

## Kierkegaard's Socratic Point of View

What our age needs... is not a new contribution to the system but a subjective thinker who relates himself to existing *qua* Christian just as Socrates related himself to existing *qua* human being (*CUP2* 77; *Pap.* VI B 98, p. 62).<sup>1</sup>

—Johannes Climacus

Not long before he died in 1855, Søren Kierkegaard composed a brief essay entitled »My Task« (*M* 340-347; *SVI* 14, 350-357).<sup>2</sup> In this relatively neglected work he argues that if we want to understand him and the activities in which he has been engaged in Copenhagen, then there is only one instructive object of comparison: Socrates and the role he played as philosophical gadfly in ancient Athens. In this paper I critically discuss this text and consider in particular Kierkegaard's claim that his refusal to call himself a Christian—in a context where it was the social norm to do so—is methodologically analogous to Socrates' stance of ignorance.

### I. *The Moment*, 10: »My Task«

When Kierkegaard died on November 11, 1855, age 42, he left behind among his papers the finished manuscript for the tenth issue of his serial *The Moment*. This final issue includes a section, dated September 1, 1855, that is entitled »My Task« and that turns out to be in effect Kierkegaard's last pronouncement upon the various activities he has been engaged in as a writer and thinker since the completion and defense of his dissertation.<sup>3</sup> It is thus also the last in a series of works within Kierkegaard's corpus that (either entirely or in part) are explicit reflections about his methodology and that often include remarks about how to understand some of his other individual works or how to conceive of them as a part of a larger philosophical and religious undertaking. To take an

analogy from literary studies, just as there are works of literature and works of criticism, so can we find within Kierkegaard's corpus a number of works that primarily seek to illuminate a certain subject matter or existential stance while also seeking to have an existential impact on the reader; at the same time, there exists a second, smaller class of writings that serves a more critical, methodological function, offering us ways in which Kierkegaard thinks we ought to approach the first class of writings together with general remarks about the overall point of view that he claims informs his authorship and about the basic method that he employs.<sup>4</sup> While most of these methodological texts have received a significant amount of attention from scholars (especially *The Point of View*), the text we are considering, »My Task,« remains relatively neglected.<sup>5</sup> Having spent several years reflecting about his authorship (and composing a number of texts in the process), Kierkegaard makes one last effort in »My Task« to draw everything together for his reader and to present in as compressed and distilled a manner as possible the essence of what he takes his task to have been. As a result, despite its neglect, this text is perhaps the best single document we have for obtaining a basic picture of how Kierkegaard conceives of his own activities as a writer and thinker.

Over the space of just a few pages Kierkegaard eloquently sketches for us what he takes to be his contemporary situation, a situation where the authentic practice of Christianity has almost ceased to exist while it nevertheless remains the cultural norm for people (notably his fellow citizens of Copenhagen) to continue to conceive of themselves as Christians. On Kierkegaard's view, there is a striking lack of fit between how his contemporaries picture their lives and how they actually live those lives: he contends that they self-deceptively think they are Christians while failing to put into practice the

Christian ideal. In response to this situation Kierkegaard openly refuses to call himself a Christian and at times even denies that he is a Christian: »I do not call myself a Christian, do not say of myself that I am a Christian...It is altogether true: I am not a Christian« (*M* 340, *SVI* 14, 350 [tran. modified]; *M* 342-343, *SVI* 14, 353). He realizes that a person who openly declares that she does not call herself a Christian is in danger of sounding crazy in a society where it goes without saying that everyone is a Christian, especially someone like him who has principally devoted himself to writing about what it is to be a Christian:

Yes, I well know that it almost sounds like a kind of *lunacy* in this Christian world—where each and every one is Christian, where being a Christian is something that everyone naturally is—that there is someone who says of himself, »I do not call myself a Christian,« and someone whom Christianity occupies to the degree to which it occupies me (*M* 340; *SVI* 14, 350-351 [italics mine]).

