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KIERKEGAARD, SØREN AABYE
(1813-55)

One person, many faces: an
introduction to a resonant life

Søren Kierkegaard was born on 5 March 1813 and died on 11 November 1855. A young Danish man, the sensitive son of an aggressively Lutheran father, he lived a four-dimensional life. He was, to begin with, a prolific literary writer, whose lifelong achievements will be made fully evident by the projected fifty-five volumes of *Søren Kierkegaard's Skriftier* that includes twenty-seven volumes of commentary on his work, all to be completed by 2009; also worth noting is the Hongs' impressive English translation (Princeton editions, twenty six volumes so far). He was an intensely self-critical, as well as critical, philosopher, too, whose focused if only fragmented attack on the nineteenth-century scientism and impersonal speculation virtually paved a way, 'leaping', into post-Hegelian (see HEGEL AND HEGELIANISM), twentieth-century philosophies of the self that, in the wake of troubled universalisms, struggle in various ways to relocate 'the individual', the responsive and responsible subject. Still best known, however, as a rebellious believer and practitioner of Christian religion, still best studied, therefore, by the theological type Kierkegaard himself despised with passion, he embodies the paradox of disbelief, disbelief as an irreducible form of belief, philosophical or otherwise: when encountering existentially and ecstatically unthinkable impossibilities such as Jesus the man-God, one *becomes* – not is – a true Christian, he stressed. Then, the fourth face? Kierkegaard remains all three at once: an aesthete, a philosopher and a religious thinker. The full dimension and implications of this short, intense life dedicated to writing, often pseudonymous and so multi-voiced, are yet to emerge. In what follows, I am going to construct a story of Kierkegaard, focusing mostly on how the patently 'Kierkegaardian' theme, three – aesthetic, ethical and religious – stages, itself reflects the three-fold dimension of his life and work, and conclude by showing how that theme is also mirrored, on a more macro-level, in the recent trends of Continental philosophy vitalized by the 'turn to aesthetics, ethics and religion'. Let me begin by noting three preliminary

should be increased in efficiency, but the poor required 'equality of opportunity' (it is claimed he coined the term) in order to rise to their maximum capabilities, and this required alleviating the most extreme forms of poverty. Socialism is rejected as undermining incentive systems and failing to deal with overpopulation; the best form of social organization is that which promotes 'the most effective subordination of the individual to the interests of the social organism with the highest development of his own personality'.

In *The Control of the Tropics* (1898), Kidd contended that the end of the nineteenth century witnessed a period of 'instinctive rivalry' for key raw materials, such as rubber, which necessitated control over tropical peoples, who were incapable of developing their own resources, but who could not expect 'good government, in the European sense' from their conquerors, though Kidd denied that there was any scientific 'warfare' for speaking of one race as superior to another.

In *Principles of Western Civilization* (1902) Kidd applied evolutionary theory to modern European development, and described the large-scale obsolescence of much of the inheritance of European thought, including utilitarianism, radicalism and *laissez-faire*, and their supersession by an evolutionary thought that dictated 'practiced efficiency' as the key to race survival, and the promotion of the strongest interest in any society, which Kidd felt was being undermined by monopoly capitalism. His ideas on group-selection were expanded in two pamphlets, *The Principal Laws of Sociology* (1907-8) and *Individualism and After* (1908). His last work, *The Science of Power* (1919), builds upon NIETZSCHE, DARWIN and others to contend that a new paganism, based upon the worship of force, that 'Might is Right', had arisen in Western civilization that rested upon collective emotion, rather than reason. Civilization had now been revealed to be little more than 'glorified savagery'; the antidote was to craft a new form of more humane collectivism, in which, for Crook, women, who were more closely attuned to species needs than men, would play a central role. Kidd died on 2 October 1916.

