



C. STEPHEN EVANS

KIERKEGAARD

An Introduction

CAMBRIDGE

CAMBRIDGE

www.cambridge.org/9780521877039

This page intentionally left blank

KIERKEGAARD

C. Stephen Evans provides a clear, readable introduction to Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55) as a philosopher and thinker. His book is organized around Kierkegaard's concept of the three "stages" or "spheres" of human existence, which provide both a developmental account of the human self and an understanding of three rival views of human life and its meaning. Evans also discusses such important Kierkegaardian concepts as "indirect communication," "truth as subjectivity," and the Incarnation understood as "the Absolute Paradox." Although his discussion emphasizes the importance of Christianity for understanding Kierkegaard, it shows him to be a writer of great interest to a secular as well as a religious audience. Evans' book brings Kierkegaard into conversation with western philosophers past and present, presenting him as one who gives powerful answers to the questions which philosophers ask.

C. STEPHEN EVANS is University Professor of Philosophy and Humanities at Baylor University. His most recent published works include *Kierkegaard: Fear and Trembling* (2006), co-edited with Sylvia Walsh, and *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love: Divine Commands and Moral Obligations* (2004).

KIERKEGAARD

An Introduction

C. STEPHEN EVANS



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521877039

© C. Stephen Evans 2009

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provision of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published in print format 2009

ISBN-13 978-0-511-51302-2 eBook (Adobe Reader)

ISBN-13 978-0-521-87703-9 hardback

ISBN-13 978-0-521-70041-2 paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of urls for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

To Jan Evans
Fellow Kierkegaard Scholar and So Much More

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>Chronology</i>	xiii
<i>Sigla used for Kierkegaard's published writings</i>	xv
1 Introduction: Kierkegaard's life and works	1
2 Pseudonymity and indirect communication	24
3 The human self: Truth and subjectivity	46
4 The stages of existence: Forms of the aesthetic life	68
5 The ethical life as the quest for selfhood	90
6 Religious existence: Religiousness A	110
7 Christian existence: Faith and the paradox	139
8 Kierkegaard's dual challenge to the contemporary world	167
<i>For further reading: some personal suggestions</i>	196
<i>Index</i>	201

Preface

It is customary for scholars who write about Kierkegaard to apologize for doing so. Kierkegaard made constant fun of the “professor” and predicted, with some bitterness, that after his death, his literary corpus would be picked over by the scholars for their own purposes. And so it has been.

Nevertheless, I offer no apologies for this effort to introduce Kierkegaard as a philosopher to those who are interested in reading him. Those of us who love Kierkegaard and who regularly teach Kierkegaard know how stimulating and provocative an encounter with his works can be. Nevertheless, for the contemporary student, and even for the professor, there are cultural and philosophical differences between Kierkegaard’s world and our own that make it difficult to understand his writings. The current work is by no means an attempt to “summarize” Kierkegaard’s thought as a substitute for reading him. It is rather an attempt to remove some of the barriers to a genuine reading of Kierkegaard.

Obviously, there are many ways one might organize an introduction to Kierkegaard’s thought. One would be to discuss and explain some of Kierkegaard’s major works, such as *Fear and Trembling*, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, and *The Sickness Unto Death*. I have chosen not to follow this route, for several reasons. One is that I feared it would encourage a kind of “Cliff’s Notes” approach involving summaries of these works. A second is that the important works are many, and their complexity is such that any adequate account of them would make this a lengthy book. Hence, I have chosen instead to introduce Kierkegaard thematically, focusing on important concepts in his works.

The major organizing structure is provided by the Kierkegaardian notion of the three “stages of existence” or “spheres of existence,” a key set of concepts in Kierkegaard’s writings. When understood as “stages” these provide an account of a path to authentic selfhood; understood as “spheres” these concepts provide a description of three rival views of

human existence and its meaning. It is thus well-suited to serve as a basis for understanding Kierkegaard's thought. After two introductory chapters discussing Kierkegaard's life and works, including his distinctive views on communication, the book therefore takes its readers through the aesthetic, ethical, and religious spheres of existence, culminating with an analysis of Kierkegaard's understanding of Christian thought and its relevance to the contemporary world. Since many courses on Kierkegaard use this same trio of concepts as an organizing tool, my hope is that the book will be useful as a supplementary text for students who are reading the primary sources.

