Søren Aabye Kierkegaard (1813-1855) was a profound and prolific writer in the Danish “golden age” of intellectual and artistic activity. His work crosses the boundaries of philosophy, theology, psychology, literary criticism, devotional literature and fiction. Kierkegaard brought this potent mixture of discourses to bear as social critique and for the purpose of renewing Christian faith within Christendom. At the same time he made many original conceptual contributions to each of the disciplines he employed. He is known as the “father of existentialism”, but at least as important are his critiques of Hegel and of the German romantics, his contributions to the development of modernism, his literary experimentation, his vivid re-presentation of biblical figures to bring out their modern relevance, his invention of key concepts which have been explored and redeployed by thinkers ever since, his interventions in contemporary Danish church politics, and his fervent attempts to analyze and revitalize Christian faith.

1. Kierkegaard's Life

Kierkegaard led a somewhat uneventful life. He rarely left his hometown of Copenhagen, and travelled abroad only five times—four times to Berlin and once to Sweden. His prime recreational activities were attending the theatre, walking the streets of Copenhagen to chat with ordinary people, and taking brief carriage jaunts into the surrounding countryside. He was educated at a prestigious boys' school (Borgerdydskolen), then attended Copenhagen University where he studied philosophy and theology. His teachers at the university included F.C. Sibbern, Poul Martin Møller, and H.L. Martensen.

Sibbern and Møller were both philosophers who also wrote fiction. The latter in particular had a great influence on Kierkegaard's philosophico-
literary development. Martensen also had a profound effect on Kierkegaard, but largely in a negative manner. Martensen was a champion of Hegelianism, and when he became Bishop Primate of the Danish People's Church, Kierkegaard published a vitriolic attack on Martensen's theological views. Kierkegaard's brother Peter, on the other hand, was an adherent of Martensen and himself became a bishop in the church. Kierkegaard regarded Martensen as one of his chief intellectual rivals. Martensen was only five years his senior, but was already lecturing at Copenhagen University when Kierkegaard was a student there. Martensen also anticipated Kierkegaard's first major literary project, by publishing a book on Faust. Kierkegaard, who had been working up a project on the three great medieval figures of Don Juan, Faust and Ahasuerus (the wandering Jew), abandoned his own project when Martensen's book appeared, although he later incorporated much of the work he had done into *Either/Or*.

Another very important figure in Kierkegaard's life was J.L. Heiberg, the doyen of Copenhagen's literati. Heiberg, more than any other person, was responsible for introducing Hegelianism into Denmark. Kierkegaard spent a good deal of energy trying to break into the Heiberg literary circle, but desisted once he had found his own voice in *The Concept of Irony*. Kierkegaard's first major publication, *From the Papers of One Still Living*, is largely an attempt to articulate a Heibergian aesthetics—which is a modified version of Hegel's aesthetics. In *From the Papers of One Still Living*, which is a critical review of Hans Christian Andersen's novel *Only A Fiddler*, Kierkegaard attacks Andersen for lacking life-development (*Livs-Udvikling*) and a life-view (*Livs-Anskuelse*) both of which Kierkegaard deemed necessary for someone to be a genuine novelist (*Romandigter*).

Kierkegaard's life is more relevant to his work than is the case for many writers. Much of the thrust of his critique of Hegelianism is that its system of thought is abstracted from the everyday lives of its proponents. This existential critique consists in demonstrating how the life and work of a philosopher contradict one another. Kierkegaard
derived this form of critique from the Greek notion of judging philosophers by their lives rather than simply by their intellectual artifacts. The Christian ideal, according to Kierkegaard, is even more exacting since the totality of an individual's existence is the artifact on the basis of which he is judged by God for his eternal validity. Of course a writer's work is an important part of his existence, but for the purpose of judgment we should focus on the whole life not just on one part.

In a less abstract manner, an understanding of Kierkegaard's biography is important for an understanding of his writing because his life was the source of many of the preoccupations and repetitions within his *oeuvre*. Because of his existentialist orientation, most of his interventions in contemporary theory do double duty as means of working through events from his own life. In particular Kierkegaard's relations to his father and his fiancée Regine Olsen pervade his work. Kierkegaard's pseudonym Johannes Climacus says of Socrates that “his whole life was personal preoccupation with himself, and then Governance comes and adds world-historical significance to it.” Similarly, Kierkegaard saw himself as a “singular universal” whose personal preoccupation with himself was transfigured by divine Governance into universal significance.

