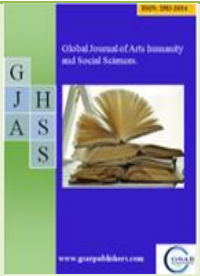


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THREE STAGES OF HUMAN EXISTENCE KIERKEGAARD'S THOUGHT

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Abstract

From ancient times until now, if the science of human beings has always been the central research problem of philosophers and theologians, then *existence* is a topic that attracts scholars to research and has been searched throughout the course of human history. It is even a topic of intellectual headache that philosophers and theologians have set themselves the task of thinking about for centuries. Especially, in the 19th century, this topic was considered the consistent content and reached the pinnacle of theory in existentialism. In particular, when mentioning the topic of human existence, it is always associated with the prominent name of Kierkegaard. He studied and pointed out three stages of human existence. Kierkegaard not simply clarifying a philosophical thought in history, but also approaching a concept of life with a noble humanism, clarifying the issues of nature and vocation, man is a religious being. Therefore, in this article, the author only focuses on researching and understanding the view of the three levels of existential human existence in Kierkegaard's thought.

Keywords: *Aesthetic stage; Moral stage; Religious stage*

Introduction

General theory of the three stages of human existence in Kierkegaard's thought: The question of human existence is central to Kierkegaard's thought. For him, existence means becoming a specific individual, which is personal and not identical for all, because each person has a different way of living. Therefore, human existence, for Kierkegaard is the capacity of each person to be self-aware, is a subjective, personal and separate commitment, and is also the responsibility of each individual. He put forward the theory of the levels of human existence, describing the movement of the ego from one plane of existence to another by an act of will, an act of choice. Kierkegaard's theory is a stark contrast to Hegel's theory of the gradual development of human self-consciousness.

Kierkegaard believes that humans must go through three stages of maturity to achieve true existence. The following are the stages of existence in his opinion. Starting from the false, low existence, and then rising to the level of transcendent existence, Kierkegaard proposed a reference system in perception with three different levels: from aesthetic experience to moral awakening and finally, reaching the pinnacle of faith. These three stages: aesthetic, moral

and religious represent three attitudes towards life, three philosophies about life. Each stage has a different nature, which humans must overcome, must jump from one stage to another. The three levels that Kierkegaard describes are the three levels of existence of each individual, where they are both unified with each other and reveal the inner struggle of loneliness in each person's life. In other words, those three stages are like three levels of the continuous rise of human life and the end point of that rise is God.

Aesthetic stage: This is the first stage in the process of human development. In this stage, people act on instinct and are often dominated by the senses. They live a life without faith, without ideals, without a standard to guide their lives other than the desire to enjoy according to their own preferences [Samuel ES, 2004, p.384]. This image is clearly sketched by Kierkegaard in the face of a Don Juan-style actor. in the work *Diary of a Seductress*. That is a person driven by a desire to always seek strange things, a person who spends his whole life only to "give himself to carnal pleasure" [Søren Kierkegaard, 2015, p. 11], likes to change and is never satisfied in his passions. This way of life makes people always pursue all kinds of love. The life of a person who loves



beauty only attaches his life to temporary and frivolous things, so life is forever a search but does not know what he is looking for. And because of human life, people wander aimlessly in a vague, wandering bubble. of human destiny, therefore always feeling a void, a void in the soul that can never be filled. Such an attitude of life inevitably leads people to a state of boredom; boredom because they cannot meet themselves in the constant changes "from the beginning there was boredom. Because of boredom, the gods created humans. And from there, along with the development of mankind, boredom also developed and spread throughout the world. The state of having to live a series of boring days makes the aesthete fall into despair; despair because they cannot satisfy the absolute desire in the relative. And in such despair, the aesthete faces a choice, must make a leap: either stay in the despair of the aesthete stage or give it up to go to another stage, the moral stage by an act of will, a determination.

