



EXISTENTIAL WELLNESS AND GROWTH

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ABSTRACT: In this paper I would re-open and revisit some of the intricate problems regarding how a person can lead a life that is spirited, intuitive, inspirational, and permeated with wellness; with special emphasis on Kierkegaard's assertion that truth when connected with life becomes a great source of deepest fulfillment and wellness. I would argue for the striking thesis of Kierkegaard that truth is something which must be lived and each individual must committedly respond to the Spirit at a personal and subjective level while making life-style choice for wellness and continual growth. Kierkegaard envisions that the life of Spirit; the religious stage; is the sole way to attain intuitive, inspirational, creative and holistic wellness and growth. Kierkegaard assumes a sharp and clear line between the ethical and religious sphere creating an apparent tension. The religious sphere, interpreters may claim to be a condensed abstract of a hermitic lifestage. I shall reevaluate the valuable assets and riches of the religious sphere and its major philosophical importance from a broader perspective of Kierkegaard's colossal edifice of religious stage.

KEYWORDS: Aesthetic, Ethical, Religious,

INTRODUCTION

KIERKEGAARD AS A PERSON AND THINKER

The Danish philosopher Søren Aabye Kierkegaard (1813-1855) does not need any introduction as he is well and widely known as the fountainhead of contemporary existentialism. Needless to say that by being the premier philosopher in the existential tradition his philosophical influence stretched further than the borders of Germany and affected the philosophy of existentialism in France as well. Although he wrote on many topics he made his chief contribution in existentialism. Since he studied theology, one may find in his thought a faint and subdued glimmer of theology too. As he also studied literature and philosophy his works are poetic, artistic and imaginative in orientation. In 1838, when the Dane experienced a religious enlightenment, he discovered great joy and solace in a deeply religious life, which seems to have also influenced his thought. More than any other



philosopher, Kierkegaard has been attached with plenty of epithets. Scholars have copiously bestowed sublime eulogies on him. He is known as Father of Existentialism, The Poet of Religion, The Father of Depth Psychology, The Melancholy Dane, The Christian Mystic, The Philosopher of Faith, and The Saint-Philosopher. In my own limited capacity, I strongly feel that the epithet Philosopher of Life-View can also be ascribed to Soren. As Kierkegaard is simultaneously a philosopher, a psychologist, a litterateur, and a deeply religious person his thought seems to be suffused with philosophy, psychology, religiousness, and literary technicalities at the same time. Thus it appears that his thought is complex and unsystematic. I would rather say that his style of presentation is unique. His works would make real sense and meaning when one tries to view his entire corpus holistically rather than fragmentarily. One may approach his thought in one's own way as there could be several possible ways to philosophize his thought. Yet, one must exercise care and caution that simply for the sake of novelty one must not do injustice to the spirit of his thought.

The Dane is widely acclaimed for writing pseudonymously by applying various pseudonyms such as Johannes de Silentio (Silent John), Johannes Climacus (John the Climber), VigiliusHaufniensis (Watchman of the Harbor), Judge William, Constantine Constantius, Anti-Climacus, and so forth. Pseudonymity was Kierkegaard's elemental style while writing. This peculiar mannerism gave Kierkegaard enough delight to manoeuvre his thought with ease. By his own admission pseudonymity was adopted by Kierkegaard because he took great delight in mystifying people; since his childhood. Subsequently, it became almost a settled habit for him. Alastair Hannay, an apt and judicious reader, scholar, and translator of Kierkegaard, remarks that pseudonymity "scrambles the author-reader link in a way that allows writings to enjoy a genuinely independent existence, letting them become considerations in the mind of the reader, to do there whatever work they have it *in themselves* to do."¹

Though Kierkegaard hailed from quite an affluent background, yet he led a comfortless and serious life. His life was permeated with intense sufferings. Melancholy was the only zing of his life in which he found solace. His thought seriously tackles life-related questions: How shall I live my life? , What kind of life is worth living- the aesthetic, the ethical, or the religious? , What is faith? etc. Indeed, Kierkegaard himself struggled to find meaning in his own life. In the *Journal* Kierkegaard says that there is something missing in his life and there



is a need to understand the purpose of his life. This implied as he himself says that he must find a truth for himself for which he could live and die. He further says that it was the truth which he lacked and for which his soul thirsts after as the African desert thirsts for water. Truly, Kierkegaard strove to live an authentic life amidst predicament of life.

