

KIERKEGAARD

An Introduction

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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.

truly to become an author, and between 1843 and 1846, he produced an astounding array of works, a number of which will be discussed in subsequent chapters. Many of these early works are pseudonymous and literary in character. Some, such as *Either/Or* and *Repetition*, have some of the character of a novel. However, it is important to note that from the beginning of his authorship, Kierkegaard also produced a series of religious works that he termed *Edifying Discourses* ("Upbuilding Discourses" in the Hongs' literal translation of the Danish "Opbyggelige.")

Even a brief sketch of Kierkegaard's life must mention two other episodes: the *Corsair* controversy and the "attack on Christendom" at the end of his life. In 1846 Kierkegaard intended to conclude what he called his "authorship" and accept a post as a Danish pastor, preferably in a rural parish. However, during that year he became embroiled in a quarrel with a Danish literary magazine, *The Corsair*. *The Corsair* was a satirical magazine, poking fun at Denmark's intellectual elite. Much of the writing for the magazine was anonymous, and this anonymity allowed for scurrilous and irresponsible attacks. (One might think of the kind of meanness anonymous postings on internet blogs allow today.)

The Corsair had up until this point exempted Kierkegaard from its biting ridicule. However, after a nasty review of Kierkegaard's *Stages on Life's Way* by a man named P. L. Møller, one of the people who regularly wrote for *The Corsair*, Kierkegaard responded, in the name of his pseudonym Frater Taciturnus, and in the response complained that it was unjust for him to be the only important Danish author who had not been "abused" in *The Corsair*. Also, in a passing remark, he revealed Møller's association with the magazine. *The Corsair* responded by making Kierkegaard the object of its ridicule in a long-lasting, sustained attack that went beyond the boundary of criticism or even ridicule of Kierkegaard's ideas, making fun of his physical appearance, the uneven length of his trousers, his supposed arrogance, and many other things, both in texts and in cartoons.

This may seem an inconsequential series of events, but it was fraught with consequences for everyone involved. Meir Goldschmidt, the editor of *The Corsair*, was later to write in his memoirs that the events were "a drama and a catastrophe for three people, of whom I am the only survivor."⁶ Goldschmidt obviously came to regret the episode and eventually gave up the lucrative magazine as an act of repentance. Møller,

⁶ Quoted in Joakim Gaff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, trans. Bruce H. Kirmmse (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 376.

who had hoped to become a professor at the University of Copenhagen, was ruined by the controversy, left for France, and soon died there, befriended only by two women he had seduced. Kierkegaard's own life was completely transformed. Prior to these events his main recreation had been walking the streets of Copenhagen, where he spent literally hours in conversation each day with people from all walks of life. After *The Corsair* made him an object of public ridicule, the character of his interchanges with ordinary people changed dramatically, as it became literally impossible for him to walk around Copenhagen without crowds of curious and sometimes jeering onlookers. Kierkegaard describes the pain he thereby suffered as the equivalent of being "trampled to death by geese."⁷

Biographers have offered vastly differing assessments of Kierkegaard's behavior in these events. In his journals, Kierkegaard portrays his action as selfless and even courageous, voluntarily taking a stand against a disreputable and demoralizing organ, and suffering the consequences for that stand, and Walter Lowrie is sympathetic to these claims.⁸ Some other writers, however, have tended to see Kierkegaard's actions as unjustly ruining Møller's life and as motivated by spite against Møller, whose review of *Stages on Life's Way* had contained a wounding personal attack on Kierkegaard himself. Joakim Garff, for example, calls Kierkegaard's treatment of Møller an "assassination," and views Kierkegaard's own account of his motivation as self-deceived rationalization.⁹

My own view is that Kierkegaard's motives in this matter were probably mixed, as is so often the case with most of us. He surely did see *The Corsair*, as well as Møller, whose sexual promiscuity as well as looseness with the truth were abundantly evident, as malicious and malevolent, and therefore had good reason to see himself as standing for the right. So I see no reason not to take Kierkegaard at his word when he claims that his action was one that was "prayerfully" undertaken. But it is not impossible that personal resentment of Møller, who had attacked Kierkegaard cruelly, also played some role in his response. It is hardly surprising that in retrospect Kierkegaard preferred to focus on his virtuous motives and ignore, as we humans generally do, any motives that were less than noble.

⁷ See *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, 7 vols., ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1967–1978), Vol. V, entry 5998, p. 376.

⁸ See Walter Lowrie, *A Short Life of Kierkegaard* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1942), pp. 176–187.

⁹ See Garff, pp. 393–394.

