**COMPARISON OF KIERKEGAARD’S STAGES TOWARDS AUTHENTIC PERSONHOOD AND STEVE PAVLINA PATH TO ENLIGHTENMENT**

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**ABSTRACT**

Soren Kierkegaard (b. 1813–d. 1855), widely regarded as the father of existentialism, distinguishes three stages of authentic personhood: aesthetic, ethical, and religious. Kierkegaard seems to suggest that people progress through these stages in life. Steve Pavlina, on the other hand, argues that people can create their meaning through conscious actions that require reflection. Using the analytic method, this paper explores Kierkegaard’s theory of stages and man’s path to authentic personhood, comparing and contrasting it with Steve Pavlina's path to enlightenment. An endeavor will be made to show how Kierkegaard's authentic personhood is similar in many ways to Steve Pavlina’s path to enlightenment and also reconcile the struggle for truth found in both of these individuals' philosophies. The conclusion reached is that these two ideologies prove fruitful in other fields of research, e.g. in understanding the stages in the development of the child.

**Keywords:** **Soren Kierkegaard stage in life’s ways. Steve Pavlina conscious evolution. authentic personhood in Kierkegaard. Discover-Your-Purpose.**

**INTRODUCTION**

In this paper, I will explore Søren Kierkegaard’s (b. 1813 d. 18555) life and philosophy, regarding his theory of stages[[1]](#footnote-2) and what it means to be an authentic person, comparing and contrasting it with Steve Pavlina’s[[2]](#footnote-3) path to enlightenment. Using the analytic method, an endeavor will be made to show how Kierkegaard’s authentic personhood is similar in many ways to Steve Pavlina's path to enlightenment. An attempt will be made to reconcile the struggle for truth, found in both of these individuals' philosophies, as a necessary component of coming into contact with something beyond oneself, contact that is subjective, personal, and highly passionate. Kierkegaard believes squarely in the Christian tradition of faith in Jesus Christ as a necessary means to attain salvation. While Steve Pavlina believes that people can create their own meaning through conscious actions.

According to David Banach (2010, P. 2), “the modern conception of man is characterized more than anything else by individualism." “Existentialism can be seen as a rigorous attempt to work out the implications of man’s being in the world of his individualism” (MacDonald, 2001, P. 2). Existentialism then becomes the philosophical approach that is preoccupied primarily with human existence in the world. Man is seen as a defiant, free individual who, even though he is a part of nature, nevertheless stands out from his grounding in the universal. Because of their enormous contribution to existentialism as a movement, Soren Kierkegaard and Fredrick Nietzsche are often regarded as the fathers of existentialism.

“Existentialism as a historical movement in philosophy took its name from Kierkegaard’s phrase existential dialectic” (MacDonald, 2001, P. 2). According to Kierkegaard (1985), as we shall see, the whole notion of starting with a "pure being" and moving from it to exist is absurd. For this reason, existentialism has also been defined as a philosophy that declares as its first principle that existence is before essence. (Omoregbe, History, P. 38)

Like Kant, Kierkegaard distinguishes between what it means to exist and how our human existence may be said to relate to the religious. Nythamar Fernandes De Oliveira (2001, P. 231), argued that Kierkegaard's original contribution to what has become known as existentialism and post-modern thought cannot do away with its religious roots. What exactly constitutes the very kernel of thinking about the meaning of being and reality in Kierkegaard's dialectics? Is life truly lived in stages? What does "authentic existence" mean for Kierkegaard? Who is an authentic individual in Kierkegaard’s view? What stages does the individual progress through to realize him/herself and to live an authentic experience? How can one contrast Steve Pavlina's account of his path to enlightenment with Kierkegaard's stages in life's ways? These are the questions facing anyone attempting to compare and contrast Kierkegaard’s philosophy with Steve Pavlina’s path to enlightenment.

In his early writings, Kierkegaard addressed these topics indirectly, and pseudonymously. According to Kierkegaard (1946, P. 2), these writings were done to expose the fallacy of organized religion, especially in the church of Copenhagen, and also the rationalism of Hegel’s philosophical systems. Stephen Dunning (1985, P. 35), describes Kierkegaard's philosophical goals by stating that he was "trying to find a way of realizing an authentic religious experience that was not subject to the rigorous rationalism prevalent at the time and doing away with systematic philosophizing

By way of comparison, Steve Pavalina's path to enlightenment is characterized by one’s willingness to create one's own meaning. Like Kierkegaard's "Christian", Steve Pavlina’s path to enlightenment is theoretically attainable by passing through different levels of consciousness, which requires a high degree of self-reflection. Steve Pavlina (2005) argued that the path to enlightenment is hopeful in its belief that all can come to truth through awareness and wisdom.

