



KIERKEGAARD (1813-55)

Søren Kierkegaard was born in Copenhagen in 1813
 he was the youngest in a large family
 raised in prosperous middle-class home, strictest
 devotion to church and religion
 father a successful merchant and avid reader of theology
 mother was father's servant before becoming 2nd wife

Barrett in *Irrational Man* describes him as a bizarre and
 eccentric figure
 who was not well received in his lifetime
 he had fine eyes, but there the attractive features ended
 "a spindly figure, a humped back, tousled head of hair
 made him look like a scarecrow"
 the hunchback was perhaps the "thorn in his flesh" he
 often mentions in his writings
 he accepted his ill-favored body with wry good humor
 always able to see comedy and pathos together as one
 human side of religion

"Kierkegaard the cripple" a phrase invoked not merely against his body but his spirit
 psychoanalytic critics have clumsily wielded their scalpels in an effort to cut down his thought

much has been made of a decisive event in his life
 the breaking off of an engagement to Regine Olsen in 1841
 Barrett thinks that too much has been made of this event
 and yet, precisely because he was an existentialist—existence precedes essence
 that this crucial fact of his existence is not without significance for his thought
 he suggests that it is a result of this painful event that Kierkegaard could not have been a
 Hegelian—no philosopher's balm could remove the pain of loss
 "The man who has chosen irrevocably, whose choice has once and for all sundered him from a
 certain *possibility* for himself and his life, is thereby thrown back on the *reality* of that self in all
 its mortality and finitude" (Barrett, 155)
 Kierkegaard viewed life as governed by a deep melancholy
 which he self-consciously tried to hide with wit and gaiety

his writings are steeped in the philosophy of Hegel
 the main theme of his writings is a reaction against Hegel and official state Christianity
 Hegel had turned Christianity into something rational
 central focus of his thought is the relationship between faith and reason
 leveled a profound critique of modernity and what Christianity had become in modernity
 was an advocate of a life of intense religious commitment
 overriding theme is his defense of what it means to be a Christian

his thought thus aims to provide insight into the meaning and fulfillment of human life

and to what makes a life worth living
thus his thought probes deeply into the question of human existence
the problem for Kierkegaard was throughout a personal one

he had chosen to be a Christian and had constantly to renew that choice, with all the energy and passion of his being
all that he thought and wrote shows this personal cast
called *Fear and Trembling* a “dialectical lyric”
Barrett sees this as an apt phrase for nearly all his writings
a lyricism, an act of self-expression
for all its lyricism it has its own exactness, and dialectical acumen
a “subjective thinker” as he called himself
“Kierkegaard does not merely tell us that being precedes thought, or that all thought is an expression of some concrete being; he shows us this truth in the flesh. . . .” (Barrett, 151)
never aimed at being a philosopher
all his philosophy was incidental to his purpose—to show what it means to be a Christian
it was his emphasis on the question of human existence
his view that the meaning of life is not something given
but something that depends on the choices we make
that makes him the first existentialist

Kierkegaard’s writings present a number of difficulties
one is that many of his works are presented under a variety of pseudonyms
his principal pseudonymous author, Johannes Climacus, declared that his task was
“to make difficulties everywhere”
in commenting on one work Climacus states:
“Thus it is left to the reader to put it all together by himself, if he so pleases, but nothing is done for a reader’s comfort” (Hong, Introduction ix)

his writings consist of volumes of personal journal entries
numerous pseudonymous essays and books
as well as essays and books signed in his own name