Though Kierkegaard's motives may have been more complex than he was willing to admit, I cannot agree with Garff and others that Kierkegaard's actions towards Møller amounted to an "assassination." Kierkegaard was drawing public attention to a fact already widely known, and forcing Møller to take responsibility for his anonymous literary activity. Møller had long had an association with *The Corsair*, and this was hardly a secret around Copenhagen; in fact, even Garff admits that Møller had revealed this publicly in T. H. Erslew's *Encyclopedia of Authors*.¹⁰ It is true that Møller lost hope for a university appointment after the clash with Kierkegaard, and even that his life began to unravel after this episode, but there is every reason to believe that the causes of this were the deep flaws in Møller's own character and had little to do with Kierkegaard. Robert Perkins has given a definitive argument that Møller was unqualified for the university post he aspired to, and had no realistic chance of ever getting it, so the claim that Kierkegaard "assassinated" Møller simply seems factually wrong.¹¹

Regardless of how one evaluates Kierkegaard's conduct here, there is no question that the affair fundamentally changed his life. He gave up the idea of becoming a country pastor, and instead decided that he must "remain at his post," i.e., continue his activity as a writer in Copenhagen. The persecution and resulting isolation he suffered gave him a profound sensitivity to the evils that can stem from an anonymous "public," egged on by the press and what we would today term the instruments of "mass media." He came to believe that true Christianity necessarily was linked to outward suffering, since Christian faith requires a break with the values that established societies always embody. Since the true follower of Christ must be willing to suffer opposition and persecution from society, and even expect such persecution, genuine Christianity must be distinguished from "Christendom," a term Kierkegaard uses to denote the kind of "establishment Christianity" that equates being a Christian with being a

¹⁰ Garff, p. 394. Howard Hong was the first to show that Møller's self-revelation in Erslew preceded Kierkegaard's connection of Møller with *The Corsair*. See Hong's discussion of the whole affair in the "Historical Introduction" to *The Corsair Affair*, ed. and trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1982), p. xxvii and also n. 279. Erslew's *Forfatter-Lexicon* has a title page dated 1847, but Hong discovered the book was printed in fascicles beginning in 1843, and that the fascicle containing the information about Møller had appeared in 1845. See also Robert L. Perkins' discussion of this issue, and his note about the Hong research, in his "Introduction" to *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Corsair Affair*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1990), pp. xiii–xxv, particularly n. 3, p. xviii.

¹¹ See Perkins' brilliant account of the whole affair in the "Introduction" cited in the previous note.

respectable member of a given society. All of these themes become prominent in the works Kierkegaard wrote from this period on, most of which were non-pseudonymous, such as *Christian Discourses* and *Works of Love*.

Kierkegaard became increasingly convinced that establishment Christianity in Denmark, as embodied by the official Lutheran church, made authentic Christian life difficult and even impossible. A genuine Christian is someone who has found forgiveness for sin through faith in Christ. Kierkegaard does not doubt this bulwark of Christian (and Lutheran) orthodoxy. However, the person who has genuine faith necessarily expresses this faith by being a follower, an imitator, of Jesus; it is not merely an abstract, propositional belief.

Christendom tones down the radical character of God's demands on a person's life. Christ's life was a decisive challenge to the established order of his day, and he paid the price for this challenge with his life. On Kierkegaard's view, the Christian who becomes a follower of Christ can expect to suffer opposition and persecution from the established order as well. Christendom claims that this is no longer the case since western society has itself become Christian. Kierkegaard rejects this assumption that society has become truly Christian. He believes that the Church in this life must always be a Church militant, struggling to define itself over against the world. It cannot expect to become a Church triumphant that has made society essentially good.

This opposition to Christendom can already be detected in some of Kierkegaard's early pseudonymous writings, but it becomes an increasingly dominant theme in the writings composed after the *Corsair* affair, and is expressed strongly in many entries in his Journal from 1846 onwards. Kierkegaard made no open break with the church as long as Jakob Peter Mynster, Bishop of Zealand, was alive, partly out of reverence for Mynster as his father's pastor and partly because Kierkegaard hoped that in some way Mynster would address the situation of Christendom, perhaps making a "public confession" that contemporary Christianity fell far short of the New Testament standard. Things came to a head in 1854, when Mynster passed away, and was eulogized by his soon-to-be successor, Hans Lassen Martensen, as a "link in this holy chain of witnesses to the truth," a chain "stretching across the ages, from the days of the Apostles up to our own times. . ."¹²

¹² Quoted in Garff, p. 729.

