

Søren Aabye Kierkegaard (1813–55)

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Biography

Although Kierkegaard's name has come to be chiefly associated with writings on philosophical themes, his various publications covered a wide range that included contributions to literary criticism, discourses on specifically religious topics and forays into polemical journalism. Born in Copenhagen in 1813, he led an outwardly uneventful existence there until his death in 1855. None the less much that he wrote drew upon crises and turning points in his personal life; even his theoretical works often had an autobiographical flavour.

Kierkegaard held that the philosophy of his time, largely owing to the influence of Hegelian idealism, tended to misconstrue the relation of thought to reality, wrongly assimilating the second to the first; in doing so, moreover, it reflected an age in which habits of abstract reflection and passive response had blinded people to their true concerns as self-determining agents ultimately accountable for their own characters and destinies. He sought to counter such trends, exploring different approaches to life with a view to opening his reader's eyes both to where they themselves stood and to possibilities of opting for radical change. He implied that decisions on the latter score lay beyond the scope of general rules, each being essentially a problem for the individual alone; even so, his portrayal of the religious mode of existence presented it as transcending limitations experienced in alternative forms of life. Kierkegaard, himself an impassioned believer, was at the same time crucially concerned to articulate the Christian standpoint in a fashion that salvaged it from recurrent misconceptions. Rejecting all attempts to provide objective justifications or proofs of religious claims, he endorsed a conception of faith that eschewed rational considerations and consisted instead of subjective self-commitment maintained in the face of intellectual uncertainty or paradox. His account was set within a psychological perspective that laid stress upon freedom as an inescapable condition of action and experience. The complex implications he believed this to possess for the interpretation of pervasive human emotions and attitudes were discussed in works that later proved highly influential, particularly for the growth of twentieth-century existentialism. Here, as in other areas of his writing, Kierkegaard made a significant, though delayed, impact upon the course of subsequent thought.

1. Life

Kierkegaard was the youngest son of a prosperous and largely self-made Danish businessman. The father was a deeply religious but exacting and guilt-ridden individual who communicated his feelings of melancholy and anxiety to other members of his family; they certainly left a lasting impression on Kierkegaard's own character and development, causing him later to describe his upbringing as having been 'insane'. It was perhaps largely from a desire to please his father, towards whom he tended to exhibit an ambivalent mixture of love and fear, that at the age of seventeen he enrolled at the University of Copenhagen with the object of taking a degree in

theology. Nevertheless, after passing his preliminary examinations he found himself increasingly attracted to other spheres of intellectual interest, particularly those involving developments in contemporary philosophy and literature; at the same time he cultivated a fashionably sophisticated lifestyle, following pursuits sharply at variance with the austere precepts that had been inculcated upon him at home. But in his journals, which he began during his protracted period as a student and continued to keep for the rest of his life, he is already to be found recording a growing dissatisfaction with the wayward mode of existence he had adopted, and the death of his father in 1838 appears finally to have prompted him to return to his academic studies with a view to settling down to a professional career. Thus by July 1840 he had been awarded his degree, and two months later he announced his engagement to marry Regine Olsen, the daughter of a highly placed civil servant. This, however, was not to be.