WORKS

- The Concept of Irony, With Continual Reference to Socrates* (1841) S.A. Kierkegaard
this was Kierkegaard's dissertation
- Either/Or, A Fragment of Life* (1843) anonymous manuscript edited by one "Victor Eremita"
- Fear and Trembling, Dialectical Lyric* (1843) by "Johannes de Silentio"
- Repetition, A Venture in Experimenting Psychology* (1843) by "Constantin Constantius"
- Philosophical Fragments, or A Fragment of Philosophy* (1844) by "Johannes Climacus"
- The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychological Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin* (1844) by "Vigilius Haufniensis"
- Prefaces: Light Reading for People in Various Estates According to Time and Opportunity* (1844) by "Nicolaus Notabene"
- Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions* (1845) by S. Kierkegaard
- Stages on Life's Way: Studies by Various Persons* (1845) by "Hilarius Bookbinder"
- Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments. A Mimical-Pathetical-Dialectical Compilation, and Existential Contribution* (1846) by "Johannes Climacus," edited by S. Kierkegaard
- "The Activity of a Traveling Esthetician and How He Still Happened to Pay for the Dinner" (1845) by "Frater Taciturnus"
- "Two Ages—The Age of Revolution and the Present Age: A Literary Review" (1846) by S. Kierkegaard
- Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* (1847) by S. Kierkegaard
- Works of Love* (1847) by S. Kierkegaard
- Christian Discourses* (1848) by S. Kierkegaard
- "Two Ethical-Religious Essays" (1849) by H.H.
- The Sickness Unto Death, A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening* (1849) by "Anti-Climacus," edited by S. Kierkegaard
- Practice in Christianity* (1850) by "Anti-Climacus," edited by S. Kierkegaard
- Two Discourses at the Communion on Fridays* (1851) by S. Kierkegaard
- For Self-Examination [First Series] Recommended to the Present Age* (1851) by S. Kierkegaard
- Judge for Yourself! For Self-Examination Recommended to the Present Age [Second Series]* (1851-52) by S. Kierkegaard
- The Book on Adler. The Religious Confusion of the Present Age, Illustrated by Magister Adler* (1846-55) by "Petrus Minor," edited by S. Kierkegaard
- On My Work as an Author* (1851) published posthumously (1859) by S. Kierkegaard
- The Attack Upon "Christendom"* (1854-55) by S. Kierkegaard

I. Main Themes***A. Reaction Against Hegel***

main theme of Kierkegaard's thought is the reaction against Hegel
Hegel's philosophy was an attempt to save truths of traditional morality and religion from the Enlightenment critique
and in so doing place them on more secure philosophical foundations
his dialectical system is designed to express moral and religious truths in more fully rational form
limited insights of both scientific reason and dogmatic religion are transcended
with higher synthesis of Absolute knowledge
the antagonistic relationship between reason and faith can be overcome
with the help of a more adequate understanding of them both

Hegel still believed it was possible to unite faith and thought
and create an all-comprehending synthesis in which all oppositions could be reconciled
on this interpretation, Hegel is close to humanist theology
attempting to harmonize reason and faith by making faith acceptable to reason
the concept of faith is transformed, but this is the price dogmatic religion has to pay for its rescue
from skeptical rationalism

Hegel criticized by protagonists of Enlightenment rationalism
who saw his philosophy as a relapse into mysticism
others like Marx, though sympathetic to dialectical and historical method,
reject Hegel's philosophy as simply religion in another guise
both of these criticisms come from point of view of rationalism and humanism
Kierkegaard, by contrast, proposes a radical defense of religious faith
but far from attempting a reconciliation with reason
emphasizes the gulf between them

in effect, Kierkegaard renews the theological tradition of 'fideism'
in which religious faith is diminished rather than strengthened by its reduction to merely human
reason
for St. Augustine, Meister Eckhart, Pascal, Luther
faith surpasses human understanding
human reason is the limited capacity of an imperfect, sinful being
who is not surprisingly unable to comprehend
an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly benevolent God
the high point of reason for these fideists is the recognition of its limits
Pascal: "Reason's last step is the recognition that there are an infinite number of things which are
beyond it"
the attempt to formulate a rational religion is an expression of arrogance
can never hope to do justice to the spiritual meaning of faith

contrast with the Enlightenment Deism
though it preserved a metaphysical role for God as creator or first cause

evidently failed to satisfy the specifically religious needs of humanity
for Kierkegaard, Hegelian idealism concedes too much to humanism and rationalism
and thus neglects or distorts the meaning of faith