In response to such a claim, those who have a general familiarity with Kierkegaard's writings may feel the strong desire to object: Isn't this a strange thing for Kierkegaard of all people to say? Don't we know he is a Christian, an exemplary Christian who has had a significant impact on theology, on philosophy and on countless other fields and whose writings remain personally moving to some, personally repugnant to others, precisely for their very Christian orientation and emphasis? One might even feel like exclaiming, »If he isn't a Christian who is?!« Yet, at least in this text, Kierkegaard declares »I am not a Christian« and insists that »anyone who wants to understand [his] totally distinct task must *train himself* to be able to fix his attention on this« very phrase and the fact that he, Kierkegaard, »continually« repeats it (*M* 340; *SVI* 14, 350 [italics mine; tran. modified]).

In fact, Kierkegaard might not be all that surprised by expressions of puzzlement of this sort from those who take themselves to be familiar with his texts. Though he

claims in »My Task« that his authorship was »at the outset stamped ‘the single individual—I am not a Christian,’ « this is the first time he has openly avowed that this is his position (*M* 344; *SVI* 14, 354).<sup>6</sup> Kierkegaard suggests that those who think they know he is a Christian (and what is supposed to follow from this) are almost certain to misunderstand him, for he openly rejects the idea that there is anything analogous in the entire history of Christianity to the stance he adopts and the task he pursues. He contends that this is »the first time in ‘Christendom’ « that *anyone* has approached things in this particular manner:

The point of view I have exhibited and am exhibiting is of such a distinctive nature that in eighteen hundred years of Christendom there is quite literally nothing analogous, nothing comparable that I have to appeal to. Thus, in the face of eighteen hundred years, I stand quite literally alone (*M* 344, *SVI* 14, 355; *M* 340-341, *SVI* 14, 351-352 [tran. modified]).<sup>7</sup>

As Kierkegaard clearly cannot mean by this claim that he is the first person ever to declare that he is not a Christian (since this is something atheists and people who practice other religions do as a matter of course), he must attach a special significance to the fact that he utters this phrase in a context where it has become the norm for people to declare themselves to be Christians and even to conceive of themselves as Christians while living lives that in no way reflect these supposed commitments.

Kierkegaard’s claim that there is no one analogous to him in eighteen hundred years of Christianity is not the only thing, however, that is extraordinary about this passage. Immediately after he claims that he stands alone in Christendom, Kierkegaard makes the perhaps even more remarkable claim that there does exist one person prior to him whose activity is analogous: »The only analogy I have before me is Socrates; my task is a Socratic task, to audit the definition of what it is to be a Christian« (*M* 341; *SVI*

14, 352). That is, Kierkegaard claims that Socrates, a non-Christian pagan philosopher, is his one true predecessor, that Socrates' philosophical activity is the only thing analogous to his activity as a writer and thinker, such that we should conceive of his task—supposedly unique within Christianity—as a *Socratic* task. I think this is a remarkable claim. If Socrates really provides the only analogy to Kierkegaard and if Kierkegaard's task truly is as thoroughly Socratic as he seems to be suggesting, then we may be in the presence here of a thought that ultimately has the potential to revolutionize the very way we think about Kierkegaard and how we approach his texts.

## **II. Kierkegaard's Socratic Stance: »I am Not a Christian«**

The idea that Kierkegaard is in some sense a Socratic figure is bound to strike most scholars of Kierkegaard as obvious. Any random selection of secondary literature is certain to include the occasional appeal to Kierkegaard's lifelong interest in Socrates and interpretations abound that seek to shore up whatever is being argued for with the thought that, after all, Kierkegaard modeled himself on Socrates, had a penchant for irony and indirection, etc., etc. But while it would be surprising to discover someone who claimed to be familiar with Kierkegaard's writings and yet who had no idea that Socrates was an important figure for him, we still lack a detailed, in-depth treatment of the matter. This is not to say that there do not exist any studies of Kierkegaard's conception of Socrates or any helpful accounts of what might be called Kierkegaard's Socratic method. But these are surprisingly few in number.<sup>8</sup> One reason I think »My Task« is a useful place to start is that this text is fairly compressed and schematic in nature. Kierkegaard is here not so much trying to put a Socratic method into practice as to invite us to take up a point of view that he thinks makes *intelligible* many of the activities he has been engaged in as a

writer and thinker since the publication of his dissertation. This means that once the point of view at issue becomes clear we will have to turn to other parts of Kierkegaard's corpus if we want to obtain a more detailed grasp of how his task actually gets implemented in practice and what it is more specifically about this task that he thinks makes it quintessentially Socratic.<sup>9</sup>

