



## Kierkegaard: Life and Thought

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Creditable as have been the contributions of Scandinavia to the cultural life of the race in well-nigh all fields of human endeavor, it has produced but one thinker of the first magnitude, the Dane, Søren A. Kierkegaard. The fact that he is virtually unknown to us is ascribable, on the one hand to the inaccessibility of his works, both as to language and form; on the other, to the regrettable insularity of English thought.

It is the purpose of this book to remedy the defect in a measure, and by a selection from his most representative works to provide a stimulus for a more detailed study of his writings; for the present times, ruled by material considerations, wholly led by socializing, and misled by national ideals, are precisely the most opportune to introduce the bitter but wholesome antidote of individual responsibility, which is his message. In particular, students of Northern literature cannot afford to know no more than the name of one who exerted a potent and energizing influence on an important epoch of Scandinavian thought. To mention only one instance, the greatest ethical poem of our age, "Brand" notwithstanding Ibsen's curt statement that he "had read little of Kierkegaard and understood less" undeniably owes its fundamental thought to him, whether directly or indirectly.

Of very few authors can it be said with the same literalness as, of Kierkegaard that their life is their works: as if to furnish living proof of his untiring insistence on inwardness, his life, like that of so many other spiritual educators of the race, is notably poor in incidents; but his life of inward experiences is all the richer witness the "literature within a literature" that came to be within a few years and that gave to Danish letters a score of immortal works.

Kierkegaard's physical heredity must be pronounced unfortunate. Being the child of old parents his father was, fifty-seven, his mother forty-five years. at his birth (May 5, 1813), he had a weak physique and a feeble constitution. Still worse, he inherited from his father a burden of melancholy which he took a sad pride in masking under a show of sprightliness. His father, Michael Pedersen Kierkegaard, had begun life as a poor cotter's boy in West Jutland, where he was set to tend the sheep on the wild moorlands. One day, we are told, oppressed by loneliness and cold, he ascended a hill and in a passionate rage cursed God who had given him this miserable existence the memory of which "sin against the Holy Ghost" he was not able to shake off to the end of his long life. When seventeen years old, the gifted lad was sent to his uncle in Copenhagen, who was a well-to-do dealer in woolens and groceries. Kierkegaard quickly established himself in the trade and amassed a considerable fortune. This enabled him to withdraw from active life when only forty, and to devote himself to philosophic studies, the leisure for which life had till then denied him. More especially he seems to have studied the works of the rationalistic philosopher Wolff. After the early death of his first wife who left him no issue, he married a former servant in his household, also of Jutish stock, who bore him seven children. Of these only two survived him, the oldest son later bishop Peder Christian, and the youngest son, Søren Åbye.

Nowhere does Kierkegaard speak of his mother, a woman of simple mind and cheerful disposition; but he speaks all the more often of his father, for whom he ever expressed the greatest love and admiration and who, no doubt, devoted himself largely to the education of his

sons, particularly to that of his latest born. Him he was to mould in his own image. A pietistic, gloomy spirit of religiosity pervaded the household in which the severe father was undisputed master, and absolute obedience the watchword. Little Sören, as he himself tells us, heard more of the Crucified and the martyrs than of the Christ-child and good angels. Like John Stuart Mill, whose early education bears a remarkable resemblance to his, he “never had the joy to be a child.” Although less systematically held down to his studies, in which religion was the be-all and end-all (instead of being banished, as was the case with Mill), he was granted but a minimum of out-door play and exercise. And, instead of strengthening the feeble body, his father threw the whole weight of his melancholy on the boy.

Nor was his home training, formidably abstract, counterbalanced by a normal, healthy school-life. Naturally introspective and shy, both on account of a slight deformity of his body and on account of the old-fashioned clothes his father made him wear, he had no boy friends; and when cuffed by his more robust contemporaries, he could defend himself only with his biting sarcasm. Notwithstanding his early maturity he does not seem to have impressed either his schoolmates or his teachers by any gifts much above the ordinary. The school he attended was one of those semi-public schools which by strict discipline and consistent methods laid a solid foundation of humanities and mathematics for those who were to enter upon a professional career. The natural sciences played no role whatever.

Obedient to the wishes of his father, Sören chose the study of theology, as had his eldest brother; but, once relieved from the grind of school at the age of seventeen, he rejoiced in the full liberty of university life, indulging himself to his heart’s content in all the refined intellectual and æsthetic enjoyments the gay capital of Copenhagen offered. He declares himself in later years to be “one who is penitent” for having in his youth plunged into all kinds of excesses; but we feel reasonably sure that he committed no excesses worse than “high living.” He was frequently seen at the opera and the theatre, spent money freely in restaurants and confectionary shops, bought many, and expensive books, dressed well, and indulged in such extravagances as driving in a carriage and pair, alone, for days through the fields and forests of the lovely island of Zealand. In fact, he contracted considerable debts, so that his disappointed father decided to put him on an allowance of 500 rix dollars yearly—rather a handsome sum, a hundred years ago.

Naturally, little direct progress was made in his studies. But while to all appearances aimlessly dissipating his energies, he showed a pronounced love for philosophy and kindred disciplines. He lost no opportunity then offered at the University of Copenhagen to train his mind along these lines. He heard the sturdily independent Sibbern’s lectures on æsthetics and enjoyed a “privatissimum” on the main issues of Schleiermacher’s Dogmatics with his later enemy, the theologian Martensen, author of the celebrated “Christian Dogmatics.”

But there was no steadiness in him. Periods of indifference to these studies alternated with feverish activity, and doubts of the truth of Christianity, with bursts of devotion. However, the Hebraically stern cast of mind of the externally gay student soon wearied of this rudderless existence. He sighs for an “Archimedean” point of support for his conduct of life. We find the following entry in his diary, which prophetically foreshadows some of the fundamental ideas of his later career: “. . . what I really need is to arrive at a clear comprehension of what I am to do, not of what I am to grasp with my understanding, except insofar as this understanding is necessary for every action. The point is, to comprehend what I am called to do, to see what the Godhead really means that I shall do, to find a truth which is truth for me, to find the idea for which I am willing to live and to die . . .”