Kierkegaard's own later writings had employed the concept of a "witness to the truth" (*Sandhedsvidne*) as the definitive embodiment of Christian faith.¹³ A witness to the truth is someone willing to suffer persecution to the point of death for the sake of the truth proclaimed, and this usage is supported by the New Testament concept of the martyr. Etymologically, the New Testament Greek word for a martyr, transliterated *martus*, has, as its basic meaning, one "who affirms or attests (often in legal matters)," and hence is close to the English term "witness."¹⁴ This sense is extended in the New Testament to "one who witnesses at cost of life, martyr."¹⁵ One can see this sense clearly at work in Acts 22:20, where Paul says, "And when the blood of Stephen your witness [*martus*] was shed, I also was standing by and approving."¹⁶

Martensen's eulogy outraged Kierkegaard for several reasons. Martensen had taken a concept that Kierkegaard himself had used to distinguish genuine Christianity from its Christendom counterfeit and used it to praise the foremost representative of that establishment Christianity. Mynster had lived a long and comfortable life at the pinnacle of Danish society. Thus, in Kierkegaard's eyes, Martensen's praise of Mynster equates such a life with the life of the martyrs who had provided the foundation for the Church. The eulogy provoked a public response from Kierkegaard in a newspaper: "Was Bishop Mynster a 'Witness to the Truth', one of 'the genuine witnesses to the truth' – is this *true*?" This polemical blast was followed by a series of newspaper articles, and eventually by a magazine, *The Moment*, that Kierkegaard began in order to carry on his polemical battle with the established Church. In all of this Kierkegaard campaigns for the view that "the Christianity of the New Testament no longer exists," and that the cause of Christianity would be best served if this were honestly admitted.

Kierkegaard published nine issues of *The Moment*, and had the tenth and final issue ready for publication when he collapsed on the street, and was eventually taken to the hospital with paralysis. He died a few weeks later on November 11, 1855, refusing to take communion from a priest who was a "state functionary," but nevertheless affirming "Yes, of course,"

¹³ See, for example, the following passage: "Christianity . . . was served by *witnesses to the truth*, who instead of having profit and every profit from this doctrine, sacrificed and sacrificed everything for this doctrine, . . . lived and died for this doctrine." (JY, 129).

¹⁴ See Walter Bauer, Frederick William Danker, William A. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Third Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), pp. 619–620.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ My thanks to New Testament scholar Mikeal Parsons for help with this point.

to his life-long friend, Emil Boesen (a pastor in the state church), who asked him whether he continued to “believe in Christ and take refuge in Him in God’s name.”¹⁷ The attack on Christendom was still rooted in faith in Christ.

Kierkegaard’s attack on Christendom should not be viewed merely as a rejection of an established, state Church. It should be seen rather as a rejection of any attempt to identify Christianity with a particular human culture or society. The attack was thus felt not just by the leaders of the state Church, such as Mynster and Martensen, but also by Nikolai Grundtvig, the inspiration for the leading reform movement within the Danish Church, a movement that included Kierkegaard’s brother Peter Christian among its adherents. (Kierkegaard’s relationship with his brother was, unfortunately, not good, and his brother’s association with Grundtvig made the situation even worse.) Grundtvig also had his difficulties with the established Church, but Grundtvig, whose brand of Christianity involved a strong admixture of Danish nationalism and enthusiasm for everything Scandinavian, could neither see the depths of the problem of Christendom nor recommend a proper cure. From Kierkegaard’s perspective, Grundtvig’s brand of cultural Christianity was simply another form of Christendom.

Kierkegaard’s critique of Christendom is doubtless of more importance for understanding his work as a theologian than as a philosopher, but it is such a strong element in his later writings that it cannot be ignored even by his philosophical interpreters. Contemporary debates about the place of religion in public life show the importance of the issues he is grappling with, and I am inclined to think that Christendom is today most alive and well in parts of the U.S., which, despite the lack of an established church, has communities that continue to identify Christian faith with the prevailing culture.

MAKING SENSE OF KIERKEGAARD’S WORKS:
IS KIERKEGAARD “POSTMODERN”?

Kierkegaard claims, in *On My Work as an Author*, that his “authorship, viewed as a *totality*, is religious from first to last” (PV, 6; italics original).¹⁸

¹⁷ Virtually all of Kierkegaard’s biographers depend on Boesen’s recollections of conversations with the dying Kierkegaard. See Garff, p. 787.

¹⁸ The suspicious attitude Garff takes towards Kierkegaard’s Journals is partially grounded in some of the work of Henning Fenger, *Kierkegaard: The Myths and Their Origins* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1980).

This is repeated and echoed in the posthumously published *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*: “the whole of my authorship relates itself to Christianity” (PV, 23). I believe that these claims are essentially correct, and that Kierkegaard was right to say that this is something “anyone who can see, if he wants to see, must also be able to see” (PV, 6). Most writers about Kierkegaard in English have accepted this point of view, at least until the last twenty-five years or so.

