

Overview of Kierkegaard's Thought

"Only the individual can truthfully will the Good, and even though the penitent toils heavily not merely in the eleventh hour of confession, with all the questions standing as accusations of himself, but also in their daily use in repentance, yet the way is the right one. For he is in touch with the demand that calls for purity of heart by willing only one thing." -- *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing*

Personal not Systematic

Kierkegaard rejects any attempt at a systemic understanding of life because only God may truly know the system. We are finite and limited; indeed, to acknowledge our limitations and dependence upon God is the essence of human fulfillment and worship. Attempting to build systems is arrogant, even idolatrous, so it is better to try to communicate truth indirectly in order that the person who receives the truth will not only understand the truth objectively, that is conceptually, but also subjectively, that is personally. A personal understanding (or "double reflection") is one that truly changes the person's desires and habits of being.

The loss of faith in the West, then, is not due to secularization per se but the loss of passionate, ethical imaginations. People have forgotten what it means to be fully human because they have stunted understandings, which they believe are systematic and autonomous. Such persons need the condition of faith to begin to truly encounter the truth.

Developmental and Free

Human life is open-ended. God has given us freedom to develop and become what we are created to be, but that freedom can be used to resist that calling. The human self has essential existence, but it is also free to cultivate the right desires and loves and to expand to its full potential. The human self, then, is both given and received yet also something to be realized and achieved. Because we are limited, we cannot ever exhaustively know all there is to know about any topic, so we must eventually choose and act on a sufficient understanding which can never be complete.

The human self is only a self because it is in relationship with God and with others. Important aspects of the human self exist because it is formed and lived with others, yet at the same time, because the self is ultimately in relationship to God, human beings can step outside their aesthetic and ethical context to follow God more fully--to "stand before God" may mean "to stand alone". Our identities are more than our common humanity.

Truth is "subjectivity," yet subjectivity is also "untruth." It is subjectivity because truth must be possessed and lived to truly be known. More specifically, one cannot know the truth unless one lives it because in the human finite condition doubts can always be raised. Learning the truth always happens while one lives out the truth. At the same time, subjectivity is untruth because human beings possess the capacity to deceive themselves continually.

Kierkegaard holds that there are three broad stages or spheres of human life: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious, and that these are bridged by the ironic and the humorous.

Stage One (Sphere One): Aesthetic (Most of Us)

Aesthetic life is defined in numerous different ways in Kierkegaard, including a life defined by intellectual enjoyment, by sensuous desire, and by an inclination to interpret oneself as if one were "on stage." There are many degrees of this aesthetic existence. At bottom, one might see the purely unreflective lifestyle. At the top, we might find those lives which are lived in a reflective, independent, critical and socially apathetic way. But many interpreters of Kierkegaard believe that most people live in the least reflective sort of aesthetic stage, their lives and activities guided by everyday tasks and concerns. Fewer aesthetically-guided people are the reflective sort. Even suffering can be cultivated aesthetically as a drama of tragic yet self-sufficient and heroic self-knowledge. Whether such people know it or not, their lives are ones of complete despair. They are bored by a pursuit of the immediate and arbitrary, and their lives are spent trying to avoid the intrusion of the ethical into their otherwise sensual existence.

Interlude: The Ironic: The ironic person from a superior position sees the problems in the aesthetic life and its relativisms, and recognizes the need for an ethical existence.

Stage Two (Sphere Two): Ethical (Some of Us)

The second level of existence is the ethical. This is where an individual begins to take on a true direction in life, becoming aware of and personally responsible for good and evil and forming a commitment to oneself and others. One's actions at this level of existence have a consistency and coherence that they lacked in the previous sphere of existence. For many readers of Kierkegaard, the ethical is central. It calls each individual to take account of their lives and to scrutinize their actions in terms of absolute responsibility. The ethical can be understood to truly absorb the best of the aesthetic existence because it creates the conditions in which enjoyment can be extended in relationships of long-term commitment (e.g. marriage). Yet at the same time, the ethical sphere is limited in its belief in its sufficiency and its reliance upon itself. The ethical person wrongly believes that the ethical life is easily accomplished. Sin and repentance, then, are problematic for the ethical stage.

Interlude: The Humorous: The humorous person cancels the pain of ethical hypocrisy and finitude by sharing laughter with others at our common state.

