A closer look at Kierkegaard

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Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography, by Joachim Garff, translated by Bruce H. Kirmmse. 867 pages, Princeton University Press, $35

Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography, published in 2000 in Danish and translated into English this past year, is an important, historically rigorous, thorough, but in some ways limited biography. The author does not fail to provide a detailed exegesis of the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard's work in parallel with the narrative of his life, and he is also able to create an especially grim and compelling portrait of life in Copenhagen and Berlin during the first half of the nineteenth century. However, Garff does not present Kierkegaard's philosophical work in the broader context of the crisis of bourgeois philosophy in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Kierkegaard, whose major works include *Fear and Trembling*, *Either-Or*, and *From the Papers of One Still Living*, remains a major figure in philosophy. He is one of the principal authors of some of the most prevalent philosophical positions in academia today, which include the rejection of reason, science and the Enlightenment, and, above all, a rejection of the unity of reason and reality, which is a rejection of the *possibility* of science. Kierkegaard saw no correlation between universal essence and individual existence—between the law-governed processes of the objective world and the perceptive and cognitive faculties of the individual. Moreover, he denied that such a correlation was actually achievable.

While Kierkegaard is by no means the only major figure of this philosophical tendency, which has since spawned existentialism, post-modernism, and various other trends, he is chronologically one of the first. Kierkegaard argued that all systems—including Hegel's Logic and scientific systems in general—"omit the individual," and therefore present an ultimately limited view of life, leaving out, in fact, the most basic features of human existence.

The acceptance of his works marked a major turning point in bourgeois philosophy—a turn away from the confidence that the application of science and reason to all facets of human life would lift the cultural and material level of every member of society, and a turn inward to subjectivism and cynicism. Since Kierkegaard, science and reason have officially been designated enemies of humanity—and have been blamed over the years for everything from misogyny to the Holocaust.

Today, one sees Kierkegaard everywhere. For instance, on February 28, 2006, the *New York Times* ran an op-ed piece by William Broadway entitled "The Oracle Suggests a Truce Between Science and Religion." Broadway wrote, "The truth is that science and spirituality, rather than addressing similar ground, speak to very different realms of human experience and, at least in theory, have the potential to coexist in peace, complementing rather than constantly battling each other."

According to Broadway, science, at best, can only describe the motion of matter, while other "moral" and "ethical" matters must be left to religion. The idea that the domain of science and reason is unlimited is, he wrote, "more hope than fact...and can exhibit a kind of arrogance."

Broadway's rancor at science's "intrusion" into "spiritual" affairs could have been lifted directly from the pages of Kierkegaard.

The influence of Kierkegaard's thought—his subjectivism, irrationalism, and mysticism—on official thought today is vast. Marxists are obliged to carefully and critically study the philosophy of Kierkegaard and his co-thinkers.

Kierkegaard's life

Garff has obviously spared no effort in providing as complete a picture of Kierkegaard's life as possible. The reader is taken through the Kierkegaard family's financial records, the Church's documentation of the family's confession visits, diaries of virtually every person who had contact with Kierkegaard, and Kierkegaard's own multitudinous and often self-contradictory journals, which are often more fiction than fact.

The book is an excellent record of Kierkegaard's life, and virtually no details escape the author's critical eye. In one poignant paragraph, Garff quotes a sentence from Kierkegaard's journal: "After my death," Kierkegaard wrote, "this is my consolation: No one will be able to find in my papers one single bit of information about what has really filled my life" (Garff, p. 101). On the contrary, Garff replies to Kierkegaard, "people frequently overlook the fact that mystification, mummery, and fiction are constitutive features in Kierkegaard's production of himself, and that this is precisely why these things help reveal the 'real' Kierkegaard" (p. 101).

What emerges from the biography is a sense of a powerful, perceptive, and articulate genius, trapped and isolated from society at large and tortured incessantly by his own conscience. Kierkegaard's writings on his own life as a writer are often eerie, sad, and darkly beautiful.

"What is a poet?" Kierkegaard writes. "His lot is like that of the unfortunates who were put in Philaris' bull [a hollow copper sculpture outfitted with flutes] and gradually tortured over a slow fire: Their screams could not reach the tyrant's ears to terrify him; to him they sounded like sweet music. And people crowd around the poet and say to him, 'sing again soon,' which means, 'may new sufferings torment your soul' " (p. 431).