Recently, however, Kierkegaard's self-assessment has been severely challenged. Joakim Garff, in his massive biography, claims that Kierkegaard's self-understanding, as expressed both in his writings and in his Journals, was essentially a literary expression of how Kierkegaard wanted to be understood by history rather than an accurate account of his true intentions. Garff himself therefore takes a critical stance towards Kierkegaard's own accounts of his life and writings, so as to avoid “the danger of being an unintentional collaborator in writing the *myth* of Kierkegaard,” a myth that “lurks everywhere in the materials.”¹⁹

Implicit in Garff's work is a claim that was earlier made explicitly by Louis Mackey. Mackey did not merely question whether Kierkegaard's own account of the “point of view” for interpreting his authorship was correct, but argued that no such point of view, whether Kierkegaard's or anyone else's, could be correct.²⁰ Mackey affirms that there is no underlying unity to Kierkegaard's authorship, only “points of view.” Even the “Søren Kierkegaard” who affixed his name to the non-pseudonymous books is ultimately just another pseudonym, a character Kierkegaard invented.²¹ Taking note of the literary character of so much of Kierkegaard's authorship, with pseudonyms layered within pseudonyms, Mackey cautions us that “[w]hen a man fabricates as many masks to hide behind as Kierkegaard does, one cannot trust his (purportedly) direct asseverations. And when he signs his own name, it no longer has the effects of the signature.”²² In the end Kierkegaard as an integral human being vanishes from our eyes: “Søren was never the same person. At most a free variable (an x), he is at last an absolute absence. A constant evanescence.”²³

¹⁹ Garff, p. xxi.

²⁰ See Louis Mackey, *Points of View: Readings of Kierkegaard* (Tallahassee, Florida: Florida State University Press, 1986).

²¹ See Mackey, pp. 187–190. As Mackey notes, the suggestion that “Søren Kierkegaard” should be viewed as just another pseudonym was first made by Søren's brother, Peter, and certainly reflects the sad estrangement of the two brothers.

²² Mackey, p. 188. ²³ Mackey, p. 187.

What is the effect of taking Kierkegaard as an “evanescence”? It gives us a Kierkegaard who is essentially “postmodern,” who does not write to edify or make us aware of any religious truth, but who helps us to see the way human language inevitably fails to convey what is intended. This postmodern Kierkegaard is ironical and “deconstructive” through and through. Roger Poole, who was a professor of literature and a strong advocate of what may be termed the literary approach to Kierkegaard interpretation, tells us that Kierkegaard as a philosopher is really a kind of anti-philosopher: “Kierkegaard writes text after text whose aim is not to state a truth, not to clarify an issue, not to propose a definite doctrine, not to offer some meaning that could be directly appropriated.”²⁴ According to Poole, Kierkegaard writes this way because he sees something that Derrida and Lacan were later to articulate. To be true or false, propositions must refer, but if language can never refer in this way, then it is impossible to convey truth straightforwardly. Kierkegaard’s “texts demonstrate to a nicety the Lacanian perception that all we are ever offered in a text is an endless succession of signifiers.”²⁵ Since Kierkegaard (actually one of his pseudonyms) is notorious for the claim that “truth is subjectivity,” it might appear that it is a mistake to treat him as a philosopher who is in dialogue with other great western philosophers, ancient and modern, who tried to convey such truths.

Ultimately, this kind of radical postmodern view cannot be consistently maintained. The person who tells us that language cannot successfully refer has himself referred to something; he or she has made a claim *about* human language. Similarly, the individual who tells us that we cannot make true statements has made a statement that purports to be true. I see no reason to saddle Kierkegaard with such self-stultifying claims. Kierkegaard is certainly a philosopher who has a clear grasp of the limits of human language and human knowledge, but he is equally far removed from a philosophy that denies the value of rigorous thought and careful distinctions. The radical postmodern Kierkegaard is a Kierkegaard who is an object of aesthetic appreciation. Such an approach to Kierkegaard allows a person to enjoy the style and literary techniques of Kierkegaard without fear of being challenged by Kierkegaard as one human person speaking to another about issues of ultimate importance. Paradoxically, such an aesthetic Kierkegaard is much less interesting, even aesthetically, than a

²⁴ Roger Poole, *Kierkegaard: The Indirect Communication* (Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 1993), p. 6.

²⁵ Poole, p. 9.

Kierkegaard who has something to say to me, someone whose voice can challenge my beliefs and assumptions, and even the way I live my life. A conversation with a human being is much more interesting than a "conversation" with an "evanescence."

