

# On Søren Kierkegaard

Dialogue, Polemics, Lost Intimacy, and Time

EDWARD F. MOONEY  
*Departments of Religion and Philosophy,  
Syracuse University, USA*

ASHGATE

# Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>	xi
Part One Kierkegaard: A Socrates in Christendom	
1 A New Socrates: The Gadfly in Copenhagen	3
2 A Religious and Interrogating Socrates: Seduction and Definition	21
3 Kierkegaard's Double Vocation: Socrates Becomes Christian	37
4 Transforming Subjectivities: Lost Intimacy, Words on the Fly	61
Part Two Love, Ethics, and Tremors in Time	
5 Love, This Lenient Interpreter: Masks Reveal Complexity of Self	89
6 Anxious Glances: A Seaward Look Renews Time and Seeker	107
7 <i>Either/Or</i> : Perils in Polarity: Crossing the Aesthetic-Ethical Divide	117
8 <i>Fear and Trembling</i> : Spectacular Diversions	137
9 <i>Repetition</i> : Gifts in World-Renewal: Repetition is Required Time	157
Part Three Plenitude, Prayer, and an Ethical Sublime	
10 <i>Postscript</i> and Other Ethics: Intimations of Our Next Self	177
11 <i>Postscript</i> : Possibilities Imparted: The Artistry of Intimate Connections	201
12 <i>Postscript</i> : Humor Takes it Back: Revocation Opens for Required Time	217
13 <i>Discourses</i> : Plenitude and Prayer: Words Instill Silence – To What End?	227
<i>Bibliography</i>	245
<i>Index</i>	255

# A New Socrates: The Gadfly in Copenhagen

*The other day I told you about an idea for a Faust,  
now I feel it was myself I was describing.  
– Papers, 1836-7*

*by bringing poetized personalities  
who say I into the centre . . . ,  
contemporaries once more [can] hear an I,  
a personal I, speak.  
– Papers, 1847*

## Sketching Life

### *Gathering Possibilities*

In the late 1830s, early in his writing career, Kierkegaard experiments with sketches of Faust in search of knowledge. He makes sketches of other fable-like figures, sketches of the Wandering Jew in search of home, of the prankster Til Eulenspiegel in search of laughs, the Master Thief in love with surreptitious gain – or perhaps in love with lawlessness itself, and of Don Juan in search of woman.<sup>1</sup> These sketches might have been partial self-portraits, or explorations of trajectories his life might assume. They were also experiments in writing, but writing, for Kierkegaard, was always a way of questioning and consolidating what he felt to be the enigma of his existence.

---

1 Kierkegaard, *Papers and Journals, A Selection*, ed. and trans. Alastair Hannay, New York: Penguin Books, 1996. Eulenspiegel, 35, I, A 51; Faust, 35, I, A 72; 35, I, A 104; 35, I, C 58; 36-7, I, A 333; 37, II, A 29; 37, II, A 56; Wandering Jew, 35, I, C 58; 37, II, A 56; Master Thief: 34, I, A 12; Don Juan 35, I, C 58. Because of its accessibility and the felicity of its translations, whenever possible I cite *Nachlass* passages from Hannay's selection (henceforth Hannay, *Papers*). Alternatively, one can consult *Søren Kierkegaard's Papirer*, I-XI, ed. P. A. Heiberg, V. Kuhr, and E. Torsting (1 ed., Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1968-70). On Kierkegaard's attraction to these "mythic" figures, see also Hannay's account, *Kierkegaard: A Biography*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 58-63. Epigraph from previous page "Forsaking Prying Knowledge," Hannay, *Papers*, 46, VII, 1, A 186. Epigraphs from this page, Hannay, *Papers*, 36-7, 1, A 333; 47, VIII, 2, B 88.

Later we get sketches of Socrates, as if Kierkegaard were experimenting with the idea of taking on a Socratic mantle. This would be a Socrates who might even carry over traits from Faust, the Wandering Jew, Eulenspiegel, Don Juan, or the Master Thief. We'd sense a Socrates in relentless search for knowledge, yet failing, and passing off his futile seeking as a virtue (a kind of Faust); a Socrates who could seem rootless and alien to those who took his piety to be impious (a Wandering Jew);<sup>2</sup> a Socrates who could be a subtle trickster who could launch a line of inquiry about your life that seemed both pertinent and impertinent and, by his logical slight of hand, drive you to exasperation (an Eulenspiegel). We'd sense a Socrates on the verge of seducing his interlocutors (Don Juan), perhaps into lawlessness, while claiming a humble ignorance (a Master Thief). This would also be a Socrates willing to die for a vocation that we can't help but admire (a saint, or as some early Church Fathers thought, a prototype or avatar of Christ).<sup>3</sup>

As Kierkegaard's career opens out in the 1840s, we have the sketches on which his lasting reputation as a writer will come to rest. They are less fable-like, yet they still lay out ways of life that we or he might aspire to attain – or ways of life that are cautionary tales: lives to avoid, that drift aimlessly, hopelessly, or that have a demonic drive. These narrative sketches – like fairy tales, operas, comedies, or scripture – show possibilities of a range of emotion or passion, a range of various attunement, attitude, or mood, a range of strength or weakness of character.

In *Either/Or*, his first great work after his dissertation, Kierkegaard composes voices from a decidedly amoral, aesthetic way of life. We have the voyeuristic stalker of “The Seducer’s Diary,” and then the infamous Don Giovanni, the seducer in Mozart’s opera. *Either/Or* is a massive compendium of texts, and presents the expected answer to a seducer’s life in the staid ethical voice of an apparently happily married and well-employed Judge Wilhelm. From the title, *Either/Or*, we know these sketches of contrasting ways of life present life-possibilities that readers should take to heart. They are literary experiments, but not only that. They bear down on us existentially.

The gallery of wonderful, strange, and frightening portraits continues to expand through Kierkegaard’s prodigious authorship. In *Fear and Trembling*, we find the Biblical Abraham treated, in part, as a template through which fables of a religious

---

2 Marcia C. Robinson traces Kierkegaard’s early immersion in the storytelling and literary criticism of Tieck. From the start, she argues, Kierkegaard saw that storytelling at its best was an aesthetic activity inescapably linked to religious and ethical orientations. The religious, ethical and aesthetical were *fused* in the best of writing (and, presumably, in the best of living). The aesthetic is degenerate only when cut off from the religious and the ethical. See “Tieck: Kierkegaard’s ‘Guadalquivir’ of Open Critique and Hidden Appreciation,” *Kierkegaard and his German Contemporaries*, Vol. 5, ed. Jon Stewart, Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007. Kierkegaard’s late reflection that he is like the Wandering Jew is noted by Paul Muench, “Kierkegaard’s Socratic Task,” Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 2006, p. 304. See also George Pattison’s masterful discussion of the Wandering Jew in *Kierkegaard, Religion and the Nineteenth-Century Crisis of Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, Chapter 4.

3 See Mark L. McPherran, *The Religion of Socrates*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996, p. 3.

or irreligious life could be projected. Still further on, in his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard creates a stock figure for ridicule, the enthusiastic assistant professor, floating in abstractions. In *Stages on Life's Way*, we discover an array of characters gathered in a discussion modeled, in part, on Plato's *Symposium*, where speakers talk of love, and toward the end, perhaps enact it.

We're given an ever-expanding portfolio of sketches of a soul, or of a creature's flailing search for soul, or of creatures defiantly rejecting the soul they might become. We have, in fact, an array of portfolios, for Kierkegaard distributes his work among various intermediaries, pseudonyms, or mock-authors, with names like Johannes de silentio, Victor Eremita, Johannes Climacus, and half a dozen others.<sup>4</sup> This ever-expanding circus of contrasting voices speak and bespeak an array of life-possibilities that does nothing to foreclose the dizzying possibility of a never-to-be-ended search. Kierkegaard is not a writer to give us a flat, finished sketch of the most desirable or worthy life – and leave it at that.

Many of Kierkegaard's sketches are strangely self-questioning. The famous *Concluding Unscientific (or Unscholarly) Postscript* looks like a scholarly tome designed to mock scholarly tomes. John of silence, the putative author of *Fear and Trembling*, is anything but silent. Johannes Climacus, John the Climber (or John Ladder), the designated author of *Postscript*, seems to ascend towards ever-improved views of religiousness or piety, but he also seems to climb down into giddy irony and humor.<sup>5</sup> Can *that* be part of piety? Quick wit and humor is hardly the mood or attunement that Anti-Climacus inhabits in *Sickness Unto Death*, concerned as it is with modes of despair. And that landmark double book, *Either/Or*, may not in fact present a crucial choice between an "either" and an "or," but instead present a subtle neither-nor.

These endless instabilities provoke and puzzle us. Which is fundamental, humor or despair? Who is fundamental, Socrates or Christ? Are Kierkegaard's works excessively intellectual or essentially anti-intellectual? Are we to admire or condemn Abraham? Is Climacus earnest or ironical? If we probe these instabilities, they can quickly become dizzying, prompting us to grasp for a steadying interpretative equilibrium, or perhaps prompting us to forego stability, to venture living without it, yet not thereby succumbing to despair. We can find ourselves shifting from the question of restoring interpretative stability in our understanding of how these issues play out for Kierkegaard – toward a focus on stability or disruption as *we try to live these issues out*, find them play out, in our own experience.

The enigmas of the authorship seem unmasterable, and not because Kierkegaard lacks the talent to bring his writing to a rounded and satisfying closure. The endlessly coiling enigmas reproduce a deep fact of human existence, its lack of rounded closure. Kierkegaard engages us in an irresistibly fascinating rehearsal of the coiling instabilities in figures like Faust or Abraham or the seducer in *Either/Or*: These

---

4 Others include Hilarius Bookbinder, H. H., Anti-Climacus, "A," Judge Wilhelm, Inter et Inter, Vergilius Haufniensis, Nicholas Notebene, Constantine Constantius and a proposed author for *Fear and Trembling*, Simon Stylites, Solo Dancer and Private Individual.

5 See John Lippitt, *Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard's Thought*, New York: St Martin's Press, 2000.

figures shadow fascinating allures and instabilities in Kierkegaard's life as well, as we glimpse segments of it in his *Journals and Papers*. And these fascinations in turn activate a shadow of ourselves.

As we live out in our own imagination the allures and instabilities that Kierkegaard exhibits, we become responsive to those trajectories of becoming that are intimately our own. This triggers a deviation – really, an uncanny complication – in our course. As we allow Kierkegaard to engage us existentially, scholarly Kierkegaard-interpretation becomes interlaced with the intimacies of self-examination. By design, it seems, Kierkegaard begins to recede as an objective problem for scholarly inquiry or accurate exposition. I came to his text to learn “about Kierkegaard,” about what *he* knew – only to hear him ask, almost impertinently, what *I* know (if anything) about *my* life. I enter the unnerving shift from reading him to *being read*. I'm no longer preparing an exposition that can tutor the uninitiated in the puzzles he presents. I'm his *patient*, as it were, listening for counsel, immersed in the puzzle of *my* existence (and resistance). I'm prepared to be *mentored* by the mysteries and powers of the text.

To let Kierkegaard deal with us is like letting Socrates draw out something unexpected from our lives, helping us to be who we are and who we could become. Socrates is not a well-schooled expert in some technical field whose “knowledge” could be transcribed in a manual. He has no knowledge of that sort to convey, and so calls himself “ignorant.” His wisdom is that he knows that he knows nothing of the sort. He's a midwife, bringing whomever he encounters to birth, or toward a birth. He's a guide through the pain and joy and danger of intimate transformation, someone there to help. Kierkegaard describes his *own* task as Socratic, taking away platitudes or slogans in the course of giving readers, one by one, an independence, bringing to birth the singularities they are. He mentors and reads us – in the interest of *setting free*.

