1. Kierkegaard's Life

Kierkegaard led a somewhat uneventful life. He rarely left his hometown of Copenhagen, and travelled abroad only five times—four times to Berlin and once to Sweden. His prime recreational activities were attending the theatre, walking the streets of Copenhagen to chat with ordinary people, and taking brief carriage jaunts into the surrounding countryside. He was educated at a prestigious boys' school (*Borgerdydskolen*), then attended Copenhagen University where he studied philosophy and theology. His teachers at the university included F.C. Sibbern, Poul Martin Møller, and H.L. Martensen.

Sibbern and Møller were both philosophers who also wrote fiction. The latter in particular had a great influence on Kierkegaard's philosophico-literary development. Martensen also had a profound effect on Kierkegaard, but largely in a negative manner. Martensen was a champion of Hegelianism, and when he became Bishop Primate of the Danish People's Church, Kierkegaard published a vitriolic attack on Martensen's theological views. Kierkegaard's brother Peter, on the other hand, was an adherent of Martensen and himself became a bishop in the church. Kierkegaard regarded Martensen as one of his chief intellectual rivals. Martensen was only five years his senior, but was already lecturing at Copenhagen University when Kierkegaard was a student there. Martensen also anticipated Kierkegaard's first major literary project, by publishing a book on Faust. Kierkegaard, who had been working up a project on the three great medieval figures of Don Juan, Faust and Ahasuerus (the wandering Jew), abandoned his own project when Martensen's book appeared, although he later incorporated much of the work he had done into *Either/Or*.

Another very important figure in Kierkegaard's life was J.L. Heiberg, the doyen of Copenhagen's literati. Heiberg, more than any other person, was responsible for introducing Hegelianism into Denmark. Kierkegaard spent a good deal of energy trying to break into the Heiberg literary circle, but desisted once he had found his own voice in *The Concept of Irony*. Kierkegaard's first major publication, *From the Papers of One Still Living*, is largely an attempt to articulate a Heibergian aesthetics—which is a modified version of Hegel's aesthetics. In *From the Papers of One Still Living*, which is a critical review of Hans Christian Andersen's novel *Only A Fiddler*, Kierkegaard attacks Andersen for lacking life-development (*Livs-Udvikling*) and a life-view (*Livs-Anskuelse*) both of which Kierkegaard deemed necessary for someone to be a genuine novelist (*Romandigter*).

Kierkegaard's life is more relevant to his work than is the case for many writers. Much of the thrust of his critique of Hegelianism is that its system of thought is abstracted from the everyday lives of its proponents. This existential critique consists in demonstrating how the life and work of a philosopher contradict one another. Kierkegaard derived this form of critique from the Greek notion of judging philosophers by their lives rather than simply by their intellectual artefacts. The Christian ideal, according to Kierkegaard, is even more exacting since the totality of an individual's existence is the artefact on the basis of which s/he is judged by God for h/er eternal validity. Of course a writer's work is an important part of h/er existence, but for the purpose of judgement we should focus on the whole life not just on one part.

In a less abstract manner, an understanding of Kierkegaard's biography is important for an understanding of his writing because his life was the source of many of the preoccupations and repetitions within his *oeuvre*. Because of his existentialist orientation, most of his interventions in contemporary theory do double duty as means of working through events from his own life. In particular Kierkegaard's relations to his father and his fiancée Regine Olsen pervade his work. Kierkegaard's pseudonym Johannes Climacus says of Socrates that “his whole life was personal preoccupation with himself, and then Governance comes and adds world-historical significance to it.” Similarly, Kierkegaard saw himself as a “singular universal” whose personal preoccupation with himself was transfigured by divine Governance into universal significance.