The story of Kierkegaard's abortive engagement is familiar from his journals, where he provided a detailed account of how he eventually broke off the relationship after an uneasy year during which he harboured regrets about his proposal. While his actual motives for making the final breach are left somewhat obscure, there can be no doubt as to its significance for his later thought and writings, allusions to it – often only lightly disguised – occurring in a variety of his works. In any case it certainly constituted a turning point. Henceforward he withdrew into a bachelor existence; moreover, although by now firmly committed to Christianity, he effectively abandoned any further thought of a clerical career and devoted himself instead to living as a writer on the very comfortable income he had inherited from his father's estate. The initial period of his authorship was in fact remarkably productive. He took less than a year over his master's dissertation *Om Begrebet Ironi* (The Concept of Irony), successfully submitting it to the university faculty in 1841, and he followed it with a series of books, all issued under pseudonyms, which were largely concerned with philosophical or psychological aspects of ethical and religious belief. The first, entitled *Enten-Eller* (Either/Or), came out in two substantial volumes in 1843 and was succeeded later in the same year by *Frygt og Bæven* (Fear and Trembling) and *Gjentagelsen* (Repetition); in 1844 *Philosophiske Smuler* (Philosophical Fragments) and *Begrebet Angest* (The Concept of Anxiety) appeared, and these in turn were followed by *Stadier paa Livets Vej* (Stages on Life's Way) in 1845 and by *Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift* (Concluding Unscientific Postscript) in 1846. Two further pseudonymous works on connected themes, *Sygdommen til Døden* (The Sickness unto Death) and *Indøvelse i Christendom* (Training in Christianity), were published in 1849 and 1850 respectively.

Although it is the writings listed above that have chiefly attracted the attention of subsequent philosophers and commentators, they by no means exhaust the total of Kierkegaard's literary output during the 1840s. Apart from some critical pieces, he also produced – this time under his own name – a number of directly religious discourses in which he aimed to present the essentials of Christian teaching; thus such works as his *Opbyggelige Taler i forskjellig Aand* (Edifying Discourses in Various Spirits) of 1847 were expressly designed to communicate and illustrate the true nature of the Christian message and the demands it imposed upon the individual. In their uncompromising emphasis on the severity of these requirements, and in their manner of stigmatizing the complacency and 'double-mindedness' imputable to contemporary

representatives of the faith they professed to serve, the latter books can be said to foreshadow the standpoint from which, in the culminating phase of his career, he launched a violent assault upon the established Church of Denmark. The occasion for this was the death of the Danish primate, Bishop Mynster, in 1854. Kierkegaard had increasingly come to regard Mynster as exemplifying in his own person many of the shortcomings of the church as a whole, and he was therefore incensed by hearing the dead prelate pronounced instead to have been a 'witness to the truth'. As a result he set out in the following months to denounce the covert worldliness and hypocrisy that permeated the clerical establishment, first through articles in the public press and subsequently in a broadsheet printed at his own expense. The ferocity of his attacks, appearing after a spell when he had published relatively little, caused surprise and some consternation. The controversy they stirred up was, however, abruptly interrupted by Kierkegaard's sudden collapse in October 1855 and his death a few weeks later.

2. The limits of objectivity

In an early entry in his journals, written when he was still a student, Kierkegaard gave vent to the dissatisfaction he felt at the prospect of a life purely devoted to the dispassionate pursuit of knowledge and understanding. 'What good would it do me', he then asked himself, 'if truth stood before me, cold and naked, not caring whether I recognized her or not?' Implicit in this question was an outlook which was to receive mature articulation in much of his subsequent work, being particularly prominent in his criticisms of detached speculation of the kind attributable to those he called 'systematists and objective philosophers'. To be sure, and notwithstanding what has sometimes been supposed, he had no wish to be understood as casting aspersions on the role played by impersonal or disinterested thinking in studies comprising scholarly research or the scientific investigation of nature: such an approach was quite in order when adopted within the limits set by determinate fields of enquiry. But matters were different when philosophical attempts were made to extend it in a manner that purported to transcend all particular viewpoints and interests, this conception of the philosopher's task leading to the construction of metaphysical theories which sought to comprehend every aspect of human thought and experience within the disengaged perspective of objective contemplation. Kierkegaard considered Hegel to be the foremost contemporary representative of the latter ambition, the famous system to which it had given rise being in his opinion fundamentally misconceived.