This Archimedean point was soon to be furnished him. There came a succession of blows, culminating in the death of his father, whose silent disapprobation had long been weighing heavily on the conscience of the wayward son. Even more awful, perhaps, was a revelation made by the dying father to his sons, very likely touching that very “sin against the Holy Ghost” which he had committed in his boyhood and the consequence of which he now was to lay on them as a curse, instead of his blessing. Kierkegaard calls it “the great earthquake, the terrible upheaval, which suddenly forced on me a new and infallible interpretation of all phenomena.”

He began to suspect that he had been chosen by Providence for an extraordinary purpose; and with his abiding filial piety he interprets his father's death as the last of many sacrifices he made for him; "for he died, not away from me, but for me, so that there might yet, perchance, become something of me." Crushed by this thought, and through the "new interpretation" despairing of happiness in this life, he clings to the thought of his unusual intellectual powers as his only consolation and a means by which his salvation, might be accomplished. He quickly absolved his examination for ordination (ten years after matriculation) and determined on his magisterial dissertation.

Already some years before he had made a not very successful debut in the world of letters with a pamphlet whose queer title "From the MSS. of One Still Living" reveals Kierkegaard's inborn love of mystification and innuendo. Like a Puck of philosophy, with somewhat awkward bounds and a callow manner, he had there teased the worthies of his times; and, in particular, taken a good fall out of Hans Christian Andersen, the poet of the Fairy Tales, who had aroused his indignation by describing in somewhat lachrymose fashion the struggles of genius to come into its own. Kierkegaard himself was soon to show the truth of his own dictum that "genius does not whine but like a thunderstorm goes straight counter to the wind."

While casting about for a subject worthy of a more sustained effort—he marks out for study the legends of Faust, Of the Wandering Jew, of Don Juan, as representatives of certain basic views of life; the, Conception of Satire among the Ancients, etc., etc.,—he at last becomes aware of his affinity with Socrates, in whom he found that rare harmony between theory and the conduct of life which he hoped to attain himself.

Though not by Kierkegaard himself counted among the works bearing on the "Indirect Communication"—presently to be explained—his magisterial dissertation, entitled "The Conception of Irony, with Constant Reference to Socrates," a book of 300 pages, is of crucial importance. It shows that, helped by the sage who would not directly help any one, he had found the master key: his own interpretation of life. Indeed, all the following literary output may be regarded as the consistent development of the simple directing thoughts of his firstling work. And we must devote what may seem a disproportionate amount of space to the explanation of these thoughts if we would enter into the world of his mind.

Not only did Kierkegaard feel kinship with Socrates. It did not escape him that there was an ominous similarity between Socrates' times and his own—between the period of flourishing Attica, eminent in the arts and in philosophy, when a little familiarity with the shallow phrases of the Sophists enabled one to have an opinion about everything on earth and in heaven, and his own Copenhagen in the thirties of the last century, when Johan Ludvig Heiberg had popularized Hegelian philosophy with such astonishing success that the very cobblers were using the Hegelian terminology, with "Thesis, Antithesis, and Synthesis," and one could get instructions from one's barber, while being shaved, how to "harmonize the ideal with reality, and our wishes with what we have attained." Every difficulty could be "mediated," according to this recipe. And just as the great questioner of Athens gave pause to his more naïve contemporaries by his "know thyself," so Kierkegaard insisted that he must rouse his contemporaries from their philosophic complacency and unwarranted optimism, and move them to realize that the spiritual life has both mountain and valley, that it is no flat plain easy to travel. He intended to show difficulties where the road had been supposedly smoothed for them.

Central, both in the theory and in the practice of Socrates (according to Kierkegaard), is his irony. The ancient sage would stop old and young and quizz them skilfully on what they regarded as common and universally established propositions, until his interlocutor became confused by some consequence or contradiction arising unexpectedly, and until he who had been sure of his knowledge was made to confess his ignorance, or even to become distrustful of the possibility of knowledge. Destroying supposedly positive values, this method would seem to lead to a negative result only.

Kierkegaard makes less (and rather too little) of the positive side of Socrates' method, his maieutic, or midwifery, by which we are led inductively from trivial instances to a new definition of a conception, a method which will fit all cases. Guided by a lofty personality,

this Socratic irony becomes, in Kierkegaard's definition, merely "the negative liberation of subjectivity"; that is, not the family, nor society, nor the state, nor any rules superimposed from outside, but one's innermost self (or subjectivity) is to be the determining factor in one's life. And understood thus, irony as a negative element borders on the ethical conception of life.

Romantic irony, on the other hand, laying main stress on subjective liberty, represents the æsthetic conduct of life. It was, we remember, the great demand of the Romantic period that one live poetically. That is, after having reduced all reality to possibilities, all existence to fragments, we are to choose ad libitum one such possible existence, to consider that one's proper sphere, and for the rest to look ironically on all other reality as philistine. Undeniably, this license, through the infinitude of possibilities open to him, gives the ironist an enthusiastic sense of irresponsible freedom in which he "disports himself as does Leviathan in the deep." Again, the "æsthetic individual is ill at ease in the world into which he is born. His typical ailment is a Byronesque Weltschmerz. He would fain mould the elements of existence to suit himself; that is, "compose" not only himself but also his surroundings. But without fixed task and purpose, life will soon lose all continuity ("except that of boredom") and fall apart into disconnected moods and impulses. Hence, while supposing himself a superman, free, and his own master, the æsthetic individual is, in reality, a slave to the merest accidents. He is not self-directed, self-propelled; but—drifts.

Over against this attitude Kierkegaard now sets the ethical, Christian life, one with a definite purpose and goal beyond itself. "It is one thing to compose one's own life, another, to let one's life be composed. The Christian lets his life be composed; and insofar a simple Christian lives far more poetically than many a genius." It would hardly be possible to characterize the contents of Kierkegaard's first great book, "Either-Or," more inclusively and tersely.