Let's consider further Kierkegaard's comparison of himself to Socrates in »My Task.« I want to make clear up front that in my view the single most important text for Kierkegaard's thinking about Socrates is Plato's *Apology*.<sup>10</sup> This is a text to which he returns again and again in his writings about Socrates and which embodies for him the Socratic ideal: a life that simultaneously is directed at the cultivation of the self together with the aim of engaging one's fellow citizens and getting them to examine themselves more closely. In the case of »My Task,« where we find one of Kierkegaard's most mature portraits of Socrates, we are invited to compare Kierkegaard's situation and the events that have unfolded in his life to the drama of Socrates' life as it is recounted by him in the *Apology*.<sup>11</sup> Recall that a significant portion of Socrates' defense speech consists of a more general account of how he came to practice philosophy and why he thinks such a life is worth pursuing, together with his explanation of why so many people have been slandering him over the years. Let me briefly remind you of the main cast of characters who make an appearance in Socrates' account of his life: (1) the Sophists, professional teachers and sometimes rivals of Socrates with whom he is often confused by the general public;<sup>12</sup> (2) the god, who manifests himself through the oracle at Delphi and perhaps through the related phenomenon of Socrates' *daimonion* or divine sign;<sup>13</sup> (3) the broader group of those reputed to be wise (represented by the politicians, the poets and the

craftsmen) with whom Socrates converses, along with the public at large which often listens to their discussions;<sup>14</sup> (4) the young Athenian men who follow Socrates around and who enjoy listening to him question those reputed to be wise;<sup>15</sup> and (5) Socrates himself, who claims that the only sense in which he is wise is that he »do[es] not think [he] know[s] what [he] do[es] not know,« and who believes that the god ordered him to »live the life of a philosopher, to examine [himself] and others,« thereby serving as a kind of gadfly who awakens people from their ethical slumbers.<sup>16</sup> Socrates offers this account of his life as a part of the defense speech he delivers before the jury. If we leave aside the character of Meletus and Socrates' other immediate accusers, there exist within the larger dramatic context of Socrates' defense two other significant characters worth mentioning: (6) Socrates' jury, a selection of his Athenian peers which also serves as a kind of literary analogue for the readers of Plato's text, who themselves are invited to arrive at their own judgment about Socrates' guilt or innocence;<sup>17</sup> and (7) Plato, who is represented as one of the young men in attendance at Socrates' trial and who, in turn, is also the writer and thinker who has composed the text in question.<sup>18</sup>

I want to suggest that Kierkegaard models what he is doing in »My Task«—speaking more generally about his method and overall approach—on the account that Socrates develops in the *Apology* and that he invites us to treat his contemporary situation as a modern analogue to the one faced by Socrates in Athens. As the text unfolds and he develops his claim that Socrates provides his only analogy, Kierkegaard proceeds to single out a variety of characters each of whom corresponds to one of the major characters in the Socratic drama (the Sophists, the god, those reputed to be wise along with the wider public, the young Athenian men who follow Socrates, Socrates himself,

Socrates' jury, Plato's readers and Plato).<sup>19</sup> Simplifying a bit, the main characters discussed by Kierkegaard are the following: (1) the pastors and theologians, who make a profession of proclaiming what it is to be a Christian and whom Kierkegaard calls »sophists«; (2) the public, who conceive of themselves as Christians but who do not actually live in accord with the Christian ideal; (3) Kierkegaard qua Socratic figure, who denies he is a Christian and who helps to make his fellow citizens aware of a deeper sense in which they are not Christians (since they think they are Christians when they are not); (4) the Christian God of Love, whom Kierkegaard believes has singled him out to be the gadfly of Copenhagen; (5) Kierkegaard's readers, individual members of the public who are isolated as individuals by Kierkegaard's texts and whom he seeks to engage as interlocutors; and (6) Kierkegaard qua writer and critic, who decides how to dramatize the Socratic engagement of his audience and who offers interpretive tools for understanding his texts.