Kierkegaard's general reaction to what he found unacceptable in the Hegelian theory is in fact crucial to an understanding of his own philosophical position. On his interpretation Hegel's philosophy ultimately rested upon a central error, one that involved the illicit identification of essence and existence, thought and reality. The German writer had endeavoured to exhibit the world, and the place of humanity within the world, in terms of an evolving sequence of logical categories that rendered its overall structure fully intelligible from the impersonal standpoint of pure reason (see Hegel, G.W.F. §§4–8). Kierkegaard disclaimed any desire to dispute the considerable ingenuity of the Hegelian metaphysic when this was regarded simply as an 'experiment in thought'. He insisted, however, that thought was not the same as reality, nor could anything real be validly deduced from it; in particular, it was altogether mistaken to

suggest that changes and developments in the sphere of actual existence were assimilable to dialectical transitions between timeless concepts – it was one thing to construct a self-contained logical or formal system, quite another to entertain the project of producing an existential one. In raising such objections, moreover, he was especially concerned to stress their relevance to Hegel's treatment of specifically human existence. The Hegelian world-picture presupposed the possibility of adopting an absolute, God-like point of view from which everything was seen as contributing to an interlocking and rationally determined totality; as a result, human nature tended to be reduced to a philosophical abstraction, the individual to a representative of the species, and the significance of a particular person's life and actions to their role in forwarding an all-encompassing historical process that overshadowed and transcended them. At the same time, Kierkegaard suggested that the notion of an impersonal 'knowing subject' of the type postulated by thinkers of the Hegelian school was symptomatic of a corresponding inclination to forget that the speculative philosopher was himself an 'existing human being' whose status and situation imposed necessary limits upon his outlook and cognitive credentials. Far from his viewpoint on the world being from nowhere within it, such a philosopher inescapably belongs to it in his capacity as a finite empirical individual who 'sleeps, eats, blows his nose' and who has 'to face the future'.

Although Kierkegaard's attitude to Hegel is most extensively displayed in the polemical references that enliven the pages of his Concluding Unscientific Postscript, scattered allusions to the faults and weaknesses of 'the System' also appear in many of his other writings. The number and variety of the contexts in which they occur indicate that he regarded the current vogue of Hegelianism as having more than a purely academic significance, the popularity it enjoyed at once reflecting and helping to promote a contemporary ethos in which what he termed the 'illusions of objectivity' exercised a pervasive and corrupting influence. Thus he conceived the age to be one wherein people had lost a clear sense of their identity as individuals ultimately responsible for their own characters, outlooks and modes of living. Instead it was customary for them to take refuge in the anonymity provided by membership of collective movements or trends and to envisage themselves as being inevitably circumscribed by the social roles they occupied in a manner that absolved them from personal accountability for their pronouncements or actions. In Kierkegaard's view, they had largely forgotten what 'it means for you and me and him, each for himself, to be human beings', succumbing to a 'quantitative dialectic' in which a bemused preoccupation with large-scale historical events and a passive submission to the levelling influence of 'the crowd' took precedence over the vital constituents of human life and experience – 'the inner spirit, the ethical, freedom'.

Confronted by such tendencies, Kierkegaard considered it to be a primary part of his task as a writer to challenge habits of thought that smothered spontaneous feeling and obstructed active commitment. He held that these had had a particularly deleterious effect in the religious sphere; the widespread belief that the fundamental tenets of Christianity could be rationally interpreted and objectively justified within the framework of the Hegelian system was symptomatic of a more general disposition to treat both religion and morality alike in a blandly contemplative spirit that detached them from the contexts of inward conviction and practical engagement to which they essentially belonged. With this in mind it was necessary in the first instance to 'make

people aware', bringing home to them the limitations of their present condition and awakening them to the possibility of subjective self-determination and change.

