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Essays in Understanding

1930–1954

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SEVENTY-FIVE YEARS ago, Kierkegaard died alone in a hospital in Copenhagen at the age of forty-three. During his lifetime he enjoyed not so much fame as notoriety. Peculiarities of his person and his way of life became, in the public eye, occasions for scandal, and only long after his death did his influence begin to make itself felt. If we were to write a history of his fame with Germany as our focus, only the last fifteen years would concern us, but in those years his fame has spread with amazing rapidity. This fame rests on more than the discovery and belated appreciation of a great man who was wrongly neglected in his own time. We are not just making amends for not having done him justice earlier. Kierkegaard speaks with a contemporary voice; he speaks for an entire generation that is not reading him out of historical interest but for intensely personal reasons: mea res agit tur.

Even as short a time as twenty-five years ago—fifty years after his death—Kierkegaard was hardly known in Germany. One reason is that not all of his work had been translated into German, even though Christoph Schrempf had called attention to him as early as the late 1880s. The far more important reason in the cultural climate in Germany of the time—through which Kierkegaard's polemic against the unbroken façade of scientific disciplines presented to the world through which Kierkegaard began to undermine that edifice-begins to make itself felt. If we were to write a history of his fame with Germany as our focus, only the last fifteen years would concern us, but in those years his fame has spread with amazing rapidity. This fame rests on more than the discovery and belated appreciation of a great man who was wrongly neglected in his own time. We are not just making amends for not having done him justice earlier. Kierkegaard speaks with a contemporary voice; he speaks for an entire generation that is not reading him out of historical interest but for intensely personal reasons: mea res agit tur.

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Kierkegaard died alone in a hospital at thirty-three. During his lifetime he received little public eye, occasions for his influence begin to make his fame with Germany as one could concern us, but in those apathy. This fame rests on a perception of a great man who is not just making amends for his influence. The far more important reason is that Germany would offer a soil in which Kierkegaardian thought could take root. Nietzsche and the so-called life philosophy (Lebensphilosophie), Bergson, Dilthey, and Simmel had prepared the way for Kierkegaard in Germany. In Nietzsche, systematic philosophy saw its fundamental tenets threatened for the first time, for Nietzsche's destruction of old psychological assumptions revealed the extra-philosophical, psychic, and vital energies that actually motivated philosophers to philosophize. This revolt of a philosopher against philosophy clarified the situation of philosophizing itself and insisted that philosophizing was philosophy. This meant the salvation of the individual's subjectivity. In a parallel development, experience philosophy (Erlebnisphilosophie) was attempting to comprehend concrete objects not from a generalized perspective but on the basis of "experience." This called for a personal apprehension of the object itself rather than the placing of it in a general category. The crucial point here is not the methodological innovation but the opening up of dimensions of the world and of human life that had previously remained invisible to philosophy or that had had only a derivative shadow existence for it.

So Germany appeared to be prepared—but for a Kierkegaard, a man whose existence was shaped by Christianity? What did the revolt in philosophy have to do with Christianity? The late eruption of his fame is more surprising the more we contemplate his resolutely Christian position and attempt to understand him from that perspective. This fragile link between philosophy and Christianity takes on substance from Kierkegaard's polemic against Hegel, which is not so much a critique of one specific philosopher as it is a rejection of philosophy as such. In Kierkegaard's view, philosophy is so caught up in its own systematics that it forgets and loses sight of the actual self of the philosophizing subject: it never touches the "individual" in his concrete "existence." Hegel indeed trivializes this very individual and his life, which are for
Kierkegaard the central concern. This trivialization occurs because Hegel’s dialectic and synthesis do not address the individual in his specific existence but, rather, treat individuality and specificity as abstractions. Against the Hegelian doctrine of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis Kierkegaard sets the fundamental paradoxicality of Christian existence: to be an individual—insofar as one stands alone before God (or death)—and yet no longer to have a self—insofar as this self as an individual is nothing before God if its existence is denied. For Kierkegaard, this paradox is the fundamental structure of human existence. In Hegel, the paradox of thesis and antithesis is “reconciled” at the higher level of synthesis. As such it is not the unresolvable paradox inherent in being, which Kierkegaard calls “existence,” the paradox in which human life, in Kierkegaard’s view, is rooted. Kierkegaard always speaks only of himself. Hegel speaks only as the exponent of his system. Kierkegaard can, in a certain sense, speak in general, too, but his general statements are not generalizations. He speaks, rather, “in generalities that apply to all by virtue of the fact that they apply to the single human being,” for everyone is an individual. In Kierkegaard’s view, Hegel negates concrete reality, contingency, and therefore the individual when he interprets history as a logically comprehensible sequence of events and a process that follows an inevitable course. This polemic against Hegel is a polemic against any and every philosophical system.

The situation today is this: The most varied and heterogeneous schools of thought look to Kierkegaard as a prime authority; they all meet on the ambiguous ground of radical skepticism, if, indeed, one can still use that pallid, now almost meaningless term to describe an attitude of despair toward one’s own existence and the basic principles of one’s own scientific or scholarly field.

