CHAPTER II

THE INDIVIDUAL, A PHILOSOPHICAL OVERVIEW

The concept of the individual is central to philosophical discourse. Usually philosophers tend to study it in contraposition to the concept of the universal. The sense read in it is then of the particular, as opposed to the universal which represents a class-essence. The relation between the two viz. the universal and particular, or individual, is studied in a variety of ways as being participation, inherence, entailment and so on. Semantically, the word "individual" suggests a negation of a division, and, thereby an integer, whose unity, (and, possibly the unieity), cannot be bartered away under any circumstances. The unity itself is understood by some philosophers as the concretely existing being as opposed to a general nature, or essence. Here, the principle of individuation may be rooted in materiality. Elsewhere, philosophers have traced the principle of individuation, as applicable to human beings, in particular, as a center of consciousness, the source of intellection, volition, instinct and so on. The existentialist philosophers, who claim to give us a human ontology, have traced the individuality to a being endowed with freedom. It is incumbent upon me to study the concept of the individual, in general, before I study it in Søren Kierkegaard. But why is this concept important for Kierkegaard?

A. Kierkegaard’s Importance for the Individual

Søren Aabye Kierkegaard, born on 5th May 1813 in Copenhagen, Denmark, was to shake the philosophical world, especially in the continent, with a revolutionary philosophical movement of existentialism. He was the seventh and the youngest child of his parents, and was brought up religiously in an environment, which demanded his
absolute obedience. Nevertheless, being the youngest, he enjoyed certain freedom which was denied to his other brothers and sisters. His close relation with his father introduced in him a sense of melancholic gloom and religious guilt that was to characterize his life all through; his melancholy and guilt emanated from a parent who believed that both he and his family lay under a mysterious curse and divine retribution. The death of his father in 1838, and the breaking of his engagement to Regina Olsen, are the two major events in his life which are said to have changed his outlook on life profoundly.

In deference to his father’s wishes, Kierkegaard began studying for a degree in Theology, but soon lost direction of life and began a somewhat wayward life, the guilt of which was to weigh heavily on him throughout his life. After the death of his father, Kierkegaard worked and acquired the degree he had long kept at bay. His works reflect deeply his personal experiences, which succinctly indicate that he wrote keeping in mind the “individual”, as opposed to the universal. All his works, in one way or the other, are said to have been addressed to the particular. His earlier pseudonymous and the psychological, and the later religious, works target the individual. His hostility to the academic establishment was also partly a result of his belief in the individual, who, in his opinion, was lost sight of by the theory-building scholars. The intellectual climate of his period was rooted in rationalizing, thanks to the preferred Hegelian Idealism that was the quintessence of essentialism. Being objective was the fashion, and the universal was considered as the embodiment of truth. Everything was generalized, and such an essentialistic philosophy took no account of the subjective experiences of the concretely existing individual and their significance for the development of a particular philosophical outlook. The particular was rejected in favour of the general, the individual, in favour of the group, the “crowd”. Crowd-mentality was the order of the day. It was against this that Kierkegaard rose as the philosopher of the individual. This is why he talks of “choice” in Either-Or, “the leap of faith” of the lonely knight of faith in Fear and Trembling, and of “the individual”, depicted in a series of scenes and situations in The Stages on Life’s Way, and of the “existence” of the concrete individual in the Concluding Unscientific Postscript. Kierkegaard’s writings, in one way or another, bore
witness to the necessity of affirming the integrity of the individual in the face of such universalistic philosophical trends of his times. The same can be said to have been true of his life, too.

Significantly, the epitaph on Kierkegaard’s tomb in Copenhagen reads, “Here Lies That Individual”, at once vehemently establishing the centrality of the concept of the individual in his life and thought. The more so, because Kierkegaard himself chose the epitaph before his death. Now, no man would go to the extent that Kierkegaard did, if it were also not a matter close to his heart. The fact, that he decided that the concern with the individual should be close to his heart in life as well as in death, suggests his devotion to the existential thought, advocated in his writings. It is not without reason that history of philosophy claims him to be the “father of existentialism”. Indeed, the concept of the individual is a recurring theme in his entire philosophy. Though there is no independent work on the concept as such in his voluminous literary output, it may be said to make its appearance everywhere in his writings.