3. Aestheticism and the ethical

Kierkegaard maintained that in his early writings he had aimed to arouse and enlarge the self-understanding of his readers by eschewing abstract instruction and by employing in its place an avowedly therapeutic method he referred to as 'indirect communication'. This meant delineating particular ways of life in a fashion that enabled people to grasp concretely and from within the distinct types of outlook and motivation involved, such a procedure being a characteristically literary or 'poetic' one. Not only were alternative positions imaginatively presented as if in a novel or play; the books in which this was done were attributed to different personages in the shape of pseudonymous authors or editors. He intended thereby to avoid the kind of *ex cathedra* didacticism he associated with standard philosophical texts of his time. Instead he favoured an undogmatic approach in which competing views and attitudes were 'allowed to speak for themselves', it being left to his readers to decide where they stood in relation to these and to make up their own minds about the practical conclusions to be drawn.

Either/Or was the first of Kierkegaard's works to be published under a pseudonym and was a book he later alluded to as clearly exemplifying his use of the above method. It purports to portray two radically dissimilar modes of existence, one characterized as 'aesthetic' and the other as 'ethical'. Both are presented through the medium of allegedly edited papers or letters, the first set being ascribed to an individual referred to as 'A' and the second to an older man who is said to be by profession a judge. Aestheticism as exhibited in A's loosely related assortment of papers is seen to take on a lively variety of forms and guises; among other things, it is held to find expression in the characters of legendary figures like Don Juan and Faust, and it is also illustrated by an account in diary form of a step-by-step seduction. By contrast, the position of the ethicist is set out in two somewhat prosaic letters which are addressed by the Judge to A and which include detailed critical analyses of the younger man's motives and psychological prospects.

What did Kierkegaard understand by the categories he distinguished? From the text the aesthetic life emerges as one in which the individual is essentially concerned with exploring means to his own satisfaction and where there is a consequent absence of overall continuity in the course he follows. As has been indicated, however, the picture drawn is complex and multi-faceted. While in general outline it is suggestive of a person in pursuit of transient pleasures rather than following any long-term aim, there are passages where attention is chiefly focused on the aesthetic individual's dependence upon unpredictable vicissitudes of mood or circumstance, and others again where emphasis is laid on his need to guard against the threats posed by ennui or melancholy. Not unexpectedly, it is the problematic possibilities inherent in A's lifestyle that the Judge singles out for criticism in his comprehensive survey of the aesthetic position. Whereas the aestheticist typically allows himself to be swayed by what he conceives to be the unalterable constituents of his natural disposition, the ethically orientated individual is prone to look at himself in an altogether different light. Both his motivation and behaviour are responsive to a self-image 'in likeness to which he has to form himself', his particular aptitudes and propensities

being seen as subject to the control of his will and as capable of being directed to the realization of demanding projects that reflect what he truly aspires to become. It is commitment to such projects which endows the ethical life with a coherence and self-sufficiency that its aesthetic counterpart conspicuously lacks (see Existentialist ethics).

Kierkegaard's treatment in *Either/Or* of the aesthetic/ethical contrast is frequently thought to echo the Kantian distinction between inclination and duty (see Kantian ethics). But although there may be discernible affinities, there are also significant differences. Thus Kant's predominantly schematic accounts of sensuous motivation are devoid of both the psychological penetration and the literary sophistication that characterize Kierkegaard's wide-ranging portrayals of the aesthetic stance. And comparable divergences are apparent in the case of the ethical. Kierkegaard's Judge may be said to follow the German philosopher in highlighting the role of the will, underlining its independence of contingent circumstances and stressing its capacity to manage the sphere of natural inclination in a way that is conformable to the ethical individual's paramount concerns. Yet while he shares Kant's belief in and respect for the latter's autonomy, he differs in not presenting moral requirements in terms of the purely formal prescriptions of practical reason. The self which it is the task of each individual to choose and develop is not an 'abstract' but a 'concrete' self; it stands in 'reciprocal relations' with its actual social and cultural surroundings, things like marriage, having a job and undertaking civic and institutional responsibilities being intrinsic to personal fulfilment in the requisite sense. It is implied, moreover, that such active participation in communal affairs, involving an unconstrained and inward adherence to standards presupposed by a shared form of life, reinforces the contrast already drawn with the unreflective or wayward 'experimentalism' typified by certain manifestations of the aesthetic outlook. Thus the Judge insists upon the conceptual exclusion from the ethical of whatever savours of the arbitrary or the merely capricious. At the same time, however, he indicates that this should not be thought of as circumscribing in any fundamental fashion the subjective freedom and independence of the individual. For although moral requirements must of necessity be treated as authoritative, they are not apprehended as deriving from a source 'foreign to the personality' but are instead experienced as springing or 'breaking forth' from the latter's essential nature.

