

# Søren Kierkegaard

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Søren Kierkegaard (born May 5, 1813, Copenhagen, Den.—died Nov. 11, 1855, Copenhagen) was a Danish philosopher, theologian, and cultural critic who was a major influence on existentialism and Protestant theology in the 20th century. He attacked the literary, philosophical, and ecclesiastical establishments of his day for misrepresenting the highest task of human existence—namely, becoming oneself in an ethical and religious sense—as something so easy that it could seem already accomplished even when it had not even been undertaken. Positively, the heart of his work lay in the infinite requirement and strenuous difficulty of religious existence in general and Christian faith in particular.

## A life of collisions

Kierkegaard's life has been called uneventful, but it was hardly that. The story of his life is a drama in four overlapping acts, each with its own distinctive crisis or "collision," as he often referred to these events. His father, Michael Pedersen Kierkegaard, was a prosperous but retired businessman who devoted the later years of his life to raising his children. He was a man of deep but gloomy and guilt-ridden piety who was haunted by the memory of having once cursed God as a boy and of having begun his family by getting his maid pregnant—and then marrying her—shortly after the death of his first wife. His domineering presence stimulated young Søren's imaginative and intellectual gifts but, as his son would later bear witness, made a normal childhood impossible.

Kierkegaard enrolled at the University of Copenhagen in 1830 but did not complete his studies until 1841. Like the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), whose system he would severely criticize, Kierkegaard entered university in order to study theology but devoted himself to literature and philosophy instead. His thinking during this period is revealed in an 1835 journal entry, which is often cited as containing the germ of his later work:

The thing is to find a truth which is true for me, to find the idea for which I can live and die....What is truth but to live for an idea?

While a student at the university, Kierkegaard explored the literary figures of Don Juan, the wandering Jew, and especially Faust, looking for existential models for his own life.

The first collision occurred during his student days: he became estranged both from his father and from the faith in which he had been brought up, and he moved out of the family home. But by 1838, just before his father's death, he was reconciled both to his father and to the Christian faith; the latter became the idea for which he would live and die. Despite his reference to an experience of "indescribable joy" in May of that year, it should not be assumed that his conversion

was instantaneous. On the one hand, he often seemed to be moving away from the faith of his father and back toward it at virtually the same time. On the other hand, he often stressed that conversion is a long process. He saw becoming a Christian as the task of a lifetime. Accordingly, he decided to publish *Sygdommen til døden* (1849; *Sickness unto Death*) under a pseudonym (as he had done with several previous works), lest anyone think he lived up to the ideal he there presented; likewise, the pseudonymous authors of his other works often denied that they possessed the faith they talked about. Although in the last year of his life he wrote, "I dare not call myself a Christian," throughout his career it was Christianity that he sought to defend by rescuing it from cultural captivity, and it was a Christian person that he sought to become.

After his father's death, Kierkegaard became serious about finishing his formal education. He took his doctoral exams and wrote his dissertation, *Om begrebet ironi med stadigt hensyn til Socrates* (*On the Concept of Irony, with Constant Reference to Socrates*), completing it in June of 1841 and defending it in September. In between, he broke his engagement with Regine Olsen, thus initiating the second major collision of his life. They had met in 1837, when she was only 15 years old, and had become engaged in 1840. Now, less than one year later, he returned her ring, saying he "could not make a girl happy." The reasons for this action are far from clear.

What is clear is that this relationship haunted him for the rest of his life. Saying in his will that he considered engagement as binding as marriage, he left all his possessions to Regine (she did not accept them, however, since she had married long before Kierkegaard died). It is also clear that this crisis triggered a period of astonishing literary productivity, during which Kierkegaard published many of the works for which he is best known: *Enten-Eller: et livs-fragment* (1843; *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*), *Gjentagelsen* (1843; *Repetition*), *Frygt og baeven* (1843; *Fear and Trembling*), *Philosophiske smuler* (1844; *Philosophical Fragments*), *Begrebet angst* (1844; *The Concept of Anxiety*), *Stadier paa livets vei* (1845; *Stages on Life's Way*), and *Afsluttende uvidenskabelig efterskrift* (1846; *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*). Even after acknowledging that he had written these works, however, Kierkegaard insisted that they continue to be attributed to their pseudonymous authors. The pseudonyms are best understood by analogy with characters in a novel, created by the actual author to embody distinctive worldviews; it is left to the reader to decide what to make of each one.