Further reading

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that period, the spirit of the time; and yet, what is strikingly uncanny (confusingly obscure) about Kierkegaard, as with Nietzsche, is that he did unmasking while masking himself (*afhim*). The third turning point (1930s and 1940s) was a century later. Kierkegaard suddenly came into prominence, discovered and reinvented as the father of 'existentialism', the intellectual movement that defines and reflects the ambiguous mood of wartime Europe, 'existence precedes essence' (Jean-Paul Sartre), which is at once resigning and resolute, alternatively political as well as intensely personal. His diary prophecy has been fulfilled. The post-humous global fame of this provincial thinker who wrote in Danish deliberately as well as naturally is a direct consequence of the Central European (mostly French café) intellectuals' attempts to locate the scars of their tested, scarred humanism against the receding background of the Enlightenment project cast, pursued and expanded by the German Idealists such as KANT and through Hegel, whose consciousness 'modern', Protestant beliefs in reason, whether circumscribed (Kant) or absolutized (Hegel), were once seemingly justified, unshakably and unstopably. A more literary reception and appreciation of Kierkegaard's work by Anglo-American writers working around this time, slightly later, is clearly evidenced, for instance, by W.H. Auden's edited volume, *The Living Thoughts of Kierkegaard* (1952). This way, Kierkegaard became plural again.

Stages on Life's Way: from aesthetic, via ethical, to religious

One: why do we, after all, believe that a 'proper' name alone is proper? It is a question of authenticity or irreducible individuality, the locus of responsibility, legal or otherwise: all the pseudonyms above refer to one person, the one and only Kierkegaard, whatever he says or claims, humorously or seriously. That's the idea, the numerically objectified 'idea of existence', as he puts it. We just, and do have to, assume we can talk about this man, Kierkegaard, and end up organizing all his writings, the linguistic traces of his existence, into one tidy encompassing system, a nameable spot – even against his will, *his* will.

The ghostly force of objectification is at work in our most basic act, need of naming or identifying; what is ironic, however, is the more fundamental evasiveness of the *I* as such, its 'existence *per se*,

The first turning point (1840) was disengagement with fiancée, Regine Olsen (1822-1904): realizing that he had made a mistake, Kierkegaard broke off the engagement abruptly. Willing to take all the blame, he could not, however, articulate the source of his own anxiety: the chronic melancholia induced by religious dread (the fear of dying before hitting 34, the Christian age of sacrifice) and the self-critical disdain for bourgeois happiness, reinforced by physical weakness, were the surface reasons, but the mystery surrounding this turn remains the same. This stranger started writing prolifically (feverishly to the deadline) after this traumatic experience, this event, this guilt.

The second turning point (1845) was the 'Corsair' affair' (December): Kierkegaard's contemporaries ignored or else ridiculed him as a loser, a loser, especially during and after his pen fight with P.L. Møller, a mere acquaintance from his student days, whose professorial opportunism led him to mount a scathing, moralizing attack on Kierkegaard's *Stages on Life's Way* (1845) 'edited, compiled and discovered by Hilarinus Bookbinder', which consists of reflections of three different or differently named author-characters), William Alham ('by himself'), Judge William and Frater Taciturnus ('taciturn brother'), who had to break his (their) engagement(s) with his (their) lovers), of Alas, Kierkegaard made a fatal mistake, again, of responding even more personally to Møller by publishing his sharp retorts in the *Corsair*, a satirical weekly for the gossip-hungry Copenhagen intellectuals, to which Møller had been contributing regularly. Having damaged Møller's reputation quite successfully, Kierkegaard, in turn, had to face the longer, more relentless public humiliation engineered, this time, by the editor who decided to be offended by Kierkegaard's implicative accusation of shady journalism: the memory of this affair, on top of the failed love affair, left a deep scar in Kierkegaard's psyche, the already wounded soul, who withdrew further into the private world of nameless, pseudonymous thoughts. The task, theme and trope of unmasking or debunking – central to, for instance, FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE'S anthropological de-mystification of Western metaphysics and especially German Idealism, Karl Marx's forensic analysis of socio-political ideology behind nineteenth-century Western capitalism (see MARX AND MARXISM), and Sigmund Freud's vertiginous exploration into the realm of the unconscious and the uncanny – are all characteristic of

