

Philosopher of the Heart: The Restless Life of Søren Kierkegaard

Clare Carlisle. 2019. London: Allen Lane.

An overriding impression from reading this enjoyable and illuminating book is that Kierkegaard would have made a wonderful friend and a great therapist. In Carlisle's portrayal he was kind, challenging, a good listener and non-judgmental. One friend recalled, 'He comforted not by covering up sorrow but by first making one genuinely aware of it, by bringing it to complete clarity' (p 179). Another wrote that despite not being a person with whom one finds tranquillity, it often happens 'that his words made clear to me precisely what I have recently been thinking about' (p xiv). To his sister-in law-who suffered severe depression he said, 'See to it that you love yourself' (p 178).

Carlisle also portrays a restless self-questioning soul, going back and forth over his decisions and position on things, saying he lived his philosophy inwardly, exploring his own anxiety and suffering, and expressing it in his relationships, books and journals. His life's preoccupation was to explore how to be a human being in the world: how to live with others, keep our promises and conform to social expectations while remaining true to ourselves. He created a philosophy anchored in the subjective experience and the idea that every human being is a 'single individual' – an insight that was taken up by later existential philosophers to argue that human nature is not fixed but a creative task for each person.

He understood the anxiety caused by the choices this forces upon us, not least through his own painful experience of discerning who he wanted to become and his subsequent decision to break his engagement to Regine Olsen. His torment over this choice lasted all his life and is explored in his writing in various ways. He ended it because he believed he could not give marriage the commitment it deserved if he was to fulfil his destiny – to become Kierkegaard the writer. It was also a decision never to marry. Arguably it was an honorable action, although it hurt and humiliated her and brought disgrace on himself. He wrote that he could only have become himself through the experience of being engaged to Regine and then living through the misery of extricating himself from this. When he died, he was wearing the engagement ring he had given her.

Carlisle is Reader in Philosophy and Theology at King's College London, and a Kierkegaard scholar. For her, 'he spoke of, and to, a deep need for God within the human heart – a need for love, for wisdom, for peace... he communicated infinite things from his own very human heart' (p 261). He believed each individual belongs to a sphere of infinite depth, which he called 'inwardness' and 'his writing opens up this sphere, right at the heart of life, and beckons the reader into it' (p xvii). Like the man she admires

her style is personal, compassionate, and lyrical.

She has structured the book along a Kierkegaardian path – living forwards then reflecting and understanding backwards, illustrating his ideas about ‘repetition’ and how we can see things differently when we revisit them, and showing the development of his thinking through his own decisions, experiences and relationships. The seminal relationship being his battle in his head with his father which played out in reality in battles with leading churchmen, publishers, critics and other writers. She notes that these people, once Copenhagen’s most illustrious figures, for many of whom he was a lone outsider and an unwelcome stirrer, are now remembered chiefly for their relation to Kierkegaard.

While he was happiest working alone on his writing, he valued immersing himself in the external world by taking daily walks and talks with friends and acquaintances, which he called ‘people baths’. He modelled his style on Socrates, his favorite philosopher, whom Carlisle says introduced him to the deepest questions of existence and taught him how to expose the illusions of an entire age. Indeed, he saw himself as a gadfly, an irritant who ‘owed his philosophical awakening to this eccentric teacher...who taught him how to expose the illusions of an entire age’ (p 241). He relentlessly attacked the complacency of Danish Christendom that he likened to the comfort of a first-class carriage. For him, becoming a Christian was a hard lifelong task, a profound way of life. His subversive central thesis that Christianity (as he construed it) no longer existed in Denmark was a challenge to his whole culture. She suggests he was the first great philosopher to attend to the experience of living in the modern world of newspapers, trains, shopping, amusement parks and abundant information. As a latter day Socrates, he often posed his questions to the crowd in a daily newspaper rather than in the marketplace.

He was constantly torn between the pleasures of writing and the agonies of publication. He feared the reaction to his controversial writings (and particularly how they would distress Regine) so his earlier works were published under pseudonyms. After Regine left Denmark with her husband, he kept up a ‘brisk fire against official Christianity...he railed against Denmark’s silk and velvet pastors’ (p 241) that he said had forgotten what it is to be a Christian and were ready for service when profit was on their side. Carlisle says he suffered digestive problems and was prone to melancholia, hypochondria and superstition. He believed he would not live long which gave him an ultimate writing deadline and helped inspire his prolific output. He sometimes considered hiding away, he was well qualified to be a parish priest or to teach. He fretted that if he continued to publish increasingly provocative works these options would cease to be available. He worried his money would run out but Carlisle says the existential urge was greater and always won out.

The Corsair, a satirical paper, launched a series of attacks on him, not only literary criticism but also character assassination and mockery of

both his philosophy and appearance: ‘His thin legs – one longer than the other – in their uneven trousers’ (p 193). He hated being seen, he was only too aware of his unbalanced gait and strange appearance. He complained ‘in this life his trousers have received too much attention, and his authorship too little’ (p 201). He was wounded by these attacks but could not resist the fight and always returned to the fray armed with his mischievous, satirical wit. Yet when he met people, even his enemies, in the street he was reportedly always calm, funny and affable. He was at odds with his world all his life but was liked and admired by many.

At times I felt irritated by this man and even some dislike – he led a very privileged life with no need to earn a living and as a young man enjoyed all the finer things in life, while his bad-tempered attacks on his fellow citizens were at times quite petulant. He could dole out trenchant criticism but did not like what came back...how all too human! Re-reading the preface it was a relief to learn that Carlisle had at times also felt dislike and been pained by this. She suggests it arises from the unvarnished exposure of all the feelings, his anger and petty resentments that poured into his journals, more so maybe because he lived alone and did not have a wife to complain to. He could be a bit of a joyless prig but he realised this and knew some thought him proud and vain, saying on his death bed that it was not so ‘I am absolutely no better than other people’ (p 248).

His father, who was from peasant stock but grew to become a wealthy merchant by the time of Kierkegaard’s birth, was dominant, austere and prone to severe depressions. Reflecting on his own disposition, he wrote of ‘the dark background of my life...the anxiety with which my father filled my soul’ (p 67) and how this had cut a path through his own life. Yet he had always felt loved by him and in return loved his father fearfully, defiantly and eager to please. As Carlisle says, this early form of loving was ‘a formation, replete with repetition;...that...he would retrace long after leaving home’ (p 72). In 1855, he collapsed in the street and died soon after at the age of forty-two, possibly from a spinal problem. Asked at the end if there was anything he still wanted to say, he answered ‘Greet everyone for me, I have liked them all very much’ (p 247).

Diana Pringle

Neo-Existentialism

Markus Gabriel. 2018. Cambridge: Polity Press.

German philosopher Markus Gabriel is a rising star in academic philosophy. In his previous book *Why the World Does Not Exist*, he attacked the overconfidence of natural science (Gabriel, 2017a). He thought that it was arrogant of natural science to suppose that it could one day provide