Kierkegaard had intended to cease writing at this point and become a country pastor. But it was not to be. The first period of literary activity (1843–46) was followed by a second (1847–55). Instead of retiring, he picked a quarrel with *The Corsair*, a newspaper known for its liberal political sympathies but more famous as a scandal sheet that used satire to skewer the establishment. Although *The Corsair* had praised some of the pseudonymous works, Kierkegaard did not wish to see his own project confused with that of the newspaper, so he turned his satirical skills against it. *The Corsair* took the bait, and for months Kierkegaard was the target of raucous ridicule, the greatest butt of jokes in Copenhagen. Better at giving than at taking, he was deeply wounded, and indeed he never fully recovered. If the broken engagement was the cloud that hung over the first literary period, the *Corsair* debacle was the ghost that haunted the second.

The final collision was with the Church of Denmark (Lutheran) and its leaders, the bishops J.P. Mynster and H.L. Martensen. In his journals Kierkegaard called *Sickness unto Death* an “attack upon Christendom.” In a similar vein, *Anti-Climacus*, the pseudonymous author of *Indøvelse i Christendom* (1850; *Training in Christianity*), declared the need “again to introduce Christianity into Christendom.” This theme became more and more explicit as Kierkegaard resumed his writing career. As long as Mynster, the family pastor from his childhood, was alive, Kierkegaard refrained from personal attacks. But at Mynster’s funeral Martensen, who had succeeded to the leadership of the Danish church, eulogized his predecessor as a “witness to the truth,” linking him to the martyrs of the faith; after this Kierkegaard could no longer keep silent. In December 1854 he began to publish dozens of short, shrill pieces insisting that what passed as Christianity in Denmark was counterfeit and making clear that Mynster and Martensen were responsible for reducing the religion to “leniency.” The last of these pieces was found on Kierkegaard’s desk after he collapsed in the street in October 1855.

## Stages on life’s way

In the pseudonymous works of Kierkegaard’s first literary period, three stages on life’s way, or three spheres of existence, are distinguished: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. These are not developmental stages in a biological or psychological sense—a natural and all-but-automatic unfolding according to some DNA of the spirit. It is all too possible to live one’s life below the ethical and the religious levels. But there is a directionality in the sense that the earlier stages have the later ones as their telos, or goal, while the later stages both presuppose and include the earlier ones as important but subordinate moments. Kierkegaard’s writings taken as a whole, whether pseudonymous or not, focus overwhelmingly on the religious stage, giving credence to his own retrospective judgment that the entire corpus is ultimately about the religious life.

The personages Kierkegaard creates to embody the aesthetic stage have two preoccupations, the arts and the erotic. It is tempting to see the aesthete as a cultured hedonist—a fairly obvious offshoot of the Romantic movement—who accepts the distinction made by Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) between artistic and sensuous pleasure while combining them in a single existential project. But in one of the essays of *Either/Or*, the aesthete sees boredom as the root of all evil and is preoccupied with making life interesting; and the famous seducer in the same volume seems less concerned with sex than with the fascinating spectacle of watching himself seduce his victim.

This clue helps one both to define the aesthetic stage and to see what a stage or sphere of existence in general is. What the various goals of aesthetic existence have in common is that they have nothing to do with right and wrong. The criteria by which the good life is defined are premoral, unconcerned with good and evil. A stage or sphere of existence, then, is a fundamental project, a form of life, a mode of being-in-the-world that defines success in life by its own distinctive criteria.

What might motivate an aesthete to choose the ethical? The mere presence of guardians of the good, who are willing to scold the aesthete's amorality as immorality, is too external, too easily dismissed as bourgeois phariseism. Judge William, the representative of the ethical in *Either/Or*, tries another tack. The aesthete, he argues, fails to become a self at all but becomes, by choice, what David Hume (1711–76) said the self inevitably is: a bundle of events without an inner core to constitute identity or cohesion over time. Moreover, the aesthete fails to see that in the ethical the aesthetic is not abolished but ennobled. Judge William presents marriage as the scene of this transformation, in which, through commitment, the self acquires temporal continuity and, following Hegel, the sensuous is raised to the level of spirit.