Stage Three (Sphere Three): Religious (Only a Few of Us)

The ethical and the religious are intimately connected: a person can be ethically serious without being religious, but the religious stage includes the ethical. Whereas living in the ethical sphere involves a commitment to some ethical absolute, *living in the religious sphere involves a commitment and relation to God*. The Kierkegaardian pseudonyms who speak of stage theory consider religion to be the highest stage in human existence. In one discussion of religious life, one of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms, Johannes Climacus, distinguishes two types within this stage, which have been called *Religiousness A* and *Religiousness B*.

A. One type is symbolized by the Greek philosopher Socrates, whose passionate pursuit of the truth and individual conscience came into conflict with his society. The ethical is discovered to be in need of “the highest good.” This is a condition of recognizing the divine immanently in the world.

B. Another type of religiousness is one characterized by the realization that the individual is sinful and is the source of untruth. In time, through revelation and in direct relationship with the paradox that is Jesus, the individual begins to see that his or her eternal salvation rests on a paradox—God, the transcendent, coming into time in human form to redeem human beings.

For Kierkegaard, the very notion of this occurring was scandalous to human reason—indeed, it must be, and if it is not then one does not truly understand the Incarnation nor the meaning of human sinfulness. For Kierkegaard, the impulse towards an awareness of a transcendent power in the universe is what religion is. Religion has a social and an individual (not just personal) dimension. But it begins with the individual and his or her awareness of sinfulness.

(The section of the three stages is adapted from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philosophy_of_S%C3%B8ren_Kierkegaard#Three_stages_of_life, though I add considerably to it at points.)

Negative Existence and Despair

Because human existence is incomplete and finite, there is always a short-fall between our temporal, actual lives and our eternal, ideal goal. If the religious stage begins with seeking the highest good, it must continue by facing the crevice between ourselves and that good. The one who resigns his or herself (the “initial moment”) to finite goods rather than deny them for the highest good does not exist yet in right relation to God.

So the person must undergo suffering (the “essential moment”) into order to pursue the highest good in God. We must continually die to ourselves and our self-sufficiency. To suffer in this sense is to surrender one’s own self-will to the will of God and God’s grace. It is only here in the recognition that one can do nothing that one may finally do something. Our guilt, then, is the “decisive moment” in acknowledging our failure before God, that nothing can be done by ourselves to repair that failure, and that nothing can be done to achieve eternal happiness without grace. Faith is a gift from God ultimately, not something we can muster up ourselves.

This is why most of humanity is secretly in despair. Those who try to live infinitely through their imaginations despair (knowingly or unknowingly) at their finitude, while those who accept their finitude through conformity despair in a condition of fatalism. Some may despair without much self-reflection, while others may despair in a true state of pessimism. Some, even act from a “despair of defiance,” refusing to become the selves God had created them to be. Such persons are “shut up” within themselves. Only in God can our finitude and our need for infinity be brought together paradoxically but truly in the person of Christ and the love of God in Christ. And only in Christ may one come to love

unselfishly one's neighbor. The imitation of Christ for the Christian is a pattern of radical follow-ship, never simple admiration.

"Father in Heaven! What is a man without You! What is all that he knows, vast accumulation though it be, but a chipped fragment if he does not know You! What is all his striving, could it even encompass the world, but a half-finished work if he does not know You: You the One, who art one thing and who art all! So may You give to the intellect, wisdom to comprehend that one thing; to the heart, sincerity to receive this understanding; to the will, purity that wills only one thing. In prosperity may You grant perseverance to will one thing; amid distractions, collectedness to will one thing; in suffering, patience to will one thing. Oh, You that give both the beginning and the completion, may You early, at the dawn of day, give to the young man the resolution to will one thing. As the day wanes, may You give to the old man a renewed remembrance of his first resolution, that the first may be like the last, the last like the first, in possession of a life that has willed only one thing. Alas, but this has indeed not come to pass. Something has come in between. The separation of sin lies in between. Each day, and day after day something is being placed in between: delay, blockage, interruption, delusion, corruption. So in this time of repentance may You give the courage once again to will one thing. True, it is an interruption of our daily tasks; we do lay down our work as though it were a day of rest, when the penitent (and *it* is only in a time of repentance that the heavy-laden worker may be quiet in the confession of sin) is alone before You in self-accusation. This is indeed an interruption. But it is an interruption that searches back into its very beginnings that it might bind up anew that which sin has separated, that in its grief it might atone for lost time, that in its anxiety it might bring to completion that which lies before it. Oh, You that gives both the beginning and the completion, give You victory in the day of need so that what neither a man's burning wish nor his determined resolution may attain to, may be granted unto him in the sorrowing of repentance: to will only one thing."