This notion of moving through different levels of consciousness to arrive at the truth is similar to Kierkegaard's knight of faith (1946, PP. 23–26). who accepts God's paradoxical nature, compelling him to suspend his moral obligations in order to enter into a highly subjective and personal relationship with HimThe knight of faith is also struggling to overcome different levels of consciousness, as is with individuals on Steve Pavlina’s path to enlightenment. Both the knight of faith and the individual on Steve Pavlina’s path to enlightenment are struggling to attain a higher purpose. This struggle toward the higher purpose is, and remains, entirely personal and highly subjective by nature.

**EXISTENTIALISM**

In the last few decades, especially since the end of the Second World War, a highly complex philosophical movement that derives its major ideas from a human understanding of life has been greatly developed; this movement is generally referred to as "existentialism." Though many existentialist philosophers reject the term or the name for its doctrine, these philosophers are still classified as existentialists. Today we refer to Heidegger’s existential philosophy, the philosophy of existence by Karl Jaspers, and Sartre's existential philosophy. All these forms of thought have been inspired by Sren Kierkegaard.

Existentialism found an especially strong foothold in France because of the circumstances of that period. In his work, The Existentialist Reader: An Anthology of Key Texts, Paul S. MacDonald (MacDonald, 2001, P. 2), explains that"... in these extraordinary years of upheaval and danger,

Several publications by several mostly unknown philosophers would dramatically reshape the central topics of immediate philosophical concern. These writers became engaged in articulating a new vision and understanding of the human person, which was a reaction to some cultural and intellectual issues". He further identified these issues as "the failure of the enlightenment project of reason, the anonymity of bureaucracy in the modern state, the alienation of the human being through oppression, the collapse of an elitist ethics, and the falling away of Christian beliefs among the intellectuals" as the reasons why existentialism became hugely popular in Europe (MacDonald, 2001, P. 2).

Scholars propose many different possible definitions of the root word "existentialism," which is generally taken to mean the philosophy of human existence. This definition usually means something different from what is ordinarily meant by it. In existentialism, existence is restricted to human existence. The existentialist philosophers, according to Joseph Omoregbe (2005, p. 39), "are not concerned with the existence of stone, trees, or animals but only with human existence." In other words, all other kinds of being are, but they do not exist. " Martin Heidegger (1965, P. 39), expressed this by saying: "The being that exists is man." "Man alone exists." Trees are, but they do not exist. Angels exist, but they are not real., but he does not exist.

Existentialism, therefore, is a philosophy preoccupied with what it means to exist as a human being. The Existentialist philosophers analyze and describe the characteristics of human existence using philosophical works and also popular writings, plays, and novels. For the existentialists, to exist means to be personally committed to a freely chosen way of life and to take responsibility for your way of life. It has been described as "the philosophy that emphasizes the uniqueness and isolation of the individual experience in a hostile or indifferent universe, regards human existence as unexplainable, and stresses freedom of choice and responsibility for the consequences of one's actions." (Omoregbe, History, 39).

Existentialism is more concerned with subjectivity than objectivity. For Kierkegaard, the important question is not "what is objective truth?" but rather "what is truth for me?" This is the truth that touches my existence, the truth that I am willing to live by, and the truth that I can base my life on. Traditional philosophers were preoccupied with abstract essence rather than concrete existence, but existentialism is preoccupied with concrete existence as opposed to essence. Sartre expressed these by saying that "existence precedes essence". (Omoregbe, 2005, p. 51), including

The main themes of existentialist philosophy are all drawn from human existence, which includes irrationalism, man as a being in the world, authentic and inauthentic existence, freedom, choice, and responsibility, anguish, commitment, and death.

**HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND LIFE OF SOREN KIERKEGAARD**

Sren Aabye Kierkegaard was born on May 5th, 1813, in Copenhagen, Denmark, the year Denmark went bankrupt. He was the youngest of seven children born into a wealthy and respected family of Michael Pedersen Kierkegaard, but had a different mother, Ane Sorendatter. His mother was quiet, simple, and not formally educated. Kierkegaard's father, on the other hand, was melancholic, deeply religious, and intelligent.

In 1830, he enrolled at Copenhagen University and began to study theology, as his father had wished. He didn't take his theological studies very seriously, though he read a lot of philosophical works. During this period, Kierkegaard attended many dinners and the theater. Kierkegaard received his doctoral degree in theology in 1840 and also inherited a large sum of money from his father. This paper will focus on three major experiences that shaped Kierkegaard's life and thoughts. Surely, more experiences contributed to Kierkegaard's thoughts, but for this paper, only these three are relevant.