Even so, it is arguable that the internal tensions between individualistic and socially conformist strains discernible in the Judge's representation of the ethical sphere cannot always be easily or satisfactorily resolved. Kierkegaard discussed one context in which they might be said to arise in a critical form when he went on to consider a way of life that constituted an alternative to the possibilities so far portrayed. This stage of existence, transcending the other two, was the religious.

4. The religious consciousness

Central to Kierkegaard's account of religion is his treatment of the concept of faith, a treatment that throws into relief the most distinctive features of his philosophical standpoint. There are two main areas in which these manifest themselves and in which it is the crucial inadequacies of human reason, practical as well as theoretical, that are emphasized.

The first concerns limitations in the outlook of accepted morality that make themselves felt at certain levels or junctures of experience and are held to call for what is termed a 'teleological suspension of the ethical'. The implications of this *prima facie* puzzling notion are explored in *Fear and Trembling*, an intricately wrought study in which Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author – Johannes *de silentio* – treats as his central theme the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac. Johannes portrays Abraham as being ostensibly called upon to set aside ethical concerns in deference to a higher *telos* or end that altogether transcends them. Such a situation is contrasted with the predicament of what he terms the 'tragic hero', the latter being someone who is forced to make a choice between conflicting moral requirements but who in doing so still remains within the bounds of the ethical domain. Thus although the decisions taken there may be at an agonizing cost, the fact that they can none the less be seen to conform to universally recognized norms renders them rationally acceptable to others and capable of gaining their respect. This, however, is not so in the case of Abraham, who, as a solitary 'knight of faith', responds to a divine command supposedly addressed to himself alone and having a content – the killing of his own son – that must inevitably strike ordinary thought as being both outrageous and incomprehensible. No attempt is made to soften the paradoxical character of such points. On the contrary, Kierkegaard's pseudonym sets out to underline, indeed to dramatize, the disturbing nature of the demands which religious faith can impose on the life and conduct of an individual. At the same time, he takes practising churchmen severely to task for paying lip service to a phenomenon whose awesome significance they fail to appreciate, and he also criticizes contemporary theorists of religion for construing an intrinsically transcendent category in terms drawn from social and essentially secular conceptions of ethics. This was not to suggest that from a religious point of view moral standards and principles could in general be abrogated or overruled. It did mean, on the other hand, that within that perspective they took on a radically different aspect, one where they possessed a relative rather than an absolute status and where it was the individual's own relation to God that was paramount, assuming precedence over all other considerations.

The claim that faith in the religious sense pertains to what exceeds the limits of human rationality and understanding recurs in the two subsequent writings that Kierkegaard referred to as his 'philosophical works' – *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Here, however, it is discussed within a wider setting and in connection with theoretical questions concerning the proper interpretation of religious assertions. Although once again ascribed to a pseudonym, albeit a different one, both books appeared under Kierkegaard's imprint as their 'editor' and in any case may be taken to have expressed views that were basically his own. Thus in each of them it is made apparent that the author totally rejects the feasibility of trying to provide religious tenets with an objective foundation. The belief that the existence and nature of God could be conclusively established from resources supplied by pure reason might have enjoyed a long philosophical career; none the less it was demonstrably unacceptable, Kierkegaard largely echoing – though in a summary form and without attribution – some of the objections that Kant had levelled against arguments traditionally advanced by theologians and metaphysicians. Nor was he any more receptive to the suggestion that religious claims of a specifically historical character, such as those relating to the doctrines of Christianity, were susceptible to justification on straightforwardly empirical grounds; it was impossible to regard