By addressing his literary output to the individual, Kierkegaard brings out the existential element in his works. He advocates the fundamental thesis of existentialism that only an individual can be said to truly exist. In direct opposition to the Hegelian idealism, he points out that existence is not a mental activity. Rather existence is individual, living, open to and attainable by all men, if only they will to do so. Existence is not a matter of intellectual abstraction, but an experience of all faculties, rational and sensual, brought into harmony through action and decision. It is only when feeling and willing are merged with thinking that man may be said to act, lifting him to a level of existence. It is only at this level that man is open to religion. For Kierkegaard, then, only he who truly exists is the individual. The reality of the individual is not given but consciously made. The individual is one who is the center of all faculties, at once rational, sensory, emotional and, above all, volitional. He is not a mere rational being, disembodied, as it were, faced with possibilities, capable of performing an act, and thus realizing his actualities. Rather he is an individual in whom desire, thought and action are
all put together as one, put together, they constitute his experience. Experience does not come to man automatically, it must be consciously chosen. We can make a distinction between “raw” experiences and the “significant” experiences. A great many experiences are such that they do not conduce to the quality of life, they do not affect man in the strict sense. They are the kind of experiences which the individual entertains in a trivial manner. But the significant experiences, on the other hand, conduce to the quality of human life. They affect man profoundly, and, in turn, the individual is called for total alertness and involvement. In order that the experiences affect him significantly, the individual must be conscious of the experience, and voluntarily choose the experience concerned and appropriate it. It is only in the choosing to act that man exists and experiences life significantly. This is so because existence is a continuous movement of flowing stream of decision and action, and not a stagnant pool of water.

It is true that Kierkegaard is a religious existentialist, but it is incorrect to brand all his works as conveniently “religious”. His genius is so versatile that some of his works have bearing on theology, philosophy, aesthetics and psychology. However, if the misconception of the nature of his works is conveniently subscribed to, it is in part due to his conviction that a man truly exist as an individual only in faith. It is this conviction that has made him dwell elaborately on man’s need for faith. The Concluding Unscientific Postscript ends on this high note of the individuality of human existence being constituted in faith. Living in a time when it had become the philosophical culture to be given over to the Hegelian speculations, Kierkegaard sought to do just the opposite. Hegelian idealism, he averred, made human existence so universal that it was treated as a sort of “mystery”. He further averred that there was a genuine need to resurrect the particular from the morass of the universal. Kierkegaard observed that speculations made existence impossible, and that one can have concrete human existence only by looking at the source of all existence. This he found in man’s personal relation with his creator, who gives him his particular type of existence. Kierkegaard can best be described as an existentialist because his works focus on the full implication of what it means to be concretely existing. His Concept of Dread and Sickness Unto Death explicate some of
these implications along with the emotional traumas experienced by man, as he goes about his day-to-day affairs.

The Hegelian emphasis on the universal at the cost of the submergence of the individual, or the particular, in the crowd, took a toll of the value of the individual. Kierkegaard was the first to envisage the disaster that was to follow. He relentlessly fought against the tendency of abrogating the individual. He therefore emerged as an outstanding rebel of nineteenth century thought. The recognition of his contribution was to come unfortunately only after his death, and that, too, only when the mankind was chastised by the two world wars. Kierkegaard’s thought was at its time genuinely innovative, too novel for its implications to be immediately understood and appreciated. Worse still, he was misunderstood even within the limited horizon of Copenhagen’s intelligentsia, which did not at any rate help to spread his ideas beyond his home country. Moreover, Kierkegaard wrote in Danish, and translations were hard to come by. Only after his death, in 1855, translations began to appear in fragments, and increasingly to influence the new European worldview immediately after the First World War. The English speaking world had to wait even longer, thanks to the bias of the Anglo-American philosophies against existentialism, with which Kierkegaard’s name came to be associated. However, with the atrocities committed by man against man on a scale unimaginable during the world wars, man clearly realized the need for specifically human values, which were talked about intensely by Kierkegaard long before the outbreak of wars. It can be said that in a way Kierkegaard could see the future, the consequences of destroying the integrity of the individual lost in the rabble; only none cared to listen. Kierkegaard saw how mere speculations on the human nature without any concern for the concrete existing individual would lead man into a hopeless predicament, which was ironically of his own making.

The influence of his thought in re-shaping the latter half of modern philosophy, especially in the continent, qualifies him as a pioneer, whose contribution cannot be ignored. He is a philosopher in a class of his own, and, yet, he set the trend for a new
philosophical movement that was initially called a “philosophy of life”, “philosophy of existence”, before it finally and technically came to be known as “existentialism”. He richly deserves the title the “father of existentialism”. Kierkegaard’s understanding of existence, as a key concept in human ontology, is unique, noble and subtle, which was something never heard of until he came along. He was honest enough to admit that the question of human ontology cannot be divorced from the religious concerns of man. This concern was to be presented, in his considered opinion, in a new philosophical movement that would somehow give primacy to the human existence as rooted in God as the ultimate living truth for man. If only the existing man can be the individual, then, speculations do not give us access either to existence or the individual; they give us only essences, which are universals. Where do we look for existence? Kierkegaard thinks that we need to look for existence within man, and not outside. When everything outside fails man, man has only himself to seek within himself. In this self-probing, man discovers the truth of the structure of his being as primarily anchored in God. His existence is authenticated by the exercise of his freedom, which is a divine gift to him. Therefore the meaning of his life is derived from his “walking side by side with God”, as it were. For this man has to be an individual in his concrete existence rather than in the abstracted essence. The relation that man ought to bear to God is a particular relation of the individual to an absolute particular. Herein lies the significance of the individual in Kierkegaard’s philosophy. This thesis is a modest attempt to study the concept of “the Individual”, as Kierkegaard understands it. But I need to project it against a canvas of the concept of the individual in western philosophy, in general. The survey undertaken however is selective, here. But it is hoped that even a selective survey will help us to appreciate Kierkegaard’s mission of locating the individual in the context of existence in his philosophy.

