

# The Notion of Spheres In Soren Kierkegaard: A Philosophical Insight

ONWUNALI KEVIN UGOCHUKWU

Department of Philosophy, Imo State University, Owerri, Imo State. Nigeria.  
+234 803 338 049 71  
scholakevin@yahoo.com

## ABSTRACT

The interchangeability of the word “sphere” with “stage” in the three stratas of life experiences of an individual in the writings of soren Kierkegaard raised arguments amidst the admirers of the works of soren Kierkegaard. While some scholars appreciate using the word “stage”, others admire using the word “sphere” this wanton usage of stage and sphere hitherto culminated into an academic distortion. This amidst other distractions like the pseudonymous writings of some of Kierkegaard’s works have credited the texts of soren Kierkegaard as not achieving any real value, idealized and a retrospective picture of authorship. Consequently, posing a problem to understanding the Kierkegaardian texts and his mind.

This article tends to demystify the seeming shrouded darkness in understanding precisely the mind of Soren Kierkegaard. This article most verily makes easier to understanding the texts of Kierkegaard by eventually taking a position in the wanton usage of these words, “sphere” and “stage”

**Keywords;** Spheres, Faith, Reason, Ethical idea

## 1 INTRODUCTION

There are three spheres on an individual’s lifeline. The spheres are; The Aesthetic, The Ethical, and The Religious.

This is Kierkegaard’s most influential doctrine, the single contribution with which he is praised by the entire histories of philosophy. Kierkegaard (1941:448) writes in this view:

There are thus three spheres of existence,  
The aesthetic, the ethical and the religious.  
Two boundary zones correspond to these  
three, irony, constituting boundary between  
the aesthetic and the ethical; humor, as the  
Religious<sup>1</sup>.

James Collins, (1953:42) discussing the Kierkegaardian spheres writes;

It is his way of stating the basic choices  
which confront the concrete individual,  
in his search for mature self-possession.  
They are the existential determinants of  
Human character, the general modes of  
living, which serves as rival patterns and  
principles<sup>2</sup>.

## 2 SPHERES OF AN INDIVIDUAL’S EXISTENCE

Soren Kierkegaard through the movement of these spheres, from one sphere to another, leads the individual into existence, so that one discovers oneself and by the act of choice, commences to exist.

This is the dialectical movement in Kierkegaard.

Ogbonna P. Anyaehie writes:

Dialectic is the key to understanding  
Kierkegaard and not vice versa. . .  
Dialectic is an invitation to the human  
existential universe, the human basis,  
which uses its apex in religious life  
(in becoming a Christian) in personal  
appropriation of the divine revelation<sup>3</sup>.

The totality of Kierkegaard's dialectic is that, it leads the individual into existence, to make a self discovery. Whence, the self is discovered, the individual beholds reality or actuality, and this is the fact of existence.

### 2.1 HOW THE IDEA OF THE SPHERES MAY HAVE EVOLVED

But the curious mind may quickly ask, how did Kierkegaard come about these spheres of his existential philosophy?. Well, scholars like James Collins, Anyaeh P. Ogbonna, have tried to offer answers to this question, out of a rigorous study on Kierkegaard. Anyaeh P. Ogbonna (ibid: 61) writes:

This whole idea seems rather to have  
been forced on him by reflection upon  
his own experiences, and he also sought  
the leading principles under which he  
could organize his literary studies, his  
extensive observation of human characters,  
as well as the lessons of his own life<sup>4</sup>.

Therefore, Soren Kierkegaard got the idea from reflection about copious studies on different philosophers, scholars and particularly

Hegel. An examination of Soren Kierkegaard's early papers and journals, reveal that, for long time, he searched uncertainly, in quest of the leading principles, under which he could organize his literary studies, his extensive observation of human characters and the lessons of his own life. Initially, he applied the terms 'stage' and 'sphere' wantonly, to any field of human endeavour, such as political or military interests. Gradually however, he came to reserve these terms, in their pregnant and technical senses, for the most fundamental commitments and organizing ideals available to man kind.

Attention has been called to a misunderstanding which the term 'stage' may produce. It may be believed that, an individual is required to begin with the aesthetic level of the ladder of life and then mount up in succession to the ethical and religious levels. In this respect, the term 'sphere of existence', is less misleading, since spheres may well be treated as simultaneously present and as overlapping.

### 2.2 PROBLEM OF THE KIERKEGAARDIAN SPHERES OF EXISTENCE.

But here comes a problem with the Kierkegaardian spheres of existential fullness, passing from the aesthetic, through the ethical, to the religious life. What remains of the lower sphere after an individual has chosen a higher level or even the highest, Soren Kierkegaard did not tell.

