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Dr. Cindy Ausec

SØREN KIERKEGAARD

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- ✘ Associate Kierkegaard as the father of Existentialism and define the term
- ✘ Identify the causes of the human psyche's problems
- ✘ Explain the stages of becoming a true self and presented in *Either/Or*
- ✘ Comprehend Kirkegaard's theory that the distinction between good and evil is ultimately dependent on God as explained in *Fear and Trembling*
- ✘ Differentiate the difference between "objective" and "subjective" as presented in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* and the importance of an individual's "passion

EXISTENTIALISM

“A chiefly 20th century philosophical movement embracing diverse doctrines but centering on analysis of individual existence in an unfathomable universe and the plight of the individual who must assume ultimate responsibility for acts of free will without any certain knowledge of what is right or wrong or good or bad” (Merriam Webster)

EXISTENTIALISM

A term applied to a school of 20th-century philosophers who shared the belief that philosophical thinking begins with the human subject—not merely the thinking subject, but the acting, feeling, living human individual. ^(Wiki)

SØREN KIERKEGAARD (1813-1855)

- ✘ Father had strong feelings of guilt which were passed to his sons “original sin” = “inherited sin”
- ✘ 1838 underwent a religious conversion, and gained a conviction of his philosophical vocation
- ✘ 1840 became engaged to Regine Olsen – broke it off realizing he had made a mistake
- ✘ *Corsair* controversy – ridiculed by the magazine

CAUSES OF THE HUMAN PSYCHE'S PROBLEMS

- ✘ Boredom – People are bored when they are not being stimulated, either physically or mentally
- ✘ Conflicts between one's ethical duty and one religious duty cause anxiety
- ✘ Despair is a result of the tension between the finite and the infinite
 - + Only way to escape despair is to have total faith in God
 - + Faith required intense personal commitment and dedication to unending self analysis

STAGES OF BECOMING A TRUE SELF

- ✘ An individual passes through three stages on the way to becoming a true self: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious
 - + Each represents competing views on life
 - + A different pseudonymous character represents each stage

STAGES OF BECOMING A TRUE SELF

- ✘ Aesthetic - the realm of sensory experience and pleasures
- ✘ Ethics is used to mean both
 - + A limited existential sphere, or stage, which is superseded by the higher stage of religious life - represents the prevailing social norms
 - + An aspect of life which is retained even within the religious life
- ✘ Religious life - the highest plane of existence

***EITHER/OR* AND THE STAGES**

- ✘ **Written in a series of pseudonyms**
- ✘ **Two parts**
 - + Deals with the aesthetic – pseudonym “A” with *Diary of the Seducer*” under pseudonym Johannes Climacus
 - + Deals with ethics – pseudonym “B” or ‘Judge Wilhelm’ with a concluding “Sermon” by a country priest
- ✘ **Introduced by an editor Victor Eremita (Victor the Hermit)**

AESTHETIC – REALM OF SENSORY EXPERIENCE AND PLEASURES

- ✘ To live the aesthetic life to the fullest one must seek to maximize those pleasures**
- ✘ Aesthetic stage of existence is characterized by: egotism**
- ✘ Fragmentation of the subject of experience**
- ✘ Flight from boredom**

AESTHETE

- × Two types of Aesthete
- × Immediate aesthete – Don Juan
 - + Mozart's *Don Giovanni*
- × Reflexive aesthete – Author of the “Seducer’s Diary”
 - + Johannes gains delight from the possibility of seduction
 - + Wants to seduce Cordelia into seducing him

IMMEDIATE AESTHETE

“If I had in my service a submissive spirit who, when I asked for a glass of water, would bring me all the world’s costliest wines, deliciously blended in a goblet, I would dismiss him until he learned that enjoyment does not consist in what I enjoy but in getting my own way” EO I, 31

“THE SEDUCER DAIRY” – REFLEXIVE AESTETE

- ✘ This type of aestheticism is criticized from the point of view of ethics**
 - + Seen to be emptily self-serving and escapist**
 - + Means of avoiding commitment and responsibility**
 - + Fails to acknowledge one’s social debt and communal existence**
 - + Self-deceiving – substitutes fantasies for actual states of affairs**

AESTHETIC

- + Importance of the aesthetic is acknowledged but it is presented as an immature stage
- + Eventually the pleasures of an aesthetic life wears thin and one must begin seeking the ethical pleasures instead