Very well, then, the Christian life, with its clear directive, is superior to the aesthetic existence. But how is this: are we not all Christians in Christendom, children of Christians, baptized and confirmed according to the regulations of the Church? And are we not all to be saved according to the promise of Our Lord who died for us? At a very early time Kierkegaard, himself desperately struggling to maintain his Christian faith against doubts, had his eyes opened to, this enormous delusion of modern times and was preparing to battle against it. The great idea and task for which he was to live and to die—here it was: humanity is in apparent possession of the divine truth, but utterly perverts it and, to cap injury with insult, protects and intrenches the deception behind state sanction and institutions. More appalling evil confronted not even the early protagonists of Christianity against heathendom. How was he, single-handed, magnificently gifted though he was, to cleanse the temple and restore its pristine simplicity?

Clearly, the old mistake must not be repeated, to try to influence and reform the masses by a vulgar and futile "revival," preaching to them directly and gaining disciples innumerable. It would only lead again, to the abomination of a lip service. But a ferment must be introduced which—he hoped—would gradually restore Christianity to its former vigor; at least in individuals. So far as the form of his own works is concerned he was thus bound to use the "indirect method" of Socrates whom he regards as his teacher. In conscious opposition to the Sophists who sold their boasted wisdom for money, Socrates not only made no charges for his instruction but even warned people of his ignorance, insisting that, like a midwife, he only helped people to give birth to their own thoughts. And owing to his irony Socrates' relation to his disciples was not in any positive sense a personal one. Least of all did he wish to found a new "school" or erect a philosophic "system."

Kierkegaard, with Christianity as his goal, adopted the same tactics. By an attractive æsthetic beginning people were to be "lured" into envisaging the difficulties to be unfolded presently, to think for themselves, to form their own conclusions, whether for or against. The individual was to be appealed to, first and last—the individual, no matter how humble, who would take the trouble to follow him and be his reader, "my only reader, the single individual." "So the religious author must make it his first business to put himself in touch with men. That is to say, he must begin aesthetically. The more brilliant his performance, the better." And then, when he has got them to follow him "he must produce the religious categories so that these same



men with all the impetus of their devotion to aesthetic things are suddenly brought up sharp against the religious aspect.” The writer’s own personality was to be entirely eliminated by a system of pseudonyms; for the effect of his teaching was not to be jeopardized by a distracting knowledge of his personality. Accordingly, in conscious imitation of Socrates, Kierkegaard at first kept up a semblance of his previous student life, posing as a frivolous idler on the streets of Copenhagen, a witty dog incapable of prolonged serious activity; thus anxiously guarding the secret of his feverish activity during the lonely hours of the night.

His campaign of the “indirect communication” was thus fully determined upon; but there was still lacking the impetus of an elemental passion to start it and give it driving force and conquering persistence. This also was to be furnished him.

Shortly before his father’s death he had made the acquaintance of Regine Olson, a beautiful young girl of good family. There followed one of the saddest imaginable engagements. The melancholy, and essentially lonely, thinker may not at first have entertained the thought of a lasting attachment; for had he not, on the one hand, given up all hope of worldly happiness, and on the other, begun to think of himself as a chosen tool of heaven not to be bound by the ordinary ties of human affection? But the natural desire to be as happy as others and to live man’s common lot, for a moment hushed all anxious scruples. And the love of the brilliant and promising young man with the deep, sad eyes and the flashing wit was ardently returned by her.

Difficulties arose very soon. It was not so much the extreme youth and immaturity of the girl—she was barely sixteen—as against his tremendous mental development, or even her “total lack of religious presuppositions”; for that might not itself have precluded a happy union. Vastly more ominous was his own unconquerable and overwhelming melancholy. She could not break it. And struggle as he might, he could not banish it. And, he reasoned, even if he were successful in concealing it from her, the very concealment were a deceit. Neither would he burden her with his melancholy by revealing it to her. Besides, some mysterious ailment which, with Paul, he terms the “thorn in his flesh,” tormented him. The fact that he consulted a physician makes it likely that it was bodily, and perhaps sexual. On the other hand, the manner of Kierkegaard’s multitudinous references to woman removes the suspicion of any abnormality. The impression remains that at the bottom of his trouble there lay his melancholy, aggravated admittedly by an “insane education,” and coupled with an exaggerated sense of a misspent youth. That nothing else prevented the union is clear from his own repeated later remarks that, with more faith, he would have married her.

Though to the end of his life he never ceased to love her, he feels that they must part. But she clings to him with a rather maudlin devotion, which, to be sure, only increased his determination. He finally hit on the desperate device of pretending frivolous indifference to her affections, and acted this sad comedy with all the dialectic subtleness of his genius, until she eventually released him. Then, after braving for a while the philistine indignation of public opinion and the disapproval of his friends, in order to confirm her in her bad opinion of him, he fled to Berlin with shattered nerves and a bleeding heart.

He had deprived himself of what was dearest to him in life. For all that, he knew that the foundations of his character remained unshaken. The voluntary renunciation of a worldly happiness which was his for the taking intensifies his idea of being one of the “few in each generation selected to be a sacrifice.” Thereafter, “his thought is all to him,” and all his gifts are devoted to the service of God.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, more than at any other time, Denmark was an intellectual dependency of Germany. It was but natural that Kierkegaard, in search for the ultimate verities, should resort to Berlin where Schelling was just then beginning his famous course of lectures. In many respects it may be held deplorable that, at a still formative stage, Kierkegaard should have remained in the prosaic capital of Prussia and have been influenced by bloodless abstractions; instead of journeying to France, or still better, to England whose empiricism would, no doubt, have been an excellent corrective of his excessive tendency to speculation. In fact he was quickly disappointed with Schelling and after four months returned to his beloved Copenhagen (which he was not to leave thereafter except for short periods),

with his mind still busy on the problems which were peculiarly his own. The tremendous impulse given by his unfortunate engagement was sufficient to stimulate his sensitive mind to a productivity without equal in Danish literature, to create a "literature within a literature." The fearful inner collision of motives had lit an inner conflagration which did not die down for years. "My becoming an author is due chiefly to her, my melancholy, and my money."

About a year afterwards (1843) there appeared his first great work, "Either-Or," which at once established his fame. As in the case of most of his works it will be impossible to give here more than the barest outline of its plan and contents. In substance, it is a grand debate between the aesthetic and the ethic views of life. In his dissertation Kierkegaard had already characterized the æsthetic point of view. Now, in a brilliant series of articles, he proceeds to exemplify it with exuberant detail.