B. The Universal and the Individual (Particular)

There is a sense in which it could be said that the whole of western metaphysics is an extension of the problem of the relation between the universals and the individuals.
While this is generally acknowledged, it is not sufficiently highlighted that their relation is inextricably linked with the problem of existence. It is therefore imperative for us to ask the question how the universal and the individual are relevant to the study of existence. If someone were to raise the question, “What exists?”, it may be supposed that the most direct way of answering the question is to give a list of things, --people, trees, animals--, that actually exist around us in our environment. Such an answer however presupposes some system of classification that our mind spontaneously and naturally does of things into *kinds* of “things”. This at once suggests that the mind, by way of a conceptual apparatus, bestows a certain unity on the diverse objects of our experience. While things themselves are individuals, their concepts through which they are grasped are unifying; the concepts are universals. At this point of argument, one may jump to the conclusion, and, as a matter of fact, it was thought by some philosophers, that what really exist are only universals, and that they are further applied to individuals that come and go on the screen of our experience. But this does not seem to be the case, if we raise the question of the origin of the concept. When we inquire into the origin of concepts, or how the universal concepts can be derived, we cannot but end with concrete things. It is clear that questions about the kinds of things that exist are really questions, which should properly be addressed to particular (kind of) things. To illustrate. The universal concept of man as a rational being is derived from the fact that the individual man severally and everywhere has the capacity to reason. It is the outcome of observing particular man that he is qualified as a rational being. The mind brings into the open what it grasps as identical in the multiplicity of things. The similarity of the multiple things indeed is rooted in the formation of their universal concept. Concepts, or universals, come into use only after being derived from the particulars. Thus it would appear to us that the particulars are ontologically prior to universals. Thus “Socrates” involves knowing some facts about Socrates: that he was a Greek philosopher, that he lived at a particular period of history, that he was the teacher of Plato, that he was sentenced to death by poison and so on. Likewise, say, “Aristotle”. Of the many features that Socrates and Aristotle possess severally, the characteristic of being human, or rational being, is what they together share in common to classify them as “man”. This is the universal, a nature, an
essence, that many particulars participate in to be precisely what they are in their nature, as distinct from, say, “trees”. The grasp of such universals presuppose certain factors. While knowing universals like “rational being”, it involves understanding the language, the concrete particular objects and the process of abstraction from the particulars. All this, in turn, implies that what exists are particulars, and that universals depend on what can be thought about the particulars, thereby justifying a prior acceptance of the particulars.

(i) Aristotle

Aristotle is one of the greatest systematisers to have given us a cogent explanation of the problem of the relation between the particular and the universal. In acknowledging the primacy of the particular, he exhibited not only his realistic bias but also his departure from the Platonic idealism. The ontology of Aristotle is founded on the notion of ōnśia. This Greek word is commonly translated as “substance”, and thereby it roughly corresponds to the Latin substantia. Ōnśia however is derived from the Greek ōn, meaning “being”. Aristotle often uses being and ōnśia interchangeably, occasioning thereby some degree of difficulty in grasping the English translation of ōnśia as “being” and “substance”, in as much as the nuances of being and substance are not necessarily the same. For Aristotle, metaphysics is the study of being (ōnśia), but, in as much as the primary sense of being is substance, on which all other ideas of being depend, metaphysics is the study of substance and all that depends on it as beings. Everything is a being because it shares in the being as such. Thus all men are men in spite of their different size, color, age, race, nationality and so on. “Man-ness”, or human nature, is something about each concretely different man, and it makes him a man despite the unique characteristics making him this particular man. If we call a being a substance, it is because we want to convey a sense that it is basic, or fundamental, about something, after which we can say other things about it. What Aristotle seems to be suggesting is that a thing is more than the sum of its particular qualities, there is something “beneath” all the qualities, “supporting” them. However, we can know only specific, actual, individual and
determinate things, say, a man, a table. We can know a substance as that which is, only in a concrete individual, or a particular thing. Being derives its primary, therefore, its truest, meaning from the concrete. Substance in the primary sense is the individual substance, for Aristotle, composed of matter and form. Substance in the secondary sense is the formal element, or specific essence, that corresponds to the universal concept. Therefore, being, in its primary meaning, is found in the particulars, for example, in “Socrates”, and not in “man” as such, nor is it present in a quality attributed to “Socrates”, but in a substance which supports the qualities. All qualities, or beings, in the secondary sense, depend for their existence through their inherence on particular substance. If there were no particular substances, there would not be things that we call qualities. Hence, it may be concluded that only particular substances primarily exist, and they are composed of matter and form. For Aristotle, unlike Plato, only individual things are real, and they are given to us as the object of our senses 11.

