

Philosophy of Religion: Kierkegaard, the Pseudonymous Writings  
Rel 495

Tue. 2:05pm-3:55pm – Birks Building 104 (or by Zoom)

(estimated enrollment: 12)

Professor George di Giovanni

[george.di\\_giovanni@mcgill.ca](mailto:george.di_giovanni@mcgill.ca)

<http://george.digiovanni.ca>

*“Philosophy is really homesickness—the desire to be everywhere at home.”*

*Novalis*

*Course description*

Søren Kierkegaard’s life was short, 1813-1853, and his authorship hardly ten years long, of which only four were dedicated to his pseudonymous works (1843-1846). It was a prolific authorship nonetheless, whether pseudonymous or declared. Including philosophical/literary works, sermons, occasional articles, and polemical tracts, but excluding the voluminous Diaries, it counts well over fifty items. It was also complicated, its genesis intimately influenced by Kierkegaard’s private life, and unavoidably mirroring it. Yet, despite all its intricate ways and byways, when in 1848 Kierkegaard began to sum up its meaning for the benefit of a future audience, he had no hesitation about it. The motivating interest behind it had been from beginning to end “the task of becoming a Christian.” And, although as so defined the task was closely dependent on Kierkegaard’s social identity, when he came to spell out what the task essentially amounted to, he did it in a way that transcended historical and religious boundaries—even the divide, perhaps, between the believer and non-believer. To be a Christian was for Kierkegaard essentially a matter of achieving *interiority*.

This, however, poses a problem for teaching Kierkegaard. How does one teach “interiority”—let alone “becoming a Christian”—and in a course in philosophy to boot? Fortunately, Kierkegaard’s authorship itself maps the way. The task is multilayered, just like the authorship. At one level, it requires spiritual discipline, the practice of which in turn requires the right guide. This is the need to which Kierkegaard’s sermons\* are addressed, all based on Biblical episodes and the teachings of the Gospels. Such a discipline, however, cannot be achieved in a vacuum. We all are the products of the historical/social milieu in which we are born—nineteenth century Protestant Denmark in Kierkegaard’s case. One cannot get hold of oneself spiritually without at

---

\*In recent translations they are called “Upbuilding Discourses.” “Upbuilding” is an ugly neologism. “Edifying” should do.

the same time getting hold of this milieu, and this, for Kierkegaard, meant exposing the superficiality of his society, whether at the religious, academic, or political institutional level. Kierkegaard's polemical tracts are directed at these levels.

Ultimately, however, the task must be a highly personal affair. There is more to Kierkegaard's sermons and polemical diatribes than the universe of his contemporary Danish society. There also is the universe of his internal life adding an existential sub-text, so to speak, to the writings. It is the story of an emotionally vulnerable, and perhaps even sick, individual, deeply affected by his failed relationships with others and by the very quarrels he deliberately instigated with the religious and social paragons of the day. This story—not any account of principled convictions, religious or otherwise—is what reveals the factors intimately motivating Kierkegaard's writings. We find it narrated in the Diaries, the voluminous record of Kierkegaard's external daily life, ever experienced by him from inside; a record, also, of the spiritual struggles that that life precipitated in him. In this narration, Kierkegaard himself, the historical individual, assumes for the reader, unwittingly on Kierkegaard's side, the figure of the protagonist of a parable, the object-lesson of what it is to strive for interiority.

The story is not always flattering. Why would someone like Kierkegaard, avowedly dedicated to the task of acquiring interiority, be as preoccupied as the Diaries clearly show he was with how his writings were received by the public at large at the time, or would be received in the future? why his agonizing concern with how he, the individual he was, was perceived and judged? why the need to make his inner martyrdom public? There is something existentially false about Kierkegaard's figure, even comic for the unsympathetic eye. But I am not here to judge. The point, rather, is that Kierkegaard was aware of the dispersing forces in his make-up. He knew of his propensity to philosophizing while, at the same time, decrying the abstractness of speculative thought. He was equally aware of his propensity to objectify himself and others, to play games with both, while at the same time preaching full self-disclosure before oneself and others. And Kierkegaard duly recorded these propensities, personalizing them in characters endowed with a fictional life and even an authorship of their own. He did it in a literary/philosophical medium that has its antecedent in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* but displays, at the hands of Kierkegaard, an artistry uniquely his. He did it, moreover, in works he published anonymously—appropriately so, for, with respect to the works' putative authors and the characters and the situations the works portray, Kierkegaard himself keeps at reflective distance. This is the Kierkegaard trying to make sense of himself, the fourth and final layer of his authorship.

To return to the issue of how to teach Kierkegaard in a course in Philosophy, if we were to approach him as just a historical phenomenon, all the layers of his authorship would of course be equally important, but just as a matter of record. If we did it with pastoral intent in mind, then predominance should be given to the sermons and the Diaries, because of their edifying quality. But, if one is interested in what Kierkegaard might have to say about human nature that has universal significance, as we should indeed be in Philosophy, then the pseudonymous authorship undoubtedly takes precedence. This is the layer of Kierkegaard's authorship to which the present course is accordingly dedicated. Nonetheless, Kierkegaard, the historical individual, cannot ever be ignored, for it might well be, as Kierkegaard would have insisted, that universal speculative meaning ("significance" might be a better word in context) is the by-product of actual existence.

Fortunately, there is a recently published biography of Kierkegaard that can help us in this regard. I am referring to Clare Carlisle's *Philosophy of the Heart: The Restless Life of Søren Kierkegaard* (2019)—a portrait of Kierkegaard and his society, historical in genre but not without the occasional pastoral overtone; relatively brief in length, yet fully informative and engagingly written. The Library has a physical copy of the book, but no electronic edition is available. There is, however, a relatively cheap Penguin edition of it easily bought. **I require the reading of this biography as preparation for the course.**

### *Syllabus*

The following are the pseudonymous works, all of them available in e-edition, which we shall study:

1. *Either/or* (1843) (There is an abridged Penguin edition which suffices)
2. *Fear and Trembling* (1843)
3. *Repetition* (1843)
4. *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844)
5. *Philosophical Fragments* (1844)
6. [*Stages on Life's Way* (1845)]
7. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846)
8. [*The Sickness unto Death* (1849)]

We shall consider the two books in square brackets only if we have time. I reserve the 7<sup>th</sup> work, the most substantial, for the graduate students in the class. The question in its regard is whether, and how, the book is a re-doing of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*.

For the undergraduate, evaluation will be based on two papers, one in mid-term, and the second at the end of term (about 10 double-spaced pages) to be assigned in due time. From the graduates, I expect one major paper, on a subject which they will have to discuss with me at the beginning of the course.

It is premature at the moment to attempt a schedule of sessions. In general, we shall take the listed books in succession, discussing each as long as we want. The reading is voluminous, but individual students might want to specialize according to their particular interests, while keeping in touch with the rest through the lectures and class discussion.

GdiG

18 October 2020