UNIT 10: KIERKEGAARD: THREE STAGES OF LIFE

UNIT STRUCTURE

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10.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- explain Kierkegaard's notion of Three Stages of Life
- discuss the conceptions of aesthetic stage, ethical stage and religious stage.
- explain the differences among the three stages.

10.2 INTRODUCTION

Kierkegaard was crowned as the 'father' of existentialism. He was primarily concerned with individual human existence. The term existence, according to Kierkegaard, is reserved for those individuals who exists individually through their values and their thoughts. The individual, Kierkegaard stated, is not just an organism but the subject, meaning one who sees things from within, as a conscious self, from his own inner perspective. Therefore, one cannot explain the individual from the side of reason or body. The self, according to Kierkegaard, is always in the process of becoming.

An individual always tries to find the meaning of his existence by getting immersed in the crowd. Kierkegaard opined that this is not the correct way. For him, the individual only by relating to God can derive the true meaning of his existence. Anxiety keeps on pervading the life of an individual which is brought about by his awareness of the fact that his existential self is deeply alienated from his essential self. The individual cannot overcome his anxiety until he actualizes his essential self in God. The individual then tries to recover his essential self and this urge come from here on, the 'process of becoming' of the individual starts.

10.3: THE THREE STAGES OF LIFE

The 'process of becoming' of the individual can be traced through the three stages or spheres of existence or 'stages on life's way', or 'existential categories' or 'modes of existing', according to Kierkegaard. The three stages are aesthetic stage, that is, the stage of immediacy; the second stage is the ethical stage, which is the stage of requirement and the last is the religious stage, that is, the stage of fulfillment. Through the three stages Kierkegaard tried to state the fundamental choices which are confronted by the individual in his search for a more developed self-possession. The Stages of life, was presented by Kierkegaard in a very compassionate and imaginative manner in his book '*Either/Or'.*

Each sphere or stage is arranged in a hierarchical manner. As the individual in his consciousness continues to develop then the progression from the aesthetic to the ethical and lastly to the religious stage takes place. The development through the different stages of existence however does not occur automatically since it has a spiritual character. Therefore a conscious choice by the individual is required for the development. The individual can spend his entire life in these self-contained spheres.

Kierkegaard regarded the spheres of existence not as absolute and rigid formula but as the most flexible means for the interpretation of experience. For him, the transition of the individual from one stage to

another takes place by a 'leap' or free decision. The transition to another sphere must be chosen inspite of the inadequacy of any sphere. However, he never argued that the movement from one stage to another can be systematically demonstrated or that, it is a necessary step. But the criticisms he put forward for the aesthetic stage, urges one to adopt the next mode and abandon the aesthetic stage.

The three spheres of existence are not compatible with one another but sometimes the two spheres, that is, the ethical and the religious stage are treated by him, as single system, only to be contrasted with the aesthetic stage. In his writings, the religious sphere is considered as the highest sphere even though there is no compromise or transition between the spheres of existence.

According to Kierkegaard, all the spheres are equally unjustified and so which sphere of existence has been chosen by the individual, is not the important matter. The main point is that the individual by exerting his freedom and by virtue of his choosing has proven himself that he is an individual. For choice, the spheres are always presented as valid or invalid possibilities. For this reason, Kierkegaard, was not able to show preference among them. He always remained neutral and employed pseudonymous characters like Judge Wilhelm and Johannes, the Seducer in his book ***Either/Or*** to portray the alternatives. They through their dialogues not only exposed the values and problems of the ethical and the aesthetic sphere but also the virtues of both of the spheres. However which one is to be chosen was not suggested by them.

Kierkegaard stated that due to inadequacy there is actual progression from one stage to another, which ends with the religious sphere. The religious sphere is the right way of life because according to him the previous stages are inadequate and both lead to despair. This he stated in his books ***Philosophical Fragments, Concluding Unscientific Postscript and Sickness Unto Death.***

10.4 AESTHETIC STAGE/ AESTHETIC MODE OF EXISTENCE

Aesthetic stage is the most delicate and least stable of all forms of existence. This stage is occupied by majority of people. The main characteristics of this stage is pleasure which remains within the realm of unreality and dream. In this stage, the person lives the character of automation and behaves according to his impulses and emotions. The aesthetic man leads a life of luxury or hedonism. According to Kierkegaard, this stage does not provide the individual with any stable sense of identity and it estranges humans from selfhood.

The desire to enjoy various varieties of pleasure is the main motive of the aesthetic person. For him everything including duty is submissive to pleasure. In the aesthetic stage, everything becomes play, enjoyment or delusion. The aesthetic person detaches himself from moral struggle and indulges only in the search of beauty.

The aesthetic stage is a dead- end road. It deprives life of all meaning and leads only to boredom and disgust. The aesthetic man is self-centered, selfish and despairing. He is only in the quest for more pleasures to escape from despair. He tries to attain the illusory life of uninterrupted pleasure.

At the end, the aesthetic stage of existence ultimately becomes boring, meaningless and empty by the repetitive forms of sensual gratification. The aesthetic stage thus detoriates to a life of meaningless despair. This acknowledgement leads to the realization that his inner spirit yearns for a more meaningful existence and his life will become intolerable, if this spiritual need is being repressed. For such individual, Kierkegaard suggested the ethical way of life. He also stated that, the transition from the aesthetic stage to the ethical stage is to be achieved by making a decision, by a commitment or by an act of will.

10.5: ETHICAL STAGE/ ETHICAL STAGE OF EXISTENCE

The ethical stage is the second level of existence. Kierkegaard described this stage as the stage of choosing oneself. The ethical man, in this stage, is required to take an active role not only in shaping his self but also in the way he lives. The ethical stage of existence is based on a set of rules that are rational and consistent. Therefore man in this stage is more rational. He recognizes and accepts the rules of conduct that are formulated by reason as these are established for the good of the society.