Kierkegaard's life was indeed full of sufferings and torment. He was born in 1813, and by 1838 five of his six siblings had died as a result of disease or childbirth and he had visited the graves of both of his parents. In Kierkegaard's dramatic memory, his father was a towering, stoic figure of power, terror, and judgment who haunted the younger Kierkegaard for years after his death.

When he was 28 years old, because of some personal affliction (possibly venereal disease) Kierkegaard forced himself to spurn the affections of the most popular woman in Copenhagen—18-year-old Regine Olsen, whom he dearly loved—without explaining to her why. Initially crushed by the rejection, Regine later married the successful philosopher Fritz Schlegel.

Kierkegaard never recovered, and his love for Regine festered into a disturbing lifelong obsession. Hundreds of pages of his journals are filled with fantasies about her, fragments of imagined conversations, cryptic book dedications, and unsent letters.

Kierkegaard's writings are extraordinarily subtle and complicated. He published his essays under various pseudonyms, each with a somewhat different philosophical outlook, and even arranged for his pseudonyms to engage in public correspondence with one another in the newspapers. In his journals, he takes up lengthy arguments against his own cornucopia of

alter egos from various points of view.

In his writing and actions, Kierkegaard expresses a profound disgust with all of official society, its meaningless rituals, its pomp and ceremony, and all its pretensions at cultivation. He sees that religion, which he considers a thoroughly private matter, has become merely an instrument of the state. Human society around him is at once absurd and brutal.

Kierkegaard's philosophy, however, emerging out of these tortured circumstances, assumes a thoroughly cynical, elitist, and misanthropic character.

Kierkegaard's Attack on Reason

Kierkegaard's reaction to the decay and moral bankruptcy of official "cultivated" society was to attack the very foundation of the Enlightenment that had produced it—reason. Reason was the cornerstone of it all—of science, of knowledge, of medicine, of the Church, and of philosophy.

Real knowledge or understanding, Kierkegaard argued, was acquired individually, emotionally and immediately through lucid experiences. Kierkegaard strongly believed, first of all, that the whole idea of Christendom was therefore mistaken. God has no relationship to human society in the abstract, Kierkegaard thought. God has relationships only with individuals, and the individual experience of God—one of terror and awe—is of an intimately personal and mystical nature.

Kierkegaard insisted to his brother, who defended simultaneously reason and the Church, in "faith's independence from compelling proofs" (p. 637). This theme reverberates throughout Kierkegaard's work, and is probably more popular today than it was in Kierkegaard's time. The phrase "leap of faith" has become so commonplace that it has been largely forgotten that Kierkegaard was its author. The controversy that originally surrounded this outlook in religious circles has also been forgotten.

Kierkegaard regarded all of the Enlightenment conceptions of scientific objectivity as total nonsense. "Absolutely no benefit can be derived from involving oneself with the natural sciences," Kierkegaard wrote. "One stands there defenseless, with no control over anything. The researcher immediately begins to distract one with his details: Now one is to go to Australia, now to the moon; now into an underground cave; now, by Satan, up the arse—to look for an intestinal worm; now the telescope must be used; now the microscope: Who in the devil can endure it?" (p. 468)

Kierkegaard viewed science, insofar as it altered a person's perception of his or her surroundings, as a "corrupting" influence.

The most important feature of Kierkegaard's philosophy is that each of his categories—irony, repetition, mercy, suffering, anxiety, etc.—are derived from immediate, subjective, emotional experience. Rather than study human thought by observing its relation to the objective course of human history, as Hegel did, Kierkegaard proposes that human thought be studied by individual introspection and reflection on "experience." In this way, Kierkegaard echoes some of the epistemology of Hegel's precursor, Kant—anticipating the philosophical movement now referred to as the "Return to Kant."

Kierkegaard rejected adamantly Hegel's view, shared by Marx and Engels, that the development of human thought is objective and universal, and that history can be studied scientifically.