Kierkegaard's relation to his mother is the least frequently commented upon since it is invisible in his work. His mother does not rate a direct mention in his published works, or in his diaries—not even on the day she died. However, for a writer who places so much emphasis on indirect communication, and on the semiotics of invisibility, we should regard this absence as significant. Johannes Climacus in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* remarks, “… how deceptive then, that an omnipresent being should be recognisable precisely by being invisible.” Although Kierkegaard's mother is absent, his mother-tongue (*Modersmaal*—etymologically derived from the words for “mother's mark or sign”) is almost omnipresent. Kierkegaard was deeply enamoured of the Danish language and worked throughout his writings to assert the strengths of his mother-tongue over the invasive, imperialistic influences of Latin and German. With respect to the former, Kierkegaard had to petition the king to be allowed to write his philosophy dissertation *On the Concept of Irony with constant reference to Socrates* in Danish. Even though permission was granted he was still required to defend his dissertation publicly in Latin. Latin had been the pan-European language of science and scholarship. In Denmark, in Kierkegaard's time, German language and culture were at least as dominant as Latin in the production of knowledge. In defiance of this, Kierkegaard revelled in his mother-tongue and created some of the most beautifully poetic prose in the Danish language—including a paean to his mother-tongue in *Stages On Life's Way*. In *Repetition* Constantin Constantius congratulates the Danish language on providing the word for an important new philosophical concept, viz. *Gjentagelse* (repetition), to replace the foreign word “mediation”. In general, we might regard the Danish language as Kierkegaard's umbilical attachment to the mother whereas Latin and German represent the law of the father, especially when employed in systematic scholarship (*Videnskab*).

The influence of Kierkegaard's father on his work has been frequently noted. Not only did Kierkegaard inherit his father's melancholy, his sense of guilt and anxiety, and his pietistic emphasis on the dour aspects of Christian faith, but he also inherited his talents for philosophical argument and creative imagination. In addition Kierkegaard inherited enough of his father's wealth to allow him to pursue his life as a freelance writer. The themes of sacrificial father/son relationships, of inherited sin, of the burden of history, and of the centrality of the “individual, human existence relationship, the old text, well known, handed down from the fathers” (*Postscript*) are repeated many times in Kierkegaard's oeuvre. The father's sense of guilt was so great (for having cursed God? for having impregnated Kierkegaard's mother out of wedlock?) that he thought God would punish him by taking the lives of all seven of his children before they reached the age of 34 (the age of Jesus Christ at his crucifixion). This was born out for all but two of the children, Søren and his older brother Peter. Søren was astonished that they both survived beyond that age. This may explain the sense of urgency that drove Kierkegaard to write so prolifically in the years leading up to his 34th birthday.

Kierkegaard's (broken) engagement to Regine Olsen has also been the focus of much scholarly attention. The theme of a young woman being the occasion for a young man to become “poeticized” recurs in Kierkegaard's writings, as does the theme of the sacrifice of worldly happiness for a higher (religious) purpose. Kierkegaard's infatuation with Regine, and the sublimated libidinal energy it lent to his poetic production, were crucial for setting his life course. The breaking of the engagement allowed Kierkegaard to devote himself monastically to his religious purpose, as well as to establish his outsider status (outside the norm of married bourgeois life). It also freed him from close personal entanglements with women, thereby leading him to objectify them as ideal creatures, and to reproduce the patriarchal values of his church and father. The latter included viewing women in terms of their traditional social roles, particularly as mothers and wives, but also in their traditional spiritual roles as epitomes of devotion and self-sacrifice. Nevertheless, whatever one's life circumstances, social roles and gender, Kierkegaard regarded everyone as equal before God under the aspect of eternity.

4. Kierkegaard's Ethics

Like the terms “aesthetic” and “religious”, the term “ethics” in Kierkegaard's work has more than one meaning. It is used to denote both: (i) a limited existential sphere, or stage, which is superseded by the higher stage of the religious life; and (ii) an aspect of life which is retained even within the religious life. In the first sense “ethics” is synonymous with the Hegelian notion of *Sittlichkeit*, or customary mores. In this sense “ethics” represents “the universal”, or more accurately the prevailing social norms. The social norms are seen to be the highest court of appeal for judging human affairs—nothing outranks them for this sort of ethicist. Even human sacrifice is justified in terms of how it serves the community, so that when Agamemnon sacrifices his daughter Iphigenia he is regarded as a tragic hero since the sacrifice is required for the success of the Greek expedition to Troy (*Fear and Trembling*).

Kierkegaard, however, does recognize duties to a power higher than social norms. Much of *Fear and Trembling* turns on the notion that Abraham's would-be sacrifice of his son Isaac is not for the sake of social norms, but is the result of a “teleological suspension of the ethical”. That is, Abraham recognizes a duty to something higher than both his social duty not to kill an innocent person and his personal commitment to his beloved son, viz. his duty to obey God's commands.