Aristotle however admits the form (eidos) as something determining and forming, in so far as being is determined in its specific singularity. The form determines the being, all beings are beings that have been “formed” 12. The becoming of the being is regulated by the form. The form is not merely the end product, rather it determines from the outset the entire process of becoming 13. The form is not an element of the thing, or identical with it, but, as the principle of the structure of its material, it changes the thing from a mere collection of materials into a structured whole. To illustrate. The form of man is the principle, according to which his flesh and bones are organized towards a suitable end. The form makes a thing this definite being, and it is specifically the same in all the members of a species. The specific form of man is the same in Socrates and in Plato. This is suggestive of an important insight in Aristotle’s philosophy. Form cannot be the principle of individuation in sensible objects. The individuating principle, on the contrary, is the matter 14. Thus Socrates and Plato are the same in form (i.e. the human form), but they are also different, or individuals, in virtue of the different matter that is “in-formed”. Form, by uniting with matter, makes something to be a particular being.
Let us give another illustration. Assume that a house needs to be built. Without the building materials a house cannot be built. The form is always a universal, a secondary substance, as it were, and the particular may be said to originate from the universal. The particular originates in the act of individuation, and the principle of individuation is matter (hyle). Aristotle talks of two types of matter, primary matter and secondary matter. The former is the matter which is entirely undetermined, devoid of any form whatsoever, but which can be prepared to receive any form. The latter is the matter which is already formed in some fashion or another. For example, building materials which are used for a house. The secondary matter therefore is the matter that has received a definite actualization, but is still capable of receiving further actualization, for example, a house. What concerns Aristotle in the context of individuation is the secondary matter.

For Aristotle, that which exists is the particular substance, as against the universal. The particular individual is prior to the universal, and is composed of secondary matter and form. That which individuates the form is the matter. Matter, by limiting the form, creates an identity for the real object as the particular individual. The realistic predilection of Aristotle could not be more emphatic. Man thus is a combination of soul (form) and body (matter). Neither can exist without the other. Soul and body are not two separate things, but are rather the matter and form of a single unified substance. The soul (form) is the universal, which needs body (matter), in order to be actualized. All that exists requires the form as well as the body. Aristotle further says that the soul of man is a rational soul. The human soul has the capacity to reason, and is the center of all actions, in the sense that his intellect directs his every move. But the rational soul cannot perform any function without the body. In other words, the rational soul cannot either exist or function alone without the body. Man is a unity, a substance, thus an existing man is one who is at once both rational and an extension; he is both a rational and an extended being. Aristotle would say that man as a "rational being is con­corporated in the secondary-matter". Man is a rational being, but he can be known so, only through the execution of the functions of his rational soul. What better way would there be to execute, if not through the performance of an act. Now, to perform an act
means to be a sensible object, in other words, to be extended. To get the idea of man as a rational being, one has to first encounter the particular individual, who is necessarily “con-corporated”, or quantified. Because man has a body, which is the same as saying that he possesses extension, he is considered to be a particular, or an individual. He is a rational being (form), individuated by his body (matter). Thus man is an individual, one who is both a thinking-subject (res cogitans) and an extended object, or a “thought-object” (res extensa, res cogitata).

Aristotle’s principle of individuation is applicable not only to humans, in particular, but also to everything that can be found on this earth as a substance. Thus, for Aristotle, a dog, a plant, a stone, a piece of paper etc. are all individuals. Not only man, a thinking-subject, is an individual, but even a “thought-object” (res cogitata), for example, a pencil, is an individual. It is clear from the above that the main factor which would qualify a being as an individual is the element of extension, or matter. Being extended is what qualifies something as an individual. With Aristotle, the material basis of the concept of the individual came to stay in western philosophy. His ideas had tremendous impact on the scholars who followed after him. The classic example of refusal to break away from the grip of Aristotle is Aquinas.

(ii) Aquinas

In Medieval times, too, St. Thomas Aquinas, accepted Aristotle’s realistic approach of upholding the supremacy of the individual as that which exists. In talking about substances, Aquinas agrees with the Aristotelian distinction between the primary and secondary substances, and thus closely follows the Aristotelian hylomorphism: the particular, or the individual being, is a unity, or a combination of matter and form. Aquinas is of the view that only individual beings primarily exist. With regard to matter, too, Aquinas takes after Aristotle, when he talks of the first and second matter. Only the second matter can be looked upon as the principle of individuation. Matter and form represent potentiality and actuality respectively. Matter is a mere possibility that receives
in itself the actuality of form. Without matter, the form cannot be actualized in an object. By form Aquinas understood the limitation of matter to a definite being. A being needs a form to be determined in its totality, to be determined as a particular, as extended, - - in short, to be identified as "this", and nothing other than this particular thing. Like Aristotle, Aquinas places great stress on the fact that primary substance, or the first substance, includes matter, and does not exist solely by reason of the form. The primary substance, or a particular being, comes into being neither by matter alone nor by form alone, but by the unity of both matter and form. Form gives the actuality, the structure, "the framework" of a definite being, but without matter it cannot actualize being on its own. To actualize and limit the being, it needs matter. Only matter can individuate form, which then becomes an existing particular being. Aquinas is thus quite clear on the fact that only concrete substances, individual compositions of matter and form, actually exist in the material world. For Aquinas, too, that which exists is quantified by matter. Man exists, and he has a body (matter) as well as a soul (form). Every man exists as a particular, who is individuated and identified by his body.

