

About Søren Kierkegaard

From Britannica:

Søren Aabye Kierkegaard (1813-55) Danish religious philosopher and critic of rationalism, regarded as the founder of existentialist philosophy. He is famous for his critique of systematic rational philosophy, particularly Hegelianism, on the grounds that actual life cannot be contained within an abstract conceptual system. With this stance, he intended to clear the ground for an adequate consideration of faith and, accordingly, of religion—specifically Christianity.

Early life. Kierkegaard's father, Michael Pedersen Kierkegaard, who had a great influence on his character, had begun his own career as a poor tenant-farmers' helper in the desolate moorlands of western Jutland. One day, desperate with rage at divine indifference to his sufferings and privations, he stood on a hill and solemnly cursed God. Soon after, he was sent to Copenhagen, to an uncle who was a dealer in woolen articles, and from that moment he prospered, ending his life as a rich man—the owner of five houses in the capital that all miraculously escaped destruction during the British bombardment of Copenhagen in 1807. Moreover, having placed his entire fortune in gilt-edged securities, he was among the few who escaped ruin in the state bankruptcy of 1813, the year Søren was born. Thus, at his death in 1838, the old man left Kierkegaard and his brother a considerable fortune that enabled Kierkegaard to spend his life writing, unhampered by financial considerations. Kierkegaard's psychological heritage was, however, far more important than his financial legacy in its consequences for his development as a man and a writer. His father combined a strict adherence to orthodox Lutheranism with a fondness for the logic of formal argument, and yet the austere religious and intellectual training he devised for the most brilliant of his sons was enlivened by a captivating imagination. Kierkegaard never shook off the influence of his father's overpowering personality nor of the suppressed melancholy that lay so disquietingly below the surface of his father's piety. At an early age, Kierkegaard became aware of the heavy burden of guilt that weighed his father down and later learned, in circumstances the traumatic effect of which he designated as "The Great Earthquake," that the reasons for it lay in the boyhood curse his father had hurled at God. Appalled by the knowledge of his father's sin, he threw himself into a life of dissipation yet remained haunted by the elder Kierkegaard's conviction that God's curse lay on the family, a conviction that the deaths of Kierkegaard's mother and five of his six brothers and sisters seemed to confirm. He went to the University of Copenhagen to study theology but neglected this in favour of philosophy. The death of his father in 1838 had a sobering effect on Kierkegaard. He resumed his theological studies and two years later took his master's degree. There was, however, another reason for his renewal of purpose; he had fallen in love with a young girl, Regine Olsen, and become engaged to her. Almost immediately, however, he began to think he had made a mistake, though he still felt himself deeply in love. It appears that he became increasingly aware of the gulf between the young, innocent, inexperienced girl and himself, weighed down as he was by a feeling of guilt and by his unusual consciousness of the complexities of the human mind, which he would never be able to communicate to Regine. As he wrote in his diary: "I was a thousand years too old for her." Accordingly, he decided to break the engagement. But Regine was in love with him, and the more he tried to persuade her to let him go, the more she clung to him. In the end he had to break off their relationship himself, but, in order to preserve her reputation, he staged an elaborate show of caddishness so as to make it appear that it was she who had rejected him. This point established, he fled to Berlin, where he lived for half a year. This little romance, novelettish though it may seem in bare outline, had a profound effect on Kierkegaard and furnished him with material for reflection and comment in several of his books.