Moral stage: The ethical stage represents a rational life, that is, a life that accepts the constraints and ethical principles set forth by reason. This is a model of a person who lives consciously, responsibly and faithfully to his duties. According to Kierkegaard, if a person in the aesthetic stage is a person who easily indulges in carnal instincts, immerses himself in pleasurable emotions, in love adventures that eventually lead to disappointment, then in contrast to this, in the ethical stage, a person is forced to accept the constraints of marriage and family as a moral regulation, a universal principle set forth by reason, meaning that the love of a couple must be a love built on eternal values and it becomes noble because of the vow of eternal loyalty that both sides freely commit to, this eternal nature is the distinction between true love and carnal passion [X. Tran Thai Dinh, 2005, pp.87-88]. If Don Juan represents the aesthetic stage, Socrates is the typical model for the moral stage or universal moral law.

Furthermore, moral life, when built on such a moral foundation, can create a sense of security, making them easily rigid. However, at some point, in their consciousness, people realize the fact that they are not capable of fulfilling moral duties, people know that they are not perfect people to be able to fulfill the basic value systems of this life [Samuel ES, 2004, p. 385]. Because human beings inherently have a lack and defect in their nature. Now, what is reasonable now becomes a burden for humans, and it is also the source of this defect that turns into anxiety, the human situation before sin. This is what makes human life unable to be at ease forever, unable to be reasonable forever. Human beings have experiences of sin, of creatureliness in themselves and of losing themselves. Now, they must make choices for themselves: one is to be faithful to morality and try to fulfill that moral law; two is to rise to the religious stage. To live in freedom with the Absolute and to return to one's own humanity requires them to make an act of commitment to a "leap" of faith, a paradoxical choice.

Religious stage: This is the final stage and also the stage that Kierkegaard considers the most sublime, because human existence never stops in the aesthetic stage, where people still live according to the carnal passions of instinct, likewise, human existence cannot

be a true existence if it only struggles to comply with the moral rules of the moral stage. Because as long as people still live within the framework of morality, people still live like everyone else, people still live following the crowd, an immoral crowd that makes individuals not know how to repent, weakens the sense of responsibility of the individual [Samuel ES, 2004, p.381]. People who live like everyone else are people who have not lived their unique personality, are people who have not existed truly. True existence must be an existence that goes beyond what can be reasoned, beyond the standards of a universal moral foundation. That existence requires man to "give up the finite to grasp the infinite,..., give up the certain to attain even more certainties..., give up the universal to grasp something higher than the non-universal" [Sanley Rosen, 2006, p.144-145]. Precisely, it is the existence before the Transcendent, the existence that expresses the unique and subjective relationship between man and God.

It is in the religious stage that man finds the fulfillment of his life in God when he becomes aware of his sin and disappointment. Therefore, sin does not belong to the ethical level, because it cannot be explained by human logic, but it is in the experience of sin and disappointment that the way of being of man in the ethical stage is surpassed. Because sin evokes in the human heart an awareness of a more authentic, higher way of being. Sin is not something irrational or rational, but it is an offense against God, it places us before His holy face, "it is sin that sets the relationship between us and the absolute" [Tran Thai Dinh, 2005, p.96]. Thus, the consciousness of sin is also a personal experience and sin makes man relate to the absolute. The faith of the religious man makes him face God in a more authentic way, or in other words, the only way to overcome the distance between God and man is not by reason but by the leap of faith.

Through the ideas presented above, we see that Kierkegaard has inaugurated a new philosophy. Reading through his main ideas, we no longer feel lost in the formal logic of Hegel's philosophy, but we recognize a soul that is constantly restless with its own existence through the stages of life. Kierkegaard's philosophy is truly a philosophy of life, a philosophy not for theoretical debate, but a philosophy for moving forward and living as a human being. It is not a philosophy that discusses abstract and distant ideas, but a philosophy that brings people back to a living existence and there, people find themselves and the destination of their lives in God.