QUEST FOR INNER TRUTH: EMBARKING ON WELLNESS

Kierkegaardendeavoured to discover the inner truth, which was objectively uncertain, and it was this inner truth about which he says: *“An objective uncertainty held fast in an appropriation- process of the most passionate inwardness is the truth, the highest truth attainable for an existing individual.”*²

Truth is to be lived, therefore, according to Kierkegaard religion would lose all its deep significance if it is not lived and appropriated by an individual. According to Kierkegaard it is of no use, if an individual comes in front of truth but never recognizes it or never makes it the deepest root of his existence.

Kierkegaard affirms that when one lives the truth one becomes divine. Theorizing about truth is futile. Truth is not for the public display of others. Truth is something in which one must live. Speculation and deliberation on truth does not enrich an individual's life. Theoretic on truth is frivolous. Truth when connected with life becomes a source of deepest fulfillment. Life of truth is significant rather than mere knowledge of truth. Existence is associated with what one must do, and not what one must know. *“Your situation is the domain of action.”*³ Action is the kernel of man's action. It is experience of truth which according to Kierkegaard makes one's existence authentic. Personality of an individual is elevated when truth is reflected in his acts. Each and every action of a human being acquires moral worth when it is suffused with truth. The root of man's existence is in living the truth. Kierkegaard affirms, *“Ask yourself and keep on asking until you find the answer, for one can recognize a thing many times and acknowledge it, one can want a thing many times and attempt it, yet only the deep inner movement, only the indescribable motions of the heart, only these convince you that what you have recognized ‘belongs unto you’ that no power can take it from you, for only the truth that edifies is the truth for you.”*⁴

According to Kierkegaard truth is not introduced in the individual from some external agency, but truth resides in the individual all the time. Truth doesn't enter into the individual



at some point of time rather it is within him always at all the time. And the truth is that the individual is an existing being, a living being who is constantly in the process of becoming himself. Objective truth is only speculative in nature whereas existentialist truth is about the actual, concrete individual. Truth for Kierkegaard is a passionate and inner commitment to something which is objectively uncertain, and therefore it is the highest purpose that can be achieved by an existing individual. Kierkegaard stated that inwardness is subjectivity. Inwardness implies that the subject must involve himself in truth. Subjectivity and truth are interwoven concepts in the philosophy of Kierkegaard. Subject in truth is subjectivity. "Subjectivity is the truth."⁵ Truth exists only in a single person and not in a crowd. Truth exists only in an individual. And the individual alone in whom truth exists can be rated as a spiritual person for in him alone spirituality exists. Spirituality cannot exist apart from individuals, in objective forces or systems.

PERSONAL, POSITIVE, CREATIVE AND HOLISTIC GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

Kierkegaard is in his elements while deliberating on life-views. He himself had to contend resolutely to formulate his own view of life amidst exigent and paradoxical situations of life which he encountered constantly in his own personal life. Kierkegaard makes striking observations regarding life-views. According to him, though life can only be understood backwards, it must however be lived forward. His philosophy of life-view underscores the point that it is the duty of the person to understand his own inner life that is to understand his own real self. What Kierkegaard is saying is that one must be true to one's self in one's own life. A person who is true to himself in fact has certainly understood himself. Kierkegaard exhorts each and every individual to remain true and loyal to oneself. He maintains that an individual in order to be true to himself must first discover his self. This discovery of the self is the real existential challenge posed by Kierkegaard. One must contend to attain self-hood. Attainment of self is the real life-view, for which a person must constantly strive.

In Kierkegaard's construct a life-view is positive and meaningful therefore one must make continual efforts to realize it. Though Kierkegaard himself experienced crisis of meaning and periods of pronounced depression and consternation yet he managed to overcome such phases of life by the constant endeavour of his spirit to lead an authentic life. Kierkegaard never succumbed to such paralyzing dismay or low-key experiences instead he pursued his



work with renewed zeal which resulted in several classics. Such was the courage of his personality which challenges each and every individual to emulate. He provoked the conscience of people.

He spoke as a personal witness to the truth; to the truth as lived by him. One must not seek truth that could be speculated dispassionately but one must seek truth for which one can live. Truth requires commitment and personal response from an individual. Truth requires from an individual active and positive disposition towards life. Kierkegaard maintains that one must not have a sluggish attitude towards truth rather one should be energetic in one's search for truth. One must have the energy to be oneself, In fact, "you have the energy (or rather if you want to have it), to win what is the main thing in life: to win yourself, to take possession of yourself."⁶ An individual must not lose himself; he must not lose his self-hood in the crowd. Kierkegaard cautions of the danger of this personality crisis which a person faces in life. "Or can you imagine anything more frightful than that it might end with your nature dissolving into a multitude, with your really becoming many, becoming like that unhappy demoniac legion, and in that way losing the innermost, the most holy thing in a man, the unifying power of personality?"⁷ Kierkegaard warns that a person who does not choose himself but allows others to choose for him loses himself that is his personality tends to be schizophrenic. He says, "choice itself is decisive for a personality's content; in choice personality immerses itself in what is chosen, and when it does not choose it wastes consumptively away."⁸