simply unidentifiable. And that is annoying. And that irony is what troubled as well as amused the young Kierkegaard for long. On 1 January 1838, for instance, in his diary (posthumously compiled into *Journals*), which he started keeping almost religiously from 3 December 1833, age 20, he writes: 'Irony is an abnormal growth; like the abnormally enlarged liver of the Strasbourg goose it ends by killing the individual.' Arguably the most unfortunate, almost literal example is Socrates, on whom Kierkegaard wrote his dissertation (Copenhagen Univ., Theology and Philosophy, 1840) entitled *Concept of Irony: with Continual Reference to Socrates* (1841), his second major publication after *From the Papers of One Still Living* (1838, the year his father died). Why did Kierkegaard ask, the Athenians bother to execute the Socrates that is not even an executable entity, to begin with? What they killed, or rather thought they had done, is the 'idea' of his existence, that infinite irritation:

Most men think, talk, and write as they sleep, eat and drink, without even raising the question of the relation to the idea; this only happens among the very few and then that decisive moment has in the very highest degree either the power to compel (genius), or it paralyzes the individual with anxiety (irony).

(6 September 1839)

Irony is the fusion of a passionately ethical view, which inwardly lays infinite stress upon the self – and of education which outwardly abstracts infinitely from the personal I. The result of the latter is that no one notices the former; therein lies the whole art of irony, and that is what conditions the infinite stress of the first.

(Undated 1845)

Socrates the existential and 'ethical' subject, laid bare, moved forward infinitely, who does not know himself and therefore keeps saying 'Know thyself' incessantly, is precisely that which survives the cut: that which undercuts any possibility of historical victimization or dialectical subjugation of a finite being that engenders, or justifies, the vision of Hegelian *scila parvatis*, a spiral ladder to heaven – to absolute knowledge. The figure of Socrates as the master artist of irony, highlighted in *Concept of Irony*, is indeed a lasting legacy of the Western philosophy taken as ongoing acts of the intellect's midwifery that is caring, of course, but

cutting, cuttingly ironic. 'Listen to the cry of a woman giving birth, look upon the death struggle at its height: and then say whether what begins and ends thus can be intended to be pleasure' (December 1854).

Two: immediately after completing *Concept of Irony*, which presented the triplet of his life-long themes in an ironic, cypic style that caused the immediate and temporary raising of the academic eyebrows. Kierkegaard spent five years churning out books on the human mode of existence, the existence spheres/stages' of life. Such early 'aesthetic' works – aesthetic not in the sense of 'looking pretty, dandy' but more technically in the sense of relating to, and itself being, 'dripping, inwardly passionate and outwardly playful', sensation-mediated and imagination-inducing – include, first, *Ethical Or* (1843, by A (Young Man), ed. Victor Eremita). Here, those he calls 'reflective aesthetes', viz., the German Romantics (see ROMANTICISM, INDIVIDUALISM AND IDEAS OF THE SELF) and more archetypal characters such as 'the Wandering Jew', Don Juan and Faust, all disbelievers or believers in reflective pleasures, 'play' with their life instead of constructing it, with escapist humour or irony drawn from the experiences of the forbidden, that is, in subtle avoidance of ethical and religious tests today, is the Hegelian mode of life that strives to synthesize irreconcilable contradictions – e.g. to martyr OR not to, to be ugly & good OR rather, to be pretty & evil – into a firmer, higher ground for informed recognition and resolution. An 'ethical' decision against and triumph over aesthetic seduction has to be made, with Hegel concludes Kierkegaard in the end. But more importantly, what Kierkegaard saw in aesthetics is not its subjugated inferiority to speculative philosophy or theology but an inaugural passivity that cannot simply be 'negated' or 'incorporated', dialectically or not; what Kierkegaard demands is not a transitional dialectic but a 'leap' of action, of faith.

