CHAPTER 1

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 æternitatis*), 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 Garff, *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.