The first major event that shaped his life happened after Kierkegaard discovered, on his twenty-second birthday, that his father had stood upon a rock on the Jutland Heath of his boyhood home and cursed God. This Kierkegaard described as an "earthquake". The knowledge of this event had a profound effect on Kierkegaard. Then, a few years later, Kierkegaard described in his journal how his father confessed to him that he had seduced his mother while she was still a maid in the family household. The knowledge of these events made Kierkegaard not enter the ministry or get married. Marriage required intimacy, and he was embarrassed by the fact that he was illegitimately conceived. He was ashamed of his father's sinful behavior. This, of course, led to the beginning of his rebellious behavior while in college. He would later call his reaction to the knowledge of his father's sins his "aesthetic stage," which was characterized by the pleasure of pleasure.

His life up until this time had been lived primarily to try and please his father. At the discovery of his father’s sin, Kierkegaard severed ties for three years. He was free to live the life of a hedonist while pursuing his passion for poetry, good food, leisure, and various intellectual pursuits. Around Easter 1838, Kierkegaard had a mystical and profound experience that led him to repent and seek forgiveness for his rebellion. According to Walter Lowrie (1942, P.123), "It was during this time that he was heard to often remark," "I am a penitent."

It is important to note that this stage in Kierkegaard's life set the stage for his existential philosophy. He would later comment that he never really left the aesthetic stage completely. But it is obvious from his writings at this time that this was a period of self-reflection and discovery. Not only was he concerned with the moral life, but he was also actively searching for a deeper meaning in his life. We find this struggle in Steve Pavlina's path to enlightenment as well. According to Walter Lowrie (1942, P.82), Kierkegaard’s thoughts and feelings at this point in his life can be described as follows:

[…]What I need is to become clear in my mind what I must do, not what I must know--except in so far as knowledge must precede every action. The important thing is to understand what I am destined for, to perceive what the Deity wants me to do; the point is to find the truth which is truth for me, to find that idea for which I am ready to live and die.

The second major event in Kierkegaard's life revolved around his relationship with a lovely young lady from Copenhagen, Regina Olsen, whom he met while on the aesthetic stage. He fell deeply in love and became engaged to the seventeen-year-old daughter of a Copenhagen politician, but later broke this engagement. Despite his deep love for her, Kierkegaard believed that his life as a thinker made him unsuitable for marriage, particularly to Regina Olsen. Up until this moment, Kierkegaard's main goal was to expose the fallacy of "Christendom" in Denmark. Kierkegaard felt he could not proceed with the marriage because his melancholy would ruin the life of this young lady from Copenhagen.

He was too melancholy, a psychological character he inherited from his father, and thought she would never be able to live with him once she got to know about his disease. This was something of a religious experience for young Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard would later declare this event (1948, P. 25), although when relating the story of Abraham to be a "teleological suspension of the ethical" In other words, God had a higher calling for him outside and beyond this world of duty, ethics, and domestic ties. He was destined for an authentic religious experience, which would require a "leap of faith" beyond his present moral duties. Kierkegaard’s relationship with Olsen became a major influence on his philosophical work.

The third major event in Kierkegaard's life revolved around his rejection of the influential German idealist philosopher, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831). Kierkegaard frowned at Hegel’s claim to have been able to encompass the whole of reality within a speculative system. According to Joseph Omoregbe (2005, P. 187), Hegel believed that reason could penetrate the depth of reality, into the ‘absolute’, and unfold its inner structure. This absolute confidence in the power of human reason was characteristic of the age of reason, which was itself a reaction against the dominance of faith in the Middle Ages. In so doing, it exaggerates the power of human reason.

Hegel’s philosophy is based on the logic of dialectics, in which the thesis is negated by the antithesis, and both the thesis and the antithesis are taken up in a synthesis. Hegel had great confidence in the power of human reason, which he believed was capable of penetrating the inner life of the absolute and grasping it. The absolute is a self-thinking thought, and it can be known through human reason. Hegel further affirmed that the rational is real and the real is rational, meaning that the absolute is reason, objectifying itself and manifesting itself as the totality of reality. Comic history is an unfolding of this process, and the history of philosophy is the progress of the absolute in coming to know itself.