Let's start with the pastors and theologians and the larger public. Kierkegaard argues that the cultural phenomenon presenting itself as Christianity—what he calls »Christendom« (*Christendhed*)—is permeated by a kind of sophistry. In particular, he compares the pastors and theologians of his day to the Sophists<sup>20</sup> battled by Socrates:

»Christendom« lies in an abyss of sophistry that is much, much worse than when the Sophists flourished in Greece. Those legions of pastors and Christian assistant professors are all sophists....who by falsifying the definition of Christian have, for the sake of the business, gained millions and millions of Christians (*M* 341, *SVI* 14, 352 [tran. modified]; *M* 340, *SVI* 14, 351).<sup>21</sup>

If the pastors and theologians correspond to the professional teachers of virtue in Socrates' day, then the larger Christian public corresponds more broadly to those in Athens who think they know what virtue is when they do not. One of Kierkegaard's main

polemics is against the official Danish church and its representatives, the pastors and theologians. He contends that the church has become a business (whose main goal, then, is to make money and to perpetuate itself as an institution), and thus a body that out of self-interest obscures the true Christian message, employing a watered-down version in order for the sake of profits to maximize the total number of Christians.<sup>22</sup> At the same time Kierkegaard also conceives of the public itself as a distinct force to be reckoned with, as an abstract crowd or mob whose existence is predicated on the failure of people to cultivate and maintain themselves qua individuals. He invites us to imagine the contemporary situation of Christendom to consist of hordes of people, all running around calling themselves Christians and conceiving of themselves as Christians, often under the direct influence and guidance of the pastors and theologians, while next to no one is actually living a true, authentic Christian life. In this way he upholds a distinction between the pastors and theologians (sophists proper), who make a living advocating what it is to be a Christian, and the larger population, who more generally think they are Christians when they are not and whom Kierkegaard generically calls »the others« (*de Andre*).<sup>23</sup>

Kierkegaard casts himself in the role of Socrates and, accordingly, depicts himself as someone who both seeks to reform the larger public and who combats the corrupting influence of the pastors and theologians. By making such pronouncements about his contemporary situation and by presenting himself as someone who is capable of observing such patterns of behavior and even of diagnosing what can lead to such a state of things, Kierkegaard is aware that he might appear to be setting himself up as an

extraordinary Christian. But he denies that he is any such thing and suggests that his refusal to call himself a Christian at all partly helps to block such attributions:

I do not call myself a Christian. That this is very awkward for the sophists I understand very well, and I understand very well that they would much prefer that with kettledrums and trumpets I proclaimed myself to be the only true Christian (*M* 341-342; *SVI* 14, 352 [tran. modified]).

Recall that Kierkegaard is well aware that his refusal to call himself a Christian is bound to strike his contemporaries as odd or even crazy against the backdrop of a society where everyone as a matter of course calls herself a Christian. Despite this appearance of bizarreness, Kierkegaard contends that there are two significant reasons why he continues to assert this about himself. First, he ties his refusal to call himself a Christian, or in any way to modify this statement, to his desire to maintain a proper relationship with an omnipotent being, a being he later characterizes as the Christian »God of Love«:

I neither can, nor will, nor dare change my statement: otherwise perhaps another change would take place—that the power, an omnipotence [*Almagt*] that especially uses my powerlessness [*Afmagt*], would wash his hands of me and let me go my own way (*M* 345, *SVI* 14, 356; *M* 340, *SVI* 14, 351 [tran. modified]).<sup>24</sup>

At the same time, Kierkegaard ties his stance of one who does not call himself a Christian to an ability to make his contemporaries (»the others«) aware of an even deeper sense in which he claims that they are not Christians:

I am not a Christian—and unfortunately I can make it manifest that the others are not either—indeed, even less than I, since they *imagine* themselves to be that [*de indbilde sig at være det*], or they falsely ascribe to themselves that they are that (*M* 340; *SVI* 14, 351 [italics mine; tran. modified]).<sup>25</sup>

I do not call myself a Christian (keeping the ideal free), but I can make it manifest that the others are that even less (*M* 341; *SVI* 14, 352).