In going through the three stages of existence, the book takes Kierkegaard seriously as a philosopher, giving full treatments of what I take to be his epistemological, ethical, and metaphysical views. On my reading, Kierkegaard poses a sharp challenge to the dominant tradition of modern philosophy. However, in several important respects he also does not fit well into the categories of "existentialist" or "postmodernist" which some have attempted to apply to him. In looking at Kierkegaard as a philosopher, I have also tried to do justice to Kierkegaard's uniqueness as a thinker, the ways in which his work does not fit the standard philosophical mold.

Naturally, I do discuss specific works of Kierkegaard at specific places in the book. Therefore, those who are looking particularly for introductions to specific works may profit from looking closely at those sections. Chapter 2, for example, discusses *The Point of View for My Work as an Author* and several sections of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* that deal with "indirect communication." Chapter 3 has an extensive discussion of the view of the self found in *The Sickness Unto Death*, and returns to *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* to treat the themes of "truth as subjectivity" and the critique of the Hegelian idea that reality can be thought of as a "system." Chapter 4 focuses mainly on *Either/Or*, volume I, while Chapter 5 looks at the portrait of the ethical life given in *Either/Or*, volume II, as well as the picture given in *Fear and Trembling*, where the ethical life is contrasted with the life of faith. Chapter 6 returns to *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* for yet another account of the ethical life, one that sees the ethical as the starting point for a religious life shaped by resignation, suffering, and guilt. Chapter 7 examines a number of philosophical issues raised by Kierkegaard's understanding of Christian faith, especially the relation of faith to reason, the Incarnation understood as the "Absolute Paradox," and the relation between faith in Christ and historical evidence. To accomplish these tasks, this chapter discusses

mainly *Philosophical Fragments*, but also *The Book on Adler* to shed light on Kierkegaard's understanding of Christianity as a revealed religion. Finally, Chapter 8 returns to *The Sickness Unto Death* for a concrete picture of human existence as it relates to faith, but it also includes a discussion of *Works of Love*, where Kierkegaard as a Christian thinker presents his mature understanding of ethics as summarized in the great commandments to love God and the neighbor.

Kierkegaard's literary output was vast, even though he died at age 42. I am only too conscious that there are many themes in Kierkegaard as well as whole works that this book barely touches on or omits entirely. Some readers will certainly object that I have focused mainly on the pseudonymous writings and have not given adequate attention to the *Upbuilding Discourses*. The reason for this slant is simply that I wanted to treat Kierkegaard primarily as a philosopher, albeit a Christian thinker, and therefore I decided to focus mainly on the works that are taught in philosophy departments and that treat issues recognizable as philosophical. In any case, since my goal was not to summarize Kierkegaard's thought, but to motivate readers to encounter him for themselves, I chose to keep this work relatively short and accessible. For the same reason, references to the secondary literature are relatively few, although I have included a very personal guide to further reading about Kierkegaard in place of a traditional bibliography or list of works cited.

I have supplied almost all the translations for quotations from Kierkegaard's published works, working from the first Danish edition of the *Samlede Værker* (Copenhagen: Gyldendals, 1901–1907). However, for the convenience of English-speaking readers I have cited the pagination for the Princeton University Press *Kierkegaard's Writings* editions, edited by Howard V. Hong. This English edition contains the pagination of the Danish edition I have used in the margins for any reader who wishes to consult the Danish.

In conclusion, I wish to thank the hundreds of students who have studied Kierkegaard with me since 1972, for all you have taught me. In many ways this is a book that you helped me write, and I have written it for you. Special thanks must go to Merold Westphal, who has taught me so much about Kierkegaard over the years, and was kind enough to read this work for Cambridge University Press, and give me a large number of helpful comments and suggestions. I must also thank my friend and colleague Robert Roberts for detailed comments on several chapters. I also thank the other members of the Baylor Philosophy Department, the members of the Philosophy Department of the University of St. Andrews,

and the participants in the Theology Research Seminar at the University of St. Andrews, for helpful discussion of chapters read to these groups. The final work on this book was done while I was in residence at the University of St. Andrews, and the staff and community of St. Mary's College there provided a wonderful place to work. My doctoral student Mike Cantrell, who was back in Waco, Texas, and had access to my library, provided me with some crucial research help during this period. Another doctoral student, Andrew Nam, is owed my gratitude for doing the index.