On the other hand, Kierkegaard argued that God could be understood or reached through logic. God was greater than, not equivalent to logic as opposed to Hegel. The only way to reach God, according to Kierkegaard, was through a leap of faith, which required one to embrace the absurd and the unexplainable. Hegel conceived of the state as the highest authority and a manifestation of the Absolute. As a result, a person must submit to the system or state. For Kierkegaard, this means the systemization of Christianity by the State, which was happening at that time in the Kingdom of Denmark. Kierkegaard conceived the individual as higher than the state and true Christianity as the direct opposite of what he saw in the Church of Denmark. Following Hegel’s logic, Christianity will become an illusion.

After Kierkegaard rejected Hegelianism, he developed his philosophy of existence based on his experience or stages in his personal life. Stephen N. Dunning (1985, pp. 182-183) argues that "the first two stages are characterized by a distinct set of beliefs and behaviors that are easily identifiable, whereas the last stage, the religious, is characterized by a highly personal, subjective, and non-rational leap of faith." Kierkegaard died on November 4th, 1855, and was buried in the churchyard in Copenhagen.

**STEVE PAVLINA: THE MEANING OF LIFE**

In 2005, an American self-help author described in a blog post how he transitioned from one identity into another by passing through stages similar to Kierkegaard's stages in life's ways. Steve was born and raised in Los Angeles and attended a private Jesuit high school but later rejected his Catholic upbringing for a more aesthetic mode of existence, which includes stealing for fun. He was later arrested for grand theft in Sacramento, California, and given 60 hours of community service, which he claimed launched him on a path to enlightenment. Below is an excerpt from Steve Pavlina’s (2005) story which is necessary for this paper.

 […] For the first half of my life, until the age of 17, I was Catholic/Christian, baptized and confirmed. I went through eight years of Catholic grammar school followed by four years of Catholic high school. I was a boy scout for several years and earned the Ad Altare Dei award. I prayed every day and accepted all that I was taught as true. I went to Church every Sunday with my family. All of my friends and family were Christian, so I knew nothing of other belief systems. My father was an altar boy when he was young, and his brother (my uncle) is a Catholic priest. One of my cousins is a member of Campus Crusade for Christ. In high school, I went to optional religious retreats and did community service, both at a convalescent home and a preschool for children with disabilities. I expected to be Catholic for life.

[…] But near the end of my junior year of high school, I went through an experience that I'd have to describe as an awakening. It was as if a new part of my brain suddenly switched on, popping me into a higher state of awareness. Perhaps it was just a side effect of the maturation process. I began to openly question the beliefs that had been conditioned in me since childhood. Blind acceptance of what I was taught wasn't enough for me anymore. I was intensely curious, not hostile about it. My family was closed to discussing the whole thing, but I did find a few open-minded teachers. My high school (Loyola High in Los Angeles) was a Jesuit school, and the Jesuits are very liberal as far as priests go. I was disappointed though. What I found was that regardless of their education and their much greater life experience, very few of my friends and teachers ever bothered to question their beliefs openly. And that gave me a huge shot of doubt. I thought, "If everyone is just accepting all of this blindly and no one is even questioning it, why should I believe it?" Over months the doubt only grew stronger, and I transferred more of my faith from my Catholic upbringing to my intelligence and senses. Despite these conflicts, my senior year in high school was by far my best.

[…] I aced all my classes and was accepted into six colleges as a computer science major: Cal Tech, UCLA (partial scholarship), UC San Diego (full scholarship), UC Berkeley, Carnegie Mellon, and Harvey Mudd. I opted to go to UC Berkeley because, at the time, its computer science program was the highest rated in the country. I was very happy to move out and finally be on my own. In the fall of 1989, I moved to Berkeley and lived in the freshman dorms. I think my Catholic upbringing was like a coiled spring — as soon as I left behind the environment that kept the spring coiled, I immediately shot to the other end of the spectrum. But I went way too far with it. I not only shed my old religious beliefs but along with it went my whole concept of morality. I was like the guy in Mark Twain's short story "The Facts Concerning the Recent Carnival of Crime in Connecticut," a story about a guy who kills his conscience.

[…] I started embracing all the stuff that was the opposite of my upbringing. I completely lost all interest in school and hardly ever went to class. I didn't care at all about getting my degree. I went to parties almost every week and drank a lot; one time doing about 14 drinks in a row and waking up with no memory of how I got to bed. I had to ask friends to piece together pieces of the previous night. To this day I’m certain I drank more alcohol before the age of 21 than after (and I’m 34 now). I also started shoplifting — a lot. The first time I did it simply because it was something I’d never done before, something I could never do as a Catholic. It was like a task to be marked off a checklist. But I soon became addicted to the emotional high of it, and I kept doing it more and more, eventually to the point of doing it several times a day.