James Collins (ibid: 46)writes:

The 'dethroned' sphere of existence does  
not simply disappear, for there are esthetic  
and ethical needs and powers in every man  
which cannot be eradicated. But Kierkegaard  
is unwilling to make the flat statement that all  
lower values, once they are recognized to be  
genuine and yet interior, can be incorporated on  
the higher level and made to serve the higher ends<sup>5</sup>.

Soren Aabye Kierkegaard, in a subtle response to what happens to the lower sphere when one has chosen a higher one, explains that, an individual's real predicament is to be placed between aesthetic way of living, and a thoroughly religious one. No permanent footing can be maintained on a purely ethical basis. From this explanation, it is crystal clear that, ethical way of life has no much predicament on an individual as the aesthetic and religious outlook. Most probable then, any move to explain what happens to a lower sphere of life when one has chosen a higher one may land Soren Kierkegaard into an inconsistency and confusion of ideas since, he will have to explain what remains of the ethical way of life when an individual chooses the religious way of life. In relation to this,

James Collins (ibid: 47) comments:

...but so great is the gap between the latter and Christian religiousness that Kierkegaard (or at least his 'philosophical' Pseudonym, Johannes Climacus), sometimes denied that, anything from the aesthetic and human order, survives the leap of faith. He lacked full confidence in the power of the supernatural order to transform natural abilities and perfections without compromising Its own transcendent character<sup>6</sup>.

### 2.3 WHY KIERKEGAARD MAY HAVE CHOSE ONLY THREE SPHERES OF EXISTENCE.

As for why Soren Kierkegaard chose only three spheres of life instead of five or even ten. Renowned academicians of quote and repute like, James Valone, Anyaeh P. Ogbonna, James Collins registered their opinions. Valone James reveals that, the values by which people live are fewer, therefore, no point creating unnecessary spheres of life. Anyaeh P. Ogbonna, highlighted that, when Kierkegaard writes on each of these stages of spheres, he is dealing with a unique and distinct lifestyle, each of which is complete in itself and incompatible, moreover, with any of the other lifestyles. Therefore, the lifestyle being unique and distinct and as Valone reveals, being fewer gives no reason for creating more spheres of life. James Collins on the other hand, explained that, Kierkegaard borrowed Hegel's triadic structure of thought, nonetheless, he applied the tripod chain of thought into human existence. James Collins (ibid: 48) communicates:

Kierkegaard profited a good deal from The study of Hegel's Logic, but he concluded that Hegel's identification of the structure of thought with that of Being, was contradicted by human experience. Hence, he sought to ally the didactical principle with the movement of concrete human choices, rather than with the supposed unfolding of the absolute 'Begriff' or rational concept. The individual in his personal character and freedom, rather than the individual as the locus of universe and necessary laws, is the responsible agent in the Kierkegaardian dialectic of the modes of existing<sup>7</sup>.

Valone James, Collins James, Anyaeh P. Ogbonna, all ended up in human existence, of commitments and organized ideas. Valone James, (1983:10) interpreting Soren Kierkegaard, writes:

What he is trying to communicate through his doctrine, however, is that

there are only a finite number of values  
in human life. So while people may live  
their lives, their values, systems are  
uniquely, distinctly tailored to their own  
personalities and lifestyles, there are only  
a limit number of fundamental values  
Commitments and organized ideas<sup>8</sup>.

This notion of spheres leads us into introducing the three spheres of life's way, namely, the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious.

### 3 THE AESTHETIC SPHERE

In the first part of his work, either/or (enten-eller), Soren Kierkegaard shows us a variety of lives and types, beginning from the lowest which is the sensory, the aesthetic individual or aesthete is essentially a driven individual, even if he or she thinks that he or she is pursuing a life purpose. The aesthete is easily fascinated. In this pursuit of the sensuous and the sensual which at the end is a chasing after the enjoyment, the aesthete is unable really to communicate because he or she is solely concerned with him or herself. James Collins (ibid; 55), describes this action of the aesthet in this form;

Sensual immediacy is the basic state of the  
Esthete individual, when passion is admitted  
only at the sensuous level and apart from the  
moral will. It inevitably turns into abstract  
and selfish lust. The individual loses power  
over himself and is made prisoner of the search  
for the pleasurable moment, a moment which  
can never be realized to complete satisfaction.<sup>9</sup>

since the life of the aesthete realizes no complete satisfaction it ends up in despair. When the curious mind asks, but why despair?. Soren Kierkegaard explains that an individual has within himself something, which will not be satisfied by a sensory life. This something is eternal. It is characteristic of the aesthete to belabour one side of human life, the corporal, the finite, the temporal, yet the other side is nonetheless there. This side constantly makes itself felt by an anxiety. The term which best describes this call of the spirit in the sensory world, Soren Kierkegaard calls dread (angst). Dread is therefore an indication that the individual has the eternal within himself. But the individual who has felt the dread within and yet obstinately persists in an existence in the sensory sphere will end in despair. On this notions 'dread' and 'despair', Soren Kierkegaard wrote two of his highly inspired books, namely, *the concept of dread* and *the sickness unto death*.