Chronology

- 1813 Søren Kierkegaard is born in Copenhagen
- 1830 Enters the University of Copenhagen as a theology student
- 1838 Publishes his first book, *From the Papers of One Still Living*, a critique of Hans Christian Andersen as a novelist
- 1840 Becomes engaged to Regine Olsen but breaks the engagement the next year
- 1841 Successfully defends his doctoral thesis, *The Concept of Irony with Constant Reference to Socrates*, and goes to Berlin to hear Schelling lecture, returning the following year
- 1843 Publishes the pseudonymous *Either/Or* in two volumes, the first book in what he will later call his “authorship,” and also begins to publish a series of *Upbuilding Discourses* under his own name. *Either/Or* is followed by *Repetition and Fear and Trembling*
- 1844 Publishes *Philosophical Fragments*, *The Concept of Anxiety*, and *Prefaces*
- 1845 Publishes *Stages on Life’s Way* pseudonymously and *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions* under his own name
- 1846 Publishes *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, with the thought that he would complete his authorship and take a pastorate, and also *Two Ages: A Literary Review*. He also becomes embroiled in a controversy with a satirical magazine, *The Corsair*, and decides that he must remain at his literary “post” rather than become a pastor. He also works on *The Book on Adler*, a work that reflects on the case of a Danish pastor deposed for claiming to have received a revelation from God, but Kierkegaard never publishes his work, though sections are later incorporated into *Two Ethical-Religious Essays*

- 1847 Publishes *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* and *Works of Love*
- 1848 Publishes *Christian Discourses* and *The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*. He completes *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, but the work is only published posthumously
- 1849 Publishes *The Sickness Unto Death*, *Two Ethical-Religious Essays*, and two books of religious discourses: *The Lily in the Field and the Bird of the Air* and *Three Discourses at the Communion on Fridays*
- 1850 Publishes *Practice in Christianity* and *An Upbuilding Discourse*
- 1851 Publishes *Two Discourses at the Communion on Fridays*, *On My Work as an Author*, and *For Self-Examination*. *Judge for Yourself!* is written but not published until after his death
- 1854 Begins a public, polemical attack on the Danish Lutheran Church as a state church, first waged in *The Fatherland*, and later, in a periodical Kierkegaard himself published, *The Moment*
- 1855 Publishes *What Christ Judges of Official Christianity* and *The Changelessness of God*. In the midst of his controversial attack on the Church, collapses on the street and dies in a hospital a few weeks later on November 11

Sigla used for Kierkegaard's published writings

- BA *The Book on Adler*, ed. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998)
- CA *The Concept of Anxiety*, ed. and trans. Reidar Thomte in collaboration with Albert B. Anderson (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980)
- CD *Christian Discourses* and *The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995)
- CUP *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, vols. I and II, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992) [Vol. I contains complete text of work, and hence all quotations are from it; II contains index, scholarly notes, and related materials.]
- EO I and II *Either/Or, Vols. I and II*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987)
- EUD *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992)
- FT *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983)
- JY *For Self-Examination* and *Judge for Yourself*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990)

- PF *Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985)
- PV *The Point of View* (includes *On My Work as an Author* as well as *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*), ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998)
- SUD *The Sickness Unto Death*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980)
- TA *Two Ages: The Age of Revolution and the Present Age: A Literary Review*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978)
- UDVS *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993)
- WL *Works of Love*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995)

CHAPTER I

Introduction: Kierkegaard's life and works

Søren Kierkegaard is acknowledged to be one of the most influential thinkers of the nineteenth century. Born on May 5, 1813, in Copenhagen, where he spent almost all of his life, Kierkegaard was not widely known outside Scandinavia in his lifetime, and was not hugely popular even in Denmark. Most of his books were published in editions of 500 copies that never sold out prior to his death in 1855, at age 42. However, around the beginning of the twentieth century he exploded upon the European intellectual scene like a long-delayed time bomb, and his influence since then has been incalculable.¹ Although Kierkegaard was not widely read in the English-speaking world until the mid-twentieth century, his works are today translated into all major world languages and his impact is strongly felt in Asia and Latin America as well as in Europe and North America.

IS KIERKEGAARD A PHILOSOPHER?

Kierkegaard's influence is broad not only geographically but also intellectually. One could go so far as to call him "a man for all disciplines," given his importance for theology, psychology, communications theory, literary theory, and even political and social theory, not to mention philosophy. Kierkegaard himself clearly wanted to be remembered primarily as a religious thinker. Indeed, he famously goes so far as to say that he was really a missionary, called not to introduce Christianity into a pagan country, but rather to "reintroduce Christianity into

¹ For an interesting account of the early reception of Kierkegaard, and particularly how Kierkegaard became known outside of Denmark, see Habib Malik, *Receiving Søren Kierkegaard: The Early Impact and Transmission of His Thought* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1997).