The fundamental chord of the first part is struck in the Diapsalmata—aphorisms which, like so many flashes of a lantern, illuminate the æsthetic life, its pleasures and its despair. The æsthetic individual—this is brought out in the article entitled "The Art of Rotation"—wishes to be the exception in human society, shirking its common, humble duties and claiming special privileges. He has no fixed principle except that he means not to be bound to anything or anybody. He has but one desire which is, to enjoy the sweets of life—whether its purely sensual pleasures or the more refined Epicureanism of the finer things in life and art, and the ironic enjoyment of one's own superiority over the rest of humanity; and he has no fear except that he may succumb to boredom.

As a comment on this text there follow a number of essays in "experimental psychology," supposed to be the fruit of the æsthete's (A's) leisure. In them the æsthetic life is exhibited in its various manifestations, in "terms of existence," especially as to its "erotic stages," from the indefinite longings of the Page to the fully conscious "sensual genius" of Don Juan—the examples are taken from Mozart's opera of this name, which was Kierkegaard's favorite—until the whole culminates in the famous "Diary of the Seducer," containing elements of the author's own engagement, poetically disguised—a seducer, by the way, of an infinitely reflective kind.

Following this climax of unrestrained æstheticism we hear in the second part the stern demands of the ethical life. Its spokesman, Judge William, rises in defense of the social institutes, and of marriage in particular, against the slurs cast on them by his young friend A. He makes it clear that the only possible outcome of the æsthetic life, with its aimlessness, its superciliousness, its vague possibilities, is a feeling of vanity and vexation of spirit, and a hatred of life itself: despair. One floundering in this inevitable slough of despond, who earnestly wishes to escape from it and to save himself from the ultimate destruction of his personality, must choose and determine to rise into the ethical sphere. That is, he must elect a definite calling, no matter how humdrum, marry, if possible, and thus subject himself to the "general law." In a word, instead of a world of vague possibilities, however attractive, he must choose the definite circumscription of the individual who is a member of society. Only thus, will he obtain a balance in his life between the demands of his personality on the one hand, and of the demands of society on him. When thus reconciled to his environment—his "lot"—all the pleasures of the æsthetic sphere which he resigned will be his again in rich measure, but in a transfigured sense.

Though nobly eloquent in places, and instinct with warm feeling, this panegyric on marriage and the fixed duties of life is somewhat unconvincing, and its style undeniably tame and unctious—at least when contrasted with the Satanic Verve of most of A's papers. The fact is that Kierkegaard, when considering the ethical sphere, in order to carry out his plan of contrasting it with the æsthetic sphere, was already envisaging the higher sphere of religion, to which the ethical sphere is but a transition, and which is the only true alternative to the æsthetic life. At the very end of the book Kierkegaard, flying his true colors, places a sermon as an "ultimatum," purporting to have been written by a pastor on the Jutish Heath. Its text is that "as against we are always in the wrong," and the tenor of it, "only that truth which edifies is truth for you." It is not that you must choose either the æsthetic or the ethical view of life; but that neither the one nor the other is the full truth—God alone is the truth which must be grasped with all inwardness.

But since we recognize our imperfections, or sins, the more keenly, as we are developed more highly, our typical relation to God must be that of repentance; and by repentance as by a step we may rise into the higher sphere of religion—as will be seen, a purely Christian thought.

A work of such powerful originality, imposing by its very size, and published at the anonymous author's own expense, could not but create a stir among the small Danish reading public. And notwithstanding Kierkegaard's consistent efforts to conceal his authorship in the interest of his "indirect communication," it could not long remain a secret. The book was much, and perplexedly, discussed, though no one was able to fathom the author's real aim, most readers being attracted by piquant subjects such as the "Diary of the Seducer," and regarding the latter half as a feeble afterthought. As he said himself: "With my left hand I held out to the world 'Either-Or,' with my right, 'Two Edifying Discourses'; but they all—or practically all—seized with their right hands what I held in my left."

These "Two Edifying Discourses,"<sup>4</sup> for thus he preferred to call them, rather than sermons, because he claimed no authority to preach—as well as all the many later ones, were published over his own name, addressed to *Den Enkelte* "The Single Individual" "whom with joy and gratitude he calls his reader," and were dedicated to the memory of his father. They belong among the noblest books of edification, of which the North has not a few.

During the following three years (1843-5) Kierkegaard, once roused to productivity, though undoubtedly kept at his task by the exertion of marvellous will-power, wrote in quick succession some of his most notable works—so original in form, in thought, in content that it is a well-nigh hopeless task to analyze them to any satisfaction. All we can do here is to note the development in them of the one grand theme which is fundamental to all his literary activity: how to become a Christian.

If the second part of "Either-Or" was devoted to an explanation of the nature of the ethical, as against the æsthetic, conduct of life, inevitably the next task was, first, to define the nature of the religious life, as against the merely ethical life; then, to show how the religious sphere may be attained. This is done in the brilliant twin books "Fear and Trembling" and "Repetition." Both were published over pseudonyms.

"Fear and Trembling" bears as its subtitle "Dialectic Lyrics." Indeed, nowhere perhaps, is Kierkegaard's strange union of dialectic subtlety and intense lyrical power and passion so strikingly in evidence as in this panegyric on Abraham, the father of faith. To Kierkegaard he is the shining exemplar of the religious life; and his greatest act of faith, his obedience to God's command to slay Isaac. Nothing can surpass the eloquence with which he depicts the agony of the father, his struggle between the ethical, or general, law which saith "thou shalt no kill!" and God's specific command. In the end, Abraham by a grand resolve transgresses the law; and lo! because he has faith, against certainty, that he will keep Isaac, and does not merely resign him, as many a tragic hero would have done, he receives all again, in a new and higher sphere. In other words, Abraham chooses to be "the exception" and set aside the general law, as well as does the æsthetic individual; but, note well: "in fear and trembling," and at the express command of God! He is a "knight of faith." But because this direct relation to the divinity necessarily can be certain only to Abraham's self, his action is altogether incomprehensible to others. Reason recoils before the absolute paradox of the individual who chooses to rise superior to the general law.