Thus, through the above pages, we realize that in the existential stages proposed by Søren Kierkegaard, the religious stage is considered by him to be the highest stage of existence. In this stage, people will see paradoxes, even absurdities in their beliefs. The choices of the subject are higher than what the world considers universal, people escape the constraints of morality, existing in their individuality. Thanks to that, people see themselves, realize themselves as a free person, a unique creature of God. Reaching the level of faith is entering a contradiction between the infinite inner self and the objective risks that always surround them. All because, at the level of faith, there is no truth but everything is a "leap" - or having a vision that transcends all barriers of law - of each individual in relation to God, the Absolute.

Kierkegaard's existential man is pushed into situations and forced to make choices to make decisions appropriate to his living conditions. As the main actor of his life, man must choose a way of life, a way of authentic existence to move towards a meaningful life. Through the image of the patriarch Abraham, his act of faith has left us with many thoughts about the true existence of man. If we read *Fear and Trembling* in a state of mind lacking silence from the outside in, we may feel a sense of constraint, that the solitude, renunciation and individuality that surpasses the social rules that Kierkegaard describes encourage a different way of life, a blind rebellion. However, if we read the work with calmness and engagement, we will experience a new attitude in recognizing the true existence of man in the world.

First of all, true existence is a "participation", the solitude, the attitude of renunciation and responsibility in each individual does not make people separate but makes people realize their own limitations before God, before the Absolute. From there, there is an attitude of respect, bowing down to recognize His truth. And sometimes, the recognition of the transcendent happens in the suffering, anxiety and conflict of people.

Human beings truly exist in a personal relationship with God. They are not alone or ordinary, but they exist in a world with God, a world of mutual correlation, and every moment of existence is an opportunity for humans to break through and carry out actions and events in their lives. It is the establishment of these relationships that creates new meaning for human life, so that, even though living in different contexts, humans still find harmony, find connections, thereby making life richer and more diverse.

And as a consequence of the "divine union", Kierkegaard showed a very special dimension, the moment when man communicates with God is also the moment when man recovers his humanity. If Sartre believes that the relationship between man and God is a relationship of projection, Kierkegaard believes that it is the only way for man to regain his being. And when man turns to religion, turns to moral laws, he is not a slave, but a free person, able to open up to the world.

Humans are free to choose, and the right choice will bring happiness. Kierkegaard believes that people are truly happy when they know how to listen and fulfill their inner duty to God. What he means here is that humans must be responsible for the deepest concerns in their hearts, only then can humans reach the depth of religion. For Kierkegaard, if existence is a way of living with a unique and personal personality, then humans can only find salvation in religion. Because only religion gives humans the strength to go beyond rational moral theories, and only religion has the ability to put humans in an absolute relationship.

Thus, the journey to achieve true human existence is a journey full of challenges, suffering, despair and failure. Because on that journey, people must find themselves, find the individuality and personality that they have lost. Kierkegaard describes this journey as starting with the realization that existence is very important to each individual, from which people must learn to face situations of existential life, they are forced to play the role of their life, so that

they are more responsible for their life and existence. Situations of existential life will help people mature and gradually reach true existence. This maturity is described by Kierkegaard through three stages, each stage has different personalities and images, but to reach another stage, people always need a leap. Each leap of a stage represents the reflection and maturity of a person, to move towards a true maturity, which is the maturity in religion, in the relationship with the Absolute. To achieve this true existence, a person must accept commitment and sacrifice. The image of the patriarch Abraham is a typical proof of true existence, he exchanged his beloved son to express his faith, although absurd, paradoxical, but with absolute faith and a spectacular leap, he overcame the challenge and became a "knight of faith", became "the father of believers." And each of us, to achieve maturity as well as reach true existence, we must also find our own direction. And as Kierkegaard pointed out, humans only achieve true existence in the relationship with God and brothers and sisters. So Kierkegaard's visions of man and his views on existence are truly meaningful for human life in general and for Christians in particular.

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