

# Soren Kierkegaard

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## Soren Kierkegaard

**Born:** 1813 | **Died:** 1855

**Nationality:** Danish

**Primary Field(s):** Philosophy (Existentialism, Religious Philosophy), Theology, Psychology

### 1. Summary

Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) stands as a monumental figure in Western thought, widely recognized as the first philosopher to articulate many of the core tenets of existentialism. His work fundamentally challenged the prevailing rationalist and idealist philosophies of his time, particularly those of G.W.F. Hegel, by shifting the focus from universal systems to the concrete, subjective experience of the individual. Kierkegaard proposed that the individual bears profound responsibility for actively giving meaning to their own life, a task that cannot be delegated or derived from external authority. He passionately stressed the imperative of living with profound passion, unwavering commitment, and a deep sense of self-awareness, urging individuals to confront the anxieties and possibilities inherent in human freedom.

Kierkegaard's philosophy delves into themes of choice, freedom, despair, faith, and the ethical and religious dimensions of human existence. He argued that authentic existence requires individuals to make subjective choices, often in the face of uncertainty and without universal guidelines, leading to a profound sense of self-creation. This emphasis on individual agency and the internal struggle to define oneself laid crucial groundwork for subsequent philosophical movements and psychological theories. His intricate exploration of the self, consciousness, and the subjective nature of truth distinguishes him as a thinker who probed the depths of human experience with unparalleled intensity and nuance.

Beyond his philosophical impact, Kierkegaard is also regarded as one of the intellectual precursors whose ideas provided a foundational framework for Humanistic Psychology. This influential perspective, emerging much later, places significant emphasis on the individual as an active agent driven by an inherent, natural tendency toward self-actualization--the process of fulfilling one's potential and achieving personal growth. Kierkegaard's insistence on the individual's internal experience, their capacity for self-determination, and the importance of personal meaning resonated deeply with humanistic psychologists, establishing a clear lineage from his 19th-century thought to 20th-century psychological theory focused on human flourishing and existential concerns.

### 2. Key Contributions

**Pioneering Existentialism:** Kierkegaard is widely credited with establishing many of the

foundational concepts of existentialism, predating its more formalized development in the 20th century. He vehemently opposed the objective, systematic philosophy prevalent in his era, advocating instead for a philosophy centered on the subjective, suffering, and choosing individual. His works explored themes such as anxiety (Angst), dread, freedom, choice, and responsibility, all of which became hallmarks of later existentialist thought. He argued that existence precedes essence, meaning individuals define themselves through their choices and actions rather than being born with a pre-defined nature.

**The Subjective Individual and Truth:** A cornerstone of Kierkegaard's philosophy is the paramount importance of the individual's subjective experience. He famously asserted that "truth is subjectivity," meaning that genuine truth is not merely a matter of objective facts or rational deduction, but rather a deeply personal and passionately appropriated understanding that transforms the individual's way of being. This radical emphasis on subjective truth challenged the Enlightenment's faith in universal reason and objective knowledge, instead highlighting the internal, lived experience as the locus of authentic meaning and ethical decision-making.

**The "Leap of Faith":** Kierkegaard introduced the concept of the "leap of faith" as a necessary, irrational act of commitment, particularly in the realm of religious belief. He distinguished between the ethical and religious stages of existence, arguing that the transition to a truly religious life involves a radical, non-rational embrace of the absurd and a personal relationship with God that transcends reason and societal norms. This "leap" is not a decision based on logical proof but an act of will and passion that involves tremendous risk and personal commitment, epitomized by the biblical figure of Abraham.

**Stages on Life's Way:** Through various pseudonymous works, Kierkegaard explored different "stages" or spheres of existence: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. The aesthetic individual lives for immediate gratification and pleasure, often leading to despair. The ethical individual lives by universal moral laws and societal duties. The religious individual, transcending both, lives in a profound, subjective relationship with God, often in paradox and isolation from the universal. These stages are not necessarily sequential or progressive in a linear sense, but represent different modes of relating to existence and selfhood, each with its own internal logic and challenges.

