

CHAPTER - I

'MAN' IN KIERKEGAARD'S PHILOSOPHY

If we go through the Philosophy of Kierkegaard we find that he is entertaining a concept of man which is, as it is ordinarily said, radically different from the traditional concept. By traditional concept we here want to refer to the Cartesian, the Kantian and the Hegelian concepts of man, Kierkegaard criticizes Descartes and Kant on the ground that they are describing man as a cognitive agent. On the face of it there is nothing wrong with the conception of man as a cognitive agent. But the point is that we cannot entertain this concept from existential point of view. The central conviction of the existentialists is that one must know himself as an individual existence. For these philosophers the question of individuality is as important as the question of existence. In other words, it is not simply existence that is important for the existentialists. It has rather the individual existence or the authenticity of existence that is important for them.

The conception of existence or the conception of man as we find in Descartes, Kant and Hegel has only

succeeded in finding out the essence of man either in cognition or in something else. Naturally, one would not be too wrong if one says that the Cartesian or the Kantian thoughts have lapsed into essentialism which we consider as the opposite camp of existentialism.

We are in a position, therefore, to say that the philosophy of Kierkegaard is a philosophy of individual. Curiously, it seems not necessary to speak of existence over and above individual. We do not know ourselves as individual unless we exist.

Should we, therefore, say that existence is always individualistic ? Let us start with the concept of individuality. History of western philosophy is full of various remarks and thoughts about individuality. From all such ideas we can collect a single notion. The notion is that individuality is another name for uniqueness. Something is an individual if it has a unique life-history of its own. It is an individual if it can be separated or distinguished from objects of similar or different kinds.

A table, from this point of view, will be considered an individual if it is possible to distinguish the table from other tables and chairs. One recalls here Leibnitz's Principle of Identity of Indiscernibles. Two drops of water, if we can discern, their numerical diversity must be different. This means that one drop of water is unique and not to be confused with another drop of water.

Can we say from this point of view that every particular that is contained in this world is an individual, when individuality is defined in terms of spatial and temporal uniqueness? A table is unique and so an individual, because the space occupied by the table is not the space which can be occupied by any other table or chair.

If we look at the whole thing from this point of view, and define individuality in terms of spatial uniqueness then a man cannot be distinguished as an individual from an inanimate object. It cannot be the contention of Kierkegaard to define human individuality in this way.

Strawson's notion of individuality is such that every particular entity of the universe is an individual for him provided of course it can be linguistically referred to and identified in his special sense. For him a table is an individual because it has a unique position in space and time ; it can be related to me in space and time in a special and unique way which will be different from the spatial and temporal relation between myself and any other object. Strawson, therefore, considers material objects as individuals. For him even persons are also individuals. What is damaging from the existentialist point of view is that the person or the human reality has been equated by Strawson with material bodies from at least one point of view.

From the above it follows that it is not simply spatial or temporal or any other kind of uniqueness that is important for defining individuality of man. Strawson's conceptions define individuality but do not distinguish man from non-human reality, It is precisely here that the existentialist would raise his head in protest.

It seems that Kierkegaard or for that matter, any other existentialists would have to define individuality or uniqueness as that of which the individual is aware. This seems to be the reason why Heidegger begins his philosophy by saying that man is existentially distinct in that he can ask questions about his existence. What it is for me to exist ~~is~~ is basically a human question. Thus we find that something is an individual if it is aware of its individuality. So far as Kierkegaard is concerned, we know that he describes man as an individual who knows of his unique existence through his acts of free-choice.

An individual therefore, must be reflective which means that an individual must be conscious. It seems that Kierkegaard and other existentialists would have to define individual existence with a careful consideration of the presence of consciousness. The presence of consciousness thus divides the world- the human and the non-human. But this is not lapsing into Cartesianism. The presence of consciousness does not make a man individual.

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Kierkegaard would say that we cannot define individuality by the presence of consciousness; nevertheless we cannot ignore that the notion of individuality is void if it is not built up in the background of the presence of consciousness. Man must be conscious in order that he may be aware of his uniqueness.

Let us not forget that it is not the awareness of spatial or temporal uniqueness that makes a man individual. Authenticity is much greater than spatial and temporal uniqueness. Existentialism attains a distinction by explaining the concept of authenticity through the notions of freedom and choice and not through the notion of spatio-temporal existence.

Can we define individuality in terms of man's physiological, biological or social distinction? Kierkegaard's answer is in the negative. The reason why he does not define individuality or manhood in terms of physiological, or biological distinction is to be found in his notion of authenticity which is the distinguishing mark of all philosophies of existence. The individual, in his opinion, is an authentically existing individual. To describe a man

in terms of his physiological or even social existence is not to distinguish him as a unique reality which is never repeated anywhere in the universe. Authenticity is simply another name for uniqueness. Authenticity is not something which we can define theoretically. It is something which can be an object of personal appreciation or realization.