"In the end," Kierkegaard wrote, "all of world history becomes nonsense. Action is completely abolished... The castle in Paris is stormed by an indeterminate number of people, who do not know what they want, with no definite idea. Then the king flees. And then there is a republic. Nonsense" (p. 495).

Whereas Hegel's philosophical categories were profoundly analytical, joined together by objective historical and logical necessity, Kierkegaard's categories are not systematically interrelated in any objective sense. They are related only insofar as they interact with one another in the individual psyche.

Kierkegaard also categorically rejected the idea that thought could in any way be shaped by objective reality, because in his view there was nothing outside of consciousness—there was only existence. "One sticks a finger in the ground in order to tell by the smell what country one is in," Kierkegaard wrote. "I stick my finger into the world, it smells of nothing" (p. 240).

"People generally believe," wrote Kierkegaard, "that the tendency of a person's thoughts is determined by external circumstances.... But this is not so. That which determines the tendency of a person's thoughts is essentially to be found within the person's own self" (p. 297).

This led him to certain nasty conclusions about mental illness. Depression, or "melancholia," Kierkegaard wrote, is purely the fault of the afflicted person, who always has "an equal or perhaps greater possibility of the opposite state." The real problem is that the depressed person lacks "faith," and fails "to expect the joyous, the happy, the good" (p. 297). There is a degree of self-loathing here, since Kierkegaard himself suffered from depression.

Biographically, Kierkegaard's mistrust of science and medicine came to the fore when he visited his doctor with unrecorded complaints in 1849. His doctor surmised that many of Kierkegaard's day-to-day ailments resulted from his hunched back and poor habits, and told Kierkegaard that he "probably drinks too much coffee and walks too little" (p. 435). Kierkegaard himself had an entirely different take on his visit with his doctor.

"I have therefore spoken with my physician," wrote Kierkegaard in his journal, "about whether he believed this misrelation in my constitution, between the physical and psychical, could be overcome so that I could realize the universal. This he doubted. I asked him whether he believed that the spirit was capable of refashioning or reshaping such a fundamental misrelation by force or will. This he doubted. He would not even advise me to bring the whole of my willpower (of which he has no notion) to bear upon it..." (p. 436).

Kierkegaard believed, as did many people in the medieval period, that sickness was the result of a "misrelation" between the soul and body, and that a person could be cured by summoning the willpower to correct it. "Psychosomatic misrelations," he insisted, cannot be treated with "powders and pills" or by "pharmacists and doctors" (p. 435). Suffering, Kierkegaard thought, can be cured only by "the God of patience," who "is truly the One who can absolutely and unconditionally persist in caring for a person" and restoring him or her to health.

Kierkegaard found the entire practice of medicine—one of the great conquests of human civilization—to be nothing more than a farce. "And what does the physician really have to say?" Kierkegaard asks himself, "Nothing."

One limitation of Garff's work is its failure to fully explain the links between Kierkegaard's turn to subjective idealism in the realm of theoretical philosophy and his political philosophy, which is at some basic level apparent in his views on medicine. In fact, Kierkegaard's theoretical and political philosophies are so thoroughly intertwined that it is truly impossible to disentangle them from each other.

By way of example, in the later stages of his life, Kierkegaard decided that the only correct moral response to the current human condition was religious martyrdom. Here, his mystical attitude toward theoretical questions crossed over into practical philosophy, ethics, and politics.

Kierkegaardian martyrdom takes the form not of death by crucifixion or stoning, but of total self-imposed isolation from society at large. One cannot marry, one must give up friends, family, and country, and one must adopt an attitude of total indifference and contempt for the rest of society. True, a martyr may have mercy for other individuals, but once one has the genuine attitude of mercy in one's mind, the deed is done—no action is required. The thought of mercy is a good in and of itself. One must be, in essence, Kierkegaard himself!

Kierkegaard's Political Philosophy

Politically, Kierkegaard, was an extraordinarily conservative defender of the aristocracy. A close political ally and acquaintance of the king of Denmark, Kierkegaard expressed a mixture of fear and disdain toward the emerging socialist and democratic movements in Europe. His first published essay was an attack on the women's suffrage movement.