In Kierkegaard's considerations there are three choices or stages on life's way- the *aesthetic*, the *ethical*, and the *religious*. These three stages or spheres are spheres of existence rather than some general universal laws. The gap between the spheres is not bridged by any gradual and necessary transformation of one sphere into another sphere, but only by leap or a free decision or a choice on the part of an individual. These spheres of existence can be speculated together but cannot be lived together in a compromising way, because these spheres of existence are mutually exclusive outlooks. The aesthetic sphere is the mundane sphere and the aesthete operates on the pleasure principle. "An aesthetic choice is no choice."⁹ The choice made by the aesthetic is a wholly immediate choice, therefore it is not a choice. The aesthete loses himself in multiplicity therefore he never makes a choice, he never chooses. Kierkegaard says "in choice it is less a matter of choosing correctly than of the energy, earnest and feeling with which one chooses."¹⁰



Kierkegaard implies that the aesthete's choice lacks aspiration, it is weak, fragile, and sluggish therefore it is no choice. Choice does not acquire true meaning for one who chooses mere aesthetically. "It is less a matter, then of choosing between willing good or evil than of choosing to will."¹¹

Those that have will would not choose evil not because they cannot choose evil but because they have chosen good. In the aesthetic sphere a person goes simply by his desire that is he is governed by his desires which are generated by external agency or by factors outside the individual. "But the person who says that he wants to enjoy life always posits a condition which is either outside the individual or in the individual but not posited by the individual himself."¹² The aesthete lives always in the instant, in the moment therefore there is no becoming, that is the person is becoming his own self. In the aesthetic sphere the inner self is missing, the inner being is missing; therefore there is no choosing or choice at the aesthetic level. There is no awareness of the inner self at this stage. "It is not a matter of the choice of some thing, not a matter of the reality of the thing chosen, but of the reality of choosing."¹³ In Kierkegaard's view "the great thing is not to be this or that, but to be oneself and every person can be that if he wants."¹⁴ At the aesthetic level the reality of choosing is missing, the aesthete lacks the desire to be his true self. Life disintegrates at this stage because there is no understanding of life, there is hardly any life-view at this stage. Kierkegaard exhorts that one must form a view of life that is positive, meaningful and edifying.

"The life-view in which one is united must be a positive life-view."¹⁵ The aesthete lives by accident, he lacks continuity. He has to transfigure the aesthetic. The ethical life-view consists in duties and responsibilities. When the individual is fulfilling life's duties he is living ethically. The duty as seen by the ethical individual does not stand outside him. "The truly ethical individual has, therefore, an inner calm and assurance because he does not have duty outside him but inside him."¹⁶ The ethical individual knows himself, but this knowledge is not sheer contemplation. The ethical individual chooses himself as a task, as a responsibility. The ethical individual sees freedom belonging to him therefore he lives responsibly, he is fully aware of his responsibility to himself. He is conscious of his responsibility towards the other. He is aware of his responsibility towards God. The ethical individual gives a serious account of himself to himself, he is honest with himself. What is of prime significance is the energy with which one becomes ethically aware; one cannot become



ethically aware in the absence of ethical enthusiasm. One cannot be ethically conscious without being conscious of one's eternal being. Only when one is fully conscious and not half-heartedly of one's duty that one expresses the ethical. The ethical life-view proposes that it is each and every individual's duty to work in order to live. "It is precisely through work that man makes himself free."¹⁷

It is an individual's duty to strive for excellence. Work expresses freedom. Work expresses the ethical. Inactivity and sluggishness belittles the ethical. A world in no one has to work would be an idle world and not a real world. Actions make life meaningful. It is through action that the ethical is manifested. It is "only in the ethical view of life can self-directed doubts about the meaning of a life be put to rest."¹⁸ Though the ethical is also the universal, yet the ethical may not act as a scruple in critical moments. The universal is based on laws and laws may change therefore the ethical may not act as a guiding force in critical life-situations faced by an individual. The universal is objective and abstract whereas the individual is subjective, concrete, and inward. In predicamental situations the ethical is not adequate to prescribe sure remedy. In such testing situations the ethical does not proffer decisive solution, in such moments the ethical is rendered superfluous. Kierkegaard observes that in such circumstances one must repose least trust upon the ethical and more reliance be laid upon religious. The ethical is now transfigured to religious. Kierkegaard is least interested in the speculative or theological tenet of religion. Religion must not be a category of thought-experiment but it should be an article of life. Flamboyant speculation on religion does not enrich a person's life. Religion when lived regulates the heart of man, and ennoble the spirit of individual. It is in religion than man finds consolation when beset with afflictions.