**Influence on Humanistic Psychology:** While a philosopher and theologian, Kierkegaard's intense focus on individual subjectivity, freedom, responsibility, anxiety, and the search for meaning directly foreshadowed key tenets of humanistic psychology. His ideas provided a philosophical underpinning for later psychologists like Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, and Rollo May, who emphasized concepts such as self-actualization, authentic living, and the individual's inherent drive towards growth. Kierkegaard's exploration of despair as a spiritual illness and his call for self-acceptance and passionate commitment resonate strongly with therapeutic approaches

aimed at helping individuals find meaning and overcome existential vacuum.

### 3. Intellectual Context and Impact

Kierkegaard's philosophical project was deeply rooted in a critical engagement with the dominant intellectual currents of 19th-century Denmark and Europe, particularly the Hegelian system. He perceived Hegelianism, with its emphasis on objective Spirit, historical progression, and dialectical synthesis, as an impersonal and abstract philosophy that dissolved the concrete individual into a universal, rational process. Kierkegaard's entire output can be seen as a passionate polemic against this philosophical trend, insisting instead on the irreducible particularity, subjectivity, and freedom of the single individual. He also reacted against the institutionalized, complacent Christianity of his time, arguing that it had lost its radical, passionate, and demanding nature, reducing faith to a mere cultural convention.

The impact of Kierkegaard's work has been vast and multifaceted, extending far beyond philosophy into theology, literature, and psychology. In philosophy, he profoundly influenced 20th-century existentialists such as Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus, who developed his themes of anxiety, freedom, responsibility, and the absurd, albeit often in secular contexts. His ideas also resonated with religious thinkers, contributing to Dialectical Theology through figures like Karl Barth, who embraced Kierkegaard's emphasis on God's transcendence and the radical nature of faith.

In psychology, Kierkegaard's detailed phenomenological analyses of human emotions and states of mind--such as anxiety, despair, boredom, and fear--provided rich material for later psychological theories. His exploration of the self and its development, particularly through his pseudonymous characters, offered early insights into personal identity and the internal conflicts of the individual. He is recognized as a significant precursor to both existential psychology and therapy, and as noted, played a crucial foundational role in the emergence of humanistic psychology. His legacy continues to inform discussions on subjectivity, authenticity, ethics, and the nature of religious experience in contemporary thought.

### 4. Major Works

*Either/Or* (1843)

*Fear and Trembling* (1843)

*Repetition* (1843)

*Philosophical Fragments* (1844)

*The Concept of Anxiety* (1844)

*Stages on Life's Way* (1845)

*Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* (1846)

*Works of Love* (1847)

*The Sickness Unto Death* (1849)

*Practice in Christianity* (1850)

## 5. Criticisms and Debates

Kierkegaard's philosophy, while profoundly influential, has also been the subject of various criticisms and debates throughout history. One common critique revolves around his highly individualistic emphasis, which some argue can lead to a form of philosophical isolationism. Critics contend that by focusing so intensely on the "single individual" and the subjective "leap of faith," Kierkegaard diminishes the importance of community, social ethics, and collective action, potentially isolating individuals from shared human experience and collective responsibility. This individualistic bent is sometimes seen as undermining the very possibility of universal moral principles or social progress.

Another area of debate concerns the accessibility and nature of his writing style. Kierkegaard often employed pseudonymity, irony, and indirect communication, which, while intentional and integral to his philosophical method, can be perceived as obscure, difficult, and even elitist by some readers. Critics argue that this deliberate opaqueness complicates the clear articulation of his ideas and can create barriers to understanding, making his work less approachable for a broader audience and leading to varied, sometimes contradictory, interpretations of his core messages. The use of multiple pseudonyms, each with a distinct philosophical viewpoint, can also be challenging for readers attempting to discern Kierkegaard's own definitive stance.

Furthermore, his specific brand of Christian existentialism has drawn criticism from both secular and religious perspectives. Secular critics often find his ultimate appeal to faith and the "absurd" irrational and a retreat from philosophical inquiry into dogma, especially given his rejection of rational proofs for God's existence. Conversely, some traditional theologians and religious thinkers have found his interpretation of Christianity to be idiosyncratic, overly pessimistic, or even heretical, particularly his emphasis on suffering, sin, and the individual's radical discontinuity with the divine, which can be seen as at odds with more communal or sacramental understandings of faith. His harsh critiques of the established church also sparked considerable controversy in his own time and continue to be debated.

## Further Reading

[Søren Kierkegaard - Wikipedia](#)

[Søren Kierkegaard - Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#)

[Søren Kierkegaard - Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#)

[Søren Kierkegaard - Britannica](#)

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