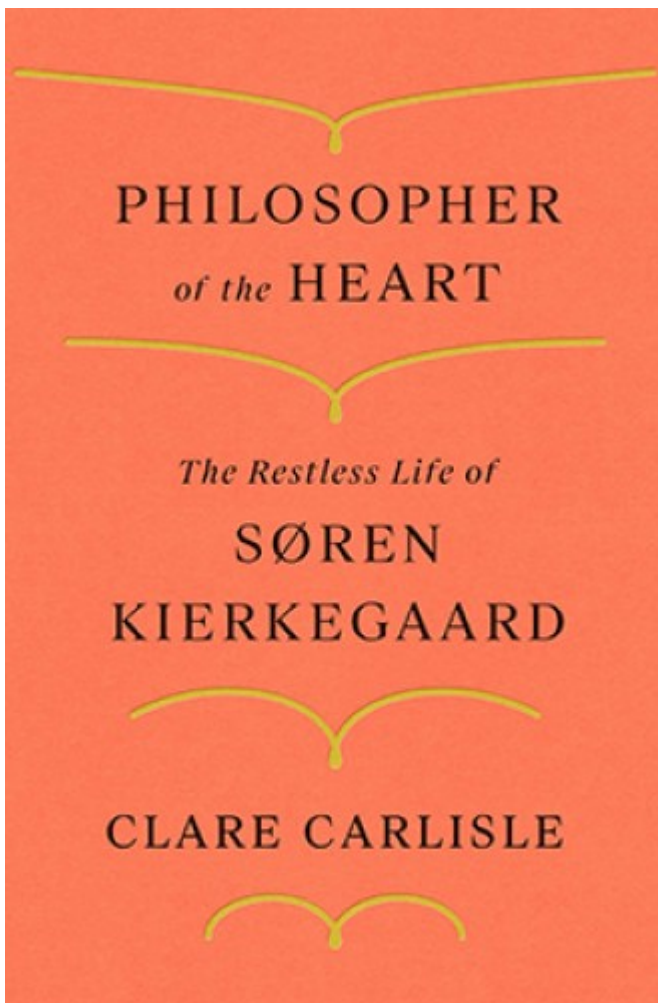


A Kierkegaardian biography of Kierkegaard

Clare Carlisle helps readers struggle with what it means to be human in the world.

by [Alan Van Wyk](#) in the [May 20, 2020](#) issue

In Review



Philosopher of the Heart

The Restless Life of Søren Kierkegaard

By Clare Carlisle
Farrar, Straus and Giroux

Clare Carlisle's wonderful new biography of Søren Kierkegaard is not an easy read. If you are simply looking for the facts of Kierkegaard's life, Alastair Hannay's *Kierkegaard: A Biography* or Stephen Backhouse's *Kierkegaard: A Single Life* might be better choices. Then again, there was nothing easy about Kierkegaard. In his name—which roughly translates as *severe graveyard*—he seems to have inherited a rather strict and demanding personality. As Carlisle admits, Kierkegaard was “not an easy travelling companion.” He was, she continues, “a difficult person—and perhaps dangerous as an exemplar.”

He was also, by many accounts a quite enjoyable walking partner (until the Corsair affair, when he was publicly ridiculed in the satirical magazine *The Corsair*). He spent most afternoons wandering the streets of his native Copenhagen, easily entering into conversation with his neighbors. In these moments, his quick wit was as enjoyable for his friends as it was painful for his enemies.

One of the arguments of Kierkegaard's philosophical and theological work was that Danish Christianity had become too easy. It was his task, he believed, to make Christianity difficult again—a task he fulfilled by producing some of the most creative, innovative, and dense works of European philosophy and theology. This conviction gave rise to a philosophical and theological project that insisted, at its heart, on the passionate silence of faith. The project employed a dizzying host of characters and pseudonymous authors, written in a breathtaking array of styles and genres that makes it impossible to know when Kierkegaard himself is speaking. There is nothing easy about any of that.

In the face of these difficulties, Carlisle announces in her introduction that she is attempting to write a Kierkegaardian biography of Kierkegaard, “following the blurry, fluid lines between Kierkegaard's life and writing, and allowing philosophical and spiritual questions to animate the events, decisions and encounters that constitute the facts of a life.” In practice this means that Carlisle follows Kierkegaard as he continually retraces his life in his writings, struggling over what it might mean to live a life. She returns repeatedly to the question that haunted Kierkegaard: “how to be a human being in the world.”