Christendom.”² Some have actually questioned whether Kierkegaard is really a philosopher at all, given his diverse interests and fundamentally religious purposes.

Is Kierkegaard a philosopher? It would be awkward to write an introduction to his philosophy if he were not, of course. Yet this question must be faced, because Kierkegaard was clearly doing something different than most professional philosophers today. One must certainly concede that Kierkegaard was not a philosopher in the usual academic sense. Although he wrote a philosophical doctoral dissertation (*The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*), he never held an academic position and never published the kinds of works philosophy professors are expected to write. Kierkegaard's works are dazzling in their variety and hard to categorize. Many are edifying or “upbuilding” works that are intended to help the reader become a better person. A large number are “literary” in character, attributed to pseudonymous “characters” whose voices are in some cases clearly different from Kierkegaard's own and who interact with each other as well as their creator. Moreover, little of the work seems to have a straightforward philosophical purpose. Kierkegaard does not write treatises whose primary aim is to expound and defend epistemological or metaphysical theses.

However, those facts are surely not sufficient to deny Kierkegaard the title of “philosopher,” for similar things could be said about Nietzsche, and hardly anyone questions Nietzsche's position as one of the seminal philosophers of the last 150 years. Though Kierkegaard's primary intentions may be edifying or religious or literary, he certainly deals with many recognizable and important philosophical issues in the course of doing what he does, and he discusses and interacts with many of the great philosophers of the western tradition, including (from ancient philosophy) Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle and (from the modern period) Hegel, Kant, and Spinoza. I suspect that uneasiness about Kierkegaard's status as a philosopher stems primarily from his self-professed religious aims rather than his unconventional way of doing philosophy.

This suspicion about whether work with religious aims can be properly philosophical is a distinctively modern and western one. Such a worry would be virtually unintelligible in traditional Indian and Chinese philosophy, just as it would have been for Plotinus, and for all of the western

² Kierkegaard considered using a variant of this phrase as a title for a whole section of his later works. See *Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, Vol. VI, trans. and ed. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1978), Entry 6271, pp. 70–71.

medieval philosophers, Christian, Jewish, or Islamic. It stems, I think, primarily from a post-Enlightenment conception of scholarly work as inspired by a passion for objectivity, grounded in a disinterested search for truth that requires the scholar to bracket out personal and human concerns in the interest of finding such truth, regardless of the consequences.

I think the best response to this worry that can be made on behalf of Kierkegaard is to note that the question "What is philosophy?" is itself philosophical and always has been one about which philosophers have disagreed. Philosophy is not a "natural kind." It is, at least to some degree, simply that activity carried on by those thinkers we call philosophers. The view that philosophy demands a kind of objectivity in which the philosopher must strive to think, in Spinoza's words, "under the aspect of eternity" (*sub specie aeternitatis*), is one to which Kierkegaard is deeply opposed, and his opposition is at least partly philosophical in character. When Hegel affirms that "philosophy must beware of the wish to be edifying,"³ he is affirming a view of philosophy that Kierkegaard thinks is mistaken, not merely because Kierkegaard finds the perspective religiously objectionable, but because Kierkegaard believes that such a view is rooted in a misunderstanding of the human condition. Kierkegaard's counter-claim that "only the truth that edifies is truth for you" may be misguided or mistaken, but it is grounded in a philosophical vision of human beings as finite, historically-situated beings whose primary task is to become whole persons.⁴ It cannot be ruled out at the beginning as unphilosophical without begging some significant philosophical questions. If anything would be contrary to the spirit of western philosophy, it would be to hold that fundamental questions, including

³ See G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 6.

⁴ Strictly speaking, the words "only the truth that edifies is truth for you" do not come from Kierkegaard, but from one of his literary characters, in this case the "country priest" whose sermon concludes the second volume of *Either/Or*, trans. and ed. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 354. Despite the pseudonymity of the country priest, I think most readers would agree that the claim is one that aptly characterizes all of Kierkegaard's work. For the convenience of the English-speaking reader, references for quotations from Kierkegaard will be taken from English language translations, using the *Kierkegaard's Writings* edition from Princeton University Press unless otherwise noted. However, the translations will be my own, and often will be different from Hong, as in the current case. The translations are based on Kierkegaard's *Samlede Værker* (Copenhagen: Gyldendals, 1901–1906). Since the Princeton edition contains the pagination for this edition in the margins, it will be easy for English readers to find the corresponding Danish passages if they wish to examine the original texts. Subsequent references to Kierkegaard's writings will be made parenthetically in the text, and a list of the abbreviations used is found at the beginning of the book.

questions about the nature of philosophy itself, cannot be asked or that rival answers to those questions should not be seriously considered.