What about the claim that Kierkegaard's own understanding of his work is a retrospective falsification? We must begin by separating out the question of whether the perspective is a retrospective one from the question of whether it is false. There is little doubt that Kierkegaard's understanding of his work evolved as the work progressed, and thus that the perspective he took at the time he wrote *The Point of View* differs from the views he may have held at the time of writing some of the earlier works. In fact, Kierkegaard affirms this himself in *The Point of View*, claiming that it would be "unfairness to God" if Kierkegaard were to affirm that he had understood his authorship in the beginning in the way that he now does (PV, 76–77). Rather, he says that his understanding of what he was about developed as he wrote, as God providentially educated him: "It is Governance that has educated me, and the education is reflected in the process that led to the production" (PV, 77). Non-believers will of course not be inclined to accept Kierkegaard's claim that the unity of the authorship is to be ascribed to the role God played in the whole enterprise. However, even a religious skeptic can take seriously Kierkegaard's claim that his understanding of the authorship evolved. And such a skeptic may be interested in the personal view of the authorship that Kierkegaard developed, and even take Kierkegaard's claims as sincere and illuminating.

As an author of a number of books myself, including several dealing with Kierkegaard, I have some sense of what such an affirmation on the part of an author might mean. In the process of writing, I have frequently found myself in the position of making discoveries about my own writing, moments where in effect I realized, "That is what I have been trying to say all along." The experience is one in which a person has a clear view of what he or she is doing only in retrospect. And yet in some sense and in some cases there is a recognition that this "retrospective" understanding is an articulation of what one was trying to do all along, perhaps confusedly and unclearly. This is true at every level of writing. Every writer has had the experience in which one finally gets the sentence or paragraph *right*, is able to say what one has been trying to say all along.

What is true for the sentence or paragraph can be even more true of a book or series of books. I recently edited a selection of my own articles on

Kierkegaard, written over a twenty-year period.²⁶ In reading over the essays I was struck by the unity and coherence of them, and it became clear to me that throughout my whole career I had been laboring to develop and articulate a particular view of Kierkegaard. Yet I by no means could have articulated what I was attempting to do at the beginning of this period. The fact that Kierkegaard sees his own authorship in a similar way as a coherent attempt to realize a particular project is therefore no reason to think his perspective is false, even if the realization on Kierkegaard's part is one that came into being along with the work itself. Everything depends on whether the coherence Kierkegaard saw in his authorship is really there. If it is, it is of course natural for a religious individual such as Kierkegaard to attribute this coherence to providence (rather than fortune), but readers do not have to accept Kierkegaard's religious explanation of his writing to find his interpretation of what his authorship is about credible.

However, even if one agrees that this kind of retrospective view of an authorship can be truthful and insightful, are there special reasons to be dubious about the particular account Kierkegaard gives? Kierkegaard recognizes that some will be inclined to be suspicious, and in fact he does not rely in *The Point of View* "on a simple declaration by the author himself." Rather, he tries to take "a completely objective attitude" towards his own works: "If I cannot, as a third party, as a reader, make good from the writings the claim that things are as I say, that it cannot be otherwise, it would never occur to me to want to win what I then perceive as lost" (PV, 33). In other words, we do not simply have a claim from Kierkegaard, made retrospectively, that the authorship has a religious purpose. Even if all we had was the claim, it would still be important to have an understanding of how an author himself views his works and have his testimony to that effect. However, we do not have to take Kierkegaard's word for what he was about. He challenges us to look at his authorship in light of his claims, to see if the books make sense as a coherent whole when viewed as Kierkegaard himself views them.

In a sense the current book is an attempt to develop the argument that Kierkegaard here describes: to give a reading of Kierkegaard's authorship as a whole in light of his declared intentions. Perhaps it will be clear only at the end whether I have succeeded or failed, but I shall try to show that what Kierkegaard says is true or at the very least highly plausible. The

²⁶ *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self: Collected Essays* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2006).

books do appear to hang together in just the way Kierkegaard says, and when read in light of what we might call his overall project, the works are illuminated both individually and in their complex inter-relationships.

This of course does not mean the books cannot be read in other ways, or that none of those other ways are interesting and helpful. In *The Point of View* Kierkegaard himself refers to the fact that he has had many readers who have read him only for aesthetic enjoyment or appreciation, which shows that he understands that there are ways of reading his works other than the one he suggests. Depending on what the reader wishes to gain, such ways of reading may be profitable. Perhaps it makes no sense to say that a person who reads the corpus differently and for different purposes is "wrong." However, if we want to learn what Kierkegaard hoped we would learn from his texts, it is only fair to take his intentions as our starting point, both as known from his own testimony and, even more significantly, as these can be seen in the writings themselves.

IS KIERKEGAARD OF INTEREST ONLY TO RELIGIOUS PEOPLE?