We would miss the significance of Thomism in Medieval philosophy, if we think that Aquinas merely repeated the Aristotelian hylemorphism. Aquinas creatively reinterpreted the doctrine of hylemorphism, and amplified it to an extent that Aristotle had not envisaged. This contribution of Aquinas is not fully appreciated by the modern western philosophers. For Aristotle, matter is the principle of potentiality that is actualized by the principle of form. But Aristotle did not elaborate on the principle of existence. Aquinas, on the other hand, treated the unity of matter and form as essence, which is still a potentiality, open to be actualized by the principle of existence. Hylemorphism of Aristotle is now amplified and extended by Aquinas to a new dimension. Existence is the new form that actualizes the potentiality of the essence. It is the existence that gets delimited by the limitation of matter. Thus every substance is compounded of essence and existence. Infinite existence gets delimited by the limitation imposed on it by the receiving essence.
Thus, for Aquinas, in every created substance existence is proportionate to the receiving essence. (Only in God essence and existence are identical). That the quantified matter is the principle of individuation is fully accepted by Aquinas, while taking the Aristotelian hylemorphism to a new height. We can well understand why Medieval philosophy is rightly treated as a transitional phase from Greek philosophy to Modern philosophy. Aquinas, for all his Biblical moorings, asserted the reality of matter. His realism acknowledged the significance of the created world and the matter that is fashioned into a cosmos. The primary matter was to remain an important legacy of Greek philosophy, accentuated by Aquinas, and it has come to dominate the western thinking even to this day under the nomenclature of materialism.

(iii) Smart and Ryle

When people discuss metaphysical questions, they commonly find themselves arguing for or against materialism. Many philosophical thinkers have expounded their metaphysics, anchored in materialism. Till the advent of modern science and its corresponding technology, materialism could not find an adequate expression, but its growth in varied forms and fields has been spectacular in our times with positive sciences establishing themselves. Its influence cannot be left unaccounted for. One obvious way of taking materialism is as a doctrine of what there is, an account of the nature of things. In this sense, it is closely associated with naturalism. The central proposition of materialism is that nothing exists except matter, or rather, more appropriately, material substance and its modifications. There is a sense in which all sorts of non-material things, too, can be said to exist, for example, thoughts and feelings. The materialist does not deny this obvious facts, but argues that the “things” in question are not independent existences, and that they can be adequately explained as modifications of matter. That they are not independent existence can be made intelligible by the consideration that there could be no such things as thoughts or feelings unless someone or something actually thought or felt, just as there could be no such thing as “the spirit of the age” unless there were persons, institutions or ways of proceeding to embody it. A thought existing without relation to a
thinker is an impossibility. To think of it as an independently real is like thinking of a quality as existing independently of the thing it qualifies. It is true, in one sense, that we can abstract the quality and consider it in isolation but, in another sense, we cannot do so because for the quality to be there, there should be first of all the entity in which the quality inheres. The idea is that there must be subjects of predication which have qualities or stand in relation to them. Thus the doctrine of materialism, in its most basic sense, holds on to the matter, the extension, as that which is real. Nothing exists without material qualification.

A version of materialism that is much discussed in metaphysics today is the Identity Theory of Mind by J. J. C. Smart. This theory defines the "mental" in terms of the identifiable structures of the body, also known as epiphenomenalism. Thoughts, feelings, wishes and other so-called mental phenomena are said to be identical with states and processes of the body, more specifically, states and processes of the nervous system, or the extension of the brain itself. Thus, the having of a thought is identical with having such and such body cells in such and such states.

In metaphysics we also find thoughts which are, to some extent, psychological in nature. By "psychological" we ordinarily mean the study of human behaviours. In this light, metaphysics is often understood with the help of human behaviour. It is the contention of philosophers of mind that human mind is understood through behaviour. Professor Gilbert Ryle talks of mental phenomena in terms of bodily behaviour. He contends that behaviour is the working of the mind. All mental happenings can be, and are, reduced to behaviours, thereby giving a materialistic view of these happenstances. Man has behaviour only because he has a body. The life of mind, for Ryle, is far from being separate from the life of the body. Thus, according to Ryle, man is understood through his behaviour. To speak of man is to refer to what he tends, or is in a position, to do. Ryle does not rule out the mental life, but only presumes that it can be, and is, reduced to bodily behaviours. Ryle's main contention is that man cannot exist without his body, he is also an extended being. Body is part of his individuated being.
(iv) Descartes

