

# KIERKEGAARD EVERYWHERE

Summer 2020

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This seminar studies the life and work of Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), a philosopher who gets a lot of public attention -- and yet, few people actually study what he wrote.



Kierkegaard's mission as an author was inaugurated by a journal entry he wrote while overlooking the ocean on the north coast of Sjælland:

What I really need is to get clear about what I must do, not what I must know, except insofar as knowledge must precede every act. What matters is to find a purpose ...to find a truth which is truth for me, to find the idea for which I am willing to live and die.

In many ways, this quote encapsulates the main thrust of Kierkegaard's entire authorship. He revolts against the idea that the goal of philosophy is to passively collect knowledge; instead, the goal is to orient oneself to live well. (And importantly, he does not think that one will automatically live well if they know a lot of things.)

We will follow in Kierkegaard's footsteps (figuratively), beginning with his fateful choice to leave the beaten path, and to seek a higher purpose for his life. He found this purpose in fighting for the importance of the individual person — her values, her choices, her happiness — in a world that was becoming increasingly mechanized, objectified, and depersonalized. We will see how Kierkegaard's defense of personhood translates into a prophetic critique (and call for reform) of institutional religion, philosophy, and science.

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## Updates to syllabus

While we are disappointed not to be able to hold this course in Copenhagen, as originally planned, there will be some advantages with the new (virtual) format. First, we will have more flexibility in regards to meeting times and days. Second, online instruction will permit the group to share and collaboratively annotate a text. Third, we will avail ourselves of virtual tours of several museums and sites of interest in Denmark.

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## Readings

- [Johannes Climacus, or de omnibus dubitandum est](#) (1842-43)
    - HH's [prompts for reading](#)
    - HH [annotated text](#)
  - [Either Or Part 1](#) (1843)
    - HH [annotated text](#)
  - [Either Or Part 2](#) (1843)
  - [Love will hide a multitude of sins](#) (1843)
  - [Philosophical Fragments](#) (1844)
  - [Stages on Life's Way](#) (1845)
  - [Concluding Unscientific Postscript](#) (1846)
  - [Works of Love](#) (1847)
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## Assignments and evaluation

Students will be expected to attend lectures/discussion, and to read approximately sixty pages (on average) per week. Grades will be based on:

1. One in-class presentation
  2. One oral exam
  3. Two short response essays / blog posts
  4. Class participation
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5. A final essay, which will be due approximately two weeks after the end of course meetings
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## Plan of meetings

We will have a minimum of thirty hours of synchronous instruction (i.e. live meetings). The plan is for the meetings to span six weeks, and in order to avoid “Zoom fatigue”, meetings will generally be less than two hours. So, on average, we will meet as a full group three times a week, and will supplement that with regular smaller group meetings.

In the first two (or three) sessions, we will cover the cultural and philosophical backdrop to Kierkegaard's work. We will then begin reading Kierkegaard's *Either-Or*.

1. [Philosophical backdrop](#): Kierkegaard's immediate philosophical forerunners were the "German idealists" such as Hegel and Fichte (who are unfortunately some of the most difficult philosophers to understand).
  - a. Socrates: Kierkegaard's hero in philosophy, who never himself wrote anything
  - b. Descartes: The method of doubt and *Cogito Ergo Sum* (Note connection to Hegel's method of doubt, and Kierkegaard's method of *fortvivelse*.)
  - c. Rationalism (Spinoza and Leibniz)
  - d. Empiricism (Locke and Hume)
  - e. Immanuel Kant
  - f. Johann Gottlieb Fichte: The idea of *Wissenschaftslehre* and the distinction between dogmatic and idealistic beginning points for philosophy
  - g. G.W.F. Hegel: The champion of objectivity, and the primary foil for Kierkegaard's arguments in favor of subjectivity
  - h. [Hans Lassen Martensen](#) (1808-1884) Kierkegaard's teacher and eventual foil; purveyor of Hegelianism in Denmark
  - i. [Poul Martin Møller](#) (1794-1838) Kierkegaard's beloved teacher, and one who scorned Hegel's aspirations for a totalizing system. Also the author of *The Adventures of a Danish Student* (not yet translated to English!) which parodies

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the consequences of living out Hegel's philosophy. Interestingly, Møller's book was also a favorite of Niels Bohr.

