

KIERKEGAARD'S NOTION OF SUBJECTIVITY AND ITS BEARING ON THE PROBLEM OF COMMUNICATION

It is very obvious to the very nature of Kierkegaard's philosophy that he should desist from any systematic attempt to explain the nature of human existence. Such system-building is more to the liking of the idealists. Kierkegaard's philosophy is opposed to all conceptual schemes and theoretical systems. A theoretical enquiry into the nature of human existence would ignore the reality of man and reduce him to a mere object. Indeed, the very starting-point of Kierkegaard's philosophy takes the form of protest against such systematisation and objectification. The subjective dimension of human existence as analysed by Kierkegaard defies categorisation. This is the significance of his characterising human existence as subjectivity in contrast to the objectivity of the speculative modes of thought and of science. The reality of human existence is not outside the individual but inheres in the subject i. e. in the concrete, free, unique individual. The self has its original being, its true actuality in what cannot be stated as an objective event. Hence each *individuum est ineffabile*, no objective statement can convey the full truth about him. Here it should be noted that this ineffability does not imply vagueness, it is because of the unfathomable depth, richness and complexity of subjectivity. Subjectivity is interpreted in terms of passionate inwardness which represents personal concern and involvement. As Pascal has aptly remarked, "the heart has reasons, which reason does not know,"¹ and what the individual man in a concrete situation knows, feels and chooses cannot be comprehended through objective reason.

The often-quoted statement that 'truth is subjectivity' implies that truth is not something that is 'outside the individual as an end-product. It is to be assimilated in inwardness. The subjective thinker is concerned first with his own existence and everything else in relation to himself. Without this human or existential relationship, the objects of the world have no significance, thus everything external has to be transformed into I. P. Q...6

things internal and each such act constitutes an affirmation of subjectivity. As Kierkegaard puts it, "Only that truth which edifies is truth for you. This is an essential predicate relating to the truth as inwardness, its decisive characterisation as edifying for you i. e. for the subject, constitutes its essential difference from all objective knowledge, in that the subjectivity itself becomes the mark of the truth."²

Objective truth is concerned with objective problems of science, mathematics and history, it is detached and disinterested and therefore indifferent to the human subject. Kierkegaard characterises the Hegelian notion of truth as 'mediate' in contrast to which his own notion of truth is 'immediate', i. e. it does not involve reflection and it is not hidden in speculative metaphysics. In Hegel, the appropriation of truth is achieved through the process of 'mediation' by reflection, i. e., truth is the product of a logical process arrived at by reflection, by the achievement gradually of elimination of the subject-object division. This is how? Hegel seeks to arrive at a reconciliation between thought and being, subject and object, knower, known and knowledge.

Kierkegaard on the other hand keeps clear of any such speculative metaphysics, by holding that the subject as an existing individual must be regarded truth in the continuous process of becoming and hence truth cannot be a static identity of subject and the object. The subject as contingent and temporal finds itself always in the tension of endless striving, truth, therefore is never final, it is always in transition, it has no beginning and no end and hence remains forever an approximation. On the other hand the metaphysical or the scientific subject is static and fixed, cannot be regarded even speculatively as synonymous. In the words of Kierkegaard, "Not for a single moment, it is forgotten that the subject is an existing individual, and that existence is a process of becoming, and that the notion of truth as an identity of thought and being is a chimera of abstraction."³ Subjectivity is direct immediate self which is to be created, lived and experienced.

Now the question arises : If truth is subjectivity and evades conceptualisation, then how is communication possible? What

is to be communicated is inarticulate and ineffable. How can we express the ineffable, indescribable character of existential reality? In other words, how is communication possible, when the very subject-matter of communication is not available in formulable terms? Thus communication emerges as a difficult problem in Kierkegaard's philosophy. In the domain of subjectivity there is something else besides the individual in the first person, there is a second person he addresses, and over and above the first and the second person, there is God.

In the first place, it is important to realise that Kierkegaard's analysis of communication is different from scientific or conceptual communication. Scientific communication is through concepts, ideas, thoughts based on abstract rational capacity of the mind. This sort of communication does not pose any distinguishable problem. On the contrary, existential communication goes beyond the sphere of rational discourse. Kierkegaard is not speaking of communication in the social and political realm. He looks at the problem of communication from an individualist point of view. Existential communication is not descriptive, it is the expression and revelation of the very being of the individual. The end of human communication is not to command but to commune, it is achieved not through objectivity but by intersubjectivity. Martin Buber has made a distinction between impersonal relationship of 'I-It' ('It' can be replaced by 'He' or 'She') and personal relationship of 'I-Thou'. 'I-It' relationship cannot be spoken with the whole being because this kind of knowledge is independent of the observer. 'I-Thou' relationship is personal immediate relationship, the whole personality of the individual is involved in it; I is completely involved and responds fully to the other person. This is what Buber calls 'a personal meeting', the personal is based on the experience of Thou, and the relation of cause and effect cannot be applied to the 'personal meeting'.

