in theological discussions about God, and with the norms of faith. These practices are good, but not sufficient. Martha's faith through her reason is one form of

faith, which is yet to develop. Knowledge about God alone is not enough to grow in our faith. One can thus say that Martha is in the ethical stage of Kierkegaardian dialectic. But the faith here is yet to grow.

Unlike Martha and Mary, Lazarus is dead to his old life and has received a new life in Christ. (Jn 11:38-44). He is in the religious stage as Lazarus is led in his faith through a simple action, through the life itself that is born out of death. Thus, Martha remains a busy servant and Mary stays at Jesus' feet, but in the end, it is Lazarus who reclines with Jesus at the table. *"Martha and Mary gave a dinner for Jesus. Martha served, and the (raised) Lazarus was*

Lazarus is presented as a token of new life that Jesus, who was dead and raised, will give to all who believe in him. The faith model of Lazarus with new life teaches that one who turns away from his old sinful life and receive the new life given by Jesus will enjoy the everlasting life here and now on this earth.

*one of those at the table with Him (Jn 12:2)."* He fulfils the prophecy made in Jn 6:54 that *"He who eats the bread of and with Jesus will live forever."* Thus, one who is dead to an old sinful life and is led to celebrate new life given by Jesus is "raised up and will live forever." Lazarus is presented as a token of new life that Jesus, who was dead and raised, will give to all who believe in him. The faith model of Lazarus with new life teaches that one who turns away from his old sinful life and receives the new life given by Jesus will enjoy the everlasting life here and now on this earth. Thus, on the one hand, Lazarus' faith model promises life to the faithful, even if she or he dies. On the other hand, it promises non-death to those who live in

faith. Resurrection is conceived as the experience of coming to faith in Jesus (Jn 5:24) and is a present reality in Christ (Jn 11:25-26). Thus, one attains the fullness of faith in the religious stage of Kierkegaardian dialectic.

## Conclusion

The unholy nexus of politics, religion, business, and media, not only in India but in most part of the world, reduced people into the crowd which blindly follow the propaganda of the wrong ideologies. This is indeed an age of disintegration. Today, knowledge itself has become the tool of the oppressors. Amidst all these situations, growing as an individual who stands away from the madding crowd by appropriating the truth in one's subjectivity and passionately committing oneself for humanity is the need of the hour and the way of empowering. Truth or faith is not a static being, but a process of dynamic becoming. People like Socrates, Diogenes, Jesus, St. Paul, St. Ignatius of Loyola, Mother Teresa and Stan Swamy and others have appropriated truth with passionate inwardness in their lives as individuals and committed to that truth at any cost in their dynamic becoming. They showed us the way of being in and through their lives. They have grown through their faith development in authentic selfhood before God. Kierkegaard's individual is the example of not the self-made by others but the self that is becoming in passionate inwardness in relationship with the absolute. Thus, the development of faith attains its highest truth in the religious stage in which we grow in selfhood before God as an individual committed to the truth which is passionately appropriated.

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