As someone who will recount the landscape and particular features of Kierkegaard's writing, I must be a kind of tutor, untangling the ins and outs of the texts. That's a scholarly task. But I also have to evoke the way that Kierkegaard mentors *me* – or *you*. That's an unscholarly, unscientific task, and not at all a postscript to his ventures (or to mine). Looking at texts becomes musing on the self or soul not only of Socrates, say, or of a citizen he accosts, or of Kierkegaard, or of a soul he lays bare in writing. It becomes musing on the self or soul of an intimate acquaintance. I muse the labyrinths of my soul. He lures me into *his* world – to let me see how it's *mine*, as well. And like the best of mentors, he then steps aside to send me on my way.

### *Encountering the Soul*

Despite the great variety of his texts and their destabilizing enigmas, Kierkegaard pursues a disarmingly simple question. It's the ancient Greek question: “*What makes for a good life*, or at least a better life, life as it was meant to be (if it yet can mean at all)?”

We seek a satisfying life responsive to what we are, including especially our needs and aspirations and what might answer them. Following Plato, we might think

of virtues or excellences that, when incorporated in our lives, would make them more worthy: honor or courage, moderation or justice might be such strengths. Or from a more recent cultural base, we might think of solidarity or creative initiative, of service or hard work or honesty. A Christian might reserve a place for hope or charity or worship, and a Buddhist might seek a release from willfulness that saves a place for flowering compassion.

Searching for virtues to consolidate a better life would be one way to respond to the question Kierkegaard presents, but consolidation might require something else, perhaps a mood, tonality or attitude. We might seek a serenity, a life of less uncertainty, one with greater promise to keep despair or emptiness at bay; or seek a subtle openness to our inescapable and grounding dependencies on others.<sup>6</sup> Yet again, it might seem that we should seek not exactly virtue, or an apt attuning mood, but the right modulation, quality, or intensity of our passions. We'd seek to feel things more deeply, or to damp down excitements, or to align passions with a community or landscape or with new ways of life alien to parents, strange to the friends of our youth. Of course, moods, virtues, and passions are not entirely separate consolidators of a life. They're interlocked in those ways of life we can admire and make our own.

The search for a confluence of virtues, passions, and attunements might just be the best picture we can ever get of the soul or self, what we might call the animating center of a life. The human task would be to seek such soul or self, to trace unfolding moods, passions and excellences that we especially care about as an unfolding story that might be ours, and to live out the emerging narratives and paths that they delineate.

Kierkegaard's journeys through ways of life are his search for self, for the vital core of the moods, virtues, and passions that give life. This makes his writing a spiritual discipline in the tradition Martha Nussbaum calls the Stoic "therapy of desire" and what Kierkegaard might call a therapy of passions.<sup>7</sup> Love of wisdom becomes *askesis*, a purifying moral exercise. In Rick Furtak's phrase, it's a "quest for emotional integrity."<sup>8</sup> These Kierkegaardian-Socratic exercises trace paths he can take to heart (as well as other paths that he will disown). As he puts it in a very early note, he searches ". . . for an idea for which I can live and die."<sup>9</sup> And he invites others to the venture, for this therapy is not done alone. Writing needs a fair share of readers *for* whom one writes, and a fair share of writers *from* whom one learns. What seems a solitary moral discipline is in fact deeply social, deeply dialogical. Spiritual exercises presuppose others within earshot, including imaginary others. Kierkegaard brings those within the city into conversation. But he also brings in Socrates, Faust,

---

6 See Robert Pippin's account of ethics as a subtle openness to dependence in *Henry James and Modern Moral Life*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000, and my response, "What has Hegel to Do with Henry James? Acknowledgment, Dependence, and Having a Life of One's Own," *Inquiry*, 45(3), 2002, pp. 331-50.

7 See Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994.

8 See Rick Anthony Furtak, *Wisdom in Love: Kierkegaard and the Ancient Quest for Emotional Integrity*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005. See also Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002.

9 "The Gilleleje Testament," Hannay, *Papers*, Gilleleie, August 1, 1835, 35, I, A 75.

Quixote, and the many future readers he anticipates, not exempting *us*. We're drawn into intimate communion along an extended conversational excursion.

### *Overviews and Contact*

There are countless telling moments of contact in reading Kierkegaard that deserve fine-grained attention. Judge Wilhelm in *Either/Or* confronts the aesthete (referred to only as "A" – as in "anonymous," or perhaps "nameless"). A heartsick young man in *Repetition* exchanges letters with a dubious friend, and most famously, in *Fear and Trembling*, Abraham journeys fatefully with Isaac to Moriah. I join such Kierkegaardian moments, starting in Chapter Six. There we begin with a woman's seacoast longing glance, a glance of unrequited love. In subsequent chapters we continue a traverse through such moments of insight, excitement, and despair, through *Either/Or*, *Fear and Trembling*, *Postscript*, and other texts, ending in a quiet, still moment, the silence of prayer, from his *Discourses*. These moments shine against a background, a setting. The broad setting or ambiance of Kierkegaard's conspectus is the vista of my attention in this Socratic Part One.

There's no better way to give this vista than to make it Socratic, letting Kierkegaard's life and work resound as a Socratic venture, weaving strands from the Athenian's dramatic life back and forth through strands of Kierkegaard's accomplishment. Kierkegaard himself confided that Socrates framed his life. From his deathbed, looking back on all that lay behind, he writes, "The only analogy I have for what I am doing is Socrates. My task is the Socratic task of revising the definition of what it means to be a Christian."<sup>10</sup>

Socrates gives us the opening we need to glimpse the maze of Kierkegaard's texts without, as it were, being utterly abandoned within his labyrinth. Casting Kierkegaard as the Socrates he took himself to be sheds unexpected light. Yet Socrates is himself a kind of maze, his portrait shifting through Plato's accounts, and Kierkegaard will cast him differently in different texts. Still, if we need an overview – and we *do* – there's no better guide. An overview means hovering at some height, dropping down to pick out passages here and there and then lifting up again. It's needed because no single text or passage gives us the broad horizon needed to appreciate Kierkegaard's ground-bass motifs: philosophy as care for the soul; care as an intellectual and a religious exercise; Socrates as an exemplar; the marriage of Socratic and Christian trajectories and loyalties.

Kierkegaard picks up the Socratic counsel to live the examined life, yet he also praises yielding to other passions that are central to a worthy life. There are several phases of a self's becoming, each embedding different passions. We *examine* a self for one thing, but we also *seek* a self, which involves a different passion. We *yield* to exemplars and to apt passions or energies as they bud, which is something different yet again. And we *bring out* or *articulate* a promising path of life and aspects of a self, perhaps in silence, perhaps in action that's quite eloquent. Examining, seeking,

---

10 See Kierkegaard, *The Moment and Late Writings*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998, p. 341. The remark was penned in 1854.

yielding, and articulating are not equivalent projects, though they work together. There can be deep tensions and disharmonies inherent in this passionate becoming, issuing in degrees of existential crisis. The coiling enigmas of the Kierkegaardian texts play out these phases of the self or soul in its becoming. Even though pursuing these enigmas intimates an endless task, it also foretells a brute fact – human existence lacks rounded closure.

### *A Labyrinth in Flux*

Finding the self is less like finding a shiny key for the moment lost in shadow than like making one's way through a maze, finding orientation in it as we move through. But if we're in motion, how can we hope to hold in focus these shifting glimpses of reconfiguring passion, mood, and strength that might provide us orientation? How do we "examine" something drenched in shadows that won't hold still? At the end of the day, will Kierkegaard give us a steady portrait, or will this venture be, as we've intimated, an endless affair?

No map of the soul's unfolding will be complete, and not because time runs out (though it will). We contend with the slippage of time, with unrequited time, continually losing who we are. Love is love, but it's also, strange to say, love lost. No amount of sprinting or slowing down lets us recover that loss. As various moods, passions, or excellences strike us as pertinent, a mapping begins. We try to capture their drift, but discover soon enough that we're moving targets to ourselves. Like an ever-changing riverbed, the self's terrain is constantly under reconstruction, its former shape lost in the past as new shapes supervene. Self or soul shifts as it undergoes life's flows and rapids and countervailing eddies – and occasionally, it settles in quiet pools.

There are unfolding spans of *reflective sketching* of the self underway, of what's lost (just behind); of what's strikingly with us (just now), and of what's anticipated (just ahead). There are unfolding spans of *strategic reflection* on how to negotiate what's ahead in light of what's behind, and spans of *active response*, which include *willingness* or *yielding* as well as resolute *decision*. These phases of unfolding emerge interactively and in flux. So the task of catching, or being, or becoming a self is a triple knot: catching a relatively unpredictable target on the move – catching it *even as the movement-of-catching-it* alters the target's motion – and catching it *even as we give subtle or dramatic impetus* to its flow in moments of judgment, negotiation, and action that may be directed to things other than the self that was the moving target in our moving sights.

By her unfolding pen-strokes an artist "avows," as it were, that her model's countenance is like *this*, even as her sketching can intimate to her something of who *she* (not her model) *is in the world*. She's a person strangely attracted to a certain curl of the lip; and then she's someone perplexed about what that unsought attraction might *mean*. Her self-awareness wanders toward adjacent attractions or perplexities

as she monitors the mobile countenance of her own existence dancing in tandem with the apparently more steady countenance of her sitting model.<sup>11</sup>

That's what it's like to read Kierkegaard. By a sympathetic vibration, as it were, his watch on himself-watching-another can set off our own self-watching. We find ourselves searching-ourselves even as we monitor his search-of-himself through his sketch of a Judge or an Abraham. Of course self-examination is worthy as it completes itself in action or inaction that will round out the affirmations, negations, and judgments that precede it. So it is with Kierkegaard. And he'll bring in the gift of our capacity to halt endless self-reflection or self-watching (which otherwise becomes paralyzing, endlessly regressive: watching a watching that's watching . . . ). He'll bring in and honor decision as a phase of becoming that's as worthy as reflection.

This continuous flow of self illustrates unrequited and requited time. Temporality is in part the affliction of *unrequited time*, a suffering of time slipping by. In *Fear and Trembling* and the *Concept of Anxiety*, unrequited lovers seek their beloved in time now lost. Yet as important as the recognition of time lost, slipping by, is the recognition of time renewed, time regained. As present moments fade, new ones befall us, holding unexpected joys (and yes, perhaps new afflictions). When *goods* befall us, time is *requited*. Isaac is lost and then wondrously returned. A hope for time's requital is what Kierkegaard calls a hope for repetition, for goods unreachable by effort but received willingly as gift.

For lovers, each moment is a wondrous and unexpected gift, but we are not always lovers, and so we suffer lost love. Quests for self resemble quests for love, each a stint with unrequited time. Not to despair of love's requital means not to lose hope for "repetition," a "movement" that returns love, self, and lost time. As responsible, temporal beings, we take up the tasks of being true to what we are and can be, and suffer the vulnerability of knowing that our efforts may or may not be requited. Obtruding futures disrupt attempts to know or preserve a flux-of-self. Yet despite despair of lasting closure here, the search continues, for living can't be forever sidestepped or postponed.

### *Transformative Exercises*

We assemble pictures of the soul – of Socrates, a seducer, or a city Judge – not just to spread out in a gallery to contemplate. We want to sort better life-possibilities from lesser ones in order better to *live out* the better (and avoid the worse). We work to take a possibility to heart, to let the living spirit of the better there in the sketches thrive as it becomes our own.<sup>12</sup> What are we to *make* of Faust or Socrates, the Master

---

11 See Robert Pippin, "On 'Becoming Who One Is' (and Failing): Proust's Problematic Selves," in Nikolas Kompridis, ed., *Philosophical Romanticism*, London: Routledge, 2006, pp. 113-40. Consider also Wilde's classic *Portrait of Dorian Gray*.