[…] I virtually never stole stuff to keep it. I'd give away most of what I stole to other people, or I'd just throw it in the trash afterward. About a month into my first semester, I got arrested. 4 months probation. I took about a week off and went right back to it, although I became a bit more cautious about it. One week after the probation period ended, I got arrested again and ended up with 40 hours of community service. I did the service and soon went right back into stealing. But I refined my methods, even more, making it much harder for me to get caught. A few close calls only gave me more confidence. I grew so accustomed to this behavior that I could steal without my heart skipping a beat. No fear. So I had to keep upping the dosage. At first, I started setting little goals, like seeing how many large candy bars I could fit in my pockets at once (13), or trying to steal every bottle of white out from the student store in one day (over 50 bottles). Then I just gave away all the candy and white to fellow students.

[…] But things went from bad to worse when I met another student who was about as morally corrupted as I was, and we became fast friends. I stopped doing the (risky) shoplifting, and together we planned and implemented a two-person theft where the odds of getting caught were very low. It worked again and again, and we both started making some actual money from it. To play it safe and not keep hitting the same locations over and over, we expanded our circle to go way beyond Berkeley to an almost 100-mile radius, from San Francisco to Sacramento to Fresno. Over about a year, we gradually escalated each theft to a dollar value that was now well into the grand theft range (at the time any theft above $400). I think our weekend record was about $2400 worth of stuff. Eventually, I got caught again, this time for grand theft. Not good. Before this arrest, I had discovered that because of my priors, I'd be looking at about two years in jail if I got convicted of grand theft. Not good at all.

[…] And to make it even worse, I was arrested in Sacramento, about a 2-hour drive from Berkeley. But my partner couldn’t wait around and expose himself too, so he drove back. I was stuck sitting in the county jail for an ID hold. I never stole with ID on me, and I gave the police one of my many fake names, but they of course didn’t take my word for it, so I had to wait in a cell while they ran my fingerprints trying to figure out who I was. So there I was… 19 years old, sitting in jail on Superbowl Sunday 1991. Expecting that I was about to lose my freedom for the next two years. That was the sound of reality crashing down around me. For the first several hours, I was in shock, unable to think straight. Maybe it was the orange clothes. But with nothing to do but sit and think for an indefinite period, I started asking all the big questions again. What the hell was I doing here? Was this me?

[…] But now my answers were very different. I realized that this context was all wrong. I resigned myself to the fact that I'd have to spend the next couple of years in jail, but I also knew that I had changed permanently and that this way of life had now ended. Two years in jail… this would be a painful lesson. But at least I had learned it. I didn't have a complete replacement context yet, but I began to plant the seed of one. Three days later I was released. They'd succeeded in identifying me. I was given a court date and sent on my way, charged with felony grand theft. It was around sunset. At first, I walked around the Capitol building and garden in Sacramento, just enjoying the fresh air and happy that I'd at least have a few more months of freedom.

[…] Eventually, I got a lawyer and met with him to discuss my case. Before I could open my mouth, he said, "Well, I've reviewed your case, and since this is your first offense, I'm pretty sure we can get it reduced to petty theft, so you'd only end up with some community service if we plead no contest. I'm on great terms with the D.A., so I'm pretty sure he'll go for it. I strongly advise against going to trial, as the evidence against you is overwhelming, seeing as you were caught red-handed." First offense? Huh? Immediately my brain filled with thoughts like, "Why does he think this is my first offense? Doesn't he know about my priors? And if he thinks this is the first offense, will the rest of the court also think it's a first offense? Should I correct my lawyer on this oversight?" After mulling it over in my mind for a few seconds, I decided I'd damn well better keep my mouth shut. It might backfire on me, but there was a chance that it might frontfire too. I figured that worst case, I'd have an angry lawyer to deal with. But the best case was too good to pass up. A grand theft was a felony; petty theft was only a misdemeanor. I had to take the risk. Of course, taking risks was something all too familiar for me.

[…] Several weeks later we went to court. I planned to keep my mouth shut as much as possible and only say the absolute minimum. Outside the courtroom, I reviewed the court's basic info about the case. They had indeed connected me with my real identity, but they also had my fake name listed too. No priors were listed. My best guess is that someone screwed up and searched for priors based on my fake name instead of my real name, even though the case was going to court under my real name. Human error? Computer error? Who knows? But one big error either way. Sure enough, when we got into the courtroom (a place that was becoming increasingly familiar), the court remained under the assumption that this was the first offense and processed it as such. I pleaded no contest to the reduced charge of petty theft and got 60 hours of community service. I did those 60 hours like it was a dream job, knowing that it could have been 17,520 hours. My head was spinning. What had just happened? The next two years were now mine again.

