# On Søren Kierkegaard

## Dialogue, Polemics, Lost Intimacy, and Time

Edward F. Mooney

# ON SØREN KIERKEGAARD

Tracing a path through Kierkegaard's writings, this book brings the reader into close contact with the texts and purposes of this remarkable 19th-century Danish writer and thinker. Kierkegaard writes in a number of voices and registers: as a sharp observer and critic of Danish culture, or as a moral psychologist, and as a writer concerned to evoke the religious way of life of Socrates, Abraham, or a Christian exemplar.

In developing these themes, Mooney sketches Kierkegaard's Socratic vocation, gives a close reading of several central texts, and traces "The Ethical Sublime" as a recurrent theme. He unfolds an affirmative relationship between philosophy and theology and the potentialities for a religiousness that defies dogmatic creeds, secular chauvinisms, and restrictive philosophies.

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EDWARD F. MOONEY
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ASHGATE

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*For Marcia,*
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# Preface

Kierkegaard is as demanding a writer and thinker as Plato or Socrates: ever provocative, ever unsettling, original, in love with argument but also with imagination, and madly elusive. The dozen-plus chapters I've assembled here are a record of wrestling with his central themes – passion, irony, subjectivity, ethics, prayer, repetition, *Augenblick* (*Øieblikket*), poetry, self-articulation, words, responsibility, the restless heart, requited and unrequited time, love. Simultaneously, they're a record of grappling with how it is that when we find evocative exemplifications of thought and value in the lives of particular persons of great worth, these exemplifications of worth, these worthy exemplars, so often appear to be responding to a call to be who they will be. And how is it that these powerful exemplars can call a reader, call Kierkegaard, call *us*, to a next and better self? My initial chapters circle around Socrates, Kierkegaard's exemplar first to last, a figure who embodies and testifies to a way of becoming at once poetic, ethical, and religious, a way that Kierkegaard found inescapable in its call.

All told, my efforts with these Kierkegaard texts work a space where theology and philosophy, literature and ethics, poetry and scripture, artistry and sacrament can mingle, affording mutual attractions and inter-animations. They need not be always already exclusive one to the other in friction or mutual suspicion. I hope that this fruitful commingling points to new possibilities for philosophy and theology.

I hope to give a sense of the sweep and tenor of Kierkegaard's accomplishment and bearing, sidestepping the challenge of an exhaustive (and exhausting) tour through all his works or through all his master themes. Of course, there are many Kierkegaards one might find lurking in his vast production, and there are approaches more rigorous and those more easygoing. At last a writer responding to the marvel of his words finds a way that beckons – and lets the chips fall. I try to free the spirit of Kierkegaard, to bring out a Kierkegaard who draws us well beyond simple philosophical, or theological, or ethical theory to a first-hand, existential reflective dialogue and polemic with the enigmas of our individual existences – even as he lays out his own intimate ventures, sufferings, and struggles with things dark and strange, not least, himself.

Kierkegaard wrote a book called *Prefaces*, and was fond of them, though they can indefinitely delay. I hear his work as an invitation to exploration, nothing more, nothing less.

Ed Mooney
Syracuse, NY
January 1, 2007

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# PART ONE
# Kierkegaard: A Socrates in Christendom

*It's not uncommon that one hears people say . . .*
*that a light shines over the Christian world,*
*while darkness broods over paganism.*

*[Yet] every single deep thinker . . .*
*becomes young again through the eternal youth of the Greeks.*

– *Fear and Trembling*

*the deep truth in Socratic ignorance–*
*truly to forsake . . . all prying knowledge.*

– *Papers*, 1846

*The only analogy I have*
*for what I am doing*
*is Socrates.*

– *The Moment*, 1854

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CHAPTER ONE

# 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.[1] 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.

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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);[2] 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).[3]

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.[4] 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.[5] 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

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4 Others include Hilarius Bookbinder, H. H., Anti-Climacus, "A," Judge Wilhelm, Inter et Inter, Vergilius Haufniensus, 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.[6] 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.[7] Love of wisdom becomes *askesis*, a purifying moral exercise. In Rick Furtak's phrase, it's a "quest for emotional integrity."[8] 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."[9] 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,

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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."[10]

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.[11]

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.[12] What are we to *make* of Faust or Socrates, the Master

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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.[13]

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 it's account."[14]

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("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.[15] 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.[16] 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

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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.[17] 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.[18] 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

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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.[19] 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, "O*f course* we know

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