If Kierkegaard is fundamentally a religious writer who wants to "reintroduce Christianity into Christendom" does this make him philosophically less interesting? It may seem so to some, particularly those who are strongly opposed to religious perspectives, or perhaps especially to those who are, or at least claim to be, indifferent to such perspectives. I shall argue, however, that this is not the case. The peculiar way Kierkegaard sees the predicament of Christianity in the modern world makes aspects of his thought interesting to those who have little or no interest in his own religious faith.

I begin by simply noting the fact that historically Kierkegaard has been deeply interesting to non-Christians. In the twentieth century he powerfully influenced writers such as Heidegger, Sartre, and Camus. Even more surprising, perhaps, is the way Kierkegaard has been eagerly read and appreciated in non-Christian cultures such as Japan.²⁷ That Kierkegaard's philosophical thought has been found interesting and powerful to non-Christians is no accident, I will argue. To see why, we must look at Kierkegaard's analysis of what we might call the crisis of the decline of Christian faith.

²⁷ For the fascinating history of Kierkegaard's reception in Japan, which considerably antedates his recognition in the English-speaking world, see an article on the internet by Kinya Masugata, found at www.kierkegaard.jp/2005/masugata2.html.

Most scholars will recognize that such a decline is a real historical phenomenon. For whatever reason, by Kierkegaard's day, the majority of intellectuals in Europe were no longer serious, believing Christians, as probably had been the case two to three hundred years earlier. The roots of the decline go back at least to the period of the Enlightenment and probably before that, and the decline has continued to the present day. One of the remarkable differences between Europe and the United States is the much higher percentage of active believers in the U.S.

The reasons for the decline are no doubt various, complex, and disputed. However, one particular account is, I think, popular enough to be called "the received view." The basic story of the received view is that religious faith in general and Christian faith in particular have declined for reasons that are primarily intellectual. There are many versions of the received view, depending on which intellectual factors are chosen for emphasis. Philosophers may focus on the attacks on natural theology given by David Hume and Immanuel Kant, or Hume's critique of miracles. Others may look at the development of skepticism about the historical parts of the Bible as the result of "higher" critical scholarship about the Bible in Germany. Others may trace the decline to the development of modern science and the alleged way in which a scientific worldview undermines a religious perspective. (Of course the development of Darwinism could also be cited, but this occurred after Kierkegaard's death.) Whatever the supposed reasons, the basic idea is that while religious faith, including Christian faith, was at one time reasonable, it is no longer so, because the evidence on which it rests is no longer credible.

I shall try to give a detailed account in later chapters of Kierkegaard's account of religious knowledge and how it is attained. For now, I must simply register his disagreement with this "received view." Kierkegaard's account of religious faith is not one that sees faith as primarily the result of evidence or reflection on evidence. Evidence is not the ground of faith, and the lack of evidence cannot be the reason for the loss of faith. From Kierkegaard's perspective, faith has not declined because humans have become smarter or have developed a better understanding of natural science. Rather, faith has declined in contemporary western culture because contemporary westerners have become emotionally and imaginatively impoverished. We have ceased to care in the right ways about the right things.

The crux of the issue can be seen in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, a book to which Kierkegaard added his own name as "editor" on the title

page, and which he essentially endorsed, despite its pseudonymity, in *The Point of View* as “the turning point in the whole authorship” (PV, 55). *Postscript*, according to Kierkegaard, both “appropriated all the pseudonymous aesthetic writing as a description of one way along which one may go to becoming a Christian,” and itself described the second way: “back from the system, the speculative, etc. to becoming a Christian” (PV, 55). So we may safely assume that the analysis of the problem of Christianity given in *Postscript* by the pseudonymous Johannes Climacus is one that Kierkegaard himself endorses.

The diagnosis Climacus presents of the ailment of the modern world is stark and simple: “My principal thought was that, those of our time, because of so much knowledge, have forgotten what it is *to exist*, and the meaning of *inwardness*” (CUP, 249; italics original). The problem is not merely that people have lost a sense of what it might mean to exist religiously but “had forgotten what it means to exist humanly” (CUP, 249). For Kierkegaard, as for Climacus, Christianity is not primarily a set of doctrines (though it requires some particular beliefs), but a way of life, a particular way of answering the questions that human existence poses. However, if we do not understand those questions, or have ceased to ask them or even care about them, we will find it impossible to understand Christian faith if that faith is essentially an answer to those questions.