[…] Soon I moved back to L.A. and got a nothing retail sales job for $6/hour and took a few nothing classes on the side. I'd had quite enough excitement over the past couple of years, and I just wanted to enjoy a quiet normal life for a while… spend some time below the radar. I reconnected with old high school friends who were going to UCLA and hung out at their fraternity house at times, but I usually stayed clear of the parties. I spent a lot of time analyzing my experience at Berkeley, needing to understand it to be able to prevent myself from ever going down that path again. But I kept my thoughts about all this to myself. I knew I had a lot of personal rebuilding to do, but I also knew that I couldn't go backward. The morals and beliefs by which I was raised were broken, but living without a sense of conscience wasn't an option. Was a belief in God required to live by a code of ethics?

[…] I became aware that despite how negative my experiences seemed, they forever changed me in a good way too. By going through those experiences, I had unlocked access to a part of myself that was previously dormant — my courage. Of course, I had to learn how to temper this courage with some sense of morality and common sense. So during this year of quiet reflection, I gradually shifted my context to create a new personal code of ethics to guide me. But instead of being rooted in religion, I built it in a more humanistic manner, integrating values like honor, honesty, integrity, humility, and fairness. It was a very deliberate and conscious rebuilding process that would continue for at least a few more years. But even during this time of 1991-92 as I was just beginning, it gave me some stability and gradually became my most empowering context up to that point.

[…] In the Fall of 1992, I decided to go back to college, starting over as a freshman. This time I went to Cal State University, Northridge (CSUN). I devoted myself to the study of time management and learned to use my time very efficiently. I aced all my classes and took my straight-A report cards from both schools back to the dean, now asking for 39 units for my second semester. Over the next decade, I experimented with agnosticism, various new-age belief systems, Buddhism, objectivism, and more. I even tried Scientology for a few months just to see what it was like. I wanted to assimilate a variety of different contexts, experience them from the inside, and then back off and compare their strengths and weaknesses. This produced a lot of instability in my life but also tremendous growth. In the long run, as I integrated new empowering beliefs and shed disempowering ones, my life began to improve across the board. For the past year, they've been fairly stable, and 2005 has by far been my best year ever. My overall religion has effectively become a religion of personal growth. Every year I continue to tweak my beliefs to try to bring them into closer alignment with my best understanding of how reality works.

It strikes me that the meaning of life for Steve Pavlina was existential in the sense of believing that meaning and purpose are not imposed from the outside by some authority but that instead one should create one’s meaning for oneself. This argument is very similar to Kierkegaard’s views on subjective religious experience.

**KIERKEGAARD THREE STAGES IN LIFE’S WAYS**

In The Stages of Life’s Ways, which is a sequel to either/or, Kierkegaard presented an intensely poetic vision of the three stages or spheres of existence: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. He presented the work as a bundle of documents fallen by chance into the hands of a bookbinder. The greater part of the work was devoted to considering the religious sphere. Anthony Storm (2005) summarized it thus:

[…] William Adham is the author of the first of the three parts of the Stages, entitled In Vino Veritas (literally, "In wine, truth"). "Af ham" is Danish for "by himself". Since this work is the companion piece to Either/Or, it may seem surprising that we encounter a new pseudonym. However, since the religious stage is presented for the first time, the new pseudonym may be justified…The "Married Man", also known as Judge William, is the author of the second portion of the Stages, entitled "Reflections on Marriage". He was also the author of the second (ethical) portion, or part two (the "Or" part), of Either/Or, otherwise known as author B. He symbolizes the ethical stage in his advocacy of marriage…contrasted with the backward-looking (esthetic) concept of recollection. Frater Taciturnus is the author of the third section (the religious stage) in the Stages. […] Frater Taciturnus is Latin for the "brother who remains silent"…Taciturnus claims that he retrieved this diary from the bottom of a lake while he was relaxing with a naturalist, who was doing research. Thus, Taciturnus' find of the book, wrapped in a watertight container, is similar to Bookbinder's find, which is again similar to Eremita's find of the documents comprising Either/Or. Note, further, that a naturalist and, if you will, a supernaturalist, are together on the lake, each with their finds. It is as if Kierkegaard gives us a new either/or, a choice between the findings of the rational scientist and the artifacts of the religious heart.

The ideology behind the three stages is that they are a continuous progression to maturity.

**THE AESTHETIC STAGE**

The first stage is the aesthetic stage, which is characterized by an indulgence in the pleasurable things of life. The aesthete lives for the moment, possessing qualities of immediacy and pleasure. The aesthete is usually immature because they are ruled by desire and emotions. What is considered good at this stage is what gives ultimate pleasure, not what is morally right or wrong. Because the aesthete person’s life has such an uncertain foundation, it may appear meaningless. Walter Lowrie (1948, P. 27) argued that "Kierkegaard described his existence in the aesthetic realm as a vain search for anchorage on a boundless sea of pleasure".