On the contrary, the Mental Substance Theory, which hails chiefly from Descartes and his followers, upholds the view that human being has both a mind and a body, and that they are ordinarily harnessed together. The body is subject to all mechanical laws and is public. But the mind, or the mental life, of man is not witnessable by other observers, and is private. I am aware of my own stream of consciousness, to which others generally do not have access. Only I am capable of knowing what is going on in my mind. The mind and body do interact with each other, and this is only a contingent relation and not a necessary one. But the mind can exist and continue with all its functions even if there were no body. The mind can exist in a disembodied state. Finally, it is the mind which is of paramount significance, because it can exist independently. Nevertheless, the material aspect of this mental substance theory cannot be ignored. Even though the Cartesians stress on the mind, as that which can exist independently, they did take into account the body as that which constitutes the individuality of man. Here, too, the material aspect is not denied. It is clear from the above that, no matter what form metaphysics is to take, materialistic, psychologistic or spiritualistic, the material basis of the concept of man as an individual cannot be denied; indeed it continued to persist in all expressions of metaphysics.

(v) Strawson

An extremely fine expression of this is to be found in the descriptive metaphysics of P.F Strawson in our contemporary times. Strawson’s work, Individuals, embraces the Aristotelian tradition. In this book Strawson advocates a descriptive metaphysics to ascertain whether there are any basic particulars. In doing so, he looks away from “revisionary” metaphysics. Revisionary metaphysics tends to revise the actual structure of thought. Many philosophers, in doing metaphysics, present an improvised version of ideas already presented. But, for Strawson, an examination of the actual structures of
thought was considered to be the best way to do philosophy. For him, “Revisionary metaphysics is at the service of descriptive metaphysics” 29, revisionary metaphysics is made possible because of descriptive metaphysics. Strawson considers Descartes to be a revisionary, while Aristotle is a descriptive metaphysician 30. Strawson defines descriptive metaphysics as essentially an attempt to “describe the actual structures of our thought about the world” 31. He intends to investigate not merely what basic particulars are “in themselves”, but to show the fashion in which we speak about particulars. Strawson is of the view that, for anything to be a basic particular, it should be identified. He considers “sound” to be an individual, but not a basic particular because it cannot be identified. Strawson in his chapter on “sounds” attempts to demonstrate that, in a purely auditory universe, our language is functionally inadequate. The description of such an auditory universe leads us to conclude that our language simply cannot adequately describe a no-space universe. It seems impossible even to speak about a universe without using spatial analogies. Strawson says that there is a certain necessity in our thinking and speaking in terms of a spatio-temporal framework or context. Strawson identifies the space-time structure as the framework of our actual thought about particulars. He argues from this claim to the conclusion that material bodies are, in a certain sense, basic to our identification of particulars. Material bodies are basic particulars, because spatio-temporal system does not exist independently of the things that occupy it, but is defined only by the relations of those things.

Again, the category of material body is the only one competent to constitute the framework actually used in particular-identification. Strawson claims that material objects are the basic forms of the particular from the point of view of speaker-hearer identification. Basic particulars are not only identifiable, but are also re-identifiable. That is to say, they not only occupy space, but also have a certain persistence through time, so that they can be re-identified as “the same thing as the one which was”. Aristotle had grasped the truth that it is substances that can remain the same, while receiving qualifications. Strawson continues the Aristotelian realistic legacy. He says that he finds it unobjectionable to say that basic particulars are “ontologically prior”, in the sense that
the identification of basic particulars is a necessary condition for the inclusion of that type. In other words, the particular is prior to the universal. Strawson insists that, on the basis of his criteria, private particulars (private experiences) do not qualify as basic particulars. Strawson firmly states that an identifying reference to private experiences involves references to particulars other than material bodies—i.e., that is, persons.

The conception of a person adds to the concept of a material body, the capacity for thought or consciousness. Strawson begins the concept of the person in terms of that which we ascribe to ourselves. Strawson asks two important questions at this juncture: Firstly, why are one’s states of consciousness ascribed to anything at all? Secondly, why are such states of consciousness ascribed to the same thing as are certain corporal characteristics or physical situations? In his attempt to provide answers to such questions, Strawson is led to a consideration of two polar views. They are the views of the Cartesians and of the “no-ownership,” or “no-subject” doctrine. The Cartesian concept of persons, as characterized by Strawson, presents a kind of radical dualism—mind and body. Accordingly, properties, or states, attributed to one substance cannot be legitimately attributed to the other. The person, for the Cartesians, is interpreted as being a dual entity, composed of two separate and distinct substances. In the no-ownership theory of the self, on the other hand, experiences do not belong to, and are not owned by, anything at all.

Both the above views of the self, or person, are, for Strawson, inadequate. According to the Cartesians, we ascribe predicates of one kind to mind and of another kind to body, or the extended substance. But such a dualistic notion destroys, or undermines, the conception of the integral unity of the person. For the Cartesians, predicates of the mind cannot be predicated of the body, and vice versa. On the contrary, the no-ownership theory is equally inadequate, because, on the one hand, we do in fact ascribe states of consciousness to a definite something (oneself) and, on the other, because we refer in speech to particular states of consciousness (or private experiences),
by making an identifying reference to the states or experiences of some identified person.  

