Kierkegaard, Søren Aabye (1813 - 1855)

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Soren Kierkegaard was a Danish theologian, philosopher, and literary critic generally credited as the founder of modern Christian existentialism. Kierkegaard was born in Copenhagen to a very wealthy family, a background that ensured him ample leisure time to pursue his literary and recreational interests. His work was informed by two especially formative relationships. The first was with his father, Michael Pedersen, an austere and forbidding merchant who rose from humble beginnings to become one of Denmark’s richest men. Although their relationship was at times fractious, Michael’s love of philosophy profoundly influenced the young Kierkegaard. Of even greater significance was Kierkegaard’s failed engagement to Regine Olsen, who was 14 years old when the two first met in 1837. They were instantly attracted, but the following year Kierkegaard began having doubts about the relationship; nevertheless, in September 1840 he proposed marriage, before abruptly breaking off the engagement less a year later. Regine soon married another man, and Kierkegaard remained single and celibate for the remainder of his life. Indeed, his life was in many ways a lonely one: by the age of 25, five of his six siblings, as well as both parents, had died.

Kierkegaard attended the University of Copenhagen, where he studied philosophy and theology. He graduated with a Ph.D. in 1841, although his committee criticized his dissertation - later published as *On the Concept of Irony* - as too informal and witty for an academic text. Kierkegaard’s philosophy has long been characterized as a rejection of system-building, above all the metaphysics of Hegel, although this relationship has been reassessed in more recent literature. In response to Hegel’s belief that human actions must be understood as an expression of the historical unfolding of Spirit (*Geist*) in the pursuit of freedom, Kierkegaard insisted that the everyday practices and lived experiences of individuals ought to form the basis of philosophical inquiry, rather than metaphysical abstractions. In keeping with his focus on existence over essence, Kierkegaard’s philosophical writings - in particular the two-volume *Either/Or* (1843) - chart the dialectical progression of the individual through three stages: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. The aesthetic stage is defined by sensuousness, egotism, and nihilism, culminating in a profound boredom. The ethical stage is understood in terms of a given community’s social norms, which in turn gives way to the religious stage. Although Kierkegaard considers the religious stage to be the culmination of human existence, he believes that even the most devout rarely live a truly religious life. Religion, for Kierkegaard, is a matter of radical choice - a ‘leap of faith’ - rather than adherence to dogma.

Kierkegaard’s thinking, whether published under his own name or under one of his various pseudonyms (Victor Eremita, Judge William, Johannes de Silentio, Constantine Constantius, Young Man, Vigilius Haufniensis, Nicolaus Notabene, Liarius Bookbinder, Johannes Climacus, Inter et Inter, H. H., and Anti-Climacus), profoundly influenced the development not only of secular existential literature and philosophy - including Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, and Albert Camus - but also twentieth-century Protestant theologians such as Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr. The psychological orientation of Kierkegaard’s work, seen most notably in 1844’s *The Concept of Anxiety* and 1849’s *The Sickness Unto Death*, also inspired numerous existentially oriented physicians and psychiatrists, including Karl Jaspers, Ludwig Binswanger, and Kurt Goldstein.

# Selected List of Works:

(1841) *On the Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates* (*Om Begrebet Ironi med stadigt Hensyn til Socrates*)

(1843) *Either/Or* (*Enten-Eller*)

(1843) *Two Upbuilding Discourses* (*To opbyggelige Taler*)

(1843) *Fear and Trembling* (*Frygt og Bæven*)

(1843) *Repetition* (*Gjentagelsen*)

(1843) *Four Upbuilding Discourses* (*Fire opbyggelige Taler*)

(1844) *Two Upbuilding Discourses* (*To opbyggelige Taler*)

(1844) *Three Upbuilding Discourses* (*Tre opbyggelige Taler*)

(1844) *Philosophical Fragments* (*Philosophiske Smuler*)

(1844) *The Concept of Anxiety* (*Begrebet Angest*)

(1845) *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions* (*Tre Taler ved tænkte Leiligheder*)

(1845) *Stages on Life's Way* (*Stadier paa Livets Vei*)

(1846) *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* (*Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift*)

(1847) *Edifying Discourses in Diverse Spirits* (*Opbyggelige Taler i forskjellig Aand*)

(1847) *Works of Love* (*Kjerlighedens Gjerninger*)

(1848) *Christian Discourses* (*Christelige Taler*)

(1849) *The Sickness Unto Death* (*Sygdommen til Døden*)

(1849) *Three Discourses at the Communion on Fridays*

(1850) *Practice in Christianity* (*Indøvelse i Christendom*)

Further Reading:

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