When in 1848 thousands demonstrated in the streets of Copenhagen to demand labor reforms, constitutional government and equal rights for women, Kierkegaard assured his readers, "Every movement and change that takes place with the help of 100,000 or 10,000 or 1,000 noisy, grumbling, rumbling, and yodeling people...is *eo ipso* untruth, a fake, a retrogression. For God is present here only in a very confused fashion or perhaps not at all, perhaps it is rather the Devil.... A mediocre ruler is a much better constitution than this abstraction, 100,000 rumbling nonhumans" (p. 494).

By and large, Kierkegaard, a misogynist himself, regarded the masses, or he called them pejoratively, "the multitude," as the inferior "woman" in the struggle between the classes (p. 483). With equal measures of arrogance and fearfulness, Kierkegaard regarded the broad majority of ordinary people as "the most dangerous of all powers and the most insignificant" (p. 488).

When, in Holstein, revolutionaries launched a rebellion, Kierkegaard advised that the government "needs a war in order to stay in power, it needs all possible agitation of nationalistic sentiments" (p. 494).

Kierkegaard argued that democracy, not monarchy, is "the most tyrannical form of government," and that of all forms of government, the government by a single individual is best: "Is it tyranny when one person wants to rule leaving the rest of us others out? No, but it is tyranny when all want to rule" (p. 487).

"A people's government," wrote Kierkegaard, "is the true image of Hell" (p. 487). Kierkegaard was unabashedly an apologist and supporter of the monarch, and when democratic revolution swept the country in 1849, Kierkegaard hid in his apartment and hoped it would all blow over.

Kierkegaard absolutely hated the idea of workers thinking for themselves. He once thanked a physician for restoring his carpenter to health: "He is once more what he has had the honor of being for twenty-five years, a worker with life and spirit, a worker who, although he thinks while he is doing his work, does not make the mistake of wanting to make thinking into his work" (p. 540).

However, Kierkegaard does offer a solution to the problem of "leveling"—his pejorative term for democracy—and that solution is religion. "No age," he wrote, "can halt the skepticism of leveling, nor can the present age.... It can only be halted if the individual, in the separateness of his individuality, acquires the fearlessness of religion" (p. 490). In the end, he suggested, "an *apparently* political movement [the democratic revolution of 1849] is *at root* a repressed need for religion" (p. 499).

Kierkegaard regarded the supreme monarch of Denmark, Christian VIII, as the parent and moral superior of every Danish man, woman, and child, and as such he regarded it as the king's moral duty to lead the country out of crisis by moral example and teaching, even though he thought the masses were largely unworthy of the effort. "Upbringing," Kierkegaard wrote, "upbringing is what the world needs. This is what I have always spoken of. This is what I said to Christian VIII. And this is what people regard as the most superfluous of things" (p. 495).

Kierkegaard even dedicated some time to attacking socialism, which had gained significant popularity in Denmark during his lifetime. In his attacks, he insisted that it was the right of any individual to "abstain" from human society altogether, and that all forms of socialism—including Christian communalism or "pietism"—force uniformity upon people and therefore restrict their freedom (p. 504).

The obvious irony is that Kierkegaard, who believed that he had nobly chosen for religious reasons to abstain from human society, was afforded that luxury of "abstention" by a small staff of cooks, maids, secretaries, and carpenters who saw to his estate and ran his errands, which he paid for out of his large inheritance.

If Kierkegaard had read even a few of the major works of socialism, including *The Communist Manifesto* (which, according at least to Garff, he did not), he might have recognized that he had merely accepted uncritically the aristocratic straw man of communism. After all, how can the democratic power of every person to influence all matters of public life, and the emancipation of the toiling masses from exploitation and poverty, possibly be construed as a restriction of personal freedom?

Whatever his intellectual posture as a defender of individual freedom, Kierkegaard defended the censorship of the press when it was invoked against his more liberal opponents (p. 62).

Kierkegaard's political philosophy is pervaded by racism, misogyny and elitism. When articles that were critical of his books were published in the newspaper *The Corsair*, Kierkegaard wrote, "*The Corsair* is, of course, a Jewish rebellion against the Christians," which had a constituency only among "Jew businessmen, shop clerks, prostitutes, schoolboys, butcher boys, et cetera" (p. 408).