But in order to arrive at a position of religious faith, which might entail a “teleological suspension of the ethical”, the individual must first embrace the ethical (in the first sense). In order to raise oneself beyond the merely aesthetic life, which is a life of drifting in imagination, possibility and sensation, one needs to make a commitment. That is, the aesthete needs to choose the ethical, which entails a commitment to communication and decision procedures.

The ethical position advocated by Judge Wilhelm in “Equilibrium Between the Aesthetic and the Ethical in the Composition of Personality” (*Either-Or* II) is a peculiar mix of cognitivism and noncognitivism. The metaethics or normative ethics are cognitivist, laying down various necessary conditions for ethically correct action. These conditions include: the necessity of choosing seriously and inwardly; commitment to the belief that predications of good and evil of our actions have a truth-value; the necessity of choosing what one is actually doing, rather than just responding to a situation; actions are to be in accordance with rules; and these rules are universally applicable to moral agents.

The choice of metaethics, however, is noncognitive. There is no adequate proof of the truth of metaethics. The choice of normative ethics is motivated, but in a noncognitive way. The Judge seeks to motivate the choice of his normative ethics through the avoidance of despair. Here despair (*Fortvivlelse*) is to let one's life depend on conditions outside one's control (and later, more radically, despair is the very possibility of despair in this first sense). For Judge Wilhelm, the choice of normative ethics is a noncognitive choice of cognitivism, and thereby an acceptance of the applicability of the conceptual distinction between good and evil.

From Kierkegaard's religious perspective, however, the conceptual distinction between good and evil is ultimately dependent not on social norms but on God. Therefore it is possible, as Johannes de Silentio argues was the case for Abraham (the father of faith), that God demand a suspension of the ethical (in the sense of the socially prescribed norms). This is still ethical in the second sense, since ultimately God's definition of the distinction between good and evil outranks any human society's definition. The requirement of communicability and clear decision procedures can also be suspended by God's fiat. This renders cases such as Abraham's extremely problematic, since we have no recourse to public reason to decide whether he is legitimately obeying God's command or whether he is a deluded would-be murderer. Since public reason cannot decide the issue for us, we must decide for ourselves as a matter of religious faith.

Kierkegaard's ultimate advocacy of divine command metaethics is tempered somewhat by his detailed analyses of the nuanced ways individuals need to relate to God's commands. These analyses amount to a subtle moral psychology, which borders on virtue ethics. It is not enough simply for God to issue a command; we need to hear and obey. But obedience is not straightforward. We can obey willingly or begrudgingly. We can refuse altogether. We can be selectively deaf, or be so filled with our egotistical desires that we are altogether deaf to our duties. In order to obey we first need to cultivate faith, since obedience to a divine command is nonsense unless we at least believe the command has come from God. To cultivate faith in a transcendent, eternal, omnipresent God, who allegedly became incarnate in the form of a particular human being who was put to death, requires one to overcome the offense to one's reason and to adopt a tolerance for paradox. To imagine the enormity of the consequences of sin, yet to relish the possibilities of freedom, engenders anxiety. We need to learn to navigate the treacherous maelstroms of despair, to recognize the self-absorption of demonic states, to veer away from prudence and vanity, and to avoid mere conformity to social mores. We also need to cultivate hope, patience, devotion, and above all love. We also need to be vigilant about our capacity for self-deception and be prepared to suffer for love and for our ultimate spiritual identity.

5. Kierkegaard's Religion

Kierkegaard styled himself above all as a religious poet. The religion to which he sought to relate his readers is Christianity. The type of Christianity that underlies his writings is a very serious strain of Lutheran pietism informed by the dour values of sin, guilt, suffering, and individual responsibility. Kierkegaard was immersed in these values in the family home through his father, whose own childhood was lived in the shadow of *Herrnhut* pietism in Jutland. Kierkegaard's father subsequently became a member of the lay Congregation of Brothers [*Brødremenighed*] in Copenhagen, which he and his family attended in addition to the sermons by Bishop J. P. Mynster.