In his work, "Kierkegaard's Stages Toward Authentic Religious Experience And The Bodhisattva Path To Enlightenment," Dan Johnson (2002, p. 4), distinguishes two kinds of aesthetic lifestyle, namely, reflective and non-reflective immediacy. He argued that alcohol, drugs, and casual sex are examples of non-reflective aesthetics, while lust and other actions that require planning are examples of reflective aesthetics. Even though this stage is necessary as a step toward authentic religious awareness, it is, however, marked with pitfalls and illusory promises of contentment. The aesthete person will eventually get tired of the sense of boredom and this will lead him/her to the ethical stage. Kierkegaard claims that all of his previous pseudonymous works were written to instill dissatisfaction with the aesthetic life in the reader.

**THE ETHICAL STAGE**

The second stage, according to Kierkegaard, is the ethical stage. This stage is characterized by obligations and adherence to duty. This is the ethical life, the code of conduct set by society, the state, and organized religion. The ethical stand is in direct opposition to the religious because it is safe, secure, and within the boundaries of rational thought. It is dutiful and an individual can measure his or her adherence to the moral norms laid down by authorities. The ethical person is, therefore, one who has the intellect to see the fallacy of the aesthetic person who is constantly distracted by external things.

**THE RELIGIOUS STAGE**

Kierkegaard considered the religious sphere to be the highest of the three modes of existence. For Kierkegaard, the religious sphere is highly subjective and personal and can be divided into two types, namely, religion A and B. Anthony Storm (2005) summarized D. F. Swenson's definition of these types this way:

[..] Religion A is characterized by a passive relation to the divine, with the accompanying suffering and sense of guilt. But it is distinguished from religion B, or transcendent religion, in that the tie which binds the individual to the divine is still, despite all tension, essentially intact... The distinctive feature of transcendent religion can be briefly stated. It consists of a transformation or modification of the sense of guilt into the sense of sin, in which all continuity is broken off between the actual self and the ideal self, the temporal self and the eternal. The personality is invalidated and thus made free from the law of God, because unable to comply with its demands. There is no fundamental point of contact left between the individual and the divine; man has become different from God.

The best example of religion B was presented by Kierkegaard in fear and trembling, where Abraham was fighting within himself to go beyond the ethical and "suspend" it to enter into a relationship with the divine. The paradoxical nature of Abraham’s action is seen in the way in which it can be communicated. It cannot be rationally justifiable, but Abraham enters into the realm of subjective truth. Marika (2005) argued that

[..] What made Abraham a man of faith is not just that he accepted God’s command – the move of infinite resignation – but that he had faith all along that God would restore Isaac to him.” Abraham sacrificing his son is in no way justifiable as the right thing to do but Abraham has the greatest faith which Kierkegaard called the teleological suspension of the ethical; the possibility of committing unethical acts given a higher calling from God to achieve a higher calling. Abraham is isolated from others by his faith, unable to justify his actions to his family. By faith, Kierkegaard means something which, in response to the call of God, takes a person outside of the realm of socially acceptable behavior, outside of the limits of human reason. It requires a 'leap of faith because it can't be done by human reason.

For Kierkegaard, to be in a state of subjective truth is to truly be an individual who struggles with advancing through the different spheres of life.

**COMPARISON OF KIERKEGAARD’S STAGES TOWARDS AUTHENTIC PERSONHOOD AND STEVE PAVLINA PATH TO ENLIGHTENMENT**

There are similarities between Kierkegaard's theory of stages and Steve Pavlina's path to enlightenment. Despite their religious upbringing in childhood, both Steve Pavlina and Kierkegaard began their quest for authentic existence on the aesthetic stage. For Kierkegaard, it started after he discovered his father's sin, while for Steve, it was after he rejected his Catholic upbringing and the code of ethics that had influenced his life. The aesthetic life for both of these individuals becomes a form of psychological hedonism, which ultimately leads to anxiety and boredom.

Furthermore, the aesthetic stage has no solid framework from which to make coherent, consistent ethical choices. Both Kierkegaard and Steve Pavlina came to this conclusion while traveling down different paths. For Kierkegaard, he realized that the aesthetic stage leads to boredom and anxiety after the initial excitement of passion has faded away, while for Steve Pavlina, it was through reflection. Both came to discover it through private introspection, thereby participating in the process of growth and change.

