

Although a mere mention of Kierkegaard's basic principles does not begin to suggest the breadth and richness of his thought, perhaps a brief listing of six of his first principles concerning human existence would help us to understand something of his tremendous influence:

(1) "Becoming is prior to being" -- This starting point of all existentialism reverses the formula in metaphysics prevalent since the time of Plato and Aristotle; namely, that essence precedes existence. Plato said that forms were eternal and thus preceded the existence of particulars; Aristotle said that forms were nothing in themselves, but existed only in existing particulars. However, both agreed that in the order of being, essences, substances, natures always preceded their existence. In fact, they both held that the existence of a being necessarily implied that that being had substance, essence, and a nature. However, in Kierkegaard's view existence (primarily human existence) is prior to all forms, essences, or natures. A being's existence determines its essence, not the other way around. This emphasis is directed against every form of determinism.

(2) Human existence must be understood subjectively. Objective knowledge tells us nothing about the realm of human experience. What is needed is passionate involvement and reflection upon one's inner life.

(3) Man is free to decide his own existence, completely self-determining as to his nature or essence. This "dread freedom" brings upon man a great anxiety. Kierkegaard wrote, "When I behold my possibilities, I experience that dread which is 'the dizziness of freedom', and my choice is made in fear and trembling."

(4) Whenever the decision not to decide his own existence predominates in a man's life, then existence is determined for him by hereditary and environmental forces. This abandonment of his individuality and merging of himself into the crowd is unauthentic existence. On the other hand, whenever the decision to assert or to actualize his freedom predominates in a man's life, then he enters authentic existence. He acknowledges his responsibility for what he is and what he becomes, throws off the influences of all determinative factors, and decides what he shall be.

(5) For the existential man the achievement of authentic existence is no guarantee of happiness. On the contrary, it is the acceptance, without illusion, of anguish and loneliness.

(6) The fear of death is the finally decisive limitation to man's freedom. To be fully free, man must be willing to accept death, at any time and in any form. As long as he is unwilling to accept death, society and circumstances can place severe limits upon his choice of mode of existence. He can then choose only among those ways of being which are tolerated by society. However, if he does this, he abandons his individuality and loses authentic existence.

Now, however, Kierkegaard, believing in God, found that this conception of human existence involved him in a paradox, a dialectic, in which man is found to be in a tension between finitude and infinitude, between the relative and the Absolute. He came to the conviction that man's task as finite is to realize