The incoherence of both theories leads Strawson to recognize the primitiveness of the concept of "person". He is of the view that, by recognizing the primitiveness of the concept of a person, he is able to answer both questions. For Strawson, the concept of a person is that to which both states of predicates can be ascribed. (M-predicates ascribing corporal characteristics and P- predicates ascribing states of consciousness). Strawson believes that we cannot identify ourselves with any of our states of consciousness, because we have them. We ascribe both kinds of predicates to something, to a person, because they are not independent of each other, they belong to the same entity. Person is a unitary concept of both body and mind. Strawson asserts that we cannot ascribe states of consciousness to ourselves, unless we are able to, or are prepared to ascribe them to others. The possibility of ascribing states of consciousness to others is a necessary condition for the possibility of ascribing such states to ourselves. We infer, through behaviour, that he or she is experiencing, say, the feeling of "pain". We derive the states of consciousness of a person through observation of his behaviour; therefore, individual consciousness has a secondary existence. But a person, the unity of body and ego (consciousness), has a primary existence. Pure individual consciousness can be derived from the concept of a person, in the sense that, through behaviour, we can infer what the person is feeling. For Strawson, a person is not an embodied ego, but a unity of body and ego. A person, in the primary sense, can never be a dis-embodied person. A person is not someone, who has a body and a mind, operating and functioning independently of each other like the Cartesian man. A person, for Strawson, is a person with a body and a mind, operating and functioning as one, an integral unity. Thus, Strawson says,  

The concept of a person is logically prior to that of an individual consciousness. The concept of a person is not to be analyzed as that of an animated body or of an embodied anima.  

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From Aristotle to Strawson through Aquinas, Descartes, J.J.C. Smart, Ryle, we come a full circle. In modern times, even in the philosophy of Descartes, we find that the material aspect in the individual was not left unaccounted. Others however readily recognized it. They did recognize the non-bodily aspect of the individual as that which was in a way paramount to the bodily aspect. Aristotle projects the form (eidos) as something determining, forming or bestowing, in so far as being is determined in its specific singularity. The form determines the being. The becoming of the being is regulated by the form. Descartes is also of the view that the mind can exist in a disembodied state, despite the fact of primacy given to the mental or the non-bodily aspect of the individual. However, with Strawson, the emphasis is in just the opposite direction. For him the primary significance is given not to the mental, but the bodily aspect of a person. By advocating a "descriptive metaphysics", he draws the utmost attention to the material aspect of the being. Though the primal focus was on the mind, philosophers before Strawson did not ignore the material aspect of man. It can be said that, throughout the history of western philosophy, man, as a person, as an individual, was not understood without his physical bodily extension. The concept of the individual, the subject matter of my thesis, has been at the heart of western philosophy. It never lost its significance or importance since ancient times. Indeed, its significance is only enhanced, if any, since Strawson thought of entitling his work, Individuals. In fact, Strawson rekindled a new perspective to the age-old philosophical problem, in as much as it now makes for an understanding of what things really are. Kierkegaard is yet another philosopher who brings in another perspective to the study in the context of existentialistic philosophy.

C. Kierkegaard’s Perspective: Existential Ontology

With the above illustrations, it is clear that throughout the history of western philosophy, man was considered as a composition of body and soul. The element of matter (body) as a constituent of man was highly favoured. However, with the emergence of Kierkegaard’s ideas, the understanding of the individual undertook a step forward, in
as much as Kierkegaard limited his study to the existential ontology of man as an individual.

In conformation with the philosophers discussed earlier, Kierkegaard, too, puts the particular, or the individual, above the universal. This indeed he does, taking up cudgels against the essentialism of Hegel. Heralding a new movement in philosophy, he is never weary of asserting in his works his new thesis that existence is prior to the universal essence. For Kierkegaard the single problem confronting the individual is how to exist in the true sense. By looking at man from an existential point of view, Kierkegaard formulates the concept of man as an individual, substantially different from the essentialist philosophers before him. For Kierkegaard, the theistic existentialist, the individual is not only a unity of body and mind, but he brings in a positive third element which he identifies as spirit: Man is the synthesis of body, mind and spirit. This understanding of the self is Kierkegaard’s most cogent expression of the human ontology, which permeates all his thought. With the inclusion of the positive third element, we find ourselves in a complex situation. However, this positive third element is what makes Kierkegaard’s ontological work unique. Kierkegaard is held chiefly as a religious thinker, but his works are characterized fundamentally by a thorough going philosophical understanding of human existence. An analysis of his philosophical works ultimately leads us to his ontological insight. Having said this, I must hasten to add that we cannot dichotomize his works, as “theological” and “philosophical”. Where his concerns are ontological, they remarkably coalesce. Kierkegaard’s understanding of human existence can be fully understood and appreciated, only when we examine man in the light of the positive third element. For Kierkegaard, human ontology is illumined by both theology and philosophy, because man is characterized by both theological and philosophical insights, as the two sides of the same coin. Therefore to understand how Kierkegaard understands the existence of man, we have to view man from both theological and philosophical perspectives. Picking only one of the two perspectives would result in a distorted understanding.
In his *Stages on life’s way*, Kierkegaard talks about three stages of existence, namely the aesthetic stage, ethical stage and the religious stage, each one representing a basic attitude to life. The Kierkegaardian scholars, in general, tend to see in the religious stage the final stage specially favoured by him. But, on a closer analysis, it is revealed that the religious stage is the culmination of all other stages of man’s existence. Kierkegaard thinks that, as man enters progressively from the lower to a higher stage, in a sense, he does not sever completely his ties with the lower stages, but rather that he is transformed with his sensitivities greatly purified. For Kierkegaard, the individual definitely realizes his existence in God, but the individual’s religiousness does not cancel his aesthetic and ethical sensibilities. This is specially true of his ethical life.