Various scholars and defenders of Kierkegaard over the years have attempted to separate the vileness of his politics from the rest of his work. In the final analysis, this simply cannot be done, for on what basis can one reject elitism and chauvinism if one has dispensed with reason itself? Without a rigorous, scientific understanding of the world situation, and of the multitude of economic, political, and social processes involved, humanity can make no progress towards social equality and democracy, and there will be no end of chauvinism and backwardness.

Kierkegaard's slide into confusion and reaction was opened up by his indifference to reason, and was a necessary product of it. Without science and reason, and left only with subjectively derived impressions and emotions, Kierkegaard did not have the means to rise above the backward social milieu into which he was born.

To those who suggest that we should overlook Kierkegaard's racism, elitism, and so on because to do otherwise would be to impose modern standards on Kierkegaard, we simply point to the writings of his antithesis, Karl Marx, whose major works were completed in the same period.

Kierkegaard's place in the history of philosophy

Practitioners of philosophy at the beginning of the nineteenth century faced a serious challenge—how were the internal contradictions of Hegelianism to be resolved? Hegel was the greatest philosophical figure of the Enlightenment, but he was also in many ways the last. He stood with his feet on two irreconcilable shores.

On the one hand, he affirmed that all processes in the universe, including human history, were law-governed, and therefore can be studied scientifically. On the other hand, religion and spirit played the decisive role in his philosophical system.

After Hegel, philosophy resolved itself into two camps, each critical of one half of Hegel.

The philosophers of the first camp maintained the Enlightenment ideal that the application of reason and science to mankind's objective surroundings, history, and society would facilitate the betterment of human civilization, and they believed that ensuing stages of human civilization would provide the means for each human person to achieve his or her fullest productive, cultural and spiritual potential.

However, they rejected the spiritual component of Hegel's philosophy, exposing it as the veil behind which real social contradictions of the current period had been hidden. As materialists, they also rejected the idea that spirit or God was the cause and central feature of all human development.

Instead, they asserted, human history was law-governed, but it was the

constant revolutionizing of humanity's own social-productive capacity that made possible each intellectual stage in humanity's evolution. It was scientific examination of the development of these productive forces that would thereby illuminate the way forward. Central figures in this camp included Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.

The second great camp in philosophy emerged around the thinkers Arthur Schopenhauer, Søren Kierkegaard and later Friedrich Nietzsche, to whom most major philosophical trends in academia today can trace their lineage. These thinkers took up the inverse critique of Hegel: they rejected the entire project of the Enlightenment—the idea that science and reason could make possible the improvement of human society.

Instead, they affirmed the spiritual element of Hegel's philosophy—they turned inwardly to subjectivism, individualism, mysticism and religion as a basis for the satisfaction of the single individual. Thoroughly pessimistic about the possibilities for the flourishing of human civilization expressed in the Enlightenment, these men developed a terribly cynical and indifferent attitude toward their fellow humans, towards science, and towards socialism.

It was Lenin who aptly observed that the two camps into which philosophy resolved after Hegel were not only philosophical camps, but ideological and political camps as well—that the two opposing theoretical perspectives reflected the ongoing war between two opposed classes. The rise to prominence of the second camp coincided historically with the rise of the bourgeoisie as a class, as the new ruling class found that the politics that flowed from the philosophical methods of the second camp were well suited to their interests.

It is no accident that Kierkegaard's philosophy became, through Martin Heidegger, the philosophy of Nazism. (See *The Case of Martin Heidegger, Philosopher and Nazi* Part 1, Part 2, Part 3.) By the end of the twentieth century, Kierkegaard's elitism, defense of social inequality, anticommunism, mysticism, and contempt for science and reason had seeped into almost every channel of official thought around the globe.

There is no doubt that Kierkegaard was a man in possession of a sensitive and powerful mind, and that he had a profound, though subjective, sense of the terror of bourgeois society. His life was indeed tragic, and it is easy to see how his story strikes a chord with many today who are likewise disgusted by the circumstances of modern life.

However, Kierkegaard's thinking, as it emerged in the arena of philosophy, took on a truly reactionary and backward form. For a better understanding of the life and philosophy of this major philosophical figure, Garff's biography, despite its limitations, is a good place to start.