in response Kierkegaard develops radical version of the fideist position
maintaining that religious faith not only does not need the support of reason
but is essentially at odds with it
as if Kierkegaard takes seriously the ironic taunt of Hume
“who, after demolishing all rational grounds for belief in miracles as evidence of the truth of
religion, remarks that anyone who still has faith ‘is conscious’ of a continued miracle in his own
person. . .” (West, 118)

crucial part of Kierkegaard’s strategy is to reject the rationalist conception of objective
knowledge
or contemplative theory, which plays such a central role in western philosophy
idea of theory (*theoria*) as disinterested, essentially unpractical contemplation
first clearly expounded in Aristotle, who describes theoretical knowledge as
“contemplation of the eternal and unchanging”

with the Enlightenment this conception of theory is transformed into
an understanding of scientific knowledge as fundamentally instrumental (Bacon)
scientific knowledge is inseparable from the ‘technological’ capacity
to manipulate and control the external world

objectivity remains an essential characteristic of theory
theory must avoid all subjective bias
it must transcend all purely subjective points of view
in order to attain an intersubjective and eternal truth
much of tradition of western epistemology sees its task as establishing with certainty
the this goal has been or can be achieved
Truth on this view is attained only when theory has cut all ties
with the merely subjective life of knowing subjects

for Kierkegaard this ideal of objective knowledge championed by the Enlightenment
is constitutionally blind to the inner life or subjective existence of the human individual
objective theoretical knowledge makes no useful contribution to understanding human life
this Enlightenment rationality underlying science
purports to tell us something about everything
but cannot even begin to tell us what we need to know in order to live
we can understand life intellectually without really existing
“he has thought everything possible, and yet he has not existed at all”
thus any attempt to weave the truths of religion into a theoretical account
inevitably distorts or falsifies them
truths of religion belong to sphere of subjective existence
cannot be grasped by abstract categories of theoretical knowledge

Notion of Subjective Truth

existence can only be known subjectively

the problem of existence must be thought

‘not dispassionately and objectively, but with the whole of our personality’ (Rhode)

this move from objective truth to ‘subjective truth’

is reflected in a number of aspects of Kierkegaard’s work

1) adopts a radically different method from theoretical approach

subjective truth cannot be expressed within categories of abstract reason

or detached and impersonal philosophical discourse

rather, it must be expressed through indirect communication

perhaps like Zen, can only express the truth indirectly

can only be the catalyst for an active process of subjective understanding

not a matter of mere recovery of original meaning, passing on of stable objective truths

but rather an active process of subjective understanding

thus Kierkegaard accords an important role for irony as means of indirect communication

his doctoral thesis discusses Socrates’ use of irony

Socratic dialogue represents ideal method for philosophical exploration of human existence

Socrates uses irony and humor to lead his interlocutors to revise their limited conceptions

irony can provoke subjective insights beyond the grasp of theoretical reason

2) another strategy is impressive array of discursive styles

more dramatist than theorist

explores a variety of subjective perspectives

employs number of pseudonyms

complex framing devices to place distance between himself and a particular view portrayed

Either/Or is ostensibly a miscellaneous collection of essays, aphorisms, a diary, letters, and a sermon, written by two authors, accidentally discovered and published by one Victor Eremita

3) related aspect is the autobiographical references

his writings reflect the important periods or decisive events of his life

their pessimism recalls the stern atmosphere of his early childhood

father’s stern religiosity and guilty secret of illegitimate child

youthful life as rich dandy

outward wit and bohemian excess concealed profound melancholy

emotional crisis of broken engagement

another consequence of his concentration on subjective truth

revised understanding of the central element of Enlightenment accounts of theoretical knowledge based on indubitable foundations and logical argument

subjective truth does not aspire to the certainty of objective theoretical knowledge

shares with the sceptic the belief that there can be no rationally certified moral system or religion