In *Fear and Trembling* this ethical stage is teleologically suspended in the religious, which means not that it is abolished but that it is reduced to relative validity in relation to something absolute, which is its proper goal. For Plato (c. 428–c. 348 bc) and Kant, ethics is a matter of pure reason gaining pure insight into eternal truth. But Hegel argued that human beings are too deeply embedded in history to attain such purity and that their grasp of the right and the good is mediated by the laws and customs of the societies in which they live. It is this Hegelian ethics of socialization that preoccupies Judge William and that gets relativized in *Fear and Trembling*. By retelling the story of Abraham, it presents the religious stage as the choice not to allow the laws and customs of one's people to be one's highest norm—not to equate socialization with sanctity and salvation but to be open to a voice of greater authority, namely God.

This higher normativity does not arise from reason, as Plato and Kant would have it, but is, from reason's point of view, absurd, paradoxical, even mad. These labels do not bother Kierkegaard, because he interprets reason as human, all too human—as the rationale of the current social order, which knows nothing higher than itself. In the language of Karl Marx (1818–83), what presents itself as reason is in fact ideology. Kierkegaard interprets Abrahamic faith as agreeing with Hegel and Marx about this historical finitude of reason, and, precisely because of this, he insists that the voice of God is an authority that is higher than the rationality of either the current establishment (Hegel) or the revolution (Marx). Against both Hegel and Marx, Kierkegaard holds that history is not the scene in which human reason overcomes this finitude and becomes the ultimate standard of truth.

## Three dimensions of the religious life of Søren Kierkegaard

The simple scheme of the three stages becomes more complex in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. The fundamental distinction is now between objectivity and subjectivity, with two examples of each. Objectivity is the name for occupying oneself with what is “out there” in such a way as to exempt oneself from the strenuous inward task of becoming a self in the ethico-religious sense. One example is the aesthetic posture, presented in earlier work; the other is the project of speculative philosophy, to which this text devotes major attention. The target is Hegelian philosophy, which takes the achievement of comprehensive, absolute knowledge to be the highest human task.

But, it is argued in the first place, speculative philosophy cannot even keep its own promises. It purports to begin without presuppositions and to conclude with a final, all-encompassing system. The very idea that thought should be without presuppositions, however, is itself a presupposition, and thus the system is never quite able to complete itself. The goal of objective knowledge is legitimate, but it can never be more than approximately accomplished. Reality may well be a system for God, but not for any human knower.

Secondly, even if speculative philosophy could deliver what it promises, it would have forgotten that the highest human task is not cognition but rather the personal appropriation or embodiment of whatever insights into the good and the right one is able to achieve. Becoming a self in this way is called existence, inwardness, and subjectivity. This use of existence as a technical term for the finite, human self that is always in the process of becoming can be seen as the birth of existentialism. Many scholars accordingly refer to Kierkegaard as the father of that movement.

The two modes of subjectivity are not, as one might expect, the ethical and the religious stages. One does not become a self simply through successful socialization. Besides, in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, ethics is treated as already recontextualized in a religious rather than merely a social context. So the two modes of ethico-religious subjectivity are “Religiousness A” and “Religiousness B.” The fact that the latter turns out to be Christianity should not lead one to think that the former is some other world religion. It is rather the generic necessary condition for any particular religion and, as such, is available apart from dependence on the revelation to be found in any particular religion’s sacred scriptures. Socrates (c. 470–399 bc), here distinguished from the speculative Plato, is the paradigm of Religiousness A.

Religiousness A is defined not in terms of beliefs about what is “out there,” such as God or the soul, but rather in terms of the complex tasks of becoming a self, summarized as the task of being simultaneously related “relatively” to relative goods and “absolutely” to the absolute good. Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms refer to the absolute good variously as the Idea, the Eternal, or God. As the generic form of the religious stage, Religiousness A abstracts from the “what” of belief to focus on the “how” that must accompany any “what.” The Hegelian system purports to be the highest form of the highest religion, namely Christianity, but in fact, by virtue of its merely objective “how,” it belongs to a completely different genus. It could not be the highest form of Christianity, no more than a dog could be the world’s prettiest cat.