In her earlier *Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Becoming*, Carlisle, who teaches philosophy and theology at King's College in London, proposed a more straightforward philosophical reading of Kierkegaard. This new Kierkegaardian biography is neither strictly philosophical or theological, nor is it quite an intellectual biography. All three of those readings would be interested in Kierkegaard for the truths he may offer, assuming a kind of authority on his part. Instead Carlisle is after Kierkegaard's struggles with living, and his attempts—and many failures—to figure out what it might mean to be a human being in the world.

As Carlisle proceeds, it becomes clear that the fundamental condition of Kierkegaard's thought and life is the suffering and anxiety that arises from freedom. Although we today are taught to value freedom above all else, often to the detriment of the content of that freedom, Kierkegaard was not so sure. Freedom, he argued, requires a decision, making of our lives an intractable either/or. If our decisions make possible future lives, they are also foreclosures on other possibilities, of what we will no longer be able to do now that this choice, rather than that one, has been made.

In Kierkegaard's little work *The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air*, it is precisely the unfreedom of the lily and the bird that marks them for praise and emulation, for they are simply, purely, and blissfully obedient. For humans (with the exception of a few "knights of faith"), that kind of obedience appears out of reach. In this sense, much of Carlisle's narrative is a tracing of Kierkegaard's attempts, in his writing and his life, to make the anxiety of freedom productive, as well as to collect and recollect his life as a return to decisions already made.

To speak of *decisions* in the plural here might be to overstate the case. For Carlisle's Kierkegaard, there was only one decision in his life that mattered: the breaking off of his engagement to Regine Olsen. Carlisle also makes clear that if this was the singular decision of Kierkegaard's life, the one he continued to return to in his writings and in his living, it was a decision that contained a whole life, all the possibilities of living. "From the start," Carlisle argues, his relationship with Regine was "charged with anxieties about his relationship to the world: should he set himself apart from the world like a hermit or a monk, or plunge into it—chase success, wealth, women; lay claim to the solid ground of a profession, a home, a family?"

The answer to these questions, when asked as the question of how to live as a human being, is “never simply intellectual or pragmatic: it will always be a spiritual task, inseparable from the question of how to live in relation to God.” Carlisle - doesn’t argue it directly, but in her story of Kierkegaard this inseparability appears to be the heart of all of his struggles—how to be faithful to that moment when the question of how to be a human being in the world comes to coincide with that of how to live in relation to God. The answer to both for Kierkegaard is to learn to love, which is also to say, to be faithful.

Kierkegaard, of course, chose the life of the hermit, the monk, the writer. He was never able to convince himself that this decision was faithful or loving to Regine, to himself, or to his God. But it was the choice he made and so it became the choice he lived and relived throughout his life.

One of Carlisle’s great achievements is to present with an immediacy of feeling both the struggle of Kierkegaard’s life and its mundane reality. Her descriptions of Kierkegaard the writer are strikingly visceral—we can see him pacing his room, writing his life into being at the same time that he is almost literally working himself to death. Her descriptions of a Copenhagen on the cusp of European modernity are similarly striking, and we can sense both the radical changes of that world and the extent to which we are still living in it. If the speed and publicness of the modern world lead us to tweets and selfies rather than philosophical treatises, we are no less than Kierkegaard caught in an anxiety of overwhelming freedom now arriving with a speed and amid a crowd we can barely handle. Carlisle’s Kierkegaard reminds us that the solution to this anxiety is not necessarily more freedom, but more love.

If I have a complaint, it is with Carlisle’s reluctance to dive more deeply into the colonial conditions of Kierkegaard’s life. The inherited wealth that allowed him to maintain his life as a hermit, a monk, and a writer came from his father who, as Carlisle notes in passing, “made his fortune selling goods shipped to Copenhagen from the East and West Indies” as part of a generation of men who “could profit from slave labour in the Danish Gold Coast of west Africa.” Two paragraphs are not enough if we are trying to understand a life lived learning to love. What sort of decision, we want Carlisle to ask Kierkegaard, is necessary to be responsible for this, our shared histories of violence?