We can now see why Kierkegaard's mission to “reintroduce Christianity into Christendom” led him to another mission that can hardly be described as sectarian – that of describing the basic structure of human existence as it is lived. It is of course for this reason that Kierkegaard is justly famous as the “father of existentialism,” however much he would have disliked and rejected many of the views of the twentieth-century existentialist “children” who paid him homage. Kierkegaard is a genuine philosopher, and a philosopher of the first rank, because he has given a penetrating description and analysis of what human life is actually like, and how it is lived. It is hardly surprising that his writings are deeply interesting to other humans as humans, regardless of whether they have any interest in his own project of articulating Christian faith in the modern world.

What exactly does Kierkegaard have to tell us about human existence? Does he have anything to tell us that we do not already know? Oddly, in one sense the answer to that second question is no. Kierkegaard himself, in commenting on his pseudonymous authorship, disclaims any grand new theories: the pseudonymous authors' significance “unconditionally does not lie in making any new proposal, some unheard-of discovery, or

in founding a new party and wanting to go further" (CUP, 629).²⁸ Instead, the goal of the pseudonyms is said to be "to read through once again the original text of individual human existence-relationships, the old familiar text handed down from the fathers, as a solo, if possible in a more inward manner" (CUP, 629–630). In one sense the Kierkegaardian texts in question then tell us nothing we do not already know, or at least nothing that "the fathers" did not know.

Kierkegaard was not the first or last philosopher to think of philosophy as an activity in which we come to understand what in one sense we already know. After all, Plato himself taught that learning is just "recollection," a claim that Kierkegaard reflected deeply upon, and attached great significance to. Plato thought that there are different ways of "knowing" or "understanding" something. As another of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms, Anti-Climacus, tells us in *The Sickness Unto Death*, even Plato's teacher Socrates recognized that "to understand and to understand are two different things" (SUD, 90). It is one thing to have a detached, propositional understanding of a truth; quite another to understand what that truth might mean for human existence, or to bring into clear conscious awareness an insight that is already present in a vague and perhaps even unnoticed way.

In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* Johannes Climacus gives several examples of what it might mean to truly understand things which in one sense everyone already knows (CUP, 165–183). We humans all know that all of us will die; we may know statistics about the average life expectancy and the major causes of death. However, it is one thing to know this and another to have asked what the fact of death implies for the meaning of life and how it should be lived. All humans know what it means to be grateful; everyone has experienced some good. Religious people may respond to this by saying that one should be thankful to God. However, for what should humans be thankful? What is actually good for us humans? Is human life itself good, so that all humans should be grateful? These are merely examples, Climacus says, of what it means to "think subjectively" about human existence.

The results of Kierkegaard's attempt to "read through the original text of individual human existence-relationships" will be spelled out in detail in subsequent chapters. At this point, however, something must be said about the notion of "inwardness" or "subjectivity" (terms that

²⁸ This quotation comes from "A First and Last Explanation," which is attached to the pseudonymous *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, but signed by Kierkegaard himself.

Kierkegaard uses interchangeably). As seen above, for Kierkegaard to talk about human existence is to talk about inwardness. What then is inwardness?

A good starting point is to notice what we might call the unfinished, open-ended character of human existence. Kierkegaard, like Nietzsche a half-century later, sees the human self not simply as a finished product, a kind of entity, but as a developing process. A self is not simply something I am but something I must become. To be sure, there is also a sense in which the self must have a kind of substantial reality, for there must be something that is undergoing the process of becoming. But the substantial reality of the self includes potentialities, and thus selfhood is a process in which a person must try to “become what one already is” (CUP, 130).

This unfinished self gives shape to itself through its choices; every decision I make is also a decision about what kind of person I want to be. Kierkegaard's analysis of existence thus turns on his analysis of human choice, and it is here where inwardness is vital. Kierkegaard is no friend of thoughtlessness or enemy of reflection. He understands, with a tradition of philosophers that goes back at least to Aristotle, that part of what makes human choice distinctive is our ability to conceive the possibilities from which we must choose and reflect on the desirability and achievability of those possibilities.²⁹ Far from decrying this kind of reflection, part of Kierkegaard's goal is to “make people aware” of the choices that confront them, helping them to choose consciously rather than mindlessly.³⁰

However, though not an opponent of reflection, Kierkegaard also holds firmly to the view that reflection by itself cannot determine a choice. Johannes Climacus makes the case for this view clearly in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, arguing that rational deliberation has within it no principle of closure, no way of bringing the process of deliberation to an end.³¹ When I think about a decision I can and should

²⁹ For a detailed analysis of Kierkegaard's understanding of choice, including both his agreements and disagreements with the Aristotelian tradition, see my essay, “Where There's a Will There's a Way: Kierkegaard's Theory of Action,” reprinted in *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self: Collected Essays* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2006), pp. 311–326.

³⁰ See PV, p. 50, where Kierkegaard says that he cannot determine a reader's choice, but can compel a reader to “become aware.”