In Soren Kierkegaard's work. *The Seducers Diary*, translated by Manuel Davila, July 2004, the Aesthete, is seen in its most sophisticated form. Johannes, the seducer is a 'reflective Aesthete', who gains sensuous delight not so much from the act of seduction but from engineering the possibility of seduction. His real aim is the manipulation of people and situations in ways which generate interesting reflections in his own voyeuristic mind. This Aesthete uses artifice, arbitrariness, irony and willful imagination, to recreate the world in his own image. This type of existence, is seen to be emptily self-serving and escapist. It is a despairing means of avoiding commitment and responsibility. It fails to acknowledge one's social debt and communal existence. And it is self-deceiving, in so far as, it substitutes fantasies for actual states of affairs. According to Ogbonna Anyaeh, (ibid:64):

He is strictly an observer, a non-  
participant and his life is one of cynical  
non-involvement. He refuses to commit  
himself to anything, which might

suggest fixed or observed standards of morality and rejects anything which might give direction and purposes to his life<sup>10</sup>.

The Aesthete, is a slave to himself, and frivolities direct his imagination with pleasure as his guide and rule. Most distinctly outspoken, Francis Lescoe (1974:34) reacted to the aesthetic sphere and the Aesthete in this manner:

One having no fixed principles, except that he means not to be bound to anything. He has but one desire, which is to enjoy the Sweetest of life, whether it is purely sensual Pleasure or more refined. Epicureanism of the Finer things in life, and art, and ironic enjoyment of one's own superiority over the Rest of the humanity, and he has no fear except that he may succumb to boredom<sup>11</sup>.

#### **4 THE ETHICAL SPHERE**

It is from the mouth of Judge William, the spokesman for the ethical sphere, that the notion of the ethical lifestyle is developed. This ethical sphere is characterized by reason, self-determination and equilibrium. The appropriate mode of expression is the responsible use of language, for it is only language, through tenses and pronouns that gives rise to self-consciousness. The term "ethic" in Kierkegaard's work has more than one meaning. It is used to denote, (1) A limited existential sphere, which is superseded by the higher sphere of the religious life. (2) An aspect of life which is retained even within the religious. In the first sense, 'ethics' is synonymous with the Hegelian notion of customary mores. In this sense, 'ethics' represents 'the universal' or more accurately, the prevailing social norms. The social norms are seen to be the highest court of appeal for judging human affairs. Even human sacrifice is justified in terms of how it serves the community, so that when Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia, he was regarded as a tragic hero since, the sacrifice is required for the success of the Greek expedition to Troy. Soren Kierkegaard chose to use Judge William to represent the personality type, reflected in the ethical sphere of existence.

##### **4.1 THE ETHICAL IDEA**

The ethical ideal is to bring every aspect of an individual's being into conformity with the universal law, so that what is essentially human may be expressed in the individual instance. The ethical existence is able to supply the greatest lack of aesthetic life, namely, a strong will. The absence of this factor accounts for a tendency of aesthetic individuals to be irresolute and ineffective in practical affairs and skeptical in matters of intellect. Judge William's ethical wisdom may be compressed within a single precept: 'choose thyself'. His view is expressed in the following passage, as written by Soren Kierkegaard: (1974:87-88)

In choosing absolutely, I choose despair and in despair, I choose the absolute, for I myself, am the absolute, I posit the absolute, but in complete identity. With this I can say that I choose the absolute which chooses me, that I posit the absolute which posits me.<sup>12</sup>

#### **5 THE RELIGIOUS SPHERE**

To be religious for Soren Kierkegaard means, having absolute relationship to the Absolute. Valone, (Ibid: 141) explaining deeper on what it means to be religious, writes;

This in the first place assumes that there exists a chasm between the transcendent and the secular which cannot be medicated, second, this grief is reflected in the person; third, our life is a self-struggle, in which both the secular and the transcendent content for being is the ultimate goal of our life; fourth, the attempt to make the secular the ultimate end of life, will end in failure and despair, the initial step to the religious life is to recognize all these.<sup>13</sup>

##### **5.1 FAITH AND REASON**

At this sphere of existence, the difference between faith and reason is striking for Soren Kierkegaard. One's movement from the aesthetic to the ethical sphere, requires an act of choice and commitment. It ushers one into the presence of reason, in as much as, moral law is an expression of one's universal reason. But the movement from

the ethical to the religious sphere is based on faith. For Soren Kierkegaard, Christian faith is not a matter of regurgitating church dogma. It is a matter of individual subjective passion which cannot be medicated by the clergy or by human artifacts. Faith, is the most important task to be achieved by a human being, because only on the basis of faith, does an individual have a chance to become a true self. This self, is the life work which God judges for eternity. The religious stage is achieved by acknowledging God and openly confession one's sinfulness, choosing oneself as, guilty and hoping for divine forgiveness. Soren Kierkegaard gives a reason for this as, before God, the individual is in the wrong.