Kierkegaard's relation to his mother is the least frequently commented upon since it is invisible in his work. His mother does not rate a direct mention in his published works, or in his diaries—not even on the day she died. However, for a writer who places so much emphasis on indirect communication, and on the semiotics of invisibility, we should regard this absence as significant. Johannes Climacus in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* remarks, “… how deceptive then, that an omnipresent being should be recognizable precisely by being invisible.” Although Kierkegaard's mother is absent, his mother-tongue (*Modersmaal*—etymologically derived from the words for “mother's mark or sign”) is almost omnipresent. Kierkegaard was deeply enamored of the Danish language and worked throughout his writings to assert the strengths of his mother-tongue over the invasive, imperialistic influences
of Latin and German. With respect to the former, Kierkegaard had to petition the king to be allowed to write his philosophy dissertation *On the Concept of Irony with constant reference to Socrates* in Danish. Even though permission was granted he was still required to defend his dissertation publicly in Latin. Latin had been the pan-European language of science and scholarship. In Denmark, in Kierkegaard's time, German language and culture were at least as dominant as Latin in the production of knowledge. In defiance of this, Kierkegaard reveled in his mother-tongue and created some of the most beautifully poetic prose in the Danish language—including a paean to his mother-tongue in *Stages On Life's Way*. In *Repetition* Constantin Constantius congratulates the Danish language on providing the word for an important new philosophical concept, viz. *Gjentagelse* (repetition), to replace the foreign word “mediation”. In general, we might regard the Danish language as Kierkegaard's umbilical attachment to the mother whereas Latin and German represent the law of the father, especially when employed in systematic scholarship (*Videnskab*).

The influence of Kierkegaard's father on his work has been frequently noted. Not only did Kierkegaard inherit his father's melancholy, his sense of guilt and anxiety, and his pietistic emphasis on the dour aspects of Christian faith, but he also inherited his talents for philosophical argument and creative imagination. In addition Kierkegaard inherited enough of his father's wealth to allow him to pursue his life as a freelance writer. The themes of sacrificial father/son relationships, of inherited sin, of the burden of history, and of the centrality of the “individual, human existence relationship, the old text, well known, handed down from the fathers” (*Postscript*) are repeated many times in Kierkegaard's oeuvre. The father's sense of guilt was so great (for having cursed God? for having impregnated Kierkegaard's mother out of wedlock?) that he thought God would punish him by taking the lives of all seven of his children before they reached the age of 34 (the age of Jesus Christ at his crucifixion). This was born out for all but two of the children, Søren and his older brother Peter. Søren was astonished that
they both survived beyond that age. This may explain the sense of urgency that drove Kierkegaard to write so prolifically in the years leading up to his 34th birthday.

Kierkegaard's (broken) engagement to Regine Olsen has also been the focus of much scholarly attention. The theme of a young woman being the occasion for a young man to become “poeticized” recurs in Kierkegaard's writings, as does the theme of the sacrifice of worldly happiness for a higher (religious) purpose. Kierkegaard's infatuation with Regine, and the sublimated libidinal energy it lent to his poetic production, were crucial for setting his life course. The breaking of the engagement allowed Kierkegaard to devote himself monastically to his religious purpose, as well as to establish his outsider status (outside the norm of married bourgeois life). It also freed him from close personal entanglements with women, thereby leading him to objectify them as ideal creatures, and to reproduce the patriarchal values of his church and father. The latter included viewing women in terms of their traditional social roles, particularly as mothers and wives, but also in their traditional spiritual roles as epitomes of devotion and self-sacrifice. Nevertheless, whatever one's life circumstances, social roles and gender, Kierkegaard regarded everyone as equal before God under the aspect of eternity.

2. Kierkegaard's Aesthetics

Kierkegaard presents his pseudonymous authorship as a dialectical progression of existential stages. The first is the aesthetic, which gives way to the ethical, which gives way to the religious. The aesthetic stage of existence is characterized by the following: immersion in sensuous experience; valorization of possibility over actuality; egotism; fragmentation of the subject of experience; nihilistic wielding of irony and skepticism; and flight from boredom.