He seems to think that adopting a position of one who refuses to call himself a Christian makes him an especially tenacious interlocutor, someone whom his contemporaries will not be able to shake off very easily:

Just because I do not call myself a Christian it is impossible to get rid of me, having as I do the confounded characteristic that I can make it manifest—also *by means of* not calling myself a Christian—that the others are that even less (*M* 342; *SVI* 14, 352-353 [italics mine; tran. modified]).

Kierkegaard conceives his task, then, to have a two-fold structure. By denying that he is a Christian in the face of his contemporaries' wont to assert the opposite, he claims to be developing and upholding some kind of religious relationship to a divine being while also acquiring a powerful means of awakening his contemporaries and making them aware of the lack of fit between how they conceive of their lives and how they actually live them.<sup>26</sup>

### III. Socratic Ignorance

In the process of sketching his contemporary situation and characterizing both the Sophist-like attributes of the pastors and theologians and the more general condition of his contemporaries (who, he claims, think they are Christians when they are not), Kierkegaard repeatedly invokes Socrates, especially in order to throw further light on his characterization of himself as a Socratic figure. He suggests that Socrates' task in Athens has the same two-fold structure as his task: Socrates is both a gadfly to his contemporaries and someone who holds that his life as a philosopher is an expression of his devotion to the god. Let's consider the image of the gadfly first. Socrates' use of this image in the *Apology* is tied to the idea of his fellow citizens' being in some sense asleep and therefore in need of being awakened. He compares their condition to that of a sluggish but noble horse who can only be stirred into life by the sting of a fly. But just as

it is not uncommon for horses to kill the flies that sting them (with the quick snap of their tails), Socrates also notes that there is a certain danger involved in his being a gadfly:

You might easily be annoyed with me as people are when they are aroused from a doze, and strike out at me; if convinced by Anytus you could easily kill me, and then you could sleep on for the rest of your days, unless the god, in his care for you, sent you someone else.<sup>27</sup>

Kierkegaard ties Socrates' ability to awaken his fellow citizens to his stance of ignorance,<sup>28</sup> and invites us to compare this stance with his own stance of refusing to call himself a Christian. He contends that Socrates' ignorance both effectively distinguishes him from the Sophists (who profess to be knowledgeable about virtue and the like and who are willing to teach this to others for a fee) while also serving as a means for making his fellow citizens aware of a different kind of ignorance that they themselves possess:

O Socrates! If with kettledrums and trumpets you had proclaimed yourself to be the one who knew the most, the Sophists would soon have been finished with you. No, you were *the ignorant one* [*den Uvidende*]; but in addition you had the confounded characteristic that you could make it manifest (also by means of being yourself the ignorant one) that the others knew even less than you—they did not even know that they were ignorant (*M* 342; *SVI* 14, 353 [italics mine; tran. modified]).

By likening his stance of someone who refuses to call himself a Christian to Socrates' position, Kierkegaard suggests that he shares with Socrates the ability to make people aware of a more shameful or disgraceful form of ignorance (cf. *Ap.* 29b), an ignorance that can only be counteracted through a greater attention to and cultivation of the self. The chief result of interacting with either a Socrates or a Kierkegaard is that an interlocutor comes to see that she has been self-complacent, thinking she knows things she is not able to defend under examination or thinking she lives a certain way that does not in fact square with her actual life. To be in such a condition is characterized by self-neglect and a lack of true intellectual curiosity, for if one thinks one is living as one