12 "Appropriation" has unfortunately become a term of art in reading Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and others. As I hear it, the basic idea is *to take up with* an idea or theme in an invested way, to take it to heart. The root meaning of "appropriation" in English still carries overtones of theft or seizure – appropriating property not one's own. You might "take up with"

Thief or voyeuristic Seducer, of the complacent Judge or an enigmatic Abraham? Then there's Anti-Climacus, that dialectician of despair, or Johannes Climacus, that mocker of professors and purveyor of high humor. Pursuing these is not just amusing recreation, or a brain-teasing challenge. These figures and their adjunct life-path scripts raise existential questions, challenges that test who and what I am. So I'm inevitably implicated as I work within and among the varieties of soul that Kierkegaard lays out.<sup>13</sup>

If *writing* is a spiritual (or even sacramental) exercise for Kierkegaard, *reading* is one too. In exchange that's sacramental, we call on and receive the sacred in a context of earnest spiritual-moral practice, ritual, or routine. Kierkegaard composed his works to be read aloud, and he often writes as a reader of his *own* work, reviewing it as a third party might. If I read his work, not to give an exposition of it but as a spiritual exercise, it will reveal me to myself. As I read its worlds, so it reads me, I *hear* myself in it. *My* soul-seeking runs in tandem with *his*.

In reading to be read, I am in part (and quite obscurely) *what* I search for – what I *love* or take to heart. I'm also, in part, a set of already engaged (and obscurely bequeathed) *resources*: for *initiating* self-seeking, for *recognizing clues* of progress (or defeat), for *taking to heart* the soul I glimpse as mine, and for *taking the next step*, “living forward,” as Kierkegaard will say. There's plenty of room, then, for mystery, puzzlement, and acceptance of grace in this light-and-shadowed wilderness we call the self.

To “know” myself intimately, existentially, seems as impossible as catching myself in motion, and *catching the me that does the catching*, as impossible as stepping in the same river twice. Kierkegaard is Socrates, but also Heraclitus, the obscure philosopher, the poet of flux and strife and instability, the writer of fragments, the sage who warned, “You would not find the boundaries of the soul, even if you should travel along every path, so deep is its account.”<sup>14</sup>

---

(“appropriate”) a subjective truth. But then again, so it seems to me, a subjective truth might *take up with you*. For Kierkegaard, being “appropriated” *by* the truth (or by a truth) is the other side of taking up with it.

13 In Chapter Seven, I discuss how *Either/Or* implicates a reader, reflecting back to the reader the stance the reader takes to the text, and thus opening toward a moral judgment of the reader. If I'm too hastily indifferent to parts of a Kierkegaard text, that fact can serve to show me, at second glance and as the dismissed text does work behind my back, that I'm hastily indifferent not only to it but to parts of my life that deserve more attention as well – more *moral* attention, that is. The text thus reads the moral contours of my life and judges it accordingly. Clark West has reminded me that this is just the way Nathan's parable to David serves to judge David, who is the reader (or hearer) of that text. See Chapter Three, note 4.

14 Heraclitus, Fragment #45, (Diel's numbering), quoted in Nussbaum's essay, “Aristotle on Human Nature,” in Ross Harrison and J.E.J. Altham, eds, *World, Mind, and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 86.

## Falling for Socrates

### *Skeptical Unknowing*

Kierkegaard, like Plato, gives us the verbal wit and living presence of Socrates, reanimating that gadfly of Athens, whom he restages amidst the flux of meanings-given and meanings-lost in and around a modern life. Even as he writes, Kierkegaard steps aside to let another respond, which makes his writing deeply dialogical, like Plato's. His address singles out a person whom he greets as "my reader." We're not allowed to turn anonymous, be "just anyone in general." Whoever reads him from heart and mind wins his intimate address.

Socrates maintains a steady *skeptical reserve*, for a good teacher won't impede a student's budding sense of self by an excessive intrusion of his or her own opinions or views.<sup>15</sup> Silence or reserve lets freedom of another grow. There's a pedagogical wisdom in stepping aside to let a student blossom on her own. Of course, this skeptical reserve is wise for another, substantive reason. Epistemically and practically we sail uncharted seas into the unknown, especially as we pursue our deepest passions. Final ignorance here is inescapable.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, wisdom is linked to silence and reserve because as we absorb the utter *importance* of a theme for (and of) our life, we're at a loss how to convey to others exactly how and why it lies so *heavily* with us. The common stock of platitudes or clichés or wooden dogmas just won't do. But what words *do* we have – beyond phrases learned by rote? There's wisdom in frankly witnessing to the condition of *being at a loss for words*, especially as words fail to sound the depth of our concern. This witness is in welcome contrast to the chatter of the city. Kierkegaard applauds.

Yet are Socrates or Kierkegaard really in the dark about knowledge? If knowledge is a virtue, and Socrates is a paragon of virtue, he must possess knowledge – so it seems. And frequently he tells us what he knows – for instance, what he knows about love, or about gratitude toward the city that nurtured him like a parent. So his ignorance isn't thoroughgoing. Perhaps he feigns ignorance to draw his interlocutor into dialogue, not letting on that he's holding the answers up his sleeve. Yet there's another way to hear this profession. His knowledge – and virtue – is not that he knows absolutely nothing, but that he knows how *little* he knows, overall, in a city that thinks it knows nearly everything, a city that hardly acknowledges its ignorance at all. The virtuous life is traversing the uncharted, living with unknowing. And we'll see that traversing the uncharted in matters of our deepest need characterizes

---

15 Ancient skepticism introduced doubt in the interest of leading a better life – not as an academic puzzle.

16 Climacus characterizes passion as a river of which we know neither the source nor the mouth: *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992, Vol.1, p. 237 (hereafter, *CUP*). I discuss passion as a deeper basis for understanding persons than language, belief, and action, in "Becoming What We Pray: Passion's Gentler Resolutions," in Bruce Ellis Benson and Norman Wirzba, eds, *The Phenomenology of Prayer*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2005. Kierkegaard writes, "What unites all human beings is passion. So religious passion, faith, hope and love, are everything." Hannay, *Papers*, 42-3, IV, C 96.

not only a virtuous, philosophical way of life, but also a religious one. Being candid about living without answers is the opposite of holding answers up one's sleeve (as a trickster Socrates or Kierkegaard might).

### *Failing Method*

Most textbook introductions depict Socrates as the inventor of the sort of cross-examination we find in contemporary courtrooms. This stubborn method of rational confrontation cost Socrates his life. He might or might not have been martyred for his religious convictions, but assuredly he was charged and put to death for his relentless, pesky, irreverent *questioning*.

The novelty and threat of his questions, their intolerable bite, were traumatic for Athenians. Interrogation was supposed to serve a moral purpose. At first glance, that purpose seems to be to uncover essential definitions, of friendship, say, or piety. Shouldn't that benefit Athens? It could move one or many toward a better life. An Athenian who submitted would be improved precisely by acquiring an intellectual grounding in explicit definitions. But, as we know, this demand for definition was seen by the city not as a benefit but as a threat. Socrates was dangerous and impertinent. Who was *he* to suggest that *they* needed to question the underpinnings of their lives?

Kierkegaard admires this familiar interrogating Socrates, and he also admires the Socrates who speaks lyrically for Diotima and for love in the *Symposium*. Socrates appears in Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments* (better translated, *Crumbs*, or *Trifles*) where he's cast as an advocate of the Platonic doctrine that "knowledge is recollection," the view that rational interrogation can induce recollection of a now forgotten intellectual truth.<sup>17</sup> But as Kierkegaard's title suggests, the results will disappoint. They'll be intellectually meager, mere *crumbs*. Kierkegaard surely knows that the great visions of Plato's middle dialogues – *Symposium*, *Republic*, *Phaedo* – arrive not through cross-examination but through myth, witness, or a kind of Socratic poetic revelation or exposition. The early dialogues – *Lysis*, on friendship, *Euthyphro*, on piety – tend to be *aporetic*, unresolved. They ought, accordingly, to cast doubt on our ready confidence (if we have it) in cross-examination's promise. We're left baffled, "ignorant," perhaps irritated or angry. And yet Socrates seems strangely comfortable without answers.

Initially, the attractiveness of Socratic interrogation lay in its promise to uncover moral definitions that could ground our lives securely. But that pledge now seems dashed. Of course, the method does good work in exposing false assumptions and untruths. But the hope was for something more redeeming. Perhaps there might be subtle but nonetheless quite valuable collateral effects, effects that are achieved

---

17 To translate the Danish *smule* or *smuler* as "Fragments" can suggest misleadingly that something whole has been shattered, and might be reassembled. "Fragments" also fails to capture the Biblical resonance of "the morsel that falls from the master's table." Paul Muench suggests "trifle," a neglected option. Taking his cue, the title's full length and lightness could then best be given as *Philosophical Crumbs, or a Trifle of Philosophy*. See Muench, "Kierkegaard's Socratic Task," p. 240.

indirectly in the course of approaching this destination that holds no answers. Say an “essential definition” of some pivotal moral term eludes us (as is usually the case). In the process of pursuing first *this* definitional proposal, and then the *next*, we come to acquire a sense of its rough contours, and of the contextual “associative field” that it occupies.<sup>18</sup> Something about justice or friendship or piety will come into view *even if* we are denied a crisp and adequate definition. That’s a reason to keep listening to Socrates (or Kierkegaard, for that matter) even when we’re left baffled or empty-handed. And we *do* keep listening.

There’s another reason to keep listening. We’ve become attached to Socrates because he offers his *person*, his *character*, his *vision*, even as he fails to give us definitions. He offers himself as a site that exemplifies truth, virtue, and wisdom. I’ll come back to explore this second reason to keep listening. At the moment I want to take up a moral burden that both Socrates and Kierkegaard incur as they promote a method that they know will fail. The moral problem is that they seem to *cover up* a feature of interrogation. In order to get citizens to buy into their enterprise, they seem to be *deceptive* about the downsides.

Well, I’ve exaggerated slightly, for Socrates makes no *explicit* promises about what his method will deliver. He just starts interrogating, and since we trust *him*, we trust that his interrogations are geared to deliver definitions that will improve our moral footing. That’s the supposition. If Socrates’ virtue is untarnished, why else would he interrogate? But once we’re seasoned in the method, we suspect that Socrates has hooked us knowing full well that the method won’t deliver helpful definitions. If Socrates and Kierkegaard are well aware that critical interrogation can expose untruth but can’t deliver much more, why aren’t they morally culpable for their failure to disclose this limitation?

We’re lured into the world of Socrates or Kierkegaard by the hope of something we can believe in, and that we *want* to believe in. We want a method that delivers virtue, so Socrates will play along – that’s his *entrée* with us. But perhaps cornering a definition of virtue might not be all that Socrates is about. The Socratic or Kierkegaardian failure of full disclosure might then seem to be an essential step in getting us closer to an unattractive but deep truth: *no mere method can fulfill the promise of virtue; no intellectual technique can deliver it*. Because we’re understandably resistant to this truth of ignorance or unknowing, we need to be *deceived* into contact with it. Experiencing the breakdown of rational interrogation might be the only way to learn its limits. But that could happen only through initial commitment to the enterprise. Do we conclude that, in the long run, this apparent deception by Socrates or Kierkegaard is not such a bad thing?

