

# Sören Kierkegaard and Existentialism

By Gerhard Rempel

The Danish philosopher Sören Kierkegaard (1813-1855) was hardly known outside of his native land at the time of his lonely death in a Copenhagen hospital. It was after his death that he came to exert a profound influence on philosophy, literature and theology first in Germany, then France and finally in North and South America. His is really not a philosophy in the technical sense, but rather theology-philosophy, or a religious philosophy, somewhat akin to the approach of Pascal or Augustine to these two related subjects. Frank Thilly says that his philosophy is theological in motivation, esthetic in its literary and poetic form, and ethical in its import. The religious orientation is combined with - and at times in conflict with - a literary and artistic sensitivity and this coupled with a highly romantic interpretation of human nature produces a highly imaginative, symbolical and poetic form of writing that results in ambiguity and at times confusion. Kierkegaard is hard reading!

Something must be said about his life and circumstances, because it had great effect on his thought and attitude. He was a sufferer. His father once cursed God, while in a storm out in the field and this closely guarded sin the father passed on to his son just before the former's death. Sören took it as a sin that would result in a curse upon the family. He broke his engagement to Regina Olson, because he felt that marriage would hinder the mission which God had laid on his shoulder. The Danish *Punch*, *Corsair*, attacked his individualism and criticism of the established Lutheran Church. During his school days and university life, though gifted and witty, he had been made the object of mockery, partly due to his melancholy, individualism and seclusion and partly due to his polemical approach. He states that he was never a child, never young and never a man, that he had never really lived and that he enjoyed no "immediacy" or contact with other people. "I did not have immediacy, and have therefore, humanly understood, not lived; I have started with reflection... I am in fact reflection from beginning to end." All this had a profound effect on him and his thinking. He never sought invulnerability, but he accepted his suffering, lived with it, and searched it to find some meaning in it for him and for "that solitary individual", who was his audience and object of his mission. In his *Journal* he wrote in 1843: "The most important thing of all is that a man stands right toward God, does not try to wrench away from something, but rather penetrates it until it yields its explanation. Whether or not it turns out as he wishes; it is still the best of all." He was a hard worker and in a short period of time (1842-1848) he produced a great amount of writing (Forty-three publications on aesthetics, philosophy and religion).

His writings have recently come into, what Heinemann calls, a "Kierkegaard-Renaissance". For forty ears he has already influenced German thought and it has also been acknowledge, that he is the formative force upon the minds of such divergent thinkers as the German philosophers, Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger; as Karl Barth; as the lay Catholic thinker Theodor Haecker, the Jesuit Pryzwara and the Spanish philosopher Miguel Unamuno. His influence has also been great on such existentialist theologians as Jacques Maritain, Nicolas Berdyaev, Martin Buber and Paul Tillich. In fact, Kierkegaard is the fountainhead of contemporary existentialism. But, what is existentialism and why has it suddenly become so productive? F. H. Heinemann first coined the term "Existenzphilosophie" in 1929 in a book, *Neue Wege der Philosophie*. He understood "existence" as a new principle which seeks to overcome the one-sidedness of both the rationalist and irrationalist schools and instead of beginning with Descartes' "cogito" as consciousness and thought begins with the subject standing in the threefold relationship with man, the Universe and God. Kierkegaard objected to Hegel's all comprehensive World-Mind in which there is little room for the individual. He therefore introduces the category of the individual, by which he means "the single, finite, responsible, simple, suffering and guilty creature, who has to make a decision in face of God and who consequently is more interested in ethical questions and in salvation than in abstract speculations."

Why did Kierkegaard suddenly get a hearing and what accounts for the rise of modern existentialism? The key lies in the fact of alienation. There is a feeling of estrangement among modern man, which has increased considerably with the further development of the Industrial Revolution, the collectivization tied to a machine age and the gradual but definite depersonalization of man. There is a rupture between human beings and their objects, between human beings and other human beings, or between human beings and the natural world, or even between human beings and their own creations in art, science and society. Alienation is a multi-dimensional phenomenon, psychological, psychopathological and sociological, because it concerns the individual and the group. Hegel spoke of this estrangement. He used the term "Entäusserung" (externalization), "Entfremdung" (alienation), "Selbstentfremdung" (self-estrangement) and "Vergegenständlichung" (objectification). Since reality is essentially spiritual to Hegel, this estrangement is primarily to the mind. The absolute Idea or Reason enters the stage of self-alienation in Nature and returns from this estrangement to Itself as Mind. Marx took Hegel's dialectical format and transformed his "alienation of creativity" into an "alienation of productivity." Idealism was replaced with materialism. But neither Marx nor Hegel was able to overcome the fact of alienation and thus Kierkegaard and Existentialism arose to fill the gap. In Existentialism, neither Hegel's Mind nor Marx' material production are the starting point, but the fact of alienation, this existential predicament itself is the starting point.

Kierkegaard represents a reaction against the whole trend of modern philosophy from Descartes to Hegel. The "Cogito ergo sum" becomes the "Sum ergo cogito". Abstract consciousness and abstract thought is rejected for the concrete spiritual individual, with his inwardness and subjectivity. He objects to Hegel's stress on the Universal, his pantheism, his all-em-bracing unity of the Logos, his elimination of all risks. He objects to his speculative philosophy as a whole to which the philosopher does not commit himself or in which he is not engaged. Philosophy as well as religion is not something to be talked about, but to be lived. He defends the Particular against the Universal. He is concerned with the individual, the singularity of the individual and the human condition in which he is found. This is the standpoint of the intuitionism of particular situations.