First philosophical works. He returned from Berlin with an enormous manuscript in his trunk, *Enten-Eller: et-livs fragment* (1843; *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*). Nearly all Kierkegaard's books were published pseudonymously, with fictitious names suited to the particular work, a peculiarity intended to persuade the reader that the ideas he proposed were not to be taken as the pronouncements of an authority but presented as various modes of life for the reader's judgment and, especially, choice. This is, in fact, the meaning of the title *Either/Or*, which offers the alternatives of an aesthetic or an ethical (or ethico-religious) view of life. Kierkegaard's belief in the necessity—for each individual—of making a fully conscious, responsible choice among the alternatives that life offers has become fundamental in all existential writing and thought. Kierkegaard's unhappy experience with Regine obviously plays a great role in *Either/Or*, and, indeed, the final part of the first volume recalls his own love story in many details recorded in his diary. The book can be seen as a secret communication to Regine, intended to

explain and justify his attitude to her. Such secret communications run through all his works, and Kierkegaard returns again and again to the question of his responsibility for what he did. *Either/Or* is a work of high artistic value; in addition, it provides an important illustration of the current literary trend when Romanticism was developing some of its later preoccupations-social realism and individual psychology-and was becoming more pessimistic and morbid in its outlook. These elements also occur in Kierkegaard's subsequent books, which appeared in rapid succession. Among them should be mentioned *Frygt og bæven* (1843; *Fear and Trembling*) and *Gjentagelsen* (1843; *Repetition*), both of which deal with faith and with the idea of sacrifice. The starting point of *Fear and Trembling* is the story of Abraham and Isaac. Once more Kierkegaard examines the implications of his break with Regine, a sacrifice, like that of Abraham, performed in obedience to a higher duty, and, like Abraham's readiness to slay his son, an act that contravenes the laws of ethics. The problem is whether situations can be imagined in which ethics can be suspended by a higher authority-i.e., by God, when God himself must be considered the essence of everything ethical. This problem-which Kierkegaard calls "the teleological suspension of the ethical"-led him to the conclusion that faith is essentially paradoxical. Repetition is associated with *Fear and Trembling* since it provides a psychological demonstration of these ideas. In 1844 *Philosophiske smuler* (*Philosophical Fragments*) and *Begrebet angst* (*The Concept of Dread*) appeared. The former is an attempt to present Christianity as it should be if it is to have any meaning. It aims particularly at presenting Christianity as a form of existence that presupposes free will, without which everything becomes meaningless. This was an attack on the prevailing Hegelian philosophy, which employed grandiose historical perspectives in which the individual was sucked up as tracelessly as a grain of dust. In fact, by this time Kierkegaard was preparing for a showdown with Hegelian philosophy, but, before he did so, he felt the need to extend his ideas concerning the philosophy of freedom into the sphere of psychology. The result was *The Concept of Dread*. Extraordinarily penetrating, it is perhaps the first work of depth psychology in existence. In this work Kierkegaard makes a clear distinction between what he calls angst, or dread - a feeling that has no definite object - and the fear and terror that derive from an objective threat (e.g., a wild animal, a gunman). How intimately Kierkegaard's ideas were intertwined with his life can be seen from an extract from his diary: But if I had explained things to her [Regine], I would have had to initiate her into terrible things, my relationship with my father, his melancholy, the eternal night that broods over me, my despair, lusts, and excesses, which perhaps in God's eyes were not so heinous; for it was dread which caused me to go astray. In the last part of the sentence we have the starting point and key to *The Concept of Dread*. Kierkegaard perceived that freedom cannot be proved philosophically because any proof would imply a logical necessity, which is the opposite of freedom. The discussion of freedom does not belong to the sphere of logic but to that of psychology, which cannot discuss freedom itself but can describe the state of mind that makes freedom possible. This state of mind is dread. Through experiencing dread, one leaps from innocence to sin, and, if the challenge of Christianity is accepted, from guilt to faith. Dread is thus sin's prelude, not its sequel, as one would think at first. In 1845 Kierkegaard had a new book ready, *Stadier paa livets vei* (*Stages on Life's Way*), a voluminous work and perhaps his most mature artistic achievement. In a way, it reiterates the idea of *Either/Or*, as the two titles indicate, but there is a vital difference-now the religious stage, or sphere, is distinguished not merely from the aesthetic but also from the ethical. This development was, in fact, a logical consequence of the ideas embodied in all his former works, which aimed at exposing the inadequacy of human ethics as a way of life. Accordingly, while in *Either/Or* there were only two spheres, the aesthetic and the ethical, in *Stages on Life's Way* there are three. In the third and last section of the book, "Guilty?/Not Guilty?," Kierkegaard dissects the story of his broken engagement from a new angle. On the aesthetic plane, a love tragedy signifies that two lovers cannot be united because an extraneous power prevents them; the story of Romeo and Juliet provides a classic example. On the ethical plane, the obstacle consists in their belonging to different spheres of existence, one interpreting love aesthetically, the other ethically. This obstacle can only be overcome by one elevating the other to his own sphere of existence, a thing that rarely happens. On the religious plane, however, the obstacle lies in the fact that one of the two is constitutionally different, for he conceives his destiny to be one of suffering, and only the acceptance of suffering will enable him to achieve detachment from the here and now and so prepare him for eternity. The aesthetic hero has his opposition outside himself; the religious finds it within. The aesthetic hero becomes great by conquering; the religious hero by suffering. But suffering in the service of "the idea" is precisely the realization of the idea in the religious sphere of existence. This was the argument that Kierkegaard had not himself conceived when he wrote *Either/Or* and for whose sake he had to write the book over again. It is an argument that evinces an increasingly sombre outlook on life and on humanity as a whole. A number of unpleasant experiences had contributed to his changed mood. Regine had married and thus crushed a romantic illusion about their remaining in a sort of divine marriage, raised above the terrestrial level, only