Kierkegaard to exemplify the ethical person used the pseudonymous character 'Judge Wilhelm'. He stated that, there are many things that are missing in the aesthetic sphere of existence. It is the ethical life, which provides the individual with that which the aesthetic sphere failed to supply. He advocates the life in which the individual chooses his actions himself unlike the aesthetic person, who relies on the worldly events, external things and circumstances to get stimulated.

Universality or rationality is the most important feature of the ethical stage. It also the essential condition for a set of principles to be regarded as the ethical principles that is applicable to all without any partiality.

For the ethicist, transforming himself into the universal individual is his main task. He sets these tasks himself. The ethicist possess the beautiful qualities like good manners, decency etc. the ethical man believes that to live an ideal life adherence to the laws of social morality is required. He realizes that for a meaningful existence only satisfaction of the sensual pleasures is not enough. Thereby he tries to embody the universal values in his existence.

Reflection and self-assessment is the characteristics of the ethical stage. The ethical person can evaluate the meaningfulness of his life through reflection. The conscious and principled choice is the sign of

the ethical stage person and their actions have importance with regard to their agreement with the rules of morality.

The ethical stage of existence however comes to an end by the uncertainty of existence, as it fails to validate one's personal existence and experience also lacks personal meaning. The ethical task of expressing himself in the universal, which is, in order to become universal, stripping himself of his individuality, is the main predicament which is faced by the ethical person. The reason behind this is that, by maintaining his individuality, he becomes guilty of deviating from the universal and thereby he sins; again by not maintaining his individuality also he sins, for not revealing what he is. Therefore, he cannot escape guilt, whether he maintains individuality or not, does not matter. Guilt, for Kierkegaard, does not mean an unpleasant hangover that comes after doing some wrong acts; rather it means that which itself insinuates itself at a much deeper level of experience.

In the ethical approach to life, a man is faced with another problem. The problem of performing his duties whatever may be the circumstances because he himself by being the member of the social milieu and by making commitments is bound to perform his tasks. However while performing his duties; the ethical person is faced with the conflicting situations like whether to follow his conscience or to get tempted by the superficial compromises, whether to perform his duty towards the society or towards his own individual self and so on. As a result of all these, the ethical man then finally comes to realize that he is not capable of performing his duties and to fulfill the moral laws. There are things which are beyond his control and which he cannot escape. The ethical man then violates the law; the great ethical universal deliberately and consequently becomes aware of his guilt. The shadow of guilt becomes darker and it keeps on spreading, making it impossible for him to remove the dread of guilt or to surpass it. The ethical person then starts to feel that only God can help him in this situation. According to Kierkegaard, guilt then becomes the dialectic element and a new 'either/or' is placed before the ethical man. Now it becomes his choice,

whether to be at the present stage fulfilling his moral laws and duties or to move to the next sphere of existence—the religious sphere, on realizing his limitations and being aware of estrangement from God, to whom he belongs. The ethical individual, then by an act of commitment, by a 'leap of faith' arrives at the religious sphere of existence. This leap, as it is without any convincing arguments and without any assurance for objective knowledge, is for Kierkegaard, leap into the unknown without knowing where one is 'leaping'.

10.6: RELIGIOUS STAGE / RELIGIOUS SPHERE OF EXISTENCE

Kierkegaard favored the religious stage as his chosen mode of existence. In his book '*Point Of View Of My Work As An Author'* he stated that, his main purpose is to arouse the religious view of his life in his readers.

In the religious sphere, the individual stands in relationship to God which is unique and subjective experience. God cannot be pursued objectively and so the relation between God and man cannot be explained objectively, conceptually or rationally.

The religious sphere of existence is regarded by Kierkegaard, as the highest and the most complete mode of existence. He called it the 'dialectic of life'. According to him, there are two types of religious life. The first one is 'Religion A'. It is natural, immanent religiousness or a kind of general religiousness in which the individual by wholly relying upon his own immanent idea of God makes an effort to relate to God and also solve his problem of guilt.

The second one is 'Religion B', the religion of transcendence, that is, the Christian religion. Religion B accepts that God, for the purpose of establishing a relation with man incarnated as human being—Jesus Christ. For accepting 'Religion B' which is based upon revelation, faith beyond reason is required. The individual is assured of his personal relation to God only by an act of faith.

Religion A, according to Kierkegaard, is the religion of the common man. It involves performing some weird activities and rituals and also believing supernatural powers, ghosts etc. it fails to bring a new man into existence because by misunderstanding the nature of existence and by completely ignoring the necessity for self-engagement it had not only lost the way to authentic existence but also falsified the concepts of man and God.

Therefore Religion A with a false hope not only weakened the individual but also failed to fulfill its claim of taking the individual to a wider range of living. The individual then moves forward to Religion B. It is only faith through which the individual can enter the world of God, totally leaving the world of reason.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1: Who is regarded as the father of existentialism?

Q2: The self is, according to Kierkegaard, always in the ————————?

Q3: What is the name of the first stage?

Q4: Man in the ethical stage is more ————————?

Q5: Religious stage is regarded as the highest stage. (True/False)



10.7 LET US SUM UP

- The three spheres of existence is the most influential doctrine of Kierkegaard. The individual, according to him, can exist in any of the three spheres. However, it is only because of experience of guilt and despair that the individual becomes aware of the qualitative differences between the three spheres. This awareness leads him to think that the other mode of existence is far more authentic than his present mode.