there are no irrefutable arguments within ethics or theology

in any case, theoretical certainty about moral or religious truth would abolish freedom while relieving us of uncertainty
uncertainty is not a defect of subjective truth
it is a consequence of what is most essential to human life—our freedom to choose

even if we cannot aspire to certainty
we nevertheless have a responsibility to strive for truth [what can this mean?]
We have no choice but to choose
not to choose is also to make a choice
important principle that we are responsible even when we are unaware of our freedom
ambivalence about freedom lies at the heart of Kierkegaard's philosophy
and is part of his legacy to existentialism
human beings are uniquely free in their ability to choose
uniquely burdened by necessity to choose
freedom is thus inextricably associated with a state of 'anxiety' or 'dread'
dread is both attractive and repulsive
anxiety—a feeling of fear which does not apply to anything definite

ambivalence of interrelated concepts of freedom and dread reflects dualist metaphysics
human beings as uneasy mixture of animal and divine, finite and infinite
opposition has long history
prominent in philosophy of Plato and St. Paul
spirit or soul is opposed to body, nature
for Kant the rational will of morality depends upon a 'noumenal self' transcending the causally determined order of nature
for Kierkegaard, too, possibility of freedom depends upon our spiritual nature
but human beings are still animals
still imprisoned in body, still subject to causal nexus of nature
weighed down by earthly inclinations and drives
freedom is thus experienced as conflict and dread

most basic choice of human beings is whether to acknowledge their freedom or try to evade it
evasion of freedom associated with 19th century mass society
leveling influence of modernity
fundamental feature of conscious selfhood: despair
people conform to conventional standards, satisfied with mediocre and average
seek distraction of transient pleasure instead of facing up to inevitability of death
despair in its most extreme when not recognized

Kierkegaard's mission is to make the individual aware of its despair
so bring it to recognize itself as free spirit
The Sickness Unto Death describes various ways in which human beings can passively ignore or actively deny their selfhood
only the self which comes to a self-conscious decision to accept God overcomes despair
progression of selfhood through ascending stages recalls Hegel's phenomenology of spirit

culminates in infinite self which stands directly before God
despair is exchanged for a position no less arduous and painful
clearest possible choice between sin and faith
fully self-conscious individual can only choose between faith and sin

but what can persuade the scientist or agnostic, or atheist
if there can be no intellectually irresistible proofs?
Kierkegaard's response is to elucidate a series of distinct 'spheres of existence'
or stages on life's way

Three Spheres of Existence

presents a subjective understanding of the alternative approaches to life

the aesthetic:

life lived in absence of resolute decision, empty and drifting
the child is the perfect and complete aesthete
lives solely in the pleasure or pain of the moment
some do grow up retaining this capacity for existing in the moment
these immediate ones sometimes beautiful to watch, says Kierkegaard
they glow in the moment but are quickly thrown into despair if the flower that delights fades
in the stricter sense, the aesthete is the one who lives for such privileged and pleasurable
moments
Kierkegaard thinks this aesthetic attitude in the end must collapse into despair
the aesthetic individual's ultimate fate is melancholy and boredom

Epicureanism shows this, the most beautiful Epicurean poems always haunted by sadness
Lucretius had the passion of madness and it is said he did in the end go mad
the aesthete is driven into panicky flight from the prospect of boredom
and thus into despair

there is also the intellectual "aesthete"
the contemplative who tries to stand outside life and behold it as spectacle
origin of Greek word "aesthetic" meaning to sense or perceive
same root as "theory" and "theater"
at a theater we view spectacles in which we ourselves are not involved
the intellectual who looks at things with detachment
and the philosopher who claims to be the spectator of all time and existence
are both fundamentally aesthetes
Kierkegaard attacks what had been held highest in philosophy—the thinker's detachment from life
in doing so he laid down the cardinal point in all subsequent existential philosophy

the ethical:

the thinker gives himself stable ethical reality by forming and renewing himself
in critical decisions which are a total inward commitment
first part of second volume of *Either/Or* on 'aesthetic validity of marriage'

