

# Kierkegaard

Philosophy



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BUSTER**

of Kierkegaard Søren Kierkegaard speaks of existence through three stages of life: the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious. The aesthetic stage is marked by the individual's only desire in life being to enjoy himself. In his fragmented manuscript of *Either/Or* Kierkegaard, through the aesthete writer "A", talks about how the sole purpose of the aesthete's life is to have laughter on his side, to live poetically and to basically live for enjoyment. He proceeds from the assumption that all men are bores and goes on to chart a history of this inherent boredom in humanity right from Biblical times to his present day.

This aesthetic stage is criticized and held up as facile against the duty-bound nature of the ethical, but Kierkegaard did not favor one over the other. In fact, his progression of the self involved the transformation of the first two stages (aesthetic and ethical) into the third (religious) in such a way that they are both retained and yet, annulled. This higher synthesis is achieved through what Kierkegaard calls "absolute choice."

The absolute choice or decision that the individual makes at a point of crisis in their life is akin to the common phrase "leap of faith." Both the ethicist and the aesthete find themselves questioning their mode of living at a certain point of time and it is here that Kierkegaard sees them as either taking the leap into the religious state or not. It is not necessary for the aesthete to pass through the ethical stage before reaching the religious state of Christianity, and vice versa although an individual may exist through both stages in the course of his lifetime.

The decision to leap into religion, Christianity for Kierkegaard, is taken for different reasons by the ethicist and the aesthete. The aesthete, represented by A, detects irony in his lifestyle and in society around him. He is not

unaware of the dangers and pitfalls of leading a hedonistic lifestyle. A's mode of living maybe viewed as decadent, undisciplined and self-indulgent but not necessarily more contemptible than the other stages. The aesthete makes great contributions, in Kierkegaard's own admission, to the world of literature and the finer arts. Because of his unrestrained freedom of expression, his ability to live in the moment, A is valuable as a creator of beauty. The ethicist, represented by Judge William, is a duty-bound rationalist. He criticizes the hedonism of A's choices and views himself as morally superior. The ethicist sees the possibility of dividing life into reasonable compartments, studying and predicting it if required. Judge William believes that humans can comprehend life. For him, the greatest value in life is in accepting oneself and one's role in the greater system of life.

Kierkegaard's primary motive behind the leap of faith is in accepting an either/or truth. For instance, to Kierkegaard, Christ could only either have been divine or not divine. He did not believe in evading the question and held that if indeed Christ died to redeem his people, then it should affect people's lives on a much more profound level. The acceptance of "faith" precisely because it was irrational or miraculous was to Kierkegaard the entry into the final stage. The decision was usually induced by a traumatic event and the ethicist and aesthete took the leap for different reasons: the aesthete in search of a greater ideal and the ethicist in his belief in the greater organic synthesis in life. In either case, the previous stage is not abolished in the religious stage, merely suspended. For Kierkegaard then, salvation lies in reaching that stage of faith where it is impossible to analyze the truth rationally and the only possible thing to do is accept it.

Kierkegaard's self is more preoccupied with whether it is headed towards salvation or not; while the self of Descartes is primarily concerned with knowing an absolute, rational truth. Proving that it exists is in itself a step towards self-fulfillment, while in Kierkegaard this question does not really arise. Descartes' self is also entirely rational and skeptic while Kierkegaard's ideal stage of religion necessitates an irrational, faithful individual.

#### Works Cited

Mullen, John D. " Between the Aesthetic and the Ethical: Kierkegaards Either/Or." *Philosophy Today* 23. 1/4 (Spring 1979): 84-94. Rpt. in *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism*. Ed. Lynn M. Zott. Vol. 125. Detroit: Gale, 2003. Literature Resources from Gale. Web. 15 May 2010.