Such realizations take place in certain situations in human life. Existentialist philosophers speak of various real life situations in which authenticity of existence strikes him like a flash of lightning. This is illustrated in "the death of Ivan Illych" by Tolstoy, a story which pictures old man Illych dying. The old man who had never been aware of himself as a distinct personality had a taste of individual existence. When standing face to face with death he realised that Ivan Illych and none but Ivan Illych is dying. He realised that somebody could have ploughed the field for him but nobody could die for him. Death, therefore, is a situation in our real life in which authenticity of existence is suddenly revealed. The philosophers of existence have also spoken of the burden of decision, - a situation in which a man feels alone and finds nobody to take a decision

for him. The decision which affects my own life is something that must be taken by me. And in all such endeavours I stand face to face with myself as the agent or the subject who easily stands out as a solitary figure in the crowd of humanity.

We shall see the account of individuality or authentic existence given by Kierkegaard in his existentialistic thinking. There is no doubt that Kierkegaard defines the authentically existing individual as subjectivity. This is a subjectivity which realizes itself through successive choices which elevates him from one level of life to another level. In other words, in Kierkegaard's philosophy, individuality or authentic existence is realizable through choice and commitment.

We can distinguish between the process in which authenticity of existence unfolds itself to a man and the nature of this kind of existence. As a matter of fact the mode of realization of authenticity reveals Kierkegaard's conception of individual man.

Kierkegaard's philosophy presents us with a dialectic which consists in a description of man's journey through the different stages on life's way . The stages have been called the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious stage. Kierkegaard believes that a reflecting individual would proceed from the aesthetic sphere, would pass to the ethical sphere, and ultimately enter into the religious sphere in which he discovers himself as a subjectivity.

The aesthetic individual is a sensuous entity full of appetite, and all that is attached to the flesh. Kierkegaard does not believe that authenticity of existence is revealed at this stage. This is chiefly on account of fact that a man cannot distinguish himself from the rest of humanity by his appetite or flesh that is everything which is physical. Here we get a negative idea about what Kierkegaard thinks about the individual man. The individual man is not a lump of flesh which is full of appetite and ever directed towards sensuous gratification.

We find that Kierkegaard considers human existence on the religious level as man's entry into the final stage on life's way. It is the final stage in the sense that it is here that man finds himself as a subject who is passionate and faithful and who wants to divinise himself.

An analysis of this transition of man from the aesthetic to the religious via the ethical reveals a certain conception of man as an individual. We find here that Kierkegaard would not conceive of the individual as primarily a physical or appetitive entity. It is not the case that in conceiving of the individual Kierkegaard can ignore the element of flesh altogether. Man cannot be pure subjectivity who can go without flesh and the senses. The point is that Kierkegaard's individual man is the very human reality which we normally encounter, but who is definitely more spiritual than physical. His man is a passionate subjectivity.

How does the individual proceed from one stage on life's way to another stage ? Kierkegaard does not compare between the merits of the different stages from a rational point of view. It is difficult to say why Kierkegaard should consider the religious level as the highest level of life. For most commentators of Kierkegaard the selection of the religious level as the highest must have been dictated by personal prejudice or predilection. If we go through the life of Kierkegaard, we find that there is a reason to believe why this philosopher is more inclined to the religious stage rather than any other stage.

Of course, the person who is motivated by existentialistic tendencies might go for the religious sphere as more valuable than any other sphere. This remark is made in view of the fact that Kierkegaard has his own idea of religion . It is something which is founded on personal faith and passion - these being manifestations of one's subjectivity. Since subjectivity exposes authenticity of existence it is only natural that the religious stage should be considered as more valuable than any other stage.

But, is there any need or necessity that every human being should liberate himself from the aesthetic sphere and lift himself to the ethical and the religious ?

If we consider man as a being who travels through the different stages in life's way, we find that he is an individual who is constantly exercising choice. This choice or commitment is irrational. It is irrational in the sense that if there be any reason behind the choice of the individual it is a reason that is more a personal tendency than a logical account. It is true that the aesthetic man is pushed to the religious sphere by his despair. But whether to respond to this despair or not is a consideration which is something different from logical consideration. There is no logically compelling reason. If we can at all speak of reason here, it is a personal or subjective reason. Consequently, this psychological reason is not something that makes the choice rational.

The picture of man that we thus get in Kierkegaard's existentialism is the picture of an irrational man. The individual is one in whom not reason, but passion is more important. The other side of the picture is this, that like many other existentialists Kierkegaard describes man as the locus of certain possibilities. Every man has the possibility of elevating himself to the religious sphere in which

he can discover his authentic existence. The existentialist philosophers in general describes the individual's life as the gradual realization of possibilities. To say that every man is a unique individual is just to point out a possibility which awaits fulfilment. We have seen that the fulfilment of this possibility is a passionate adventure and not a journey on the way of reason. In short we can say that the picture of man in Kierkegaard's philosophy is the picture of an irrational man - a man with the possibility of realising the authenticity of his existence.

Since for Kierkegaard this realisation is of supreme importance therefore, he gives exclusive importance to passion and irrational commitment. The concept of possibility is important for it says that we cannot consider man after a model. Although we know that this possibility is open in a single direction nevertheless it is true that every man does not actualize the possibility which lies in him. This will account for the variation which we find between one man and another. Although existence is an exciting thing nevertheless the possibility of the realisation is presented as a possibility. Only those

people who are sufficiently strong to maintain their individuality, there is an existential life. Consequently, given the possibility which Kierkegaard will locate in every individual, we may say that the concept of the individual involves the notion of passion, choice, commitment and freedom. Kierkegaard's man is a free and passionate individual.