only Christian marriage can unite love and duty
marriage embeds love in a context of social responsibility, giving it permanence
ethical sphere corresponds to social dimension of existence
harbors danger of mere conformity to social convention
and despairing abdication of freedom that this implies

the three “stages on life’s way” are not like floors of a building in which the lower stages are left behind as one climbs to the top
the aesthetic attitude is a part of life, but needs to be integrated with the other stages
in choosing the aesthetic one actually enters the ethical in so far as one has made a choice

the religious:

only religion offers possibility of fully satisfactory existence
only religion answers to the fully self-conscious individuality of authentic existence
Kierkegaard often speaks of ethico-religious
and no doubt for him there is a single leap from aesthetic into the religious
for a really passionate temperament that has renounced the life of pleasure
the consolations of the ethical are a warmed over substitute at best

the real difference between the ethical and religious is drawn out in *Fear and Trembling*
has to do with the uniqueness of the individual
the calling of the religious man who has to break with ordinary moral code
example of Abraham reveals faith as a “monstrous paradox”
a paradox no thought can grasp
because faith begins where thinking leaves off

an ethical rule expresses itself in a universal
all men must do such and such
but the religious personality may be called upon to do something that goes against social norm
Abraham is called upon to sacrifice his own son
an anguish in the fear of disobeying God and the doubt that this call may come from Him
demands of religion may sometimes be incompatible with demands of morality

we must believe even though faith violates human rationality, nature, and morality
why should human beings believe in what they must find irrational, unnatural and immoral?
for Kierkegaard what is required is “leap of faith”
once the leap has been made the overwhelming value of the religious life will be apparent
his varied writings are heroic attempts to give both non-believer and conventional Christian
some idea of what that life involves
hopes to awaken his contemporaries to the urgency of self-conscious and authentic decision
to counteract soporific effect of conformist society

The Attack Upon Christendom

when we advance from the aesthetic to the religious we become really serious
 the seriousness of someone who has at last arrived at his center
 who is at last totally engaged with the project of his life
 this person exists under the eye of eternity—what he does in the moment is absolutely real
 [think of eternal recurrence, the unbearable lightness of being]
 quite fitting that the last act of Kierkegaard's life was thoroughly existential
 an attack upon the Christianity of his native Denmark
 by extension the public Christianity of the whole modern world
The Attack upon Christendom a powerful polemic
 takes its place among the greatest polemics ever written
 his last work [similar to Nietzsche and his polemic *The Antichrist*]

central fact of modernity is the drift toward mass society
 Kierkegaard's ultimate conviction is that Christianity is something that concerns the individual
 attack against the smug complacency of his time [and our time too!]
 that believed itself Christian and did not even know that it was not
 Kierkegaard's polemic is against institutionalized Christianity

draws comparison with Dostoevsky's "The Grand Inquisitor"
 "The Grand Inquisitor, the Pope of Popes, relieves men of the burden of being Christian, but at the same time leaves them the peace of believing they are Christians" (Barrett, 175).

Summary

Kierkegaard presents powerful and passionate case for essential inwardness of religious life
 and emptiness of merely external observances
 'objective Christianity' considered totally inadequate
 obscures the full and severe demands of true Christianity
 true Christian must be prepared to live in a state of permanent tension
 like the revivalist preacher calls for inward renewal
 certainly an important figure in development of Protestantism

also important for philosophy more generally
 in attempts to illuminate nature of faith
 sheds light on the subjective or, in later terms, 'existential' truth of the human condition
 if his solution to the problem of existence has not always been persuasive
 his diagnosis of the problem is powerful
 in his preoccupation with choice between faith and unbelief
 he uncovers the significance of freedom and responsibility
 leaves us in little doubt that theoretical reason of the Enlightenment cannot help with either
 emphasis on individual existence and decision
 complemented by critique of inauthenticity of modern life
 central concepts of anxiety, dread, despair, freedom, authenticity
 along with his exploration of basic dimension of human existence
 now seen as origin of existentialism