

Robert Sarkissian's summary of Kierkegaard's philosophy

Søren Kierkegaard was a Danish philosopher and religious thinker who wrote literary and philosophical essays that reacted against Hegelian philosophy and the state church in Denmark, setting the stage for modern existentialism. Kierkegaard was born in Copenhagen, the youngest of seven children. He spent his formative years under the influence of his melancholic and devoutly religious father whose teachings stressed the suffering of Christ. Kierkegaard went to study philosophy and theology at the University of Copenhagen, where his personal despair grew, leading him to the therapeutic decision to become a cleric and marry his fiancée Regine Olsen, the daughter of a treasury official. Shortly after completing his doctoral dissertation, *The Concept of Irony* (1841), he broke the engagement, partly for fear that he and his fiancée might lack common philosophic interests, but he gave the impression of acting out of a brutal and indifferent selfishness in order to make the breach definitive. Thereafter he embarked on a life of seclusion and a writer's career that produced a constant flow of books over the next ten years with at least twelve major philosophical essays.

Kierkegaard's early philosophical works were written under pseudonyms. He wished to avoid giving the impression that the views expressed in the books constituted any definitive religious position, or even that they necessarily represented his own position. In *Either/Or* (1843) he writes that there are two ways of life, the "aesthetic" and the "ethical." The aesthetic life is based on sensory pleasures, intellectual or physical, which is based in temporality, and the ethical life is based in moral codes and the infinite, the eternal. The aesthetic way of life leads to "dread" (angst), the call of the infinite, and eventually leads to despair. Once this is realized, the individual may enter the ethical sphere.

In 1843 he also wrote *Fear and Trembling*, and *Repetition*. In *Fear and Trembling*, the conflict between the ethical and the religious is shown in the "teleological suspension of the ethical" of Abraham's decision to sacrifice his son in obedience to God's command. Abraham got his son back after proving his faith, showing that with God anything is possible. Abraham showed that one can be forced to disregard ethics if God commands it, which is the paradoxical nature of religion. Kierkegaard begins to see that there are three spheres, though he doesn't state it explicitly; the third sphere is the "religious," higher than the ethical. He also sees that God can accomplish what to the human mind is absurd, and by having faith in the absurd, one can recover what was lost. In *Repetition* he considers the same theme, describing his relationship with Regine through the pseudonym Constantin Constantius. Before he finished the book, Regine married another man, and Kierkegaard came to the conclusion that he was free now, and this is how the book concludes; Constantin devotes his life to the "idea," his philosophical and literary works.

In 1844 came *Philosophical Fragments*, which attempts to present Christianity as he thought it should be. He continues the theme of the paradox by saying that Christ is the absolute paradox, He is God in time, both infinite and finite, which humans cannot comprehend. God is infinitely higher than man, because man lives in sin, and therefore He always appears paradoxical, and Christianity seems absurd. *Stages on Life's Way* appeared in 1845, in which he explicitly states that there are three spheres and divides the book into three parts which deal with each. It is the sequel of *Either/Or* with the added explanation of the religious. The ethical is a transition stage because its laws are impossible to fulfill, so you must believe in the paradox and enter the religious, which is the fulfillment.

Concluding Unscientific Postscript (1846) attacked Hegelianism because of its notion of an objective science of the human spirit which he thought obscured the nature of Christianity. He disliked Hegel's systematizing and his fusion of logic with existence, claiming that existence cannot be described objectively or logically. The objective

uncertainty of Christianity and one's relation to it is the highest truth for an existing individual, therefore truth is subjectivity: "Faith does not result from straightforward scholarly deliberation, nor does it come directly; on the contrary, in this objectivity one loses that infinite, personal, impassioned interestedness, which is the condition of faith." This work was supposed to be his last, but he wrote *Works of Love* (1847) the next year, a description of the various kinds of love and the perfection of Christian love. He also writes about the "offense" of Christianity, a theme that he would continue in *Practice in Christianity*.

Kierkegaard was also publishing religious discourses during these years, which were always written in his own name. Between 1843 and 1845 he wrote eighteen of them. He stressed that these were not sermons, since he felt he didn't have the authority to preach. The discourses were always addressed to the "single individual" before God. He continued to write discourses until his death, including *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions* (1845), *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* (1847), *Christian Discourses* (1848), *Three Discourses At The Communion On Fridays* (1849), *Two Minor Ethical-Religious Essays* (1849), and *The Changelessness of God* (1855).

The Concept of Anxiety (1844) and *The Sickness Unto Death* (1849) are his psychological works which earned him the title of father of modern psychology. *The Concept of Anxiety*, considered in the context of Adam's original sin, describes anxiety as a stage that is necessary before one makes the leap of faith into Christianity, the stage where one shudders at one's freedom. Anxiety can lead to sin, sin compounds the anxiety of freedom, and freedom is lost through sin; this cycle of sinfulness and anxiety can be broken only by faith. *The Sickness Unto Death* brilliantly describes the "self," and how the self "relates itself to itself." The self is a synthesis of the infinite and finite, temporal and eternal, which can only find rest in God. A misrelation in the synthesis leads to despair. He describes different kinds of despair, one of which is the despair that one has when one does not realize one is in despair, i. e. "ignorance of having an eternal self"; another the "despair in which one does not will to be oneself", i. e. wishing to be another self; another the "despair to will to be oneself", or asserting the self without relation to God. He further divides these three conditions, but he concludes that despair is sin, and despair *is* the sickness unto death. One can also despair over one's sins, and worst of all one can despair over forgiveness of one's sins when one refuses forgiveness. To Kierkegaard sin and faith are opposites; either one despairs or one has faith.

Kierkegaard considered *Practice in Christianity* (1850) to be his most important book, in which he attempts to reintroduce Christianity into Christendom ("official Christianity"), his main theme up to his death five years later. He examines the offense of Christianity and how the state church in Denmark attempted to remove the offense, which he thought watered down the message. He was actually trying to offend his contemporary Christians, hoping the offense would lead them to a stronger faith. His later works became very blunt, attacking the church and Christendom for their complacency. He wrote articles in a Danish journal called "The Fatherland" in which he criticized the state Lutheran church for saying all citizens were Christians simply by being born in Denmark. In 1855 he wrote *This Must Be Said--So Let It Now Be Said* and encouraged people to leave the church because their official Christianity was a "forgery." The same year he wrote *What Christ's Judgment Is On Official Christianity* in which he called the clergy "freethinkers" for their mediocrity.

Few 19th-century thinkers have surpassed Kierkegaard's influence on 20th-century thought, yet there is no "Kierkegaardian school" of philosophy or theology, largely due to the fact that he did not develop an all-embracing system. He has had a strong influence on philosophers Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre and on theologian [Karl Barth](#), and has also been admired as a literary stylist and innovator.

References:

- 1996 *Grolier Multimedia Encyclopedia*, Copyright 1996 Grolier Interactive, Inc.
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- Frithiof Brandt and Peter P. Rohde. *Søren Kierkegaard, Introduction to the Philosopher*.
- [D. Anthony Storm's Web Site on Kierkegaard](#).