them as representing ordinary historical facts of the sort to which standard appeals to inductive inference and evidence would normally be considered appropriate. As he acknowledged, Lessing and Hamann were thinkers who in different ways had already underlined the problematic issues raised by the latter. But it was perhaps Hume's contention in his first Enquiry that only a 'miracle in his own person', subverting all the principles of his understanding, could bring a reasonable individual to embrace the Christian religion which most strikingly foreshadowed Kierkegaard's approach to the subject. No doubt Hume himself had intended his words to be taken in a strictly ironical sense. Even so, Kierkegaard implied that it was open to believers to look at sceptical asides of the type cited in a different light. For by exposing the vanity of attempts to encompass within its grasp matters that lay beyond the scope of reason, such remarks could be said to provide salutary reminders of what was really at stake. It was not to the spheres of impersonal judgment and dispassionate assent that the religious consciousness rightfully belonged, but on the contrary to those of individual choice and inner commitment.

5. Faith and subjectivity

Kierkegaard was certainly not alone in suggesting that writers who tried to justify religious belief on cognitive grounds were more confused about its true nature than some of their sceptically minded critics and to that extent posed a greater threat to it; indeed, Kant himself had virtually implied as much when he spoke of denying knowledge to make room for faith, as opposed to seeking to give religious convictions a theoretical foundation that could only prove illusory (see Kant, I. §4). The question arose, however, of what positive account should be given of such faith, and here Kierkegaard's position set him apart from many thinkers who shared his negative attitude towards the feasibility of providing objective demonstrations. As he made amply clear, the religion that crucially concerned him was Christianity, and far from playing down the intellectual obstacles this ostensibly presented he went out of his way to stress the particular problems it raised. Both its official representatives and its academic apologists might have entertained the hope of making it rationally acceptable to a believer, but in doing so they showed themselves to be the victims of a fundamental misapprehension. From an objective point of view, neither knowledge nor even understanding was possible here, the proper path of the Christian follower lying in the direction, not of objectivity, but of its opposite. It was only by 'becoming subjective' that the import of Christianity could be grasped and meaningfully appropriated by the individual. Faith, Kierkegaard insisted, 'inheres in subjectivity'; as such it was in essence a matter of single-minded resolve and inward dedication rather than of spectatorial or contemplative detachment, of passion rather than of reflection. That was not to say, though, that it amounted to a primitive or easy option. On the contrary, faith in the sense in question could only be achieved or realized in the course of a person's life at great cost and with the utmost difficulty (see Faith).

To understand what lay behind this claim it is important to recognize that Kierkegaard broadly distinguished between two levels or stages of development at which religious belief manifested itself. In his account of the first of these, in which he specified the criteria that any standpoint must conform to if it was to count as a religious one, he was at pains to emphasize the element of 'objective uncertainty' surrounding assertions about the transcendent, such uncertainty deriving

from the absence of rational support previously alluded to. So construed, faith essentially involved personal venture or risk, preserving it being figuratively compared to 'remaining out upon the deep, over seventy thousand fathoms of water'. But to hold fast to a conviction in the face of a lack of objective justification or grounds was not the same as giving assent to something that appeared to be intrinsically contrary to reason, an 'offence' to the understanding itself. And it was in the latter terms that Kierkegaard referred to the Christian conception of the incarnation, this being an 'absolute paradox' that required the believer to 'risk his thought' in embracing its reality. Moreover, it was in the light of such a requirement that the level of faith aspired to in Christianity could be said to constitute 'the highest passion in the sphere of human subjectivity', exceeding other forms of religious belief in virtue of the unique nature of the demands it made upon an individual's mind and outlook.