The rise into the religious sphere is always likely to be the outcome of some severe inner conflict engendering infinite passion. In the splendidly written "Repetition" we are shown *ad oculos* an abortive transition into the religious sphere, with a corresponding relapse into the æsthetic sphere. Kierkegaard's own love-story is again drawn upon: the "Young Person" ardently loves the woman; but discovers to his consternation that she is in reality but a burden to him since, instead of having an actual, living relation to her, he merely "remembers" her when she is present. In the ensuing collision of motives his æsthetically cool friend Constantin Constantius advises him to act as one unworthy of her—as did Kierkegaard—and to forget her. But instead of following this advice, and lacking a deeper religious background, he flees the town and subsequently transmutes his trials into poetry—that is, relapses into the æsthetic

sphere: rather than, like Job, whom he apostrophises passionately, “receiving all again” (having all “repeated”) in a higher sphere. This idea of the resumption of a lower stage into a higher one is one of Kierkegaard’s most original and fertile thoughts. It is illustrated here with an amazing wealth of instances.

So far, it had been a question of religious feeling in general—how it may arise, and what its nature is. In the pivotal work “Philosophic Trifles”—note the irony—Kierkegaard throws the searching rays of his penetrating intellect on the grand problem of revealed religion: can one’s eternal salvation be based on an historical event? This is the great stumbling block to the understanding.

Hegel’s philosophic optimism maintained that the difficulties of Christianity had been completely “reconciled” or “mediated” in the supposedly higher synthesis of philosophy, by which process religion had been reduced to terms which might be grasped by the intellect. Kierkegaard, fully voicing the claim both of the intellect and of religion, erects the barrier of the paradox, impassable except by the act of faith. As will be seen, this is Tertullian’s *Credo quia absurdum*.

In the briefest possible outline his argument is as follows: Socrates had taught that in reality every one had the truth in him and needed but to be reminded of it by the teacher who thus is necessary only in helping the disciple to discover it himself. That is the indirect communication of the truth. But now suppose that the truth is not innate in man, suppose he has merely the ability to grasp it when presented to him. And suppose the teacher to be of absolute, infinite importance—the Godhead himself, directly communicating with man, revealing the truth in the shape of man; in fact, as the lowliest of men, yet insisting on implicit belief in Him! This, according to Kierkegaard, constitutes the paradox of faith par excellence. But this paradox, he shows, existed for the generation contemporaneous with Christ in the same manner as it does for those living now. To think that faith was an easier matter for those who saw the Lord and walked in His blessed company is but a sentimental, and fatal, delusion. On the other hand, to found one’s faith on the glorious results, now evident, of Christ’s appearance in the world is sheer thoughtlessness and blasphemy. With ineluctable cogency it follows that “there can be no disciple at second hand.” Now, as well as “1800 years ago,” whether in Heathendom or in Christendom, faith is born of the same conditions: the resolute acceptance by the individual of the absolute paradox.

In previous works Kierkegaard had already intimated that what furnished man the impetus to rise into the highest sphere and to assail passionately and incessantly the barrier of the paradox, or else caused him to lapse into “demonic despair,” was the consciousness of sin. In the book *Begrebet Angest* “The Concept of Sin,” he now attempts with an infinite and laborious subtlety to explain the nature of sin. Its origin is found in the “sympathetic antipathy” of Dread—that force which at one and the same time attracts and repels from the suspected danger of a fall and is present even in the state of innocence, in children. It finally results in a kind of “dizziness” which is fatal. Yet, so Kierkegaard contends, the “fall” of man is, in every single instance, due to a definite act of the will, a “leap”—which seems a patent contradiction.

To the modern reader, this is the least palatable of Kierkegaard’s works, conceived as it is with a sovereign and almost medieval disregard of the predisposing undeniable factors of environment and heredity (which, to be sure, poorly fit his notion of the absolute responsibility of the individual). Its sombreness is redeemed, to a certain degree, by a series of marvellous observations, drawn from history and literature, on the various phases and manifestations of Dread in human life.

On the same day as the book just discussed there appeared, as a “counter-irritant,” the hilariously exuberant “Forewords,” a collection of some eight playful but vicious attacks, in the form of prefaces, on various foolish manifestations of Hegelianism in Denmark. They are aimed chiefly at the high-priest of the “system,” the poet Johan Ludvig Heiberg who, as the arbiter elegantiarum of the times had presumed to review, with a plentiful lack of insight, Kierkegaard’s activity. But some of the most telling shots are fired at a number of the individualist



Kierkegaard's pet aversions.

His next great work, *Stages on Life's Road*," forms a sort of resumé of the results so far gained. The three "spheres" are more clearly elaborated.

The aesthetic sphere is represented existentially by the incomparable *In Vino Veritas*, generally called "The Banquet," from a purely literary point of view the most perfect of Kierkegaard's works, which, if written in one of the great languages of Europe, would have procured him world fame. Composed in direct emulation of Plato's immortal *Symposium*, it bears comparison with it as well as any modern composition can. Indeed, it excels Plato's work in subtlety, richness, and refined humor. To be sure, Kierkegaard has charged his creation with such romantic superabundance of delicate observations and rococo ornament that the whole comes dangerously near being improbable; whereas the older work stands solidly in reality.

It is with definite purpose that the theme of the speeches of the five participants in the banquet is love, i.e., the relation of the two sexes in love; for it is there the main battle between the æsthetic and the ethical view of life must be fought out. Accordingly, Judge William, to whom the last idyllic pages of "The Banquet" again introduce us, in the second part breaks another shaft in defense of marriage, which in the ethical view of life is the typical realization of the "general law." Love exists also for the ethical individual. In fact, love and no other consideration whatsoever can justify marriage. But whereas to the aesthetic individual love is merely eroticism, viz., a passing self-indulgence without any obligation, the ethical individual attaches to himself the woman of his choice by an act of volition, for better or for worse, and by his marriage vow incurs an obligation to society. Marriage is thus a synthesis of love and duty. A pity only that Kierkegaard's astonishingly low evaluation of woman utterly mars what would otherwise be a classic defence of marriage.