Then, *Fear and Trembling* (1843, Johannes de Silentio) would follow and did follow. In this work that curiously echoes Hegel's use of Antigone, the defiant Hellenic sister torn between bio-familial inclination (aesthetic) and observance of the *polis* law (ethical), Kierkegaard, by contrast, retells the Hebrew legend featuring Abraham the man, old but still tempted, who, at God's command, nearly sacrificed his only son, Isaac. The action of this father is not only callous (un-aesthetic) but also

What we see is however not necessarily the Augustinian kind of 'return of', say, 'a repentant playboy' to the bosom of God, the ultimate source of one's authenticity. The nominal oneness does not guarantee the oneness of the named but could, on the contrary, further disguise the actual complexity of the person's psychological identities. When, in 1850, Kierkegaard writes:

Socrates did not possess the true ideal, nor had he any notion of sin, nor that man's salvation required a crucified God... He therefore retained irony which simply expressed his superiority to the world's folly. But for a Christian, irony is not enough, it can never answer to the terrible truth that salvation means that God is crucified, though irony can still be used for some time in Christendom, to arouse people

(*Journals*, undated)

the sounds, looks, different, indeed. But has he discarded irony entirely? Would the eradication of irony be enough? Note: his later text is equally, heuristically, arousing. Kierkegaard, one must remember, questioned in every step of the way any dogmatic, self-servingly pious, institutionalized talk of a one-time rebirth or redemption. The force of religious belief, manifest ever more intensely in his later works, is in the very transformative or trans-substantive becoming of a person: repeatedly practised, not merely held, faith makes one 'self', the self being, as Anti-Chimacus says in *Sickness unto Death* (1849), practically 'a relation which relates itself to itself'. The Kierkegaard used selectively by French existentialists later was just that self.

Four: curiously, the late Michel Foucault, the late twentieth-century thinker, who creatively revived traditional asceticism, also held a similar view: ethics as a self-relation rather than, more moral-mechanically, self-regulation. As with many 'post-modern' or 'post-Hegelian' philosophers (e.g. Jacques Derrida), who pointedly resist universalizing the concrete stance of the autobiographical I, Foucault's so-called 'quasi-religiosity' has Kierkegaardian resonances. The last two decades have been seeing 'dead-locked' limit-philosophy's articulated turn to ethics and religion, which resembles, and seems even to be anticipated by, Kierkegaard's 'stages'. Inspired by Emmanuel Levinas's radical, ethico-theological reworking on the phenomenological tradition of modern philosophy, Continental philosophers of religion

seems, indeed, clearly indicative of a new beginning where the lyrical evocation of 'purity of heart' *Uppbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* (1847) symbolically in the case of the much celebrated spiritual text (1846-55) bear his real name, even Kierkegaard's later religious or 'single-mindedly' *Three*: as many readers observe it, the majority of

Intermission: the Corsair affair

are affirmed. mountable superiority or offensiveness to reason faith in the divine and Christian God's insurmountable centrality of human phase, where the immovable centrality of human heralds Kierkegaard's more explicitly 'religious' cal or psychological contents. The *Concluding* equivalent to *Meditations* stripped bare of empirical *Science of Logic* taken here as a purely ontological especially in his God-thinking, and that of Hegel's opened up two centuries back in *Meditations*, parodies – the path of thinking Rene Descartes – i.e. belief in a way that revisits and complicates – i.e. 'John the climber' sets out to question religious Johannes Chimacus, ed. S. Kierkegaard), where to the previous *Philosophical Fragments* (1844, by cns, ed. S. Kierkegaard), a fragmented companion *Unscientific Postscript* (1846, by Johannes Chimacus (1840-56) saw the publication of *Concluding* earlier). Then, last, this 'aesthico-ethical' stage mock-dialectically related three figures (noted the sequel to *Either/Or*, vividly and summarily to write *Stages on Life's Way* (1845), which, as come the 'stage' thinking, Kierkegaard went on. Despite the evidence that he has, in a sense, over-possible temporal orientation towards the past. static, in Mr Constantinus's view, for its irreversible acquisition as a form of 'recollection', too edge acquisition (that subverts Plato's view of knowledge acquisition) that subverts Plato's view of knowledge acquisition (1843, by Constantinus) repeatedly in *Repetition* (1843, by Constantinus) rather than coolly empty, unfolds really intense rather than coolly empty, unfolds ethically; and such a sense of suspension, 'frighen-ights in terms of the theological suspension of the or-death'), which Kierkegaard describes and spots a sentimental medium but a brutal stare, edgy (life-allegory points to that shaky ladder to faith, not Morth, where he sets up his altar. Again, this could not climb higher than the top of Mountain He did not feel any need to go beyond faith', or *Exordium*, the (Abraham) was not a thinker. realm of un-thought: as the narrator says in unjust (unethical). It is justifiable only in a higher