The individual is thereby, subject to an enormous burden of responsibility, for upon his existential choices, hangs his eternal salvation or damnation. Anxiety or dread (angst), is the presentiment of this terrible responsibility, when the individual stands at the threshold of momentous existential choice. Anxiety is a two-sided emotion; on one side, is the dread burden of choosing for eternity, on the other side, is the exhilaration of freedom in choosing oneself. Choice occurs in the instant, which is the point at which, time and eternity interact- for the individual creates through temporal choice, a self which will be judged for eternity. But the choice of faith is not made once and for all. It is essential that faith be constantly renewed by means of repeated avowals of faith. This is the non-relational leap of faith, which makes a human individual greater than the Angels. It is in choosing God and by making the choice for God, that the individual transcends the finiteness and temporality of his own existence, and establishes a personal relationship with his creator. This sphere of existence, is the summit of life's ways attained through the process of reflective thought.

## 6 CONCLUSION

From this article, we have come to realize that , diverse values of different people are expressed in multiple forms. For Kierkegaard, these values, commitments, organized ideas, find their expressions in these three unique, distinct, outstanding personality types, each boldly representing a sphere of way of life. These spheres of life's ways are, The Aesthetic, The Ethical, and The Religious ways of life. The ways of earthly existence is hitherto, dependent on these ways of life experiences with Soren Kierkegaard has situated in three stratas. These will enable the human individual to decipher which pattern of life he or she would choose, as the journey here on earth continues. The Aesthetic sphere offers a life style which is inadequate to fill up the human cravings for fulfillment. The Ethical sphere offers an ethical and morally appreciate able life style which goes a long way in fulfilling the human craving for fulfillment. Nonetheless, human wants are insatiable and thus, the ethical sphere is unable to bring human life to final happiness or fulfillment. At this juncture, the religious sphere comes to make perfect what the aesthetic and ethical spheres were unable to do. The religious sphere supplies the human individual with the lack in the aesthetic and the ethical spheres. This lack is, one returning to his or her creator which is contained in the religious sphere and if one returns to God one will have that eternal peace which is that fulfillment and happiness that is so dearly sought for.

## References

- Kierkegaard Soren; *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans;  
David Swenson and Walter Lowrie, Princeton: Princeton University Press,1941,p.448.  
Collins James; *The Mind of Kierkegaard*, Chicago: Henry, Regney Company,1953, p.42.  
Ogbonna Anyaeh P.; *A Preface to Kierkegaard*, Owerri: Austin Printers and Publishers with Clacom publications, Philippines, India, 2005,p.43.  
Ibid; p.61.  
Collins James, Op.cit.,p.46.  
Ibid; p.47.  
Ibid; p.48  
Valone James; *The Ethics and Existentialism of Kierkegaard: Outline for a philosophy of life*, London: University Press of America,1983,p.10.  
Collins James; *Op.cit.*,p.54.  
Ogbonna Anyaeh P.; *Op.cit.*,p.64.  
Lescoe Francis; *Existentialism: with or without God*, new York: Alba house Press,1974,p.34.

Kierkegaard Soren, *Either/ Or*, volume 2, trans., Walter Lowrie, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1974, p.87-88.

Valone James, *The Ethics and Existentialism of Kierkegaard, Outline for a philosophy of life*, Lanham: University Press of America, 1983, p.141

This academic article was published by The International Institute for Science, Technology and Education (IISTE). The IISTE is a pioneer in the Open Access Publishing service based in the U.S. and Europe. The aim of the institute is Accelerating Global Knowledge Sharing.

More information about the publisher can be found in the IISTE's homepage:

<http://www.iiste.org>

The IISTE is currently hosting more than 30 peer-reviewed academic journals and collaborating with academic institutions around the world. **Prospective authors of IISTE journals can find the submission instruction on the following page:**

<http://www.iiste.org/Journals/>

The IISTE editorial team promises to review and publish all the qualified submissions in a fast manner. All the journals articles are available online to the readers all over the world without financial, legal, or technical barriers other than those inseparable from gaining access to the internet itself. Printed version of the journals is also available upon request of readers and authors.

### **IISTE Knowledge Sharing Partners**

EBSCO, Index Copernicus, Ulrich's Periodicals Directory, JournalTOCS, PKP Open Archives Harvester, Bielefeld Academic Search Engine, Elektronische Zeitschriftenbibliothek EZB, Open J-Gate, OCLC WorldCat, Universe Digital Library, NewJour, Google Scholar