In many ways, taking Kierkegaard seriously as a philosopher is to return to the kind of conception of philosophy that inspired the Greeks, for whom philosophy was intensely concerned with questions about the good life. Such a conception of philosophy does seem strange or even quaint in the contemporary world, where philosophy has become a kind of specialized, technical profession, one which does not clearly tend to make its practitioners practically wiser or better people. However, a challenge to this contemporary conception of philosophy seems well within the domain of the philosophical tradition. I conclude that Kierkegaard's edifying concerns, both ethical and religious, do not preclude entering into a serious philosophical conversation with him, including a conversation about the relation between philosophical reflection and edification.

A BRIEF SKETCH OF KIERKEGAARD'S LIFE

I begin with a brief and highly selective recounting of Søren Kierkegaard's life. Any account of Søren's life must begin with Kierkegaard's father, Michael Pedersen Kierkegaard, whose influence on Søren was profound and permanent. Michael Kierkegaard came from a poor family on the western side of Jutland, but at age 11 he was invited to Copenhagen to be apprenticed to an uncle who was a merchant. Michael parlayed his business smarts and hard work into a flourishing business of his own. He became his uncle's heir, made some shrewd investments in a time when Denmark was suffering financial collapse as a result of picking the wrong side in the Napoleonic Wars, and eventually became one of the wealthiest men in Copenhagen.

Despite his financial success, Michael Kierkegaard by all accounts suffered from what was then called "melancholy," and would today doubtless be termed depression. His first wife died childless after two years of marriage, and just over a year later Michael married his servant, Anne Sørensdatter Lund, already four months pregnant with their first child. Søren would be the seventh and last of their children, born when the mother was 45 and Michael 56. Michael was a devout and pious man, but his melancholy mingled with a strong dose of guilt to produce a strict and severe form of Christianity for his children. Staunch and loyal members of the State Lutheran Church, the Kierkegaard family also attended the Moravian meeting that met on Sunday evenings, giving

young Søren a strong dose of what might loosely be termed “evangelical pietism” to leaven Lutheran orthodoxy.

What caused the old man's strong sense of guilt? Speculation has centered on two things: sexual sin and an episode in Jutland when the young Michael had cursed God because of his poor, miserable life, though it was shortly to be almost miraculously transformed. Whatever the cause, we know that somehow the older man's feelings of guilt were transferred to his sons. In Danish, the term for “original sin” is *Arvesynd*,⁵ literally “inherited sin,” and it appears that Søren believed quite literally that his father's sins had been transmitted to him as well.

This “inherited sin” was fraught with significance for Kierkegaard's life. Søren struggled all his life with the melancholy and sense of guilt that he shared with his father. Perhaps even more important, the relation to the father played a key role in what may have been the most determinative episode in Kierkegaard's life: his broken engagement to Regine Olsen.

In 1840 Kierkegaard had become engaged to Regine, but almost immediately he realized he had made a terrible mistake. After an agonizing period in which he foolishly (from my perspective) played the scoundrel in a vain attempt to free Regine (and her family) from any attachment to him, he finally broke the engagement the following year, and fled to Berlin for a period of intense writing. His reasons for breaking the engagement may not have been completely clear even to himself, and we shall probably never know them with certainty. However, the following facts seem reasonably firm: (1) Kierkegaard came to believe that he had some personal impediment or flaw that made it impossible for him to marry. (2) Whatever this problem was, he could not explain it to Regine without divulging his (now deceased) father's deepest secrets, something Søren could not do. (3) Kierkegaard gave the whole situation a religious interpretation; he believed he was called by God to be an “exception” who must sacrifice Regine and the joys of married life. (Though it is also true that at times Kierkegaard had doubts about this, and thought that if he had truly had faith, he would have remained with Regine.)

Despite the broken engagement, Kierkegaard loved Regine deeply. He continued to think about her and write about her in his journal until the end of his life. There is ample evidence that Kierkegaard's writings, especially the earlier books, are partly intended as ways of communicating with Regine. In any case, the broken engagement allowed Kierkegaard

⁵ I shall in this book follow Kierkegaard's nineteenth-century Danish spelling, in which all nouns were capitalized.