A moral scorecard might judge that Socratic interrogation is a good thing. First, it removes false confidence in our grasp of conventional knowledge. Second, it’s a good thing to give rational interrogation an all-out try, in order, paradoxically, to discover its breaking point. It’s good to use interrogation to remove false confidence

---

18 Sharon Krishek introduces the helpful notion of an “associative field” in her path-breaking discussion of Kierkegaard’s concepts of love: “The Infinite Love of the Finite: Faith, Existence and Romantic Love in the Philosophy of Kierkegaard,” Ph.D Dissertation, University of Essex, 2006, p. 8.

in interrogation *itself* as an all-purpose virtue-discovery machine. Interrogation can bring us to the truth that, in moral or spiritual inquiry, method takes a back seat to *the virtue of an exemplary person*. It's the person, not the method, that passes virtue on. The failure of the method might then function to enhance our ties to Socrates as exemplar. He *stays* there when we need him most. We'll return in a moment to this most important insight.

On the other side of the scorecard, the disvalue of the Socratic practice is that it gulls the untutored by promoting a false hope, or failing to expose its falsity. Socrates either downplays the fact that an intellectual search for sturdy security-conferring definitions can't be successful, or fails to disabuse us of the illusion he knows we hold, that interrogation can get beyond exposing falsehoods to give us the *constructive* truths we need for moral footing.

Yet we should not overlook an extenuating circumstance. Socrates can't explain or justify his interrogating procedures. He'll remain especially obscure about his conviction that he should interrogate a life – for good reason. And it's not because he likes to be cruelly opaque with us. Socrates transgresses anything his audience could recognize as a reasonable appeal or justification or explication of what he's doing because he is engaged in what Jonathan Lear calls an innovative cultural project.<sup>19</sup> It's a project that is dramatically traumatic for the city. Socrates needs to make space for *instituting* a new concept, the idea that one has a "life-as-a-whole" that needs assessment and examination. Standing back to evaluate a life is a novel and threatening gesture – a crime – in a culture whose practice would be to evaluate only an *action* or a *policy*. His questions didn't make too much sense to his audience, and his professed ignorance was, in part, an acknowledgment that he could not deliver answers to them. What language would be comprehended? And perhaps Socrates himself was not quite able to know what sort of answers he was groping for. Thus the awkward but alluring way that Socrates opens issues he can't close, starts fights he leaves unfinished, and looks for definitions he can't find. Kierkegaard likewise raises more questions than he can answer, questions that his audience can neither answer nor abide, questions that may also stagger him. He asks, for instance, how it can be that in Christendom *no one is yet a Christian!*

We've asked whether there is a culpable sleight of hand in Socrates' promotion of a method he knows will fail. I think there's no conclusive answer. We leave this slight detour to take up again the proposal that even as interrogation fails, a surprising good arrives – contact with the exemplary person.

### *From Technique to Person*

Socrates removes the confidence of his Athenian interlocutors. "*We know what we know,*" they might say, "and we needn't concern ourselves with what we *don't* – which can't be all *that* much!" That brazen confidence (or complacency) is as common in Copenhagen (or in any contemporary village or metropolis) as it is in Athens. Kierkegaard, too, goes after such willful gall. They might think, "*Of course* we know

---

19 See Jonathan Lear, *Happiness, Death, and the Remainder of Life*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000, pp. 101-5.

what life is about – it’s *here, all around us!* How could we *not* know it?” And they might add, “Even if *we* are ignorant, there are *experts* of a theoretical temper whose job it is to offer a *conceptual* grasp of life’s structure.” We rest assured. Our eloquent cultural icons will tell us what life’s about: will to *power*, the struggle to *survive*, the capacity for *politics*, or reverence for the *gods*, or *art* or the capacity to show *charity*. We debate these proposals. But Kierkegaard and, were he present, Socrates would demur. To pursue these conjectures and to put great store in our debates around them, they’d protest, is to participate in the illusion that an *answer lies just ahead*. From the point of view of Socrates or Kierkegaard, at the most fundamental level we just *don’t know* (objectively, impersonally, from a scholarly standpoint) *what life’s all about*. We don’t have *theories* of life that meet our existential needs, nor will they be forthcoming. Interrogation exposes our ignorance, which should make us less confident that we’ll soon have figured out what life’s about. In its breakdown, interrogation makes way for humility, faith, and wisdom.

Socrates knows that moral footing is necessary, and that providing it is a two-phased operation. Interrogation helps to deflate moral confidence, but if it’s not to undermine *all* trust in virtue, Socrates must see that listeners stay attached to him – perhaps in his role as interrogator, but perhaps also in his role defending love or in his standing with courage before the court and later before death. The brilliant flash of his questioning could keep his admirers hooked. Socrates knows his virtue is not reducible to the virtue of the method he passes on. Methods are techniques whose power can spring free from any particular practitioner. That *is* their power. But the virtue of a *person* can’t be pawned off as the power of falsity-exposing skills passed on as method. Socrates’ admirers will learn from his *example*.

However entertaining, witty, and skillful Socrates and Kierkegaard may be in their interrogations, they also have a melancholy, tragic side. They sense that they’ll not be heard, and that just around the corner there are charges against them for disrupting the peace – or worse. We sense they might say *more*, give us more to *grasp* in our moral unsteadiness. On our particularly bad days we can fear that Socrates and Kierkegaard are only messengers of misfortune. Socrates brings the bad news that we don’t really have a grasp of friendship or piety – things we *thought* we understood. Kierkegaard brings the upsetting news that we have no grasp of what commitment, faith, or ethics actually demand. And there’s more bad news, for in the long run Socrates takes away a hope that security can be found in formulating crisp definitions of contested terms. Kierkegaard, for his part, takes away all hope that security can be found in doctrine or creed, in academic scholarship or theory.

If Socrates can’t restore our moral footing, that’s news we’d rather not have heard. The parallel bad news from Kierkegaard is that faith is never more than a hair’s breadth from despair. If knowledge of definitions can’t provide a secure basis for human life, if it’s unavailable, metaphysically beyond the pale, the prerogative of the gods alone – then *how can Socrates be a moral exemplar?* His method removes untruth. But why do we admire him if he can’t deliver replacements for what he breaks? What will give the footing that we need?

We’ve glimpsed the answer. We look past the *method* to the *person* wielding it. A method that fails as a truth-detector brings us incidentally to the inestimable worth of an exemplar, someone who exemplifies the value and the truth we seek. We trust the

person, Socrates. He instills a restorative confidence by directing our interest away from those shattered hopes for a method – toward *him*. *Socrates himself* becomes the basis of our moral footing, delivered as the contours of his character: his passions, virtues, attunements – his soul. He gives us that solid basis through *contact with him* – with a life we can't but follow, and can't but praise.

Security-conferring definitions are *not* available, but a security-instilling way of life *is* – a life wherein knowledge is entwined in the living of it, a strength or excellence *lived knowingly*. In the *Symposium* Socrates *avows* knowledge of love and in the *Apology* he *avows*, and bears *witness* to, the wrongness of disobedience and the rightness of justice.<sup>20</sup> This *avowed* knowledge survives despite the lack of any method there to vindicate it. We absorb that knowing through our trust in the person who avows it, on the basis of the eloquence of his *witness*. It can take hold as it dodges the ordeals of harsh interrogation. It's knowledge that eludes interrogation because interrogation puts propositions in the dock, and a person is much more and quite other than a set of propositions interrogated in the dock. Knowledge that's *witnessed to* and *exemplified*, even knowledge that's *avowed*, is backed by character and bearing. In the case of Socrates, it's knowledge vividly entwined in the contours of his life as it's lived and spoken out. Those close to Socrates find his life and speech a song they can't but love.

Socrates has an intimate, non-intellectual knowledge of courage, of friendship, of inquiry, of camaraderie, of drinking – a coping know-how, a knowing unexplicated but *exemplified*, knowledge that's in contact with the world, with his fellows, and with a path of virtues.<sup>21</sup> He convinces us, and Kierkegaard, of his existential worth not only by dialectic but by *living out that worth*. In his portraits Kierkegaard gathers living possibilities that embed vice and virtue in a *living out of them*. We see Socrates at work – sometimes interrogating, sometimes musing, sometimes holding forth, intervening in his city's affairs, then retreating outside the city's walls. We see a worthy and memorable life-toward-death, a life-despite-death, a living that seems to go unruffled straight through death, a life whose speech, action, and undergoing are far more persuasive than any enumeration of principles could be. We have an exemplar of devotion to a philosophical and religious ideal, *a beacon of living truth* (if I can put it that way). He lives beyond the assurance of objectively secured results or intellectual protocols that might vindicate his unwavering convictions. Kierkegaard *reverses* this skeptical Socrates dancing with utter existential confidence over an anxious abyss of "objective uncertainty." Climacus puts it with a memorable flourish. We have in Socrates "*a solo dancer in honor of divinity*."<sup>22</sup>

---

20 *Apology*, 28C, in Plato, *The Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961.

21 I return to "intimate" or "tactile" knowledge in the final sections of Chapters Three and Five.

22 *CUP*. p. 89, Paul Muench's translation.

*Falling in Love*

Interrogation, for an enchanted Kierkegaard, was a way to remove nonsense, damp down chatter, and decrease the culture's ambient noise. And he saw that his mentor had another side – so I believe. Beyond his exposé of untruth, Socrates modeled simple truths – that beauty was an inward radiance behind a rough exterior, that death was nothing to fear, that critique could be liberating as well as frustrating, that one should follow the path of justice. Socrates utters some memorable propositions: “The unexamined life is not worth living.” But he's memorable also for a way of life delivered by Plato's evocation of *who he is*.

Socrates was irresistible. The young man in the *Theages* blushingly confides that he makes his *best* philosophical progress when he is in the same room with Socrates, when he can see him, sit beside him, and (heaven forbid) touch him.<sup>23</sup> As others saw his beauty, so Socrates saw *theirs*, having received, as he put it, “the gift of being able to detect at a glance both a lover and a beloved.”<sup>24</sup> In the *Symposium* he says, “I am ignorant of all things except the nature of love.”<sup>25</sup> He had the sort of intimate, visceral knowledge of love that he, as one smitten, could not fail to know, and that others, if they were the least bit attentive, could not fail to notice, too. The *eros* that radiated through his rough exterior gives those responsive to it a path of discovery. Built into this love or allure we find strengths of character, steady serenity, convictions as they play out in the drama of his final days. That drama eludes reduction to any platitude that could make the social rounds as a fashionable *bon mot*, or a creedal proposition. In the great speeches of the *Apology* or *Crito* we get not platitudes but the *person*.

The *Republic* and *Symposium* stage brilliant arguments embedded in a dramatic context that features Socrates. But there's more than argument and more than the citizen, Socrates. Even when we forget their place in an argument, we remember the Myth of Er, the parable of the Cave, Diotima's speech, the Ring of Gyges. These narratives testify to Plato's imaginative powers (and to the poetic, lyrical powers he passes on to Socrates). They stand on their own like operatic arias, even as we know that they're part of a larger drama that features Socrates as the leading voice. From this angle, Socrates wears these on-stage tales as part of his alluring and puzzling verbal attire, as much a part of him as his beard. Seeing him is to hear the myth, the image, the narrative. The allure of the speech redounds to the allure of the speaker, and viceversa. Kierkegaard loved the Socrates whose biting wit could bring the mighty down. He also loved the Socrates living out a radiant *vision* of self or soul.

---

23 See Paul Friedlander, *Plato: An Introduction*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1958, p. 130. The authenticity of the attraction is striking, even while questions remain about the authenticity of the dialogue that expresses it.

24 *Lysis*, 204b.

25 *Symposium*, 177d.

### Taking Stock

To know any writer, especially one as complex as Kierkegaard, it helps to know his mentors. As he says on his deathbed, his task was *always* Socratic. Bringing Kierkegaard into contact with Socrates tilts Kierkegaard toward *philosophy*. This makes him much more than a colorful critic of a fashionable Hegelianism or an old-fashioned defender of the faith. Bringing Socrates into contact with Kierkegaard tilts Socrates toward *religion*. This makes him much more than a crotchety critical thinking machine. These shifts in how we take these two impressive figures create an unexpected *rapprochement*.