The most resolute adherents of the most diversified camps nonetheless share Kierkegaard’s basic concept of “choice,” which has in the meantime also taken on a somewhat abstract quality. There is, however, still another reason why the Protestant and Catholic camps both call on the authority of Kierkegaard. This reason does not lie in Kierkegaard’s specific, subjective character, but, rather, in the milieu in which he as a religious being lived and had to live. Kierkegaard was the first thinker to live in a world constituted much like our own, that is, in a wholly secularized world stemming from the Enlightenment. In its polemic, an unconditionally religious life—❛Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher,” for example, did not move into the same world in which we are living. Luther defended himself against existence, that “evil” world with the one we actually inhabit. The existence is possible at all in Kierkegaard as its forebear. The doctrine of atheism pale in comparison with between a self-contained atheist and the same world. To be radically religious not only in the sense that one is a human being, not in the sense that no one else stands alone.

The existence that concern this his life that the Christian individual” renounces his self, however over against which—and from reality of God. From its very he his own desires, his own possible sequence of being-determined God remains curiously suspended from God. In his diaries, Kierkegaard in his life was a sin committed when still a child, once cursed of the son; he inherited, as it were, to him as a writer was to compose off his engagement with Regier of a “normal” life, the possibility.

What determined his life, not the law immanent in his being, what was totally external to him, namely, the curse of his father.

*Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher (1768-1834), German philosopher of religion. —Ed.
unconditionally religious life—the very kind of life that Schleiermacher,* for example, did not lead—had to deal with just about the same world in which we are living today. If the Christian from Paul to Luther defended himself against worldliness and the secularization of existence, that “evil” world was a world fundamentally different from the one we actually inhabit. To the extent that such a thing as a religious existence is possible at all in the modern world, it has to turn to Kierkegaard as its forebear. The differences between Protestantism and Catholicism pale in comparison with the gigantic abyss that has opened up between a self-contained atheistic world and a religious existence in that same world. To be radically religious in such a world means to be alone not only in the sense that one stands alone before God but also in the sense that no one else stands before God.

The existence that concerns Kierkegaard is his own life and it is in this his life that the Christian paradox has to be realized. The “individual” renounces his self, his individuality, his worldly possibilities, over against which—and from without, as it were—stands the inexorable reality of God. From its very beginnings, his life is not determined by his own desires, his own possibilities; it is only a consequence, a consequence of being-determined-by-God. But this being-determined-by-God remains curiously suspended between being close to and being far from God. In his diaries, Kierkegaard says that the determining factor in his life was a sin committed by his father. Kierkegaard’s father had, when still a child, once cursed God. This curse was decisive for the life of the son; he inherited, as it were, that curse. The only task of concern to him as a writer was to comprehend this ambiguous condition of being-determined-by-God. This vulnerability, of which one can never say whether it is a curse or a blessing, accounts for Kierkegaard’s breaking off his engagement with Regine Olsen and thus forgoing the possibility of a “normal” life, the possibility of not being an “exception.”

What determined his life, then, was not what was inherent in it, not the law immanent in his individual life alone and in no other, but what was totally external to it, what it would experience only later, namely, the curse of his father. And from his perspective this curse was

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*Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher (1768–1834), Protestant theologian and philosopher of religion. —Ed.
carried over to him in the fact that he could not know if he himself had not fathered a child. This possibility, which, as Theodor Häcker* said of it, "we would have to call almost abstract," was a "thorn in his side." In his vulnerability, this abstract possibility became the most burdensome of realities. Chance is what is outside the self, which draws into itself through this outsideness the entire obligation of the transcendent, of that which is willed by God alone. In being taken with absolute seriousness, a seriousness that is identical with ultimate logic, the contingent becomes the last locus in which God himself speaks, however distant he may be.

To the degree that this vulnerable life can be maintained only by the most ferocious of commitments to logic, so to that same degree Kierkegaard's concrete self succumbs to a cruel psychological addiction to reflection. Taking one's own possibilities seriously is what gives rise to this compulsive reflection; hence, the essential task is to eradicate those possibilities and to be nothing more than an anonymous incarnation of logic. But writing is always the product of a specific person, of someone with a name, and if a writer is to achieve this desired anonymity publicly and, so to speak, as witness to his own namelessness, then his name has to hide behind a pseudonym. But every pseudonym threatens to take the place of the author's real name and so to take possession of the author. And so it is that one pseudonym follows on the heels of another and that hardly any two of Kierkegaard's works appeared under the same name. This changing of pseudonyms reveals, of course, an aesthetic playing with possibility, that seductive possibility that Kierkegaard himself, under the name "Victor Eremita," presented in Either/Or.

Both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche mark the end of Romanticism, each of course in a very different way, but despite those differences there is a common element in their advance beyond it. The richness of life and the world that the Romantics regarded in terms of aesthetic opportunity and possibility is, in Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, wrenched out of the aesthetic context. In Kierkegaard, what the Romantics saw as aesthetic possibility becomes the essential existential problem. For the realm of the inner life and the inescapable obligations it imposes, possibility be-

*Th. Häcker's Sören Kierkegaard und die Philosophie der Innerlichkeit was published in 1913 and his Sören Kierkegaard, Kritik der Gegenwart (2nd edition) in 1922. —Ed.
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comes reality, namely, the reality of sin. In Nietzsche, art becomes the
most essential moral and morally symptomatic fact. Kierkegaard repre-
sents, in a sense, an atonement for, and the vengeance of, Romanticism.
In him, the aesthetic possibility Romanticism employed ironically as a
pretex to excuse itself in the eyes of the world takes its vengeance and
becomes inescapable inner reality, indeed, becomes reality per se. Kier-
kegaard paid back with his life the debts that Romanticism piled up with
noncommittal abandon.

Gegenwart (2nd edition) in 1922.