Soren vehemently detested the attitude of people who have made religion an object of mockery. He disdains those who made religion an object of ridicule. The truth of religion is that it must be lived. Truth exists only when it is lived. It is a person's action that can either reveal or conceal truth. "Truth exists for the particular individual only as he himself produces it in action. If truth exists for him in any other way, and is prevented from existing in that way, we have there a phenomenon of the demoniacal."¹⁹ He reiterates that religion should not be a subject of theological enquiries. Divine Being or God should not be a theological topic. Religion must be a life-view. Human reason is rather infirm to comprehend the total



incomprehensibility of the Divine Being. God cannot be seized by the narrow limits of understanding alone. To seize God by understanding alone would only confound the issue. Arbitrary conjectures, suppositions, and hypotheses regarding the Divine Being must first be dropped and pave the way for faith. The only positive attitude possible in relation to God is faith and not knowledge. Faith demands unconditional obedience to the will of God. Those who have the religious life-view accept God's will with absolute submission. "If you want to adore God in truth, then it must be by deeds and not words only."²⁰

Offering arresting and distilled insights on the religious life-view Kierkegaard asserts, "it is an edifying thought, then, that against God we are always in the wrong."²¹ In his view "God's love is always greater than our love."²² Therefore an individual is always in wrong against God. Amidst sufferings and ills of life one feels that one is right against God and still one is suffering wrong. The suffering intensifies because one finds it painful to be in the wrong. One finds it painful to accept oneself as wrong against God. When one wants to be in the right against God one finds oneself in a finite relationship. Finding that one is always in the wrong against God expresses an infinite relationship between the individual and God. When one recognizes that one is always in the wrong and God is always in the right, one is truly in religious devotion. This recognition, according to Kierkegaard is a matter of love and freedom as one is by no means compelled to recognize that one is always in the wrong. This inward recognition takes place only at spiritual level which indeed is a true discovery of the undiscovered self. Religion must be felt by each and every individual intimately and inwardly in one's own existence or inner self. Before God, each and every individual by virtue of his being or existence has dignity and profound worth. This entails that the individual must respond to the message of God without conditions. The message is personal and subjective and not general and objective, therefore the responsibility of responding to this message lies with the individual at a personal level.

CONCLUSION: I am not offering any philosophical conclusion but only a reassessed account of Kierkegaard's position that appropriation and assimilation of truth is more important than speculation. I have reaffirmed that for Kierkegaard leap of faith is of major philosophical significance which occurs in the religious sphere. Faith is the actual existential stance of Kierkegaard which I have emphasized and which leads to existential wellness and growth.



NOTES

1. Kierkegaard, SorenAabye, *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*, translated and with an introduction by Alastair Hannay, Penguin Classics, London, England, 1992, p.7.
2. Kierkegaard, SorenAabye, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to thePhilosophical Fragments*, trsl. David F. Swenson, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1944, p.182.
3. Kierkegaard, SorenAabye, *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*, translated and with an introduction by Alastair Hannay, Penguin Classics, London, England, p.487.
4. Op. Cit. pp.608-609
5. Kierkegaard, SorenAabye, *Concluding UnscientificPostscript to thePhilosophical Fragmentstrsl.* David F. Swenson, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1944, p.187.
6. Kierkegaard, SorenAabye, *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*, translated and with an introduction by Alastair Hannay, Penguin Classics, London, England, p.482.
7. Ibid., p.479.
8. Ibid., p.482.
9. Ibid., p.485.
10. Ibid., pp.485-486.
11. Ibid., p.487.
12. Ibid., p.493.
13. Ibid., p.490.
14. Ibid., p.491.
15. Ibid., p.580.
16. Ibid., p.546.



17. Ibid., p.565.

18. Ibid., p.559.

19. Kierkegaard, SorenAabye, *The Concept of Dread*, translated with introduction and notes by Walter Lowrie, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1973, p.123.

20. Kierkegaard, SorenAabye, *Meditations from Kierkegaard*, trsl. T.H. Croxall, Philadelphia, U.S.A., 1974, p.22.

21. Kierkegaard, SorenAabye, *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*, translated and with an introduction by Alastair Hannay, Penguin Classics, London, England, 1992, pp.604-605.

22. Ibid., p.60.

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