In popular perception, Kierkegaard is quickly identified as religious, but Socrates less so. He's been often featured – quite misleadingly – as fashioning a secular, rational critique of backward Athenian religious ways, making him a kind of proto-Enlightenment religious skeptic. After all, he *appeared* to be a dangerous skeptic to those in the city who put him on trial and sentenced him to death precisely for impiety. But this is terribly misleading for it leaves out the Oracle that sets out his vocation. It leaves out his trusted *daimon*, it leaves out his religious informant on love, Diotima, and leaves out his debt to the god Asclepius, a debt that he discharges as he dies. It neglects his approving views of immortality and his hymns in answer to the dream that appears to him just before his death. The dream tells him to “make music and compose.”<sup>26</sup> Kierkegaard roots his love in a Socrates whose *philosophical* initiatives are inseparable from his *religious* convictions, devotions, and way of life.

The remaining three chapters of Part One continue this introduction of Kierkegaard's aims and accomplishments focused through the lens of his relation to this astonishing Athenian figure, a figure of innumerable gifts. The Socrates Kierkegaard loved is a master of rational interrogation and critique, an extraordinarily *imaginative, poetic-philosophic* genius, a person of great moral and political courage who is stalwart in his religious-philosophical calling. Here is a mirror in which Kierkegaard's alluringly multifaceted poetic, religious, and intellectual accomplishments can be gauged, a mirror in which his writing can now appear as a set of realizations, restagings, or repetitions of Socratic themes and life.

To open these first chapters with such a broad comparison has its risks. We move lightly over many texts and completely neglect still others. This is skating over thin ice. But if the aim is to evoke the ambiance Kierkegaard inhabits and the vista he enjoys and suffers, then that's a necessary risk. Only a climb above the fine-grained detail of the texts affords the prospect from which we see – or hear – the subtle coloring, timbre, and ringing overtones of Kierkegaard's production. Failing to climb up to take in the expanse, we lose perspective as we get too close to too many pages of too many good books. As a balance, the chapters in Parts Two and Three drop down considerably to wrestle with specific texts, and occasionally with only a brief passage within them. In the next chapter, we feature Socrates as he appears in the *Symposium*, a Socrates whose lyricism ascends and whose interrogations fall to the side.

---

26 *Phaedo*, 60e.

# A Religious and Interrogating Socrates: Seduction and Definition

*My task is the Socratic task of revising the definition  
of what it means to be a Christian. . . .  
– The Moment, 1854*

*What the world needs, absorbed  
as it is in so much learning,  
is a new Socrates.  
– Sickness Unto Death*

## Socratic Allure

Kierkegaard has his author Johannes de silentio subtitle *Fear and Trembling* “Dialectical Lyric.” As I hear it, this gives pride of place to lyric – which can be *conducted* dialectically. In Plato’s *Symposium*, when it comes to his turn to speak, Socrates begins with some dialectical forays and then delivers his lyrically enchanting tale of love that he’s heard from a priestess. Piety, poetry, and philosophy are artfully combined. And if we hear an undertone of violence in Alcibiades’ outburst toward the end of this otherwise quite civilized discussion, then we might find in the mix even a threat of politics (he’ll be known as something of a tyrant, after all).

In the *Symposium*, Socratic wisdom and conviction appear largely unconstrained by interests in rational vindication. A largely interrogating, combative Socrates is replaced by a more lyrical, enchanting one. Of course there are some poetic, nearly lyrical moments in the *Apology* as Socrates speaks of death and underworld conversations. But in the *Symposium* the balance of lyric and dialectic noticeably shifts.<sup>1</sup> The cool and collected Socrates of *Euthyphro* may be preferable to the *Symposium* Socrates of love, poetry, and drink. Be that as it may, the Socrates we seek

---

1 Plato begins to upstage or abandon Socrates certainly by the late dialogues, and, as some believe, perhaps as early as the middle dialogues, *Symposium*, *Republic*, and *Phaedo*. But the Socrates we find in *Symposium* – the more lyrical, less interrogating Socrates – can be a different side of the Socrates of the *Apology*, not just an excessive and purely Platonic *supplement* to that earlier figure, or *rejection* of him. I take Socrates both as the interrogator of the early dialogues *and* as the lyric speculator, spinner of myth and vision, that we find in the middle dialogues.

is the Socrates that Kierkegaard embraced. He welcomed both the hard interrogator and “the solo dancer” in praise of love and the divine.<sup>2</sup>

Socrates arrives late, having fallen into a mysterious trance on the way to the party. He’s presented as someone who escapes into a dream-world and, for significant moments, leaves everyone far behind. His closest friends seem undisturbed by this spell of vacancy, of absence, though *our* curiosity is piqued. Why does Plato insert this potentially discrediting detail? Do we want to trust the views of a person subject to such otherworldly flights? Socrates snaps out of it in time to find his friends and join them as they settle on the evening’s entertainment. They land on a topic bound to please and amuse and even instruct – the theme of love.

So far there’s nothing in this *mise en scène* to suggest that Socrates is a well-oiled stoic thinking machine. Quite the contrary. He confides that he “can’t name a time when I was not in love.” We might remember an earlier dialogue where he confessed to having “the gift of being able to detect at a glance both a lover and a beloved.”<sup>3</sup> Only a minor dialectical skirmish prefaces his speech, which he begins unabashedly with the revelation that his knowledge of love comes from a priestess whose credentials are never presented. He repeats her story – and calls that *knowledge*. He’s not guessing here; love is something he really *knows* about. As he puts it, “*I am quite ignorant of all things except the nature of love.*”<sup>4</sup>

Socrates leaves his critical persona to one side. Aristophanes presents a profound and hilarious story of the creation of the sexes, the splitting of original unified, spherical creatures in two as a punishment, and the attendant yearnings and sexual probings of one half-creature for its missing other half. Does Socrates *accept* this comic take on love? It would be churlish of him to even *want* to undermine this captivating story. On what basis, then, are we won over by *his* account – especially since the contrasting vision of Aristophanes is so enchanting?

We’re won over, smitten, by the *tale* – but also by the *teller*, the *person* revealed in and through his telling and its staging. Take reading a story to children. Kierkegaard reminds us of the absolutely central role of the story *teller*. He gives more importance to the teller than to the tale. And quite unexpectedly he tells us that the “procedure for storytelling [is] Socratic.” “The whole point,” he says, “is to *bring the poetic into touch with their lives in every way*, to exercise a power of enchantment.”<sup>5</sup> As Kierkegaard has it, Socrates has “the power of enchantment.” And we learn that storytelling – not just interrogations – can be Socratic. In the *Symposium*, as well as in some of the most memorable passages in the *Republic*, the *Apology*, and other dialogues we find moments when Plato enchants us with Socrates the storyteller, the storyteller who gives us Diotima, the image of the Cave, the Myth of Er, and other

2 *CUP*, p. 89. I thank Paul Muench for this passage.

3 *Lysis*, 204b.

4 *Symposium*, 177 d; the sentiment is repeated in *Theages*, 128 b: “. . . as I am always saying, I am quite ignorant in general save for one small subject: the nature of love.”

5 *Journals and Papers*, 7 vols, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1967-1978, Vol. 1, p. 265 (henceforth, *JP*). See Marcia C. Robinson’s discussion, “Tieck: Kierkegaard’s ‘Guadalquivir’ of Open Critique and Hidden Appreciation,” in Jon Stewart, ed., *Kierkegaard and his German Contemporaries*, Vol. 5, Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007.

narrative gems. As Kierkegaard reflects on storytelling here, he gives us the Socrates who wins us through his imaginative vision and through his poetic skills in relaying that vision.

Plato gives us an enchanting theater of speakers and food and flute girls, all contrived to free up imagination. Drink and music famously work to that end, and love frees up our capacity for fantasy and attraction, too. Socrates has quite an exceptional power to attract. We remember the young man in *Theages*, who confesses that his best learning takes places when his eyes meet the gaze of Socrates, when he's in immediate *contact*. This *seductive, enchanting* side of Socrates is confirmed by Alcibiades, who bursts into the room, a lover scorned who now in his torment cuts a ridiculous figure.<sup>6</sup> His tale of infatuation, of his stumbling pursuits and painful rejections, grips our imagination as such ill-fated infatuations will. It's the story of unrequited love. Inhabiting the space of his story frees our imagination for an *intimate, enacted knowledge* of love – which is at the greatest remove from knowledge contained in propositional summation.

As the grip of practical reality is loosened through poetry and love, imagination frees up. Through Plato's contrivance, we come to question our orientation, to wonder *what's going on*. Why is the comic *Aristophanes* given such tender attention? (Or, shifting forward, why does Kierkegaard value humor and the comic?) Why does *Alcibiades* burst so violently on the scene? (And why does Kierkegaard place a violent Abraham so centrally?) As Socrates speaks, are we listening to Diotima, or to Socrates' *rendition* of Diotima? Or is Diotima just a convenient pseudonym that Socrates invents? Why does Plato say that these speeches by Socrates, Diotima, Aristophanes, and others are reports from a gentleman who wasn't there, but *heard* that *several years past something like* the symposium here recounted in fact occurred? (And why does this gentleman confess to *not remembering very well* what was said then?) Is this anonymous person a reliable conduit of truth?

Each question irrupts to unsettle our practical certainty, and each unsettling impact forces imagination alive. We work to "connect the dots," as best we can, paying rapt attention, awaiting clues along the way, learning how to live with uncertainty. We're freed from following a merely factual drone. Do we *need* to have wisdom anchored in credentialed testimony? What could "credentialed testimony" *mean* in this context?

Kierkegaard uses a similar "unanchoring" device in his use of pseudonyms. We're uncertain where Diotima leaves off and Socrates begins, or where Socrates leaves off and Plato begins, and likewise, we wonder where Climacus or Judge Wilhelm leave off and Kierkegaard begins. What's *unambiguous* amidst this uncertainty is that Socrates does not win us to his view of love by combative questioning. Loosening imagination and feeding our susceptibility to love, we're won over by his *lovely speech on love*.

Plato makes this literary device of "slipping anchors" duplicate and reinforce the dynamic of love and seduction that's under explicit discussion. Just as Kierkegaard retreats behind his pseudonyms, Plato lets himself retreat into the shadows by putting an irresistible *Socrates* center stage. Socrates then lets *himself* retreat by putting

---

6 *Symposium*, 212d-222c.

*Diotima's* irresistible tale center stage. Love loves the seductive shadow play of hide and seek, of revelation and retreat. We're captivated and, like any of love's captives, we can't say exactly *what's going on*. We gesture toward the stars or angels – or toward a mysterious woman. Does Socrates love Beauty itself? *Diotima's* beauty? The beauty of the telling? The beauties among his listeners? And what does *Kierkegaard* love in *his* thralldom? The man's intelligence? Combativeness? Poetry? Moral courage? If it's *Diotima's* tale that seduces Socrates, is that what smites us, too? Or is it *Socrates* who smites us? (And moving forward, if *Kierkegaard* smites us, perhaps it's also his Athenian companion who simultaneously enchants.) Yet shouldn't we admit that there's something quite *irregular* about coming to our philosophical convictions and endearments in this bewitching way? *And yet . . .*

### Love Comes From Love

What *could* we say in favor of *Diotima's* story? Well, Socrates' *daimon* didn't *forbid* him from taking it seriously. But don't we need more reason for crediting this story than the mere fact that we're not *prohibited* from considering it?