today, such as Jean-Luc Marion and John Caputo, are debating the very possibility of the Gift (*Gift*), that which is, in the idiom of the later Kierkegaard, 'absurdly' given from God - as opposed to *a priori* given as a condition (Kant) - which it is always wrong for us humans (or Christians) not to accept. The task (*Opgave*), for Kierkegaard, is to realize it, every time the gifting happens to the believer. The task, for us readers, would be to receive the Kierkegaardian gift of thought, critically.

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SEE ALSO: main currents in philosophy

KYOO LEE

KINGSLEY, CHARLES (1819-75)

One of the leaders of the mid-Victorian Christian Socialist movement, Charles also achieved renown as a philosopher, novelist and, to a lesser degree, a historian. Born on 12 June 1819 at Holne Vicarage, Devonshire, Kingsley wrote sermons in imitation of his clergyman father at the age of four. Entering Magdalene College, Cambridge, in 1838, he read COLERIDGE, CARLYLE and MAURICE with interest, and was ordained in 1842. Presented with the living of Eversley, he witnessed first hand rural poverty and ignorance in the mid-1840s. Meeting F.D. Maurice, whose *Kingdom of Christ* assuaged his religious doubts, in 1844, Kingsley reacted similarly to the 1848 revolutions, and, with Thomas Hughes and others, contributed as 'Parson Lot' to *Politics for the People* (1848), *Tracts on Christian Socialism* (1850) and *The Christian Socialist* (1850-1). Here a leading theme was the denial that 'selfish competition' was necessarily founded in human nature, and that the rights of private property were absolute, or unbounded by duties proportionate to rights, which views were clearly much indebted to Carlyle's *Past and Present* in particular. Becoming

Professor of English Literature at the newly founded Queen's College, London, Kingsley wrote his first two novels, *Two Years Ago* (1848) and *Alton Locke* (1850), against the background of the revolution. Their portrayal of the distress of the rural labourer and urban artisan made them amongst the most important 'social' novels of the period. But while Chartists found much of appeal in his writings, despite his opposition to Feargus O'Connor's Land Plan, Kingsley's own politics were Toryish in their sympathy with county squires, whose case for agricultural protection he reiterated, and clergyman, whom he wished to assist the poor rather than submit to the loss of their own privileges. His later novels included *Hypatia* (1853), which aimed to describe Christianity as 'the only truly democratic creed', *Westward Ho!* (1855), *Two Years Ago* (1857), on the Crimean War, and *The Water Babies* (1863).

Appointed to the professorship of Modern History at Cambridge in 1860, he held the post for nine years; a popular lecturer, he never engaged systematically with the subject. His inaugural lecture, 'The Limits of Exact Science as Applied to History', stressed the importance of biography to historical understanding, but, while paying lip-service to political economy, managed to avoid confronting any controversy about actual historical development. In his later years he took a pronounced interest in natural science, and in a lecture entitled 'The Theology of the Future' and elsewhere attempted a reconciliation between science and theology, especially Darwinism, which he believed did not contradict Christian teaching. His later theology was much inspired by Maurice, while he proclaimed himself a 'Platonist' in philosophy, with a taste for mysticism, and was in agreement with JOHN STUART MILL, whose promotion of co-operation he also supported, on the cause of women's suffrage.

He died on 23 January 1875.

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