ETHICS

- ✘ The ethical life offers pleasures the aesthetic life cannot – an aesthete can never do something solely for the good of someone else
- ✘ Ethics is used to mean both
 - + A limited existential sphere, or stage, which is superseded by the higher stage of religious life - represents the prevailing social norms
 - + An aspect of life which is retained even within the religious life

ETHICS

“But what is it to live aesthetically, and what is it to live ethically? What is the aesthetic in a person, and what is the ethical? To this I would answer: the aesthetic in a person is that by which he immediately is what he is; the ethical is that by which he becomes what he becomes.” (EO II, 178)

ETHICS

- ✘ The aesthete needs to choose the ethical, which entails a commitment to communication and decision procedures
 - + The necessity of choosing seriously and inwardly
 - + The belief that predications of the good or evil of our actions have a truth value
 - + Choosing what one is doing, rather than just responding to a situation
 - + Actions are to be in accordance with rules
 - + Rules are universally applicable to moral agents

FEAR AND TREMBLING - ETHICS

- ✘ **Centers on Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac**
- ✘ **Conceptual distinction between good and evil is ultimately dependent on God**
 - + **God's command supersedes any human society's definition of ethics**
 - + **The unique relationship between God and an individual may override all commitments arising from general ethical laws**

RELIGION

- ✘ Considers the religious life to be the highest plane of existence
- ✘ Believes that almost no one lives a truly religious life – concerned with how to be a ‘Christian in Christendom’
- ✘ Faith is a matter of individual subjective passion – not regurgitation of church dogma
- ✘ The individual is responsible for his or her choices upon which hangs their eternal salvation or damnation

CONCLUDING UNSCIENTIFIC POSTSCRIPT

SUBJECTIVE TRUTH, INWARDNESS, TRUTH IS SUBJECTIVITY

- ✘ Discussion of how we can know the metaphysical and God
- ✘ Central paradox is the assertion that the eternal, infinite, transcendent God became a human being Jesus
- ✘ We cannot believe in God because we cannot prove he exists – therefore we must have faith in him

CONCLUDING UNSCIENTIFIC POSTSCRIPT

- ✘ **Objective reflection** makes the subject accidental
- ✘ **Objective reflection** always leads away from the subject
- ✘ **All external decisiveness** is rooted in subjectivity

CONCLUDING UNSCIENTIFIC POSTSCRIPT

- ✘ The subject is a living being
- ✘ **Subjective reflection** turns inwardly to the subject, and desires in this intensification of inwardness to realize the truth
- ✘ The subjectivity of the subject becomes the final stage, and objectivity a vanishing factor

“Not for a single moment is it forgotten that the subject is an existing individual, and that existence is a process of becoming, and therefore the notion of the truth as identity of thought and being is a chimera of abstraction, in its truth only and expectation of the creature; not because the truth is not such an identity, but because the knower is an existing individual for who the truth cannot be such an identity as long as he lives in time” (*Concluding Unscientific Postscript*)

CONCLUDING UNSCIENTIFIC POSTSCRIPT

- ✘ If an existing individual could really transcend themselves, the truth would be something final and complete
- ✘ Doesn't believe that we can transcend ourselves
- ✘ The "I am I" mathematical point does not exist
- ✘ Essential knowledge relates to existence
- ✘ Accidental knowledge does not relate to existence

CONCLUDING UNSCIENTIFIC POSTSCRIPT

- ✘ Passion is the means by which the subject is rendered infinite

“In passion the existing subject is rendered infinite in the eternity of the imaginative representation and yet he is at the same time most definitely himself”

CONCLUDING UNSCIENTIFIC POSTSCRIPT

- ✘ Faith is not the outcome of any objective reasoning
- ✘ Belief that Jesus save the human race by his death on the cross involves historical elements
 - + Can never achieve complete certainty about historical events
 - + Historical research is never definitively concluded – must perpetually postpone that commitment
 - + Faith must be a passionate devotion on oneself

CONCLUDING UNSCIENTIFIC POSTSCRIPT

“ Here is such a definition of truth: *An objective uncertainty held fast in an appropriation-process of the most passionate inwardness is the truth, the highest truth attainable for and existing individual.*”

CONCLUDING UNSCIENTIFIC POSTSCRIPT

“ If I am capable of grasping God objectively, I do not believe, but precisely because I cannot do this I must believe. If I wish to preserve myself in faith I must constantly be intent upon holding fast the objective uncertainty, so as to remain out upon the deep, over seventy thousand fathoms of water, still preserving my faith.”