The figure of the aesthete in the first volume of Either-Or is an ironic portrayal of German romanticism, but it also draws on medieval
characters as diverse as Don Juan, Ahasverus (the wandering Jew), and Faust. It finds its most sophisticated form in the author of “The Seducer's Diary”, the final section of Either-Or. Johannes the seducer is a reflective aesthete, who gains sensuous delight not so much from the act of seduction but from engineering the possibility of seduction. His real aim is the manipulation of people and situations in ways which generate interesting reflections in his own voyeuristic mind. The aesthetic perspective transforms quotidian dullness into a richly poetic world by whatever means it can. Sometimes the reflective aesthete will inject interest into a book by reading only the last third, or into a conversation by provoking a bore into an apoplectic fit so that he can see a bead of sweat form between the bore's eyes and run down his nose. That is, the aesthete uses artifice, arbitrariness, irony, and willful imagination to recreate the world in his own image. The prime motivation for the aesthete is the transformation of the boring into the interesting.

This type of aestheticism is criticized from the point of view of ethics. It is seen to be emptily self-serving and escapist. It is a despairing means of avoiding commitment and responsibility. It fails to acknowledge one's social debt and communal existence. And it is self-deceiving insofar as it substitutes fantasies for actual states of affairs.

But Kierkegaard did not want to abandon aesthetics altogether in favor of the ethical and the religious. A key concept in the Hegelian dialectic, which Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authorship parodies, is Aufhebung (sublation). In Hegel's dialectic, when contradictory positions are reconciled in a higher unity (synthesis) they are both annulled and preserved (aufgehoben). Similarly with Kierkegaard's pseudo-dialectic: the aesthetic and the ethical are both annulled and preserved in their synthesis in the religious stage. As far as the aesthetic stage of existence is concerned what is preserved in the higher religious stage is the sense of infinite possibility made available through the imagination. But this no longer excludes what is actual. Nor is it employed for egotistic ends. Aesthetic irony is transformed into religious humor, and the aesthetic
transfiguration of the actual world into the ideal is transformed into the religious transubstantiation of the finite world into an actual reconciliation with the infinite.

But the dialectic of the pseudonymous authorship never quite reaches the truly religious. We stop short at the representation of the religious by a self-confessed humorist (Johannes Climacus) in a medium which, according to Climacus's own account, necessarily alienates the reader from true (Christian) faith. For faith is a matter of lived experience, of constant striving within an individual's existence. According to Climacus's metaphysics, the world is divided dualistically into the actual and the ideal. Language (and all other media of representation) belong to the realm of the ideal. No matter how eloquent or evocative language is it can never be the actual. Therefore, any representation of faith is always suspended in the realm of ideality and can never be actual faith.

So the whole dialectic of the pseudonymous authorship is recuperated by the aesthetic by virtue of its medium of representation. In fact Johannes Climacus acknowledges this implicitly when at the end of Concluding Unscientific Postscript he revokes everything he has said, with the important rider that to say something then to revoke it is not the same as never having said it in the first place. His presentation of religious faith in an aesthetic medium at least provides an opportunity for his readers to make their own leap of faith, by appropriating with inward passion the paradoxical religion of Christianity into their own lives.

As a poet of the religious Kierkegaard was always preoccupied with aesthetics. In fact, contrary to popular misconceptions of Kierkegaard which represent him as becoming increasingly hostile to poetry, he increasingly referred to himself as a poet in his later years (all but one of over ninety references to himself as a poet in his journals date from after 1847). Kierkegaard never claimed to write with religious authority, as an apostle. His works represent both less religiously enlightened and more religiously enlightened positions than he thought he had attained in his
own existence. Such representations were only possible in an aesthetic medium of imagined possibilities like poetry.