According to Kierkegaard, the paradox of the incarnation lay in the notion that the eternal or timeless had entered the sphere of finite and temporal existence: this amounted to uniting contradictories in a fashion that meant a 'breach with all thinking'. Such a feature precluded treating it as if it could be vouchsafed by ordinary historical enquiry, and he set aside the scholarly pursuit of biblical research and criticism as altogether irrelevant to what was here at issue; quite apart from the specifically 'approximative' status he assigned to history as a branch of knowledge, the content of the particular 'hypothesis' under consideration defied logic in a way that contravened the principles governing any kind of accredited cognitive discipline. Furthermore, he regarded its paradoxical character as having another crucial consequence, namely, that there was no basis for the common assumption that the contemporary witnesses of what was recorded in the Gospels were in a better position to authenticate the reality of the incarnation than subsequent generations who had only the testimony of others to rely on. To suppose that in the present case the evidence of direct observation was superior to testimony was to fail to see that neither could ever function as more than an 'occasion' for belief of the sort of question. With both, a volitional leap of faith was necessary, one that involved a 'qualitative transition' from the realm of rational thought into that of the intellectually inaccessible or 'absurd'.

Kierkegaard's stress on the gap separating faith from reason, which it could need divine assistance to surmount, was reflected in the controversial account he offered of religious truth; this likewise received a subjective interpretation. Thus in a well-known passage in the Postscript he contrasted two distinct ways of conceiving of truth, one treating it as a matter of a belief's corresponding to what it purported to be about and the other as essentially pertaining to the particular manner or spirit in which a belief was held. And it was to the second of these conceptions that he ostensibly referred when he declared that 'subjectivity is the truth', genuineness of feeling and depth of inner conviction being the decisive criterion from a religious point of view. Admittedly he has sometimes been criticized here for a tendency to shift from construing religious truth along the above lines to doing so in terms of the objective alternative, with the questionable implication that sheer intensity of subjective acceptance was sufficient to authenticate the independent reality of what was believed. But however that may be, it is arguable that in this context – as is often the case elsewhere – his prime concerns were conceptual and phenomenological in character, rather than epistemic or justificatory.

Kierkegaard's central aim was to assign Christianity to its proper sphere, freeing it from what he considered to be traditional misconceptions as well as from the falsifying metaphysical theories to which there had more recently been attempts to assimilate it. If that meant confronting what he himself called 'a crucifixion of the understanding', the only appropriate response from the standpoint in question lay in a passionate commitment to the necessarily paradoxical and mysterious content of the Christian religion, together with a complementary resolve to emulate in practice the paradigmatic life of its founder (see Existentialist theology §§1, 2).

6. Psychological themes and influence

Kierkegaard's preoccupation with the category of subjectivity that ran like a continuous thread through his theoretical writings was integrally linked to his conception of human beings as individual and self-determining participants in the 'existential process'. The view that freedom and the possibility of change constituted fundamental conditions of human life and fulfilment was delineated in his so-called 'psychological works', *The Concept of Anxiety* and *The Sickness Unto Death*. In both books the structure of human personality is portrayed in developmental and volitional terms; individuals exist in the mode, not of being, but of becoming, and what they become is something for which they themselves are ultimately responsible. In this connection certain pervasive attitudes and emotions can be seen to possess a special significance, Kierkegaard giving priority of place to a form of anxiety or dread (*Angst*) which differed from sentiments like fear in lacking any determinate object and in being directed instead to 'something that is nothing'. Such a state of mind might manifest itself in a variety of ways, but he made it clear that his fundamental concern was with its relation to the consciousness of freedom. Thus he referred to the particular kind of dizziness, or vertiginous ambivalence between attraction and repulsion, that was liable to afflict us when, in certain circumstances, the realization dawned that there was nothing objective that compelled us to opt for one course of action rather than another; in the last analysis what we did was up to ourselves alone, freedom being said to 'look down into its own possibility' as though into a yawning abyss or void. Kierkegaard believed that the psychological phenomenon so identified had momentous consequences, not least for its bearing on the religious alternatives of sin and salvation. On the one hand, the story of Adam represented a mythical illustration of how the awakened consciousness of freedom could arouse an anxiety whose occurrence in this case was the precursor of sin. On the other hand, however, such an emotion might also arise when there was a possibility of making a qualitative leap, not into sin and alienation from God, but towards the opposite of this, namely, faith and the promise offered by Christianity. But here Kierkegaard reiterates the point that a presentiment of the difficulties and sacrifices entailed made the latter a course which there were strong temptations to resist; it followed that people were only too prone to conceal from themselves their potentialities as free beings, such self-induced obscurity serving as a convenient screen for inaction and a failure to change. Self-deception of this sort in fact formed a component of many of the varieties of spiritual despair which Kierkegaard picked out for analysis, as well as underpinning his diagnosis of some of the broader types of malaise he detected in the social and cultural climate of his time.