waiting for God to make the impossible possible. This, in fact, was the idea underlying both *Fear and Trembling and Repetition*. Now it had all come to nothing, and the disillusionment emerges clearly in the first part of *Stages on Life's Way*, called "In Vino Veritas" or "The Banquet," which is modeled on Plato's *Symposium* and deals with the same subjects—love, eros, sex, woman—and reflects a biting sarcasm and scathing contempt for women in general.

Attack on Hegelianism. Kierkegaard also had other disappointments. He quarreled with literary critics who did not see the purport of his writings or, even worse, did see it and still tried to make him a laughingstock. From these skirmishes, he emerged victorious but deeply hurt and filled with an enormous disgust for mankind. This bitterness manifests itself in most of what he wrote afterward. But his next book was an exception. It bears the impressive title "Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments. A Mimic-Pathetic-Dialectic Composition, an Existential Contribution. By Johannes Climacus. Published by S. Kierkegaard." (1846). It is typical of Kierkegaard's irony that his most philosophically important work figures as a postscript to a book only about a fifth its size. And by calling his book "an existential contribution," Kierkegaard gives the reader a strong hint of his own philosophical position; his aim is to settle accounts with the predominant philosophy of his time, the Hegelian philosophy, which had swept Europe. Kierkegaard attacked Hegel's attempt to systematize the whole of existence, declaring that a system of existence cannot be constructed, since existence is incomplete and constantly developing. He further drew attention to the logical error that arose from Hegel's attempt to introduce mobility into logic and so revealed the confusion arising from the mixing of categories. Hegel thought he had created the objective theory of knowledge; Kierkegaard put forward the thesis that subjectivity is truth or, to quote his own definition, "the objective uncertainty maintained in the most passionate spirit of dedication is truth, the highest truth for one existing." These tenets, which have become the foundation stones of modern existentialism, have not only punctured "the system," as Hegel called his own philosophy, but have made all philosophical systems precarious. The system builder will never understand that it is not possible to understand existence intellectually. Hegel equated existence and thought and thus left no room for faith. Accordingly, Christianity appeared as a mere paragraph in the system, an example of the general, and that, according to Kierkegaard, was the scandal. Kierkegaard did not feel himself called upon to persuade people to become Christians, but he certainly did feel an obligation to let his contemporaries understand what Christianity really is. And more than that, he had a feeling that God had designated him for a special task and that he should give up writing altogether.