³¹ See CUP, 335–338, where Climacus criticizes and satirizes the Hegelian notion that reflection somehow continues “so long until” it “cancels itself.”

reflect on the reasons for one action over against another, but reason itself provides no natural end to this process. I can always think longer, look for more reasons, reflect more on the reasons I have, or reconsider the weight I have placed on my reasons. Of course humans do not deliberate forever prior to action, but why not? According to Climacus, it is because there is something more to the human self than reason. We bring the process of deliberation to a close because we want something or care enough about something to cease thinking and act. Though Kierkegaard affirms human freedom and responsibility, he consistently rejects the notion of a *liberum arbitrium* (a disinterested or indifferent will) as a myth.³² We can make choices only because we have desires, hopes, fears, wishes, hates, and myriads of other “interested” attitudes towards the possibilities that confront us. It is these “carings” that move us to act and give our lives the “push” that is needed to move beyond reflection. The transition from possibility to actuality is a movement, a movement that Climacus metaphorically terms “a leap,” a leap that is made possible by “interestedness” (CUP, 340).

This means that an understanding of human existence must include an understanding of what today would be termed our emotional lives. The motto on the title page of *Either/Or* could well be the motto for the whole of Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous authorship, and a good deal of his edifying writings besides: “Is reason then alone baptized, are the passions pagans?” However, there are emotions and there are emotions. Kierkegaard knows that much of the time what moves a person to act are momentary feelings. Perhaps many such feelings are emotions that we have little control over. That is certainly sometimes the case. I have little control over the fear I feel if I am in a strange, dark room and hear a sudden, unexpected noise. A person who is completely dominated by such involuntary urges is close to what philosopher Harry Frankfurt has called a “wanton,” a person who is barely recognizable as a person.³³ Such a person lurches through life, with wild reverses in direction possible if these immediate impulses change.

However, Kierkegaard does not share the view of many of our contemporaries that all of our emotions are like this, things we have no control over. He believes it is possible for a human life to acquire

³² See *Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers*, Vol. II, entry 1268.

³³ See Harry Frankfurt, “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person,” in *Free Will*, ed. Robert Kane (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 127–144, esp. pp. 133–134. This article first appeared in *The Journal of Philosophy*, LXVIII (January 14, 1971), pp. 5–20.

continuity, to manifest what Nietzsche would later call “a long obedience in the same direction” and thereby acquire what ethicists call character.³⁴ For this to occur, the individual must have or develop what Kierkegaard calls a passion, which might be defined as a sustained, enduring emotion, an emotion that gives shape and direction to a person's life.³⁵ The difference between a momentary feeling and a passion is the difference between a feeling of infatuation and a couple that is deeply in love for a lifetime.

Passions in this sense do not simply happen to a person. To be sure, there is an element of passivity in a passion, since by definition a passion must be something that moves us, and in the normal case this means that in some way a passion involves a response to something. Still, genuine passions can be cultivated, and indeed must be worked at if they are to endure. In the normative sense in which existence is equivalent to becoming a true self, “existing, . . . cannot be done without passion” (CUP, 311). Existence is indeed “motion,” but there must be “a continuity that holds the motion together,” and this is provided by passion (CUP, 312).

Some passions for Kierkegaard can endure because they do not merely reflect some temporal whim, but are grounded in what he and his pseudonyms call “the eternal.” Though there are “earthly passions” that may be relatively long-lasting, authentic passions must be passions for goals that are in some sense eternal. He uses the term “eternal” in different and complicated ways, but one is simply to designate ideals, timeless possibilities that can in some way move us, become part of us.

Subjectivity or inwardness are simply Kierkegaardian terms for this affective dimension of human life that must take center stage if we are to understand human existence. In the next two chapters, I will explore Kierkegaard's view of subjectivity, first by discussing his view of whether and how one can communicate about subjectivity. I will look at Kierkegaard's claims about “indirect communication,” giving close

³⁴ Nietzsche actually speaks of “obedience over a long period of time and in a *single* direction.” See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), p. 291. Interestingly, the religious writer Eugene Peterson has appropriated Nietzsche's phrase for his own un-Nietzschean purposes. See Eugene Peterson, *Perseverance: A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1996).

³⁵ Alternatively, if one wishes to reserve the term “emotion” for occurrent feelings, one could define a passion as a long-term disposition to have emotions of a specific kind.

attention to the way he attempted to practice this art through his use of pseudonyms and the irony and humor that are pervasive features of his work. Then, in Chapter 3, I will look concretely at Kierkegaard's view of human existence by beginning a discussion of Kierkegaard's view of the "stages" or "spheres" of human existence.