The religious sphere is shown forth in the third part, "Guilty—Not-Guilty," with the apt subtitle "A History of Woe." Working over, for the third time, and in the most intense fashion, his own unsuccessful attempt to "realize the general law," i.e., by marrying, he here presents in the form of a diary the essential facts of his own engagement, but in darker colors than in "Repetition." It is broken because of religious incompatibility and the lover's unconquerable melancholy; and by his voluntary renunciation, coupled with acute suffering through his sense of guilt for his act, he is driven up to an approximation of the religious sphere. Not unjustly, Kierkegaard himself regarded this as the richest of his works.

One may say that "Guilty-Not-Guilty" corresponds to Kierkegaard's own development at this stage. Christianity is still above him. How may it be attained? This is the grand theme of the huge book whimsically named "Final Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Trifles," (1846): "How shall I become a Christian, I, Johannes Climacus, born in this city, thirty years of age, and not in any way different from the ordinary run of men"?

Following up the results gained in the "Trifles," the subjectivity of faith is established once for all: it is not to be attained by swearing to any set of dogmas, not even Scripture; for who will vouch for its being an absolutely reliable and inspired account of Christ? Besides, as Lessing had demonstrated conclusively: historic facts never can become the proof of eternal verities. Nor can the existence of the Church through the ages furnish any guarantee for faith—straight counter to the opinion held by Kierkegaard's famous contemporary Grundtvig—any more than can mere contemporaneity establish a guarantee for those living at the beginning. To sum up: "One who has an objective Christianity and nothing else, he is *eo ipso* a heathen." For the same reason, "philosophic speculation" is not the proper approach, since it seeks to understand Christianity objectively, as an historic phenomenon—which rules it out from the start.

It is only by a decisive "leap," from objective thinking into subjective faith, with the consciousness of sin as the driving power, that the individual may realize (we would say, attain) Christianity. Nor is it gained once for all, but must ever be maintained by passionately assailing the paradox of faith, which is, that one's eternal salvation is based on an historic fact. The main thing always is the "how," not the "what." Kierkegaard goes so far as to say that he who with fervency and inwardness prays to some false god is to be preferred to him who worships the true god, but without the passion of devotion.

In order to prevent any misunderstanding about the manner of presentation in this remarkable book, it will be well to add Kierkegaard's own remark after reading a conscientious German review of his "Trifles": "Although the account given is correct, every one who reads it will obtain an altogether incorrect impression of the book; because the account the critic gives is in the *ex cathedra* style (*docerende*), which will produce on the reader the impression that the book is written in a like manner. But this is in my eyes the worst misconception possible." And as to its peculiar conversational, entertaining manner which in the most leisurely, *legère* fashion and in an all but dogmatic style treats of the profoundest problems, it is well to recall the similarly popular manner of Pascal in his *Lettres Provinciales*. Like him—and his grand prototype Socrates—Kierkegaard has the singular faculty of attacking the most abstruse matters with a chattiness bordering on frivolity, yet without ever losing dignity.

For four and a half years Kierkegaard had now, notwithstanding his feeble health, toiled feverishly and, as he himself states, without even a single day's remission. And "the honorarium had been rather Socratic": all of his books had been brought out at his own expense and their sale had been, of course, small. (Of the "Final Postscript," e.g., which had cost him between 500 and 600 rix dollars, only 60 copies were sold). Hardly any one had understood what the purpose of this "literature" was. He himself had done, with the utmost exertion and to the best of his ability, what he set out to do: to show his times, which had assumed that being a Christian is an easy enough matter, how unspeakably difficult a matter it really is and what terribly severe demands it makes on natural man. He now longed for rest and seriously entertained the plan of bringing his literary career to a close and spending the remainder of his days as a pastor of some quiet country parish, there to convert his philosophy into terms of practical existence. But this was not to be. An incident which would seem ridiculously small to a more robust nature sufficed to inflict on Kierkegaard's sensitive mind the keenest tortures and thus to sting him into a renewed and more passionate literary activity.

As it happened, the comic paper "The Corsair" was then at the heyday of its career. The first really democratic periodical in Denmark, it stood above party lines and through its malicious, brilliant satire and amusing caricatures of prominent personalities was hated, feared, and enjoyed by everybody. Its editor, the Jewish author Meir Goldschmidt, was a warm and outspoken admirer of the philosopher. Kierkegaard, on the other hand, had long regarded the Press with suspicion. He loathed it because it gave expression to, and thus subtly flattered, the multitude, "the public," "the mob"—as against the individual, and because it worked with the terrible weapon of anonymity; but held it especially dangerous by reason of its enormous circulation and daily repetition of mischievous falsehoods. So it seemed to him who ever doubted the ability of the "people" to think for themselves. In a word, the Press is to him "the evil principle in the modern world." Needless to say, the tactics of "The Corsair," in particular, infuriated him.

In a Christmas annual (1845) there had appeared a blundering review, by one of the collaborators on "The Corsair," of his "Stages on Life's Road." Seizing the opportunity offered, Kierkegaard wrote a caustic rejoinder, adding the challenge: "Would that I now soon appear in 'The Corsair.' It is really hard on a poor author to be singled out in Danish literature by remaining the only one who is not abused in it." We know now that Goldschmidt did his best in a private interview to ward off a feud, but when rebuffed he turned the batteries of his ridicule on the personality of his erstwhile idol. And for the better part of a year the Copenhagen public was kept laughing and grinning about the unequal trouser legs, the spindle shanks, the inseparable umbrella, the dialectic propensities, of "Either—Or," as Kierkegaard came to be called by the populace; for, owing to his peripatetic habits—acquired in connection with the Indirect Communication—he had long been a familiar figure on the streets of the capital. While trying to maintain an air of indifference, he suffered the tortures of the damned. In his *Journal* (several hundred of whose pages are given over to reflections on this experience) we find exclamations such as this one: "What is it to be roasted alive at a slow fire, or to be broken on the wheel or, as they do in warm climates, to be smeared with honey and put at the mercy of the insects—what is that in comparison with this torture: to be grinned to death!"