Showdown with the church. Kierkegaard could not abstain from writing, and now the "mission" was beginning to crystallize. God had appointed him, he thought, to reveal to his contemporaries the true nature of Christianity and to expose the scandal of the established Church of Denmark, the clergy of which had betrayed their religion by making themselves comfortable in secular society, in short, had become civil servants instead of followers of Christ. It is clear that Kierkegaard was moving in the direction of even greater austerity in his religious thinking, and in the works that he now produced, particularly *Kjerlighedens gjerninger* (1847; *Works of Love*), *Christelige taler* (1848; *Christian Discourses*), *Sygdommen til døden* (1849; *The Sickness unto Death*), and *Indøvelse i Christendom* (1850; *Training in Christianity*), he depicted a Christianity sterner and more uncompromising than in any of his other writings. The last book was also a disguised attack on the heads of the Danish church. By 1855 he felt convinced that God had authorized him to attack the established church and its clergy ruthlessly, and he began at once with a great number of small books and pamphlets and even a periodical called *The Moment*, to the 10 numbers of which he was the sole contributor. The strain of this intensely conducted campaign made grave inroads on his health. After nearly two years of it he collapsed and was brought to a hospital, where he died a month later. By that time he had exhausted his fortune. The few things of value he possessed he left to Regine, the woman he had loved and who by that time lived in the Danish West Indies, married to the governor. Influence on modern existentialism. It was not until several decades after Kierkegaard's death that the philosophical and artistic value of his work began to be fully appreciated. In 1877 the Danish literary critic Georg Brandes published the first book ever written about Kierkegaard and gave a brilliant analysis of his thought and life. In Germany interest in Kierkegaard became widespread, and everything of his was translated before World War I. It was not, however, until the years between the two world wars that knowledge of his work became widespread. The theology of the Swiss Protestant theologian Karl Barth also helped to escalate existentialist thinking, as did the philosophical thought of Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger and the Jewish religious thinker Martin Buber. The crucial understanding of Kierkegaard's writing came in the post-World War II years, which seem to have created a more

penetrating realization of such states as angst and suffering. Now the interest in Kierkegaard became universal, and by a century after his lonely death, Kierkegaard's time had finally come.

Additional reading. Biographical and critical works include Walter Lowrie, *Kierkegaard* (1938, reissued in 2 vol., 1970), a comprehensive study of his life and thought; Johannes Hohlenberg, *Søren Kierkegaard* (1954, reprinted 1978), a reliable account; Peter P. Rohde, *Søren Kierkegaard: An Introduction to His Life and Philosophy* (1963), for the general reader; Gregor Malantschuk, *Kierkegaard's Thought* (1971, reprinted 1974), a standard work; James Collins, *The Mind of Kierkegaard* (1953, reissued with a new preface and bibliography, 1983), a good introduction to Kierkegaard's philosophy; John W. Elrod, *Kierkegaard and Christendom* (1981), a study of the later religious works; Niels Thulstrup, *Commentary on Kierkegaard's "Concluding Unscientific Postscript"* (1984), a helpful explication of this important text; Joseph H. Smith (ed.), *Kierkegaard's Truth: The Disclosure of the Self* (1981), a multiauthor collection of essays, approaching Kierkegaard's work from literary, philosophical, and psychoanalytic viewpoints; Lev Shestov, *Kierkegaard and the Existential Philosophy* (1969), the first work to underline the existentialist point of view; Eduard Geismar, *Lectures on the Religious Thought of Søren Kierkegaard* (1937), a clear account of Kierkegaard's thought by one of his leading students; Adi Shmüeli, *Kierkegaard and Consciousness* (1971), a penetrating account of Kierkegaard's thought; and Mark C. Taylor, *Journeys to Selfhood: Hegel and Kierkegaard* (1980), a clear comparison. See also François H. Lapointe, *Søren Kierkegaard and His Critics: An International Bibliography of Criticism* (1980).