3. Kierkegaard's Ethics

Like the terms “aesthetic” and “religious”, the term “ethics” in Kierkegaard's work has more than one meaning. It is used to denote both: (i) a limited existential sphere, or stage, which is superseded by the higher stage of the religious life; and (ii) an aspect of life which is retained even within the religious life. In the first sense “ethics” is synonymous with the Hegelian notion of *Sittlichkeit*, or customary mores. In this sense “ethics” represents “the universal”, or more accurately the prevailing social norms. The social norms are seen to be the highest court of appeal for judging human affairs—nothing outranks them for this sort of ethicist. Even human sacrifice is justified in terms of how it serves the community, so that when Agamemnon sacrifices his daughter Iphigenia he is regarded as a tragic hero since the sacrifice is required for the success of the Greek expedition to Troy (*Fear and Trembling*).

Kierkegaard, however, does recognize duties to a power higher than social norms. Much of *Fear and Trembling* turns on the notion that Abraham's would-be sacrifice of his son Isaac is not for the sake of social norms, but is the result of a “teleological suspension of the ethical”. That is, Abraham recognizes a duty to something higher than both his social duty not to kill an innocent person and his personal commitment to his beloved son, viz. his duty to obey God's commands.

But in order to arrive at a position of religious faith, which might entail a “teleological suspension of the ethical”, the individual must first embrace the ethical (in the first sense). In order to raise oneself beyond the merely aesthetic life, which is a life of drifting in imagination, possibility and sensation, one needs to make a commitment. That is, the aesthete needs to choose the ethical, which entails a commitment to communication and decision procedures.
The ethical position advocated by Judge Wilhelm in “Equilibrium Between the Aesthetic and the Ethical in the Composition of Personality” (Either-Or II) is a peculiar mix of cognitivism and noncognitivism. The metaethics or normative ethics are cognitivist, laying down various necessary conditions for ethically correct action. These conditions include: the necessity of choosing seriously and inwardly; commitment to the belief that predications of good and evil of our actions have a truth-value; the necessity of choosing what one is actually doing, rather than just responding to a situation; actions are to be in accordance with rules; and these rules are universally applicable to moral agents.

The choice of metaethics, however, is noncognitive. There is no adequate proof of the truth of metaethics. The choice of normative ethics is motivated, but in a noncognitive way. The Judge seeks to motivate the choice of his normative ethics through the avoidance of despair. Here despair (Fortvivlelse) is to let one's life depend on conditions outside one's control (and later, more radically, despair is the very possibility of despair in this first sense). For Judge Wilhelm, the choice of normative ethics is a noncognitive choice of cognitivism, and thereby an acceptance of the applicability of the conceptual distinction between good and evil.

From Kierkegaard's religious perspective, however, the conceptual distinction between good and evil is ultimately dependent not on social norms but on God. Therefore it is possible, as Johannes de Silentio argues was the case for Abraham (the father of faith), that God demand a suspension of the ethical (in the sense of the socially prescribed norms). This is still ethical in the second sense, since ultimately God's definition of the distinction between good and evil outranks any human society's definition. The requirement of communicability and clear decision procedures can also be suspended by God's fiat. This renders cases such as Abraham's extremely problematic, since we have no recourse to public reason to decide whether he is legitimately obeying God's command or whether he is a deluded would-be murderer. Since public
reason cannot decide the issue for us, we must decide for ourselves as a matter of religious faith.

Kierkegaard's ultimate advocacy of divine command metaethics is tempered somewhat by his detailed analyses of the nuanced ways individuals need to relate to God's commands. These analyses amount to a subtle moral psychology, which borders on virtue ethics. It is not enough simply for God to issue a command; we need to hear and obey. But obedience is not straightforward. We can obey willingly or begrudgingly. We can refuse altogether. We can be selectively deaf, or be so filled with our egotistical desires that we are altogether deaf to our duties. In order to obey we first need to cultivate faith, since obedience to a divine command is nonsense unless we at least believe the command has come from God. To cultivate faith in a transcendent, eternal, omnipresent God, who allegedly became incarnate in the form of a particular human being who was put to death, requires one to overcome the offense to one's reason and to adopt a tolerance for paradox. To imagine the enormity of the consequences of sin, yet to relish the possibilities of freedom, engenders anxiety. We need to learn to navigate the treacherous maelstroms of despair, to recognize the self-absorption of demonic states, to veer away from prudence and vanity, and to avoid mere conformity to social mores. We also need to cultivate hope, patience, devotion, and above all love. We also need to be vigilant about our capacity for self-deception and be prepared to suffer for love and for our ultimate spiritual identity.