Kierkegaard’s ontology thus has an unmistakable religious colouring, which is expressed by the positive third element of spirit, because he is committed to Christian belief that all men are created by God after his own image. To be a spirit means to be stamped by God’s image. God created man in “his image”, as a result of which man has in him a spirit. Man’s mind and body are united in the spirit. Every man as an individual is a synthesis of body, mind and spirit, but, for man, to exist truly he should realize within himself what the spirit implies, namely his authenticity by the exercise of his freedom, especially the freedom for God. It is this freedom that makes man unique among all the other creatures on earth.

Kierkegaard’s conception of the individual is manifestly theological. The uniqueness of Kierkegaard’s ontology consists in the conception of a telos, to which man is intentional. Man’s existence is not merely a continual exercise of freedom, but the exercising of his freedom should be towards a goal. Agnostic existentialists may address man, the *Dasein* as existing in anticipation of death, because, to these existentialists, death, as the innermost and inevitable possibility-of-being, becomes the central issue of *Dasein’s* being-in-the-world. But Kierkegaard’s being-in-the-world is also being-in-sojourn, in virtue of the telos lying outside and beyond the being-in-the-world. Kierkegaard’s individual exercises his freedom, which is regulated by attaining the goal.
of realizing his true self in God. For Kierkegaard, Man's existence signifies more than the possibility of death. Death is inevitable, but what man makes of life is of paramount importance. Man's existence becomes authentic and meaningful when he is moving towards the goal. The telos makes every free action accountable. A meaningful life is one anchored in God, and steadily moving towards that telos. To exist, for Kierkegaard, means to attain a goal, and because there is a goal, death becomes meaningful, not otherwise. When man strives to move towards the goal, he is at the same time edifying himself, therefore life becomes meaningful. Because his present existence may fall short of the requirements set by the telos, he has to become the like of what is required. This calls for continual rectification, on the part of the individual, of his inadequacies. Kierkegaard expressly addresses his pseudonymous works to the existing individual in order to help him to come to terms with his own existence.

Kierkegaard's ontological insight covers a wide range of therapeutics of the spirit and mind in his works, which are all intended to assist the individual to overcome his inauthentic existence. Kierkegaard, in some of his works, therefore, dwells on human psychology extensively, especially when he talks of man as experiencing despair, which he refers to as "the sickness unto death". His psychological insight becomes significant and much needed, as man is viewed as the synthesis of the body, mind and spirit. When man is faced with his telos, on the one hand, and his actuality (pseudo existence), on the other, he can be best understood. Despair is one such psychological situation, closely bordering on a spiritual situation of religious consciousness of "guilt", or sin.

Though some of Kierkegaard's works would expressly qualify for their religious thoughts, there is indeed an ontology of the human individual, and, to this extent, it is significant to all, believers and non-believers. Religion, which is a matter of faith, addresses to the individual, and not to the universal. Authentic human existence, too, is addressed to the individual, irrespective of his belief or otherwise. Both demand of man a discipline and conscious actions. Individual is autonomous. The autonomy of the individual however need not be regarded as a challenge to religious truth, but, on the
contrary, the autonomous individual, in his process of development or realizing his existence, may fall back on religion and religious realities. An individual, on being religious, too, can exhibit himself as an autonomous and free agent. To some thinkers, religious faith, rather than contravening the autonomy of the self, is its highest and most concrete assertion. Kierkegaard is one such thinker. A genuinely religious act is a free action. A person acting under compulsion cannot be said to be religious. With a *telos* in hand man has to constantly suffer and strive to attain the goal. It is a ceaseless striving, as man, through every action, learns more about himself as anchored in the absolute. Likewise existence, too, is a continuous process, a becoming. As the individual makes a qualitative decision, he moves closer to the truth, he learns more about himself. The active nature of the individual is not contravened by the faithful affirmation of the absolute. Religious faith affirms that the individual is in a process of development. It is clear, then, that Kierkegaard’s individual can be understood in all its totality, when viewed in close relation with the religious faith. The positive third element in man is what makes a radical difference to human ontology. Until and unless man realizes that he is a synthesis of body, mind and spirit, he will have lost his existence. In order to realize his existence, he will have to choose himself as a synthesis of the temporal and eternal. It is the eternal that generates a sense of direction for the individual.