For Kierkegaard Christian faith is not a matter of regurgitating church dogma. It is a matter of individual subjective passion, which cannot be mediated by the clergy or by human artefacts. Faith is the most important task to be achieved by a human being, because only on the basis of faith does an individual have a chance to become a true self. This self is the life-work which God judges for eternity.

The individual is thereby subject to an enormous burden of responsibility, for upon h/er existential choices hangs h/er eternal salvation or damnation. Anxiety or dread (*Angest*) is the presentiment of this terrible responsibility when the individual stands at the threshold of momentous existential choice. Anxiety is a two-sided emotion: on one side is the dread burden of choosing for eternity; on the other side is the exhilaration of freedom in choosing oneself. Choice occurs in the instant (*Øjeblikket*), which is the point at which time and eternity intersect—for the individual creates through temporal choice a self which will be judged for eternity.

But the choice of faith is not made once and for all. It is essential that faith be constantly renewed by means of repeated avowals of faith. One's very selfhood depends upon this repetition, for according to Anti-Climacus, the self “is a relation which relates itself to itself” (*The Sickness Unto Death*). But unless this self acknowledges a “power which constituted it,” it falls into a despair which undoes its selfhood. Therefore, in order to maintain itself as a relation which relates itself to itself, the self must constantly renew its faith in “the power which posited it.” There is no *mediation* between the individual self and God by priest or by logical system (*contra* Catholicism and Hegelianism respectively). There is only the individual's own *repetition* of faith. This repetition of faith is the way the self relates itself to itself and to the power which constituted it, i.e. the repetition of faith *is* the self.

Christian dogma, according to Kierkegaard, embodies paradoxes which are offensive to reason. The central paradox is the assertion that the eternal, infinite, transcendent God simultaneously became incarnated as a temporal, finite, human being (Jesus). There are two possible attitudes we can adopt to this assertion, viz. we can have faith, or we can take offense. What we cannot do, according to Kierkegaard, is believe by virtue of reason. If we choose faith we must suspend our reason in order to believe in something higher than reason. In fact we must believe *by virtue of the absurd*.

Much of Kierkegaard's authorship explores the notion of the absurd: Job gets everything back again by virtue of the absurd (*Repetition*); Abraham gets a reprieve from having to sacrifice Isaac, by virtue of the absurd (*Fear and Trembling*); Kierkegaard hoped to get Regine back again after breaking off their engagement, by virtue of the absurd (*Journals*); Climacus hopes to deceive readers into the truth of Christianity by virtue of an absurd representation of Christianity's ineffability; the Christian God is represented as absolutely transcendent of human categories yet is absurdly presented as a personal God with the human capacities to love, judge, forgive, teach, etc. Kierkegaard's notion of the absurd subsequently became an important category for twentieth century existentialists, though usually devoid of its religious associations.

According to Johannes Climacus, faith is a miracle, a gift from God whereby eternal truth enters time in the instant. This Christian conception of the relation between (eternal) truth and time is distinct from the Socratic notion that (eternal) truth is always already within us—it just needs to be recovered by means of recollection (*anamnesis*). The condition for realizing (eternal) truth for the Christian is a gift (*Gave*) from God, but its realization is a task (*Opgave*) which must be repeatedly performed by the individual believer. Whereas Socratic recollection is a recuperation of the past, Christian repetition is a “recollection forwards”—so that the eternal (future) truth is captured in time.

Crucial to the miracle of Christian faith is the realization that over against God we are always in the wrong. That is, we must realize that we are always in sin. This is the condition for faith, and must be given by God. The idea of sin cannot evolve from purely human origins. Rather, it must have been introduced into the world from a transcendent source. Once we understand that we are in sin, we can understand that there is some being over against which we are always in the wrong. On this basis we can have faith that, by virtue of the absurd, we can ultimately be atoned with this being. The absurdity of atonement requires faith that we believe that for God even the impossible is possible, including the forgiveness of the unforgivable. If we can accept God's forgiveness, sincerely, inwardly, contritely, with gratitude and hope, then we open ourselves to the joyous prospect of beginning anew. The only obstacle to this joy is our refusal or resistance to accepting God's forgiveness properly. Although God can forgive the unforgivable, He cannot force anyone to accept it. Therefore, for Kierkegaard, “there is only one guilt that God cannot forgive, that of not willing to believe in his greatness!”.