imagines then no deeper self-examination is deemed necessary, and if one thinks one knows all about a subject then one feels no need to look into it in a more searching way. While Socrates' concern with what a person knows might on the face of it seem to be of a different order than Kierkegaard's concern with whether a person lives as a Christian, the principal focus of both of them is what we might call the practical sphere of human life, the sphere of ethics and religion, where an individual's grasp of a given ethical or religious concept is inherently tied to whether or not it plays an appropriate role in the life she leads.<sup>29</sup> Like Socrates, Kierkegaard focuses in particular on the tendency people have to lose track of the fundamental connection between knowing what virtue is or what it is to be a Christian and actually living a virtuous life or living an authentic Christian life.<sup>30</sup>

The dangers associated with Socrates' being a gadfly include the tendency of other people to grow angry with him as well as an unwillingness to take him at his word when he claims that he himself is ignorant about what he can show that the others only think they know. In the *Apology* he says that it is not uncommon for his interlocutors to grow angry in response to having been refuted by him and for them and the larger audience to assume that he must know, despite his claims of ignorance, what he has shown that they do not know:

As a result of this investigation, gentlemen of the jury, I acquired much unpopularity, of a kind that is hard to deal with and is a heavy burden; many slanders came from these people and a reputation for wisdom, for in each case the bystanders thought that I myself possessed the wisdom that I proved that my interlocutor did not have.<sup>31</sup>

The characteristic ways people have of responding to Socrates' profession of ignorance have also, according to Kierkegaard, applied with respect to his denial that he is a Christian. He claims that he often faces the same kind of anger, together with a

corresponding presumption about his own Christian status. But he is quick to deny that it in any way follows from his having an ability to make others aware that they are not

Christians that he himself is a Christian:

But as it went with you [Socrates] (according to what you say in your »defense,« as you ironically enough have called the cruelest satire on a contemporary age)—namely that you made many enemies for yourself by making it manifest that the others were ignorant and that the others held a grudge against you out of envy since they assumed that you yourself must be what you could show that they were not—so has it also gone with me. That I can make it manifest that the others are even less Christian than I has given rise to indignation against me; I who nevertheless am so engaged with Christianity that I truly perceive and acknowledge that I am not a Christian. Some want to foist on me that my saying that I am not a Christian is only a hidden form of pride, that I presumably must be what I can show that the others are not. But this is a misunderstanding; it is altogether true: I am not a Christian. And it is rash to conclude from the fact that I can show that the others are not Christians that therefore I myself must be one, just as rash as to conclude, for example, that someone who is one-fourth of a foot taller than other people is, ergo, twelve feet tall (*M* 342-343; *SVI* 14, 353 [tran. modified]).

Part of the difficulty in taking seriously Socrates' ignorance or Kierkegaard's denial that he is a Christian is an unwillingness to accept the idea that someone in that condition could nevertheless be a skilled diagnostician and able conversation partner. We find it hard to believe that Socrates could understand his interlocutors as well as he seems to be able to (seemingly being acquainted with all the different forms that their ignorance can take) while remaining himself ignorant about the subject in question. Similarly, could Kierkegaard really be as good at depicting the various ways that a person can fall short of being a Christian while continuing to think she is a Christian if he were not himself that very thing? But this is to underestimate the power of self-knowledge. For Socrates and Kierkegaard to be good at diagnosing and treating different species of that more disgraceful kind of ignorance what is required first and foremost is that they have become acquainted in their own case with the phenomenon at issue, the tendency of a person to a

kind of self-satisfaction where she imagines she knows more than she does. This tendency is a condition she is prone to that she needs to discover and—through self-examination and self-scrutiny—learn to regulate and control. While it is clearly true that a Socrates or a Kierkegaard will not make an effective conversation partner if he cannot discuss with some precision whatever it is he suspects that his interlocutor only thinks she knows, the chief qualification is that he be personally acquainted with the activity of forever being on the lookout for any such tendency in his own case. In fact, he must himself be an accomplished master of this activity (he must uphold the Delphic injunction to know thyself) if he is to be able to help others to make similar discoveries about themselves and to introduce them into the rigors of a life that seeks to avoid that more disgraceful kind of ignorance in all its various manifestations.