In his insistence upon the ultimacy of human freedom and his correlative attention to the devices and strategies whereby people may seek to protect themselves from a recognition of some of its disturbing implications, Kierkegaard anticipated themes that were taken up, albeit much later and often in an explicitly secular setting, by a number of leading twentieth-century writers (see Existentialism). Subjectivity and the primacy of the individual, the 'burden' of freedom, the contrast between authentic and inauthentic modes of existence – these and associated topics became familiar through the works of existentialist philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger as well as figuring in the wider field of imaginative literature. Nor were those the only areas in which his ideas eventually made an impact. In the sphere of ethics his emphasis on radical choice indirectly contributed to the growth of non-cognitivist theories of value, while in religion his conception of faith had a profound influence on the development of modern Protestant theology, notwithstanding understandable reservations about some of his more extreme claims regarding its paradoxical character.

List of works

Kierkegaard, S.A. (1962–4) *Samlede Vaerker*, ed. A.B. Drachmann, J.L. Heiberg and H.O. Lange, Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandel, 20 vols.

(The definitive edition of Kierkegaard's complete works.)

Kierkegaard, S.A. (1841) *Om Begrebet Ironi*, trans. H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong, *The Concept of Irony*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989.

(Kierkegaard's university dissertation. Though principally concerned with Socratic irony, he also discusses the concept in relation to writers associated with German romanticism.)

Kierkegaard, S.A. (1843a) *Enten-Eller*, trans. H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong, *Either/Or*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987, 2 vols.

(Presents contrasting life-views, one aesthetic and the other ethical, in the form of papers and letters attributed to two imaginary characters.)

Kierkegaard, S.A. (1843b) *Frygt og Baeven og Gjentaelsen*, trans. H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong, *Fear and Trembling and Repetition*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983.

(Two pseudonymous writings: the first an extended meditation on the implications of the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac; the second a portrayal in fictional form of psychological, ethical and religious issues raised by a problematic love-affair.)

Kierkegaard, S.A. (1844) *Philosophiske Smuler*, trans. H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong, *Philosophical Fragments*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985.

(A concise and complex study in which idealist and rationalist approaches to truth are contrasted with ones fundamental to Christian belief.)

Kierkegaard, S.A. (1844) *Begrebet Angest*, trans. R. Thomte and A.B. Anderson, *The Concept of Anxiety*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980.

(An analysis of a pervasive attitude of mind (Angst) chiefly evoked by an awareness of human freedom and of possibilities involving radical choice.)

Kierkegaard, S.A. (1845) *Stadier paa Livets Vej*, trans. H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong, *Stages on Life's Way*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988.

(The stages in the title are identified as aesthetic, ethical and religious, Kierkegaard's treatment of the last of these drawing indirectly but graphically on his own life and experience.)

Kierkegaard, S.A. (1846) *Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift*, trans. D.F. Swenson, L.M. Swenson and W. Lowrie, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1941.

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References and further reading

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(A penetrating critical biography.)

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(Relates Kierkegaard's critique of traditional forms of philosophy to the work of such later thinkers as Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida.)

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