Perhaps we listen, and allow the tale to steal our hearts – because *we've come to love and trust Socrates*, because we're gullible, because we just don't feel compelled to verify his sources. Would a *rational*, exclusively *interrogating* Socrates pass over this case of *falling* for *Diotima*, or *pass over* this case of *Kierkegaard's* falling for a *non-interrogating* Socrates?<sup>7</sup> An easygoing Socrates *cagily seduces* us – through confiding his *own* seduction (sharing a confidence breeds intimacy). He's not taken in by Alcibiades, but by this alluring tale of love and beauty, or by the mysterious woman who conveyed it. And it can't be irrelevant that we love to see Socrates put to the test. *Diotima* at first interrogates him, softening up his resistance, as it were. She turns Socratic method to her advantage, at the old man's expense. The sage of Athens is forced to learn from her, to be backed down by her erotic and intellectual visionary power. Later he lounges, relaxed among his friends, and casts a spell, just as *Diotima* had cast hers. We even see how he's bewitched the powerful Alcibiades, who arrives drunk with love.

The matter of love in the *Symposium* is not the only evidence we have for a Socrates who enacts, or radiates virtue (let's say), rather than using interrogation to define or delimit it. In *Phaedo*, we see how he absorbs belief in immortality within his life, takes it up as an aspect of his being (or becoming). Socrates is casual about his lengthy but frail arguments for immortality, uttered under a sentence of death, as he patiently awaits its date. He hints that they're less than convincing demonstrations. Yet our confidence in his *belief* in immortality is not thereby diminished. Our confidence seems solid and seems to derive from his impressive comportment, evocatively portrayed. He shows that he has no fear of an *afterlife*, nor any fear of *living* in this life, nor any fear of *leaving* this life. This is a kind of immortality, a defeat of death's hold on him, a freedom from death that is achieved in *this* life. As Johannes de silentio will say, Socrates becomes immortal "when he

---

7 This might be the madness of love, explored and praised in the *Phaedrus*.

hears the verdict,” long before he drinks the poison.<sup>8</sup> The body may expire, but at the moment when it counts, death has no dominion. It’s not a dying but a *living* Socrates – who happens to expire. And from his point of view, death is not an obstacle to his living as he would, but in fact highlights what it is to live as who he is – in a sense, *deathlessly*.<sup>9</sup>

We learn of love in the *Symposium* through Diotima’s tale, but also by seeing the effect that Socratic beauty has on Alcibiades. Socratic beauty speaks as an irresistible inner quality or spirit projected through a rough, perhaps even repellant, exterior. This display matches a platitude – say, that true beauty is more than physical surface. But we learn the *force* of that turn of phrase through the witness of Alcibiades *smitten then and there*, and through the witness of Socrates, dispassionate in a love that Alcibiades can’t grasp, and that therefore humbles and enrages him. Kierkegaard cherishes this Socrates – a biting intellect, but also a man at home among friends and in the marketplace, talking here of love and mysteries, enjoying comic theater and conviviality, all the while serene and alluring, and but a hair’s breadth from violence.<sup>10</sup>

Philosophy is the wisdom that keeps Socrates sober in the midst of drinking, and is the love that lets him be swept up by beauty. It’s serenity in a life informed by admirable convictions, upheld (at best, only partially) by a discipline that dislodges untruth. The truths of love or immortality, for example, are not brought out by interrogation. Love is vouchsafed by the alluring story of a priestess. The truth of immortality is vouchsafed by the moving display of Socrates’ composed and passionate comportment in the days and hours before his death. Socrates loved to disabuse Athenians of their claim to know. He trumpeted no knowledge to replace what he took away. Yet he doesn’t leave us utterly empty-handed. Plato, like Kierkegaard, builds a theater of ideas and action where characters can *live out* their truths.

We read the early and middle Platonic dialogues as Kierkegaard did, moved by the simple, radiant convictions he found apparent in the life of Socrates, convictions by which he lived and died, authenticated in his abiding by them, and in their abiding support of him. We see what it is to yield absolutely to one’s vocation, to be buttressed by one’s god, to hold convictions about immortality, love, or the invulnerability of “the good man” to harm, all the while remaining candidly “ignorant” of any doctrine or teaching or arguments that might successfully back them up. There’s no freestanding, abstract knowledge that could make those convictions *more* convincing than the demonstrative *living out of them*. It’s the Socratic *life* that speaks eloquently,

---

8 *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alastair Hannay, New York: Penguin Books, 1985, p. 141. In the Hongs’, translation, p. 117. Hereafter, for Hannay trans., *FTP*, for Hongs’ trans., *FT*.

9 For two views of immortality as something other than an afterlife that begins at the end of a biological death, as a “deathlessness in living,” or living beyond the hold of death as one lives, see D.Z. Phillips, *Death and Immortality*, London: Macmillan, 1970, and John Herman Randall, *Plato: Dramatist of the Life of Reason*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1970, p. 214.

10 Kierkegaard sees himself as accused, like Socrates, of corruption of the youth. (Hannay, *Papers*, 47, VIII, 1, A 11), and capable of writing both tragedy and comedy in answer to Socrates’ question at the end of the *Symposium* (14 July, 37, II, A 132).

and its splendor is discovered through falling in love.<sup>11</sup> Kierkegaard is neither the first nor last to be happily seduced by this sometime gadfly who's also a witness to love.<sup>12</sup>

## Revising Definitions

Kierkegaard's doctoral dissertation (it was called a *magister* in his day) is titled *The Concept of Irony with Constant Reference to Socrates*.<sup>13</sup> His examiners might have disliked the candidate's indecorous and self-indulgent style, full of unscholarly irony and wit. But they had no problem with the presumption that Socrates is simultaneously admirable, skeptical, and pious. They could not have guessed that just a few years ahead, Kierkegaard would deploy Socratic irony and combative wit in a general critique of Danish Christendom, including the University. The student who couldn't resist writing on Socratic irony would become a thorn in their flesh precisely because he took that gadfly's irony to heart.

Kierkegaard's Socratic barbs, especially in *Unscholarly Postscript*, were especially aimed at academic pretensions to have completed a system mastering all culture-spheres – science, art, religion, ethics – indeed, all knowledge and belief. In their presumed mastery of all things human and divine, or in their aspiration to such mastery, the city's cultural elites had forgotten what it was to become a Christian, which is, among other things, to forego all such aspirations. Our lead epigraph is taken from one of Kierkegaard's last *Journal* entries. His vocation, he says, has been “*the*

---

11 See my discussion of Cavell's “falling in love with the world” as a condition for living in it in “Acknowledgement, Suffering, and Praise: Stanley Cavell as Religious Continental Thinker,” *Soundings*, Fall, 2005.

12 George Pattison picked *The Socratic Witness to Love* as the working title for the book that later appeared as *Kierkegaard's Upbuilding Discourses: Philosophy, Literature, and Theology*, London and New York: Routledge, 2002. For the Kierkegaard-Socrates connection see Paul Muench, “Kierkegaard's Socratic Task,” Ph.D Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 2006; “The Socratic Method of Kierkegaard's Pseudonym Johannes Climacus: Indirect Communication and the Art of ‘Taking Away’,” in Paul Houe and Gordon Marino, eds, *Søren Kierkegaard and the Word(s)*, Copenhagen: Reitzel, 2003, pp. 139-50; and “Kierkegaard's Socratic Point of View,” *Kierkegaardiana* 24 (2005), reprinted (abridged) in Sara Ahbel-Rappe and Rachana Kamtekar, eds, *A Companion to Socrates*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2005, pp. 389-405. Also, Jacob Howland, *Kierkegaard and Socrates: A Study in Philosophy and Faith*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006; and David Possen, “Søren Kierkegaard and the Very Idea of Advance Beyond Socrates,” Dissertation, University of Chicago, 2007. For excellent accounts of Socrates as an enigmatic exemplar, see Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

13 It might come as a surprise that in 1841 the Theology Faculty of the University of Copenhagen passed a dissertation devoted almost exclusively to the *pagan* Socrates. The Christian King of Denmark signed off as well.

Socratic task of revising the definition of what it means to be a Christian.”<sup>14</sup> This should startle us in at least two ways.

First, how could Kierkegaard, an ordinary parishioner, presume to go about altering or amending a doctrinal definition of the Christian faith? That would be the exclusive prerogative of ecclesiastical authorities. Yet the Socratic task is to disabuse others of untruth, so to revise a definition might mean to unseat a *going* definition, to deflate a *current* assumption. If the conventional definition reads, “To be a Christian is to be born in a Christian country and attend church at least once,” then that definition *needs* revision. Kierkegaard-Socrates could mock and deflate and so “revise” a *mistaken* definition without providing a replacement. This reading gives us a Kierkegaard-Socrates concerned to expose untruths, to attack pride, to mock the presumption to intellectual mastery. He unsettles anyone who remains complacent in a commonplace conceptual bed.

A space less cluttered by shoddy presumptions permits a better definition of Christianity to appear – in some shape or form. Perhaps Kierkegaard does more than expose bad definitions. But if he remains true to his Socratic ignorance, an emerging positive definition can’t shape up as a verbal formulation or anything like a dictionary or encyclopedia entry for “Christianity.” Is there another way one could be “revising the definition of what it means to be a Christian”? Potters and sculptors give their clay definition. That’s not lexical revision. Perhaps a “revised definition” of what it means to be a Christian means giving a better shape to the contours of the unfolding character or way of life we’d want to call “Christian.” A definition so construed is a narrative, a life defined through narrative, whose living has a narrative structure. As we imagine a painter giving better definition to an elusive countenance before her, so Kierkegaard would give better shape and contour to the shifting countenance of an elusive Christian life. The way Plato attends to the Socratic life, and the way the Gospels attend to the Christian life, so Kierkegaard could attend to Gospel and Platonic life-narratives (as well as the cautionary life-narratives of Faust or Don Juan). Taking up this task of revising a definition would amount to sketching out a collaborative Socratic-Christian identity.

There is a second respect in which the epigraph should startle. Kierkegaard declares his task to be “revising the definition of what it means to be a Christian,” and then adds, “*Therefore I do not call myself a Christian.*” Why this disavowal? It’s reasonable, after all, to assume that Kierkegaard *is* a Christian, *always* a Christian. True, sometimes he writes as a non-Christian. But then he signals the distance between his own commitments and non-Christian ones by using pseudonyms. If nothing else, his church attendance and *Christian Discourses* should identify him as Christian. Nevertheless, he’s adamant here that he does not call himself a Christian, and this avowal is made in his *own* voice. To clinch his protest, in the final issues of *The Moment* (his polemical dispatches), Kierkegaard goes further. He avows repeatedly not just that he *won’t call* himself a Christian but that he’s *not* one. Is it Christian or non-Christian? He says both.

---

14 See *The Moment*, Hongs’ trans. p. 341; I’ve adopted Pattison’s translation, *The Philosophy of Kierkegaard*, Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2005, p. 172.

A Christian finds work attending to the poor and sick. A Socratic gadfly finds work mocking Copenhagen's new-fangled Tivoli that boasted a side-show featuring a wax-figure, wind-up Christ.<sup>15</sup> When Kierkegaard puts his Socratic tasks front and center, then he might say, as in our epigraph, that his task is Socratic, that he's doing *Socratic* business, and *therefore* he won't call himself a Christian.<sup>16</sup> He might say (more forcefully) that he was *not* a Christian because the bar for being Christian is so high that no one clears it. Yet it's strangely haunting that on his deathbed Kierkegaard doesn't say a word about his Christian calling.