There could be no thought now of retiring to a peaceful charge in the country. That would have been fleeing from persecution. Besides, unbeknown perhaps to himself, his pugnacity was aroused. While under the influence of the “Corsair Feud” (as it is known in Danish literature) he completes the booklet “A Literary Review.” This was originally intended as a purely aesthetic evaluation and appreciation of the (then anonymous) author of the “Commonplace Stories” that are praised by him for their thoughtful bodying forth of a consistent view of life which—however different from his own—yet commanded his respect. He now appended a series of bitter reflections on the Present Times, paying his respects to the Press, which he calls incomparably the worst offender in furnishing people with cheap irony, in forcibly levelling out and reducing to mediocrity all those who strive to rise above it intellectually—words applicable, alas! no less to our own times. To him, however, who in a religious sense has become the captain of his soul, the becoming a butt of the Press is but a true test. Looking up, Kierkegaard sees in his own fate the usual reward accorded by mankind to the courageous souls who dare to fight for the truth, for the ideal—for Christianity, against the “masses.” In a modern way, through ridicule, he was undergoing the martyrdom which the blood witnesses of old had undergone for the sake of their faith. Their task it had been to preach the Gospel among the heathen. His, he reasoned, was in nowise easier: to make clear to uncomprehending millions of so-called Christians that they were not Christians at all, that they did not even know what Christianity is: suffering and persecution, as he now recognizes, being inseparable from the truly Christian life.

First, then, the road had to be cleared, emphatically, for the truth that Christianity and “the public” are opposite terms. The collection of “Edifying Discourses in Diverse Spirits” is thus a religious parallel to the polemic in his “Review.” The first part of these meditations has for text: “The purity of the heart consists in willing one thing”—and this one thing is necessarily the good, the ideal; but only he who lives his life as the individual can possibly will the good—else it is lived in duplicity, for the world will share his aspirations, he will bid for the rewards which the bowing before the crowd can give him. In the second part, entitled “What we may learn from the Lilies of the Field and the Birds of the Air”—one of Kierkegaard’s favorite texts—the greatest danger to the ethico-religious life is shown to be the uneasiness about our material welfare which insidiously haunts our thought-life, and, notwithstanding our best endeavors, renders us essentially slaves to “the crowd”; whereas it is given to man, created in the image of God, to be as self-contained, unafraid, hopeful as are (symbolically) the lily and the bird. The startlingly new development attained through his recent experiences is most evident in the third part, “The Gospel of Sufferings,” in which absolute stress is laid on the imitation of Christ in the strictest sense. Only the “individual” can compass this: the narrow way to salvation must be traveled alone; and will lead to salvation only if the world is, literally, overcome in persecution and tribulation. And, on the other hand, to be happy in this world is equivalent to forfeiting salvation. Thus briefly outlined, the contents of this book would seem to be sheer monkish asceticism; but no synopsis, however full, can hope to give an idea of its lyrical pathos, its wealth of tender reflections, the great love tempering the stern severity of its teaching.

With wonderful beauty “The Deeds of Love” (Kjerlighedens Gjerninger) (1847) are exalted as the Christian’s help and salvation against the tribulations of the world—love, not indeed of the human kind, but of man through God. “You are not concerned at all with what others do to you, but only with what you do to others; and also, with how you react to what others do to you—you are concerned, essentially, only with yourself, before God.”

In rapid succession there follow “Christian Discourses”; “The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air”; “Sickness Unto Death” (with the subtitle “A Christian Psychological Exposition”); “Two Religious Treatises”; “The High Priest, the Publican, the Sinner”; “Three Discourses on the Occasion of Communion on Friday.”

In the course of these reflections it had become increasingly clear to Kierkegaard that the self-constituted representative of Christ—the Church or, to mention only the organization he was intimately acquainted with, the Danish State Church—had succeeded in becoming a purely worldly organization whose representatives, far from striving to follow Christ, had made life quite comfortable for themselves; retort to which was presently made that by thus stressing

“contemporaneousness” with its aspects of suffering and persecution, Kierkegaard had both exceeded the accepted teaching of the Church and staked the attainment of Christianity so high as to drive all existing forms of it ad absurdum.

In his “Preparation for a Christian Life” and the somber “For a Self-Examination” Kierkegaard returns to the attack with a powerful re-examination of the whole question as to how far modern Christianity corresponds to that of the Founder. Simply, but with grandiose power, he works out in concrete instances the conception of “contemporaneousness” gained in the “Final Postscript”; at the same time demonstrating to all who have eyes to see, the axiomatic connection between the doctrine of Propitiation and Christ’s life in debasement; that Christianity consists in absolutely dying to the world; and that the Christianity which does not live up to this is but a travesty on Christianity. We may think what we Please about this counsel of perfection, and judge what we may about the rather arbitrary choice of Scripture passages on which Kierkegaard builds: no serious reader, no sincere Christian can escape the searching of heart sure to follow this tremendous arraignment of humanity false to its divine leader. There is nothing more impressive in all modern literature than the gallery of “opinions” voiced by those arrayed against Christ when on earth—and now—as to what constitutes the “offense.”

Kierkegaard had hesitated a long time before publishing the “Preparation for a Christian Life.” Authority-loving as he was, he shrank from antagonizing the Church, as it was bound to do; and more especially, from giving offense to its primate, the venerable Bishop Mynster who had been his father’s friend and spiritual adviser, to whom he had himself always looked up with admiring reverence, and whose sermons he had been in the habit of reading at all times. Also, to be sure, he was restrained by the thought that by publishing his book he would render Christianity well-nigh unattainable to the weak and the simple and the afflicted who certainly were in need of the consolations of Christianity without any additional sufferings interposed and surely no reader of his devotional works can be in doubt that he was the most tender-hearted of men. In earlier, stronger times, he imagines, he would have been made a martyr for his opinions; but was he entitled to become a blood-witness—he who realized more keenly than any one that he himself was not a Christian in the strictest sense? In his “Two Religious Treatises” he debates the question: “Is it permissible for a man to let himself be killed for the truth?”; which is answered in the negative in “About the Difference between a Genius and an Apostle”—which consists in the Apostle’s speaking with authority. However, should not the truth be the most important consideration? His journal during that time offers abundant proof of the absolute earnestness with which he struggled over the question.