- j. Different genres within philosophy
  - i. Dialogue: Socrates
  - ii. Axiomatic derivation: Spinoza
  - iii. Meditation: Descartes
  - iv. SK says in *Johannes Climacus* that he needs to adopt narrative form in order to accomplish what he intends.
- 2. Cultural backdrop
  - a. The christianization of northern Europe
  - b. Denmark up to the Golden Age
  - c. [\*Pantheismusstreit\*](#)
  - d. Romanticism and science. Scientists of the early 19th century, such as [H.C. Ørsted](#), sought a comprehensive world picture.
  - e. [Natural theology](#) (e.g. William Paley). There was an attempt, primarily in England, to justify Christian belief using "scientific methods." These attempts were severely criticized by Hume (see [\*Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion\*](#)) and then Kant. As we will see, Kierkegaard is no friend of natural theology.
  - f. Hans Christian Andersen
- 3. The early life of Søren Aabye Kierkegaard
  - a. [Regine Olsen](#)
- 4. Pseudonyms: Most of Kierkegaard's works are written under pseudonyms. That adds an additional layer of difficulty in interpreting his writing. K explains his use of pseudonyms in "[The Point of View of My Work as an Author](#)".
- 5. Either-Or
  - a. Preface
  - b. Selections from the writings of A, the aesthete
  - c. Judge William: The equilibrium between aesthetic and ethical  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/j.ctt24hrd0.4.pdf>
  - d. Alasdair MacIntyre, [selection from \*After Virtue\*](#)
- 6. Johannes Climacus or De Omnibus Dubitandum Est
- 7. Philosophical fragments
  - a. I, A project of thought

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- b. II, The god as teacher and savior
  - c. III, The absolute paradox
  - d. IV, The case of the contemporary disciple
  - e. V, The disciple at second hand
8. Concluding Unscientific Postscript
- a. I.1, The historical view
  - b. I.2, The speculative view
  - c. Robert Adams, [Kierkegaard's Arguments Against Objective Reasoning in Religion | The Monist](#)
  - d. Lessing, "[On the proof of the spirit and of power](#)"
  - e. II.1.2, Possible and actual theses of Lessing
  - f. II.2.1, Becoming subjective
  - g. II.2.2, The subjective truth, inwardness, truth is subjectivity
  - h. Theories of truth in analytic philosophy
  - i. The notion of indirect communication
9. Works of Love
10. Transmission and reception of Kierkegaard's thought
- a. Denmark: Kierkegaard → Rasmus Nielsen → Harald Høffding → Niels Bohr
  - b. Existentialism (de Beauvoir, Sartre, Camus)
  - c. Translation into English: David Swenson, Walter Lowrie, Howard and Edna Hong
  - d. Continental philosophy. Typically Kierkegaard is placed on the continental side of the analytic/continental divide. However, in many ways, Kierkegaard thinks like an analytic philosopher. He is resistant to system-building, and his approach is (at least according to his own description) negative. (See, especially, Concluding Unscientific Postscript, where he argues in favor of being a "negative thinker".)
  - e. Theology ([Karl Barth](#))
  - f. Alasdair MacIntyre's critique of Kierkegaard
  - g. Analytic philosophy
    - i. Ludwig Wittgenstein
    - ii. Epistemology of religion ([reformed epistemology](#), [Lara Buchak on faith](#))
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- iii. David Lewis: Attitudes *de dicto* and *de se*
  - iv. Bas van Fraassen: Belief and the will, objectifying inquiry
  - v. Transformative experience
  - vi. Thomas Nagel on the limits of objectivity in ethics
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## Systematic issues in Kierkegaard's work

- Direct and indirect communication
  - Objectivity versus subjectivity
  - What is truth?
  - Ethics
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## Additional resources

- HH, [A Smule of Danish](#)
  - Jon Stewart, [Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered](#)
  - Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, [Søren Kierkegaard](#)
  - Jon Stewart, [A Companion to Kierkegaard](#)
  - [The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard](#)
  - [Oxford Bibliographies: Kierkegaard](#)
  - Patrick Gardiner, [Kierkegaard: A Very Short Introduction](#)
  - Joakim Garff, [Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography](#)
  - Gregor Malantshuk, [Kierkegaard's Thought](#)
  - [Kierkegaard's complete writings](#) (in Danish)
  - [The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard](#)
  - [Provocations: Spiritual Writings of Kierkegaard](#)
  - Jon Stewart, [Video Lectures on Kierkegaard](#)
  - Joakim Garff, [Kierkegaard's Muse: The Mystery of Regine Olsen](#)
  - Merold Westphal, [Becoming a Self: A Reading of Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript](#)
  - Anthony Rudd, [Kierkegaard and the Limits of the Ethical](#)
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- For more on Hegel's idea of presupposition-free philosophy: Stephen Houlgate, [An Introduction to Hegel](#)