Kierkegaard maintains that direct communication of existential truth is not possible, because it presupposes certainty and finality. The mode of objective communication is direct because it is indifferent to the existing subject (communicator). On the other hand, the indirect communication cannot be indifferent to the communicator, it is concerned with the subject because it

contemplates inwardly. Kierkegaard calls this 'double reflection'. The reflection of the inwardness confers upon thinker a 'double reflection', so to say, because in thinking he thinks the universal, but existing in his thought, he becomes infinitely interested in his own existence. The first reflection is thinking of the universal, the second reflection is the assimilation of the universal in one's own existence, in inwardness. The ability to communicate truth inwardly is an art. To quote Kierkegaard, "The greater the artistry, the greater the inwardness.... Wherever subjective is of importance in knowledge, and where appropriation thus constitutes the crux of the matter, the process of communication is a work of art, and doubly reflected."⁴ The common ground between artistic activity and existential communication is the human interior. The meaning an artist seeks to convey is of reality as it is experienced and lived through, not as it is described or stated. He expresses what is inarticulate and ineffable. As T. S. Eliot says that 'all poetry is a raid on the inarticulate'. Artistic activity is the expression of feeling, which cannot be conceptualised. An artist expresses himself indirectly through symbols which are suggestive, evocative, indefinite and non-cognitive. Jaspers has used the word cipher which is a unique symbol and cannot be verified. As he says, "Symbolism has at the same time an unfathomable depth which it alone transmits the light of indefinite being."⁵

Indirect communication is through the emphatic use of signs which properly executed leads to the Socratic art of maieusis. Socratic method was indirect which consists in leading the reader to a point where he finds out for himself what the author has been trying to convey to him. All that Socrates could do in the manner of communication was to assist others negatively by means of his maieutic art or 'midwifery' in order that they might arrive at the truth by themselves. Socrates was essentially a midwife who could deliver but not bring forth the new life. Indirect communication tries to bring about a certain revelation in the recipient and at the same time it awakens one's own authentic existence. Both the communicator and recipient act independently and retain their individuality. The attempt to communicate the whole of my being is bound to shatter. Communication thus becomes the cornerstone as well the stumbling block of Kierkegaard's existentialism.

The communication of the unique and the singular becomes more difficult when Kierkegaard describes the relationship between man and God which is wholly subjective and personal and therefore is highly incommunicable. The unique religious experience is highlighted by the myth of Abraham. However, this entire elaboration of the religious stage has to be comprehended symbolically, for this is not the realm of discursive reasoning. Thus acknowledging the inadequacy of language, Kierkegaard says, "Abraham is silent but he cannot speak and therein lies his anxiety and dread .. Speech is a consolation which translates me into the universal."⁶ The ethical demands that Abraham should speak, so that others can understand him. Abraham knows that he cannot make others understand through language. There is a great clash between the ethical and the religious. Abraham experiences anguish and dread because of the constant struggle. Thus it is at the religious stage that man realises the essential anguish of the human situation. For it is here that one feels completely alienated from others because others look upon him from universal demands of ethics. Kierkegaard's approach towards religious experience is a-social and is a-moral. But the question is would not religious experience be transformed into mysticism when it becomes highly individual, private and incommunicable ?

Is the image of man portrayed by Kierkegaard adequate ? To answer this, one has to evaluate critically Kierkegaard's notion of subjectivity. Our criticism may be divided into two parts: (a) criticism of the internal inconsistency of Kierkegaard's position (b) criticism of Kierkegaard's neglect of external factors which are essential for a comprehensive approach towards man. Kierkegaard's notion of subjectivity suffers from certain internal weaknesses. On the one hand the very nature of this notion of subjectivity is such that it cannot be defined by any rational means of analysis, still he makes an attempt to explain — the idea of truth and subjectivity. Every expression—even if it is one of clarification involves in varying degrees some rational explanation. If truth is subjectivity then it should not be expressed at all. However irrational existence a philosophy might have to deal with, it cannot altogether dispense with conceptualisation.

But even if such conceptualisation and characterisation of man as defining himself in and through his actions, were excused

as unavoidable, the question still arises as to whether such a characterisation puts us into the right perspective. This leads us to what we have called the external criticism. Kierkegaard seems to have overemphasised the subjective and irrational character of human existence, ignoring the fact that communication involves factors which are objective. It is right that in the process of communication, one does not determine the other; but this interpersonal relationship certainly brings about a change in the other person. The individual is not a 'windowless monad'; he has got a reciprocal relationship with his fellow-beings. He is continuously becoming a different person, for his every experience is a part of continuing process. Kierkegaard's notion of subjectivity is extremely individualistic. The task of the subjective thinker is only to reflect on his inward reality. The existential man is not supposed to be interested in anything else in the world. One need not be a social scientist in order to point out the multi-dimensional personality of the individual, which develops within a social-context. The conclusion that the individual himself is moulded in many respects, including those of his choices and decisions, though reciprocal relationship with others, is inescapable, even though such factors may limit man's consciousness of his existential situation.

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NOTES

1. Blaise Pascal : *Thoughts (Pensees)* Trans. by W. F. Trotter, in the *Harvard Classics*, 1956, p. 98, No. 277.
2. S. Kierkegaard : *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Trans. by David F. Swenson, Princeton, 1944, p. 226.
3. *Ibid.* p. 176.
4. *Ibid.* pp. 72-73.
5. K. Jaspers : *Philosophy*, Vol. 3 Trans. by E. B. Ashton, p. 129.
6. S. Kierkegaard : *Fear and Trembling*: Trans. by Walter Lowrie, p. 106.