I suspect that a further reason that we may find it difficult to take seriously Socrates' ignorance is that it does not seem to sit well with our idea of him as a philosopher. While we may certainly applaud the manner in which he helps others to overcome their more disgraceful condition of ignorance, the fact remains that Socrates still seems to fall short of a certain philosophical ideal. The image we get of him in many of Plato's dialogues is of someone who is always approaching knowledge, perhaps gaining greater and greater conviction about what he holds to be the case but never actually arriving at knowledge itself.<sup>32</sup> This picture of Socrates (upheld both by Plato and Aristotle and most of the philosophical tradition since them, including Hegel and the early Kierkegaard of *The Concept of Irony*) tends to conceptualize his philosophical activity as being only a part of a larger enterprise, as itself incomplete or preliminary in nature.<sup>33</sup> While Socrates' method of engaging his interlocutors may help cleanse them of

misconceptions or remove a certain kind of self-satisfaction that stands in the way of a proper philosophical engagement of a given topic, once Socrates has done what he does well (so the story goes) then other methods are required if we are actually to gain what he has shown his interlocutors to lack. Though Kierkegaard seems to endorse a version of this picture in his dissertation, as his conception of Socrates develops in his later writings he more and more vehemently comes to reject this picture and instead maintains that Socrates' philosophical activity is not a mere precursor to something else but itself the human ideal (the best ethical and religious life available outside of Christianity). Socrates' life as a philosopher is thus held by Kierkegaard to be humanly complete, and ought in his view to make a claim on us and to serve as a model that we can emulate in our own lives. Socrates' activity of examining and refuting, forever on the lookout for further instances of a person's thinking she knows what she does not, becomes a life-long, ever vigilant task that he invites each of us to take part in; a task that a person will never finish, for the moment she begins to imagine that she has finished with such self-examination and self-scrutiny is the very moment when she may begin to think she knows something she does not.<sup>34</sup>

To motivate this picture of Socrates, Kierkegaard appeals to the religious significance that Socrates attaches to his activity as a gadfly in Athens. In the face of the reputation for wisdom that he has acquired over the years, Socrates upholds his stance of ignorance and insists that it really is the case that he lacks knowledge of the very things he tests others about. But this would then seem to leave us exactly where Socrates found himself upon first hearing of the oracle's claim that no one was wiser.<sup>35</sup> How can it truly be the case that Socrates is both ignorant (as he insists) and the wisest among human

beings? Recall that in the *Apology* Socrates offers us a way out of this apparent bind and, in the process, exhibits the very modesty that is often associated with his stance of ignorance:

What is probable, gentlemen, is that in fact the god is wise and that his oracular response meant that human wisdom is worth little or nothing, and that when he says this man, Socrates, he is using my name as an example, as if he said: »This man among you, mortals, is wisest who, like Socrates, understands that his wisdom is worthless.«<sup>36</sup>

The claim that human wisdom is worth »little or nothing« can strike people in quite different ways. In the traditional picture of Socrates (in which he battles the Sophists, destroying sophistry to make room for philosophy, though himself remaining only a preliminary step in its development), one might be inclined to restrict this claim about human wisdom to pre-philosophical forms of wisdom. As philosophy develops and becomes ever more sophisticated, a wisdom becomes possible that no longer is »little or nothing« but rather approaches the wisdom Socrates reserves for the god. In his later writings on Socrates Kierkegaard rejects this reading and instead takes it to be the case that Socrates means to draw a strict line *between* the human and the divine, and to ground claims of human wisdom in an individual's ability to remain aware of that distinction.<sup>37</sup> On this picture the difference between a wise human being and an ignorant one is that the wise person remains aware of her ignorance in relation to the wisdom of the god; the task is to develop oneself while maintaining this awareness, thereby at the same time developing a proper relationship to the god. For Kierkegaard, then, Socrates is to be taken at his word when he says that human wisdom is worth little or nothing. He does not think that Socrates' practice of philosophy is meant to begin with this little or nothing and incrementally try to bring it as close as possible to what only the god truly possesses.