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While Kierkegaard called it the stages in life’s ways, Steve Pavlina (2005) seems to think that it is Conscious Evolution, i.e., "a process in which something passes by degrees to a different stage, especially a more advanced or mature stage". He says this includes the evolution of thought, society, knowledge, and the capabilities of life. In the end, both found their mission. For Kierkegaard, it was to dispel the false Christianity in the kingdom of Denmark, while for Steve (2005), it was to "encourage and assist people in pursuing their conscious growth, to help them find a path away from a life of quiet desperation and towards a life of courage, purpose, and responsibility."

Both Kierkegaard and Steve Pavlina found that ethical life is based on a set of rules established for the good of society. For Kierkegaard, as it was for Steve Pavlina, it means the effect their actions will have on others, which evokes a more mature set of principles. So Steve Pavlina (2005) puts it in his blog,

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Both Kierkegaard and Steve Pavlina found that ethical life is based on a set of rules established for the good of society. For Kierkegaard, as it was for Steve Pavlina, it means the effect their actions will have on others, which evokes a more mature set of principles. So Steve Pavlina (2005) puts it in his blog,

After I reached adulthood and began seriously pondering the question of how to live, the first major stopping point was essentially where Aristotle left off. In my early and mid-20s, I spent a lot of time working on living virtuously. I saw living the best possible life as becoming a person of virtue: living with honor, integrity, courage, compassion, etc. I listed out the virtues I wanted to attain and even set about inventing exercises to help myself develop them.

Because he was concerned with how to be a Christian in the Kingdom of Denmark, Kierkegaard considered the religious life to be the highest stage of existence. For Kierkegaard, the relationship with God is exclusively personal. For this reason, he argued that the only way to make life worthwhile is to embrace faith in God and that faith necessarily involves embracing the absurd, which requires uncertainty, going beyond logic and reason. He proposed the "Night of Faith," which he illustrated with Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, as the apex of the religious stage. Steve Pavlina seems to suggest that the pursuit of greater courage and consciousness is man’s highest calling. Steve Pavlina (2005) presented this in his blog thus:

I see the pursuit of greater courage, consciousness, and conscience as an end in itself. However, such pursuits will solve many problems along the way, and often this is easier than attacking such problems directly. For example, you can attack problems like being overweight, being addicted to smoking, and having unsatisfying relationships and make very little progress across the board. But if you work on developing your courage, awareness, and self-discipline, these problems will solve themselves they'll become almost trivially easy.

One of the main differences between Kierkegaard and Steve Pavlina’s path to enlightenment is the goal toward which both aim. For Kierkegaard, faith in Jesus Christ is a necessary means to attain salvation, while for Steve Pavlina, Conscious Evolution is self-perfection leading to measurable growth for the benefit of the individual. The knight of faith and the thinking man in Steve Pavlina’s Conscious Evolution are different in their view of the human condition. While both would agree that self-reflection is a necessary step toward authentic existence, Kierkegaard, as a Christian, believes that this is attainable through faith in God, whereas Steve Pavlina believes individuals can achieve this through their conscious human reason, which requires courage, purpose, and responsibility.

**CONCLUSION**

The ultimate aim of this research on Kierkegaard and Steve Pavlina was not merely to analyze their thoughts, but to understand man’s path to enlightenment through their respective philosophies. Kierkegaard is a figure I greatly respect and regard as having a good insight into some features of human society, even though he was a vindictive loner with an inferiority complex.

Many similarities run between Steve Pavlina's path to enlightenment and Kierkegaard's stages toward authentic personhood. What I consider valid about both of these viewpoints is the way they resonate with my search for an authentic life. I believe that the path to enlightenment is a conscious search for the ultimate question that many philosophers have tried to answer. I.e., what is the meaning of life? Both Kierkegaard and Steve Pavlina sought to answer this question through their respective ideologies.

In conclusion, I think the need for meaning is a universal need shared by all humanity. Both Kierkegaard and Steve Pavlina offered their respective viewpoints to answer these questions, thereby making significant contributions to those who seek meaning in their lives. Kierkegaard and Steve's respective viewpoints developed here may also prove fruitful in other fields of research, e.g. in understanding the stages in the development of the child.

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1. For Kierkegaard, there are spheres or stages in human development. Therefore,I will use the terms `stage' and `sphere' interchangeably. For a discussion of these terms and their interchangeability, see H. Liehu, Sören Kierkegaard's Theory of Stages and its Relation to Hegel (Helsinki: Hakapaino Og, 1990), pp. 14-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Steve Pavlina (April 14, 1971) refers to the American self-help author, motivational speaker, and founder of Dexterity Software. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)