### Ranking Religiousness

Are these two hats, the Socratic and the Christian, altogether of the same importance? Does one sort of religiousness take precedence over the other? *Philosophical Crumbs* has Socrates mark out an approach to truth that contrasts *unfavorably* (it seems) to a Christian one; *Unscholarly Postscript* seems to set out a hierarchy that places Socratic religious pathos "beneath" a Christian pathos; and *Sickness Unto Death* finds wrongdoing to be a matter of sin rather than, as Socrates would have it, a matter of simple ignorance. These accounts seem to place Socrates in the shadow of an even fuller Christian existence. As a *development* of Socratic religiousness, Christianity is an *advance* – so it seems.<sup>17</sup>

Doesn't common sense dictate that a Christian has to let Socrates step aside for Christ? Even if Johannes Climacus has Christian religiousness a step above Socratic piety, that may not suffice to show that *Søren Kierkegaard* ranks the Socratic vis-à-vis the Christian, with the Christian winning out. Kierkegaard needs a collaborative identity, Christ and Socrates in the crucial roles, *each* of utmost importance. He's *inescapably* linked to Socrates even as he's *inescapably* linked to Christ. There is textual evidence – I think it's decisive – that Kierkegaard takes his Christian and Socratic identities to be linked like hand in glove in sub-zero weather. Lacking a glove, the hand is useless; lacking a hand, the glove is useless. Ranking their *comparative* indispensability makes no sense at all. Since neither Christ nor Socrates is dispensable, both are *indispensable*. In a specific passage that we'll revisit, Kierkegaard speaks of Socrates and Christ as representing two "qualitatively different magnitudes." The upshot is that we lack an *independent standard* for calibrating their comparative indispensability. We'd be mistaken to claim that the Christian life is a step up on the Socratic life, not because it isn't, but because it makes no sense to say one way or the other – either that *it is* or that *it isn't*.

This late passage unseats the idea that a Christian existence is "one up on" the Socratic and also challenges a view whose dependence on rank ordering may not be obvious. Thinking adverbially, we might take Kierkegaard as a Christian who happened to think and act *Socratically*.<sup>18</sup> But we might also take Kierkegaard as

15 See my discussion of Tivoli and its wax replica of Christ, Chapter Eight.

16 I thank Steve Webb for this. For further discussion, see note 9, Chapter Three.

17 "Between one human and another, the Socratic relationship is the highest, the truest." *Fragments*, Hongs' trans., p. 55.

18 John D. Caputo suggested this view in conversation.

a Socratic who happened to think and act *Christianly*. Or yet again, Kierkegaard might be a marvelous figure who lived *Christianly Socratically*. Now if we accept only the *first* of these descriptions, namely that Kierkegaard is a Christian acting and thinking Socratically, then we're smuggling in a ranking. We're excluding two other plausible descriptions. Kierkegaard needn't argue that the first option is false, nor that the second or third is true. The evidence tilts toward the view that Kierkegaard just abstains from endorsing *any* ranking. He was ambivalent about, if not outright opposed to, the idea of grading Socrates against Christ, or Christ against Socrates. There are several other reasons to drop the sticky intuition that for a Christian, Socratic-pagan religiousness must be set aside.

### Socrates Surpassed?

The fundamental intuition that Christian life is a step up on the Socratic is challenged in the *first* place by the passage where Kierkegaard denies that a yardstick exists for making the required comparative assessment (we return to this passage in Chapter Three). It's challenged in the *second* place by the implications of a revelation in *The Point of View of My Work as an Author* – Kierkegaard can't help but believe that "*Socrates has become a Christian.*"<sup>19</sup> Has Socrates renounced his old identity? Kierkegaard doesn't claim this, and if he believes that Socrates has become Christian while still retaining his Socratic identity, it must be possible for at least one life to be both fully Socratic and fully Christian. The bombshell about Socrates becoming Christian challenges the *existential* force of the *Postscript* machinery that pulls asunder Socratic "religiousness A" and Christian "religiousness B." Kierkegaard does not say that Socrates has become *less Socratic* in becoming Christian, nor that in becoming a Christian, he's made a qualitative *advance* on his initial, "merely pagan," standing. Socrates could be pictured as assuming an additional role – not as giving up or diminishing a former role. A concert pianist could become a conductor without becoming *less* a pianist, or *no longer* a pianist. If one can be fully pianist and fully conductor (finding both roles indispensable to one's identity), then perhaps, on analogy, one can be fully Socratic and fully Christian. One could conduct and play simultaneously, and if that weren't an option for a particular performance, one still would not lose one's pianist-identity on the night one served as a conductor.

The *third* reason to resist the fundamental intuition that Christian religiousness must advance on the Socratic arises when we ask, "From what position can such an evaluation be made?" What standing, in particular, does Climacus have for ranking these extraordinary figures? Why not let heaven be judge? Which is to say, judge *not* – period! Kierkegaard's deathbed testimony that his vocation was always Socratic (and the notable *absence* of final testimony that his vocation was *Christian*) should encourage a Socratic reserve, a suspicion of ultimate ontological rankings. If Kierkegaard embraces a substantive Socratic ignorance, this means abjuring a "god's eye view" – the only position, it seems, from which a comparative objective

---

19 *The Point of View*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998, p. 54.

ranking of religiousness could be attempted. Furthermore, grading these exemplars presumes that we have a clear grasp of the figures that stand before us – a doubtful proposition.

We're consigned to a deep agnosticism (or *should* be), not about the inestimable or even *absolute* worth of Socrates or Christ, but about their *comparative* worth, one measured against the other. To assume that "religiousness A" will be diminished with the appearance of "religiousness B" puts at naught both *Socratic* skeptical reserve and *Christian* humility. To assess the worth of but one of these exemplary figures means that one upgrades oneself to a position of *moral jurisdiction* in this matter. Socrates or Christ properly grasp *us* (we don't grasp *them*). Seeing this would cool the impulse to nail either with a measured worth.

There's a *fourth* challenge to the idea that Socratic religiousness will diminish as Christianity assumes its "proper" place. Johannes Climacus supports the idea that "B religiousness" is an advance on "A religiousness", but he leaves the existential *feel* of the *transition* to the Christian under-described. We get abstract distinctions between ignorance and sin, the absurd and the paradox, the transcendent and the immanent, but how do these play out "on the street"? When it comes to describing the felt, qualitative differences between an ethical and an aesthetical life, Kierkegaard is fulsome. The ethical Judge Wilhelm devotes hundreds of pages to what the aesthete would give up and what he would gain were he to change his allegiances. Socrates has become a Christian, but what has he lost and gained, in tangible terms? Without a lively sense of an *existential friction* (or at least a *contrast*) between ways of life, it's not so clear what the proposed advance amounts to in practical or experiential terms. There will be obvious *cultural* indications of difference: a Greek temple is not a Lutheran church. There will be liturgical differences: a Socratic prayer will be easy to distinguish from a Christian one. But in what we've called the moral-spiritual life "as it's lived on the street," the difference becomes elusive. A new hybrid creature might find her Christian side deferring easily to her Socratic, and her Socratic side deferring easily to her Christian, like a fluid marriage where neither *needs* to claim ultimate privilege.

*Fifth* and finally, Climacus is a less than reliable purveyor of Kierkegaard's settled views. Johannes might distribute *misinformation* (sprinkled with enough solid information to make him credible). It would violate Kierkegaard's authorial strategy to be too straightforward about his own beliefs – to declare, for instance, that *his* views must always trump the views of a pseudonym. It's testimony to his Socratic reserve that Kierkegaard leaves us hanging without answers. Johannes may be indulging his yen for dialectics ("proving" the respects in which "B" is an advance on "A") in a situation where the greater part of virtue would be to remain silent.

Overall, whatever their *practice*, both Kierkegaard and Climacus *say* that they *distrust* wordy disquisitions.<sup>20</sup> The whole *Postscript* apparatus of technical

---

20 In his epilogue to *The Philosophy of Kierkegaard*, George Pattison contrasts "The Christian Witness" to "The Simple Wise Man" [Socrates]. The book-length literature in English of the tension or convergence of the Socratic and the Christian in Kierkegaard is slim. Recent very helpful contributions are Jacob Howland, *Kierkegaard and Socrates*, and the Muench and Possen works mentioned in note 12 above.

distinctions – religiousness A and religiousness B, the objective and the subjective, the transcendental and the immanent, guilt and sin, the paradox and the absurd, the comic and the ironic – might work to draw in (intellectually) and then to mock a bevy of grave, humorless professors, clinging to these terms of art, and wildly overconfident of their ability to climb. (Luckily, *we're* not in that benighted group!)

Imagine Kierkegaard watching, amused, as Climacus shows off his anti-academic/academic skills. He might relish the thought of unstuffing Climacus' excess knowledge, taking Climacus down a bit – especially when he turns didactic, confidently unrolling his dialectical charts! Since Climacus is a humorist, he might *himself* step outside a passage of his text to mock its goings on, enjoying a twinge of ironic self-deprecation. He might relish a quiet superiority as he locates himself knowingly as sub-Christian – while readers are unknowingly sub-sub even as they *think* they're Christian. Come to think of it, Climacus might take quiet pleasure also in downgrading his teacher, Socrates – visiting revenge on the instructor who makes him feel shamefully inadequate.

The possibilities for *humor* in these *Postscript* flurries are infinite, which rules out the humorless proposal that the overriding aim of *Postscript* is to provide an analytic mind with a technical apparatus designed to enable specialists to recite the conceptual ins and outs of religiousness B or A. Such grave analysis undermines the aims of this self-described non-Christian humorist, and instills a cool analytic stare that freezes up its object – in this case, freezes up the lively spirit of a Socratic and Christian identity. Look at the *Postscript's* subtitle, *Mimic-Pathetic-Dialectic Compilation – an Existential Contribution* and the title, in the more appropriate idiom suggested by Alastair Hannay: “*Concluding Unscholarly Addendum to Philosophical Crumbs (or Trifles)*.” These As and Bs must be taken with a grain of salt.<sup>21</sup>

I've laid out five considerations that challenge the “fundamental intuition” that a Christian standpoint necessarily diminishes a Socratic one. Perhaps no single consideration is decisive. Nevertheless, there's reason to ride this plausible and attractive position – that Kierkegaard affirms a collaborative identity, and that such an affirmation doesn't require that Socrates and Christ be rank-ordered. Socrates needs Christian charity and love of neighbor, and Christ needs Socratic interrogation and vision. Each supports cognitive and interpersonal humility. It might well seem *unchristian* for a Christian to place herself in advance of a pagan – of *any* stature, let alone of the stature of a Socrates.

## Socrates Meets Christ

How can we begin to picture the collaboration in Kierkegaard's life and writing of both a Christian and a Socratic spirit? Socrates is a model for a kind of earnest seeking-striving not unlike a *Christian* seeking-striving. Now if a decadent Christian culture is the major deterrent to Christian seeking-striving, then to become Christian

---

21 These are Hannay's renderings. See his *Kierkegaard: A Biography*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 315. See Chapters Ten and Twelve below for a discussion of irony and humor in *Postscript*, and especially the last minute “revocation” of that work.

requires that one become Socratic.<sup>22</sup> His questioning is needed to force one out of an only *cultural* Christendom – in order to become Christian. Socrates *answers* Christian needs. As Kierkegaard's author Anti-Climacus declares, what is needed is "a new Socrates." "Socrates, Socrates, Socrates," he cries, invoking his name three times. "Absorbed as it is in so much learning, what the world needs is a new *Socrates*."<sup>23</sup>

Dostoevsky's Ivan Karamazov imagines Christ's return to 16th Century Spain to minister to the people's needs. *The Grand Inquisitor* is Ivan's "poem" for Alyosha, something he calls "a preposterous thing."<sup>24</sup> It depicts an event about as crazy as Socrates becoming Christian, or as Socrates entering Copenhagen. Kierkegaard imagines Anti-Climacus crying "*Socrates, Socrates*," letting us know whom *he* wants returned to minister to our needs. Let's continue this imaginative conceit. If Socrates returns, waking up in Copenhagen, so too, we might imagine that while he's in residence, Christ enters the city. Would Socrates then turn aside, retreat, or attack? Or would Christ, finding him there, turn aside, retreat, or attack?