Modern man finds himself in a leveling process and this destroys singularity, qualitative difference of the Self and the order of value and status. Man is suffering a process of dehumanization. He has become an object and is therefore no longer a subject. Self-estrangement is an internal process, based on one's attitude to oneself. Here Kierkegaard is the psychologist of self-estrangement. The state of alienation is the state of anxiety. Anxiety is "the uncanny apprehension of some impending evil, of something not present, but to come, of something not within us, but of an alien power." This is found in his *The Concept of Dread*. In *The Sickness Unto Death* anxiety becomes despair and this is the sickness unto death. Despair is the misproportion in the relation of the self to itself, or every disturbance in the process of becoming a Self, an illness of man as a spiritual being, arising from his attempt to separate himself from the power which created him, or from the fact that he neglects what is eternal in him and forgets his spiritual nature. Starting with despair then, the problem is how to become oneself again. The solution he finds in "reintegratio in statum pristinum." He coined the term "repetition" and meant by it "becoming again oneself before God". The problem is how to go on from unauthentic being to authentic being.

What is the philosophical solution to the problem? Kierkegaard has no philosophical system; that would be contrary to his thinking and approach. But in his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* there are some propositions that point the way:

1. All essential knowledge concerns existence.
2. All knowledge, which does not relate itself to existence, in the reflection of inwardness, is essentially viewed contingent and inessential knowledge; its degree and scope is indifferent.
3. Objective reflection and knowledge has to be distinguished from subjective reflection and knowledge.
4. The objective way of reflection leads to objective truth, and while the subject and his subjectivity becomes indifferent, the truth also becomes indifferent, and this indifference is precisely its objective value; its objectivity is either a hypothesis or an approximation.

5. Subjective knowledge requires personal appropriation. In subjection truth becomes appropriation, inwardness or subjectivity. In fact, the only reality which an existing being can know otherwise than through some abstract knowledge is his own existence. Here it is necessary that the existing subject should plunge itself into its own subjectivity.

6. Only ethical and religious knowledge is therefore essential knowledge; they alone are essentially related to the fact that the knowing subject exists; they alone are in contact with reality. In them alone truth and existence coincide.

7. The essential truth is subjective or internal; or "truth is subjectivity".

This amounts not only to a complete reevaluation of human knowledge, or a reaction against Hegel, but a reaction against modern science in general as it becomes more and more abstract. He substitutes for the old distinction between truths of reason and truths of fact, the existential dualism of objective or inessential truth and subjective or essential truth. "He wishes to return from abstract inessential knowledge to concrete essential knowledge, from the exterior to the interior, from the objective to the subjective, from possibilities to reality." Kierkegaard's existential thought is dialectical and paradoxical. Since the existing subject is occupied in existing, it follows that he is in process of becoming. And just as the form of his communication ought to be in essential conformity with his mode of existence, so his thought must correspond to the structure of existence. Thus it is dialectical. Objective truth is certain or approaches certainty, we are told. Subjective truth however, we are told, becomes a paradox; and this fact is true because of the relationship with an existing subject. Subjectively something is true because the person passionately believes in it, has appropriated it and assimilated it with his whole existence, even if or rather because the object of his belief is a paradox and an absurdity. Truth to Kierkegaard means "true to oneself", i.e. "true to one's eternal self" and therefore true to God. Truth is not a quality of propositions, but of human beings.

Throughout the thought of Kierkegaard runs the master category of the individual. He writes: "I marked my writings to which I attached my name with the category of the individual from the beginning; and it continued like a formula to be repeated in stereotyped fashion so that the individual is not a later invention of mine but has been there from the beginning. "Hiin Enkelte" really means "that solitary individual". He means the individual as separated from the rest, in his aloneness and solitude, face to face with his destiny, with the Eternal, with God Himself and with the awful responsibility of decision and choice. In the core of the I is a center from which choice springs, from which responsibility for one's acts springs, from which the ultimate sense of uneasiness with anything that falls short of the highest of all in reality ultimately issues, from which remorse and repentance arises. He had keen distaste for the crowd and the mass which could serve as the hiding place of the individual, who this seeks to sacrifice his true quest for inward intensity and responsibility.

How is Kierkegaard's thought to be evaluated as a philosophy and as a religious viewpoint? His dissatisfaction with abstract science, which moves in mere possibilities; his search for the concrete and reality; his insistence that choice and decision transcend the relativity of knowledge and introduce something unconditional; all this is very much alive today. But, in his emphasis on subjective reflection he has underrated objective reflection. His subjectivity can easily lead to introspective confusion and pathological egocentricity. Religion on the other hand cannot be purely subjective. It requires objective evidence for its beliefs. "Subjectivity is truth" is an overstatement. It can lead either to the erroneous conclusion that an existential logic is possible or to relativism and irrationalism. Edward J. Carnell criticizes Kierkegaard on two accounts and with this I could agree: (1) Passion should be guided by the seriousness and truth of the object, and not by its rational offensiveness. (2) Worthy faith should be aroused by a joint cooperation between the nature of the object and the sufficiency of the evidences that support it.

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