When Kierkegaard finally published “The Preparation for a Christian Life,” the bishop was, indeed, incensed; but he did nothing. Nor did any one else venture forth. Still worse affront! Kierkegaard had said his last word, had stated his ultimatum—and it was received with indifference, it seemed. Nevertheless he decided to wait and see what effect his books would have for he hesitated to draw the last conclusions and mortally wound the old man tottering on the brink of his grave by thus attacking the Church. There followed a three years’ period of silence on the part of Kierkegaard—again certainly a proof of his utter sincerity. It must be remembered, in this connection, that the very last thing Kierkegaard desired was an external reorganization, a “reform,” of the Church—indeed, he firmly refused to be identified with any movement of secession, differing in this respect vitally from his contemporaries Vinet and Grundtvig who otherwise had so much in common with him. His only wish was to infuse life and inwardness into the existing forms. And far from being inferior to them in this he was here at one with the Founder and the Early Church in that he states the aim of the Christian Life to be, not to transform the existing social order, but to transcend it. For the very same reason, coupled to be sure with a pronounced aristocratic individualism, he is utterly and unreasonably indifferent, and even antagonistic, to the great social movements of his time, to the political upheavals of 1848, to the revolutionary advances of science.

As Kierkegaard now considered his career virtually concluded, he wrote (1851) a brief account “About my Activity as an Author” in which he furnishes his readers a key to its



unfolding—from an aesthetic view to the religious view—which he considers his own education by Providence; and indicates it to be his special task to call attention, without authority, to the religious, the Christian life. His “Viewpoint for my Activity as an Author,” published by his brother only long after his death, likewise defines the purpose of the whole “authorship,” besides containing important biographical material.

At length (January, 1854) Mynster died. Even then Kierkegaard, though still on his guard, might not have felt called upon to have recourse to stronger measures if it had not been for an unfortunate sentence in the funeral sermon preached by the now famous Martensen—generally pointed out as the successor to the primacy—with whom Kierkegaard had already broken a lance or two. Martensen had declared Mynster to have been “one of the holy chain of witnesses for the truth (sandhedsvidner) which extends through the centuries down from the time of the Apostles.” This is the provocation for which Kierkegaard had waited. “Bishop Mynster a witness for the truth”! he bursts out, “You who read this, you know well what in a Christian sense is a witness for the truth. Still, let me remind you that to be one, it is absolutely essential to suffer for the teaching of Christianity”; whereas “the truth is that Mynster was worldly-wise to a degree—was weak, pleasure-loving, and great only as a declaimer.” But once more striking proof of his circumspection and single-mindedness—he kept this harsh letter in his desk for nine months, lest its publication should interfere in the least with Martensen’s appointment, or seem the outcome of personal resentment.

Martensen’s reply, which forcefully enough brings out all that could be said for a milder interpretation of the Christian categories and for his predecessor, was not as respectful to the sensitive author as it ought to have been. In a number of newspaper letters of increasing violence and acerbity Kierkegaard now tried to force his obstinately silent opponent to his knees; but in vain. Filled with holy wrath at what he conceived to be a conspiracy by silence, and evasions to bring to naught the whole infinitely important matter for which he had striven, Kierkegaard finally turned agitator. He addressed himself directly to the people with the celebrated pamphlet series “The Present Moment” in which he opens an absolutely withering fire of invective on anything and everything connected with “the existing order” in Christendom—an agitation the like of which for revolutionary vehemence has rarely, if ever, been seen. All rites of the Church—marriage, baptism, confirmation, communion, burial—and most of all the clergy, high and low, draw the fiery bolts of his wrath and a perfect hail of fierce, cruel invective. The dominant note, though varied infinitely, is ever the same: “Whoever you may be, and whatever the life you live, my friend: by omitting to attend the public divine service—if indeed it be your habit to attend it—by omitting to attend public divine service as now constituted—aiming as it does to represent the Christianity of the New Testament) you will escape at least one, and a great, one in not attempting to fool God by calling that the Christianity of the New Testament which is not the Christianity of the New Testament.” And he does not hesitate to use strong, even coarse, language; he even courts the reproach of blasphemy in order to render ridiculous in “Official Christianity” what to most may seem inherently, though mistakenly, a matter of highest reverence. The swiftness and mercilessness of his attack seem to have left his contemporaries without a weapon: all they could do was to shrug their shoulders about the “fanatic,” to duck and wait dumbly until the storm had passed.

Nor did it last long. On the second of October, 1855, Kierkegaard fell unconscious in the street. He was brought to the hospital where he died on the eleventh of November,—aged 42. The immense exertions of the last months had shattered his frail body. And strange: the last of his money had been used up. He had said what he thought Providence had to communicate through him. His strength was gone. His death at this moment would put the crown on his work. As he said on his death-bed: “The bomb explodes, and the conflagration will follow.”

In appraising Kierkegaard’s life and works it will be found true, as Höffding says, that he can mean much even to those who do not subscribe to the beliefs so unquestioningly entertained by him. And however much they may regret that he poured his noble wine into the old bottles, they cannot fail to recognize the yeoman’s service he did for sincere Christians in compelling them to rehearse inwardly what ever tends to become a matter of form: what it means to be a

Christian; and for others, in deepening their sense of individual responsibility. In fact, every one who has once come under his influence and has wrestled with this mighty spirit will bear away some blessing. In its time when, as in our own, the crowd, society, the millions, the nation, had depressed the individual to an insignificant atom—and what is worse, in the individual's own estimation; when shallow altruistic, socializing effort thought naively that the millenium was at hand, he drove the truth home that, on the contrary, the individual is the measure of all things; that we do not live en masse; that both the terrible responsibility and the great satisfactions of life inhere in the individual. Again, more forcibly than any one else in modern times, certainly more cogently than Pascal, he demonstrated that the possibility of proof in religion is an illusion; that doubt cannot be combatted by reason, that it ever will be *credo quia impossibile*. In religion, he showed the utter incompatibility of the æsthetic and the religious life; and in Christianity, he restated and repointed the principle of ideal perfection by his unremitting insistence on contemporaneousness with Christ. It is another matter whether by so doing Kierkegaard was about to pull the pillars from underneath the great edifice of Christianity which housed both him and his enemies: seeing that he himself finally doubted whether it had ever existed apart from the Founder and, possibly, the Apostles....

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L.M. Hollander. *Selections from the Writings of Kierkegaard*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas, 1912.

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