There is something paradoxical about Religiousness A. Socratic ignorance—the claim of Socrates that he is the wisest of men because, while others think that they know, he knows that he does not—reflects the realization that the relation of the existing, and thus temporal, individual to the eternal does not fit neatly into human conceptual frameworks. But Christianity, as Religiousness B, is more radically paradoxical, for the eternal itself has become paradoxical as the insertion of God in time. In this way the task of relating absolutely to the absolute becomes even more strenuous, for human reason is overwhelmed, even offended, by the claim that Jesus is fully human and fully divine. In the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* there is an echo of Kant’s admission, “I have therefore found it necessary to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith”—though Kantian faith has a very different “what.”

Some writings of Kierkegaard's second literary period extend the analyses of the first. For example, the two halves of *Sickness unto Death* can be read as reprising Religiousness A and B, respectively, in a different voice. But several texts, most notably *Kjerlighedens gjerninger* (1847; *Works of Love*), *Training in Christianity, Til selvprøvelse* (1851; *For Self-Examination*), and *Dømmer selv!* (1851; *Judge for Yourselves!*), go beyond Religiousness B to what might be called "Religiousness C." The focus is still on Christianity, but now Christ is no longer just the paradox to be believed but also the paradigm or prototype to be imitated.

These works present the second, specifically Christian, ethics that had been promised as far back as *The Concept of Anxiety*. They go beyond Hegelian ethics, which only asks one to conform to the laws and customs of one's society. They also go beyond the religion of hidden inwardness, whether A or B, in which the relation between God and the soul takes place out of public view. They are Kierkegaard's answer to the charge that religion according to his view is so personal and so private as to be socially irresponsible. Faith, the inward God-relation, must show itself outwardly in works of love.

The first half of *Works of Love* is a sustained reflection on the biblical commandment "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Matthew 22:36). This commanded love is contrasted with erotic love and friendship. Through its poets, society celebrates these two forms of love, but only God dares to command the love of neighbours. The celebrated loves are spontaneous: they come naturally, by inclination, and thus not by duty. Children do not have to be taught to seek friends; nor, at puberty, do they need to be commanded to fall in love. The celebrated loves are also preferential: one is drawn to this person but not to that one as friend or lover; something in the other is attractive or would satisfy one's desire if the relation could be established. Because they are spontaneous and preferential, Kierkegaard calls the celebrated loves forms of "self-love."

This is not to say that every friend or lover is selfish. But, by their exclusionary nature, such relations are the self-love of the "We," even when the "I" is not selfish in the relation. Here one sees the political ramifications of commanded love, for an ethics that restricts benevolence to one's own family, tribe, nation, race, or class expresses only the self-love of the We.

By contrast, commanded love is not spontaneous, and it needs to be commanded precisely because it is not preferential. Another person need not be attractive or belong to the same We to be one's neighbour, whom one is to love. Even one's enemy can be one's neighbour, which is a reason why society never dares to require that people love their neighbours as they do themselves. For the Christian, this command comes from Christ, who is himself its embodiment to be imitated.

One could hardly expect the literary and philosophical elite to focus on the strenuousness of faith as a personal relation to God unsupported by reason, or on the strenuousness of love as responsibility to and for one's neighbour unsupported by society's ethos. That task was the responsibility of the church—a responsibility that, in Kierkegaard's view, the church had

spectacularly failed to fulfill. As these themes came more clearly into focus in his writings, the attack upon Christendom with which his life ended became inevitable.

Kierkegaard says that his writings as a whole are religious. They are best seen as belonging to the prophetic traditions, in which religious beliefs become the basis for a critique of the religious communities that profess them. The 20th-century theologies that were influenced by Kierkegaard go beyond the tasks of metaphysical affirmation and ethical instruction to a critique of complacent piety. In existential philosophies—which are often less overtly theological and sometimes entirely secular—this element of critique is retained but is directed against forms of personal and social life that do not take the tasks of human existence seriously enough. Thus, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) complains that his secular contemporaries do not take the death of God seriously enough, just as Kierkegaard complains that his Christian contemporaries do not take God seriously enough. Likewise, the German existential phenomenologist Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) describes how people make life too easy for themselves by thinking and doing just what “they” think and do. And Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–80), the leading representative of atheistic existentialism in France, calls attention to the ways in which people indulge in self-deceiving “bad faith” in order to think more highly of themselves than the facts warrant.