We might think that the city was not big enough for both of them. Alternatively, each might be big enough to acknowledge the other. And if we take Dostoevsky's cautionary tale to heart, they might acknowledge that they *need* each other. In light of his tale, we must suppose, sadly, that Grand Inquisitors and their misled flocks will always be with us – will *be* us. There will always be Christendom. But if cultural Christendom will always be with us, we'll always need Socrates. As Kierkegaard takes up his *critique of the city*, Socrates is center stage, making it vulnerable to a more specific Christian address or revelation regarding (for example) love of neighbor and of God. However, if a Christian address or revelation inevitably ossifies, rigidifies, reifies, then Socrates will remain a permanent resident and on call. Dostoevsky's fear, and perhaps Kierkegaard's as well, is that the appearance of Christ will not ensure that the city will change. It's likely to crucify once more. And so Socrates retains his commission.

---

22 CUP, p. 556. "Religiousness A must first be present in the individual before there can be any consideration of becoming aware of the dialectical B [Christianity]." Socrates might be the existential condition for hearing the Christian revelation. Religiousness A then becomes a possibility inherent in human nature. As such, it can appear anywhere and at any time in history, making Socrates always a potential presence in Christendom. Socratic questioning – we might say philosophical questioning – is ever-present as a condition of Christian faith. In *Unscholarly Postscript*, Johannes aims not to go further than Socrates (as Hegelians might), but to expose what it *means for him to become a Christian*. (Although it's often helpful to distinguish a pseudonym from Kierkegaard, just as often Kierkegaard's views are indistinguishable from views of a pseudonym. Kierkegaard's late journal entry, "*My task is the Socratic task*," repeats precisely the view of Johannes Climacus.)

23 *The Sickness unto Death*, trans. Alastair Hannay, New York: Penguin Books, 1989, p. 124; Hongs' trans., p. 92. Hereafter *SUD*.

24 Interestingly, for a Kierkegaard reader, one recent translation has Ivan call his poem "an absurd thing." Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhovskiy, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990, p. 246. (This sentence is the lead into Chapter V.)

## Who Needs Critique?

What does this imply for those who don't take up inquiries or critiques that are explicitly Socratic? Can one be a Christian without knowing "what it means to become a Christian" – without having thought it through, or cultivated one's Socratic self? Kierkegaard can't expect every would-be Christian to plow through *Concluding Postscript*. Perhaps a simple believer can know *tacitly* what it is to become a Christian, without being schooled in the sophisticated paraphernalia that *Postscript* provides. Tolstoy's simple peasants were true Christians but ignorant of Socrates and Climacus. But to puzzle over *them*, Kierkegaard might say, is to neglect the task at hand. To worry about what makes unschooled feudal peasants miles away count as true Christians is not the business at hand, which is first and foremost to worry about what *I* am and *we* are and could be. The audience *Postscript* has in mind is not simple peasants.

If you or I or Kierkegaard's local citizenry are already reading *Postscript*, or reading responsively *about* it, we've become perforce an audience he can admonish. He admonishes in terms he'd kindly spare his less bookish companions on the street – and certainly, in terms that he'd spare distant peasants, however pertinent those terms would be for us. *We* need – and the "we" here is primarily those who claim some rough affinity to Christian culture, moral practice, and belief – *we* need this exploration because *we're not yet* Christian, spiritually speaking. Yet presumably *some* in the realm *think* they are. To narrow the target of address, Climacus aims Socratic skepticism at those intrigued by Hegelian or mock-Hegelian disquisitions, and who nevertheless picture themselves as Christians, more *developed* Christians, in *virtue* of their Hegelian (or simply fashionable) aims and achievements. Skepticism dissolves ingrained *intellectual* presumptions – those that intellectuals are apt to harbor. And Climacus assumes that Socratic *midwifery* will get we intellectuals born toward better things.

## Not Calling Oneself Christian

Socrates sets the course for a traverse across the broad sweep of Kierkegaard's work and life. Consider again those lines penned only weeks before his death where Kierkegaard reaffirms his unwavering Socratic vocation. We can include a fuller version of the passage. Here's the epigraph, less trimmed down, in George Pattison's translation:

The only analogy I have for what I am doing is Socrates. My task is the Socratic task of revising the definition of what it means to be a Christian. Therefore I do not call myself a Christian (keeping the ideal free), but I can make it plain that nobody else is either.<sup>25</sup>

---

25 This is George Pattison's translation, *The Philosophy of Kierkegaard*, p. 172. The standard translation is misleading here. (See *The Moment and Late Writings*, trans. Hongs, p. 341.) Where Pattison has "I can make it plain that nobody else is [Christian] either," the Hongs have "I can make it manifest that the others are that [i.e., Christian] *even less*" [my emphasis]. The comparative "*even less*" puts Kierkegaard in an untenable position, having him claim that

Let's pause with those parts of this passage that I earlier trimmed out. If Climacus is revising a definition, he wears his Socratic hat; that makes calling himself a Christian somewhat beside the point. He's doing Socratic, not Christian duty. With the full quotation, we can see his rejection of a Christian status from yet another angle. Not calling himself a Christian, he says, will "keep the ideal free."

One way to tie down the detail of a moral (or moral-religious) ideal is to imagine an exemplar living it out. Now if Kierkegaard claims that he's a Christian, he runs the risk of casting his life as exemplary. But in that case, "the ideal" of being a Christian would not be "kept free." It would be bound up with the example he lives out. That would deflate the ideal, making it no more than the haphazard (or ordered) life that Kierkegaard happens to lead.

When Kierkegaard pleads for "the ideal" to remain free, he means free from the vagaries of his personal existence – or *any* sublunary existence. This is to say that the bar for being Christian must always be higher than anyone's actual accomplishment. Moreover, it says that, however convenient a *cultural* Christian identity may be, such convenience does not bear on the impossibly strenuous demands of a *religiously* Christian point of view. From that non-cultural standpoint, persons *never* are Christian, but at best, strive to *become that*. For Kierkegaard to call himself Christian would be vain – not very *Christian!* There's a rhetorical point to notice, as well. Kierkegaard's *cultural* identity remains Christian – that's how others will place him. He attends church. And even after his bitter attacks on the Church, on the occasion of his burial, and to the chagrin of a cousin who protested loudly, the Church officiated and so called him its own. Yet any number of his contemporaries could easily feel offense at Kierkegaard's barbs – for instance, his sharp quip that there are no Christians in Copenhagen. His neighbor could feel the sting. *He*, good citizen that he is, has been accused of *not being a Christian!* Now if Kierkegaard avows *himself* to be Christian, then his neighbor has a quick retort: "*You*, Kierkegaard, are *equally* a city resident. So the moral onus falls just as well on *you* – in fact, you're worse than me: *you cast the first stone!*" This parry gets deflected if Kierkegaard concedes at the outset that he does not call himself a Christian. His neighbor, then, has lost his target.<sup>26</sup>

At the level of the street, it seems, it would be a tactical mistake for Kierkegaard to call himself a Christian. And at a more theoretical level, as we've seen, it would *also* be a mistake: absolutely no one meets the bar for being (as opposed to *becoming*) a Christian, and so Kierkegaard does not. Let me make a final – and minor – remark on this issue.

Kierkegaard says ". . . I do not call myself a Christian, . . . *but I can make it plain that nobody else is either.*" It's easy to hear this last remark as a petty "tit for tat,"

---

he is *more Christian* than his neighbors. True, Kierkegaard attacks his neighbors' so-called Christianity, but surely *not*, as I've argued, on the presumption that *he is more Christian* than they are – except in the very limited sense that if one is not a Christian, it's better to be aware of this, and he, unlike his countrymen, *is* aware of his failings.

26 Compare *Point of View*, p. 43. "If it is an illusion that all are Christians, and something is to be done, it must be done indirectly, not by someone who loudly declares himself to be an extraordinary Christian, but by someone . . . who declares himself *not* to be a Christian." On how Kierkegaard hopes he'd respond were a pagan outside Christendom to ask him if he were a Christian, see Chapter Three, note 9.

as if Kierkegaard were warning his offended neighbor: “*Watch out!* If you judge *me* for admitting *I’m* not Christian, I’ll turn it back and show that *you’re* not one *either!*” This sets Kierkegaard in a spat of nasty mud-slinging. But a more salutary reading has him making his familiar point that the Christian ideal is just too high for mere mortals to attain. It’s plain that *nobody* is Christian. One can hold this without slinging mud. And here the second epigraph can come into play. If not a Christian (though becoming one), Kierkegaard at least could be the “new Socrates” that Copenhagen so desperately needed.

### Excessive Polemics

Socrates was a political-religious irritant in Athens, as Kierkegaard would become in Copenhagen. Poul Martin Møller, Kierkegaard’s teacher, friend, and mentor, passed on a warning to this budding writer-to-be. The career was not quite launched. Møller was ill – in fact, in the throes of dying. No doubt he prepared his parting words carefully. He worried that his feisty friend and student could be “too polemical.” Møller deftly captures Kierkegaard’s genius and deepest pleasure. He sees that the burden Kierkegaard carries is to master his acutely polemical disposition. Of course, a dyed-in-the-wool polemicist would polemically reject this advice, and perhaps take up polemics with even greater vigor. Yet perhaps it’s otherwise – perhaps Kierkegaard *heeded* his good friend.

His challenge was to find a calling that would allow his natural talent for polemics to flourish, peaked not just by any passing opportunity, but inspired by a noble end. The higher and more urgent the calling, the more legitimate polemics in its service would seem. Can one be “excessive” in pursuing a life whose ideal is as demanding and comprehensive as a Christian calling – or, for that matter, can one be “excessive” in pursuing a Socratic calling? The goal of being Socratic or of being Christian might be pitched high enough that no amount of polemical work on its behalf could be too much. Kierkegaard could take Møller’s warning to heart, not by foregoing polemics, but by deploying them for the best of ends. The gadfly of Copenhagen was as polemical as could be in the service of his ideal.

### The End of the Day

As he approaches death, Socrates seems serene, assured that he has done as his *daimon* urged. He’s kept to the path allotted him. He does not regret the polemical “excess” that has brought the wrath of Athens down on him, and Kierkegaard would not regret his “excess,” either – not regret those sharp attacks that brought the wrath of Copenhagen down on him. Bruce Kirmmse lays out the parallel:

When Kierkegaard lay on *his* deathbed, he was satisfied in the knowledge that he had completed his life’s work and had placed a torpedo under the ark of the Established Church. He knew that the final issue of *The Moment* lay ready for publication, and he knew that the most incisive and troubling article in that issue was the one entitled “My Task,” in which

Kierkegaard repeatedly states “I am not a Christian,” explaining his position by stating that “the only analogy I hold before myself is Socrates.”<sup>27</sup>

Kierkegaard never wavers in his Socratic witness. Here is Kirmmse’s forthright summary of the life.

[T]he Greek gadfly remained Kierkegaard’s polemical-ironic *daimon*, emblematic of the highest human relationship. The elusive Kierkegaard remained Socratic through and through, from his dissertation to his deathbed.<sup>28</sup>

---

27 Bruce Kirmmse, “Socrates in the Fast Lane: Kierkegaard’s *The Concept of Irony* on the University’s Velocifere,” in Robert L. Perkins, ed., *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Concept of Irony*, Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2001, pp. 98-9. Kierkegaard remembered Moller’s worrying that “[you’re] so polemical . . . that it is quite frightful.”

28 Ibid.