Rather, it is to engage in a task of self-examination and self-scrutiny of the sort that helps a person to *fortify* herself against the ever prevalent tendency to think she knows things she does not; that is, against the tendency to lose track of the difference between the human and the divine. For Kierkegaard, Socrates' life as a philosopher embodies a rigorous task of ethical self-examination that expresses in its human modesty a deeply religious commitment. Socrates' ignorance is the point from which a person shall not be moved, not the point from which a better, more developed philosophy can begin to emerge.<sup>38</sup>

As Kierkegaard develops the parallel between himself and Socrates, it becomes clear just how significant Socrates is for him personally. One of the ways this manifests itself stems from his claim that he stands *alone* within the Christian tradition. While underlining yet again that he thinks that »in Christendom's eighteen hundred years there is absolutely nothing comparable, nothing analogous to [his] task,« he notes that there are certain burdens associated with occupying such a unique position:

I know what it has cost, what I have suffered, which can be expressed by a single line: I was never like the others [*de Andre*]. Ah, of all the torments in youthful days, the most dreadful, the most intense: not to be like the others, never to live any day without painfully being reminded that one is not like the others, never to be able to run with the crowd, the desire and the joy of youth, never free to be able to abandon oneself, always, as soon as one would risk it, to be painfully reminded of the chain, the segregation of singularity that, to the point of despair, painfully separates a person from everything that is called human life and cheerfulness and gladness....With the years, this pain does decrease more and more; for as one becomes more and more spiritually developed [*Aand*], it is no longer painful that one is not like the others. To be spiritually developed is precisely: not to be like the others (*M* 344; *SVI* 14, 355 [tran. modified]).

With such real isolation and heartfelt loneliness in view, Kierkegaard's claim that Socrates occupied an analogous position becomes all the more poignant since this in effect ensures that there is at least one person who would be in a position to understand

the difficulties of his task. Early on in »My Task,« just after he claims that Socrates provides his only analogy, Kierkegaard turns and openly addresses him:

You, antiquity's noble simple soul, you the only *human being* I admirably acknowledge as a thinker: there is only a little preserved about you, of all people the only true martyr of intellectuality, just as great *qua* character as *qua* thinker; but how exceedingly much this little is! How I long, far from those battalions of thinkers that »Christendom« places in the field under the name of Christian thinkers...how I long to be able to speak—if only for half an hour—with you! (*M* 341; *SVI* 14, 352 [tran. modified])

In this way Socrates becomes a kind of inner companion for Kierkegaard, someone to whom he can confide and whose example he can draw upon in his darker, lonelier moments, or in those moments perhaps when he feels least understood by his contemporaries.<sup>39</sup>

#### **IV. Kierkegaard as Writer and Thinker**

In addition to characterizing his contemporary situation and his response to that situation in terms of the four main figures we have been discussing thus far (the pastors and theologians, the public, the Christian God of Love, and himself qua Socratic figure), Kierkegaard makes clear in »My Task« that he also conceives of himself as playing a role analogous to that of Plato the writer and thinker. Just as Kierkegaard often depicts (and takes part in) Socratic exchanges within his texts, so also in his capacity as a writer does he frequently engage in a conversation with the individual readers of these texts, usually addressing them in the singular as »my dear reader« (*M* 345; *SVI* 14, 356). Though the individual reader is frequently invited by Kierkegaard to apply what has been enacted in a given work to her own life (as a reader of one of Plato's dialogues might come to examine herself more closely in the light of certain exchanges that Plato has portrayed between Socrates and a given interlocutor), there are also cases within Kierkegaard's

corpus where he engages the reader qua reader, seeking to instruct her on how to read his texts. Kierkegaard's activity in this case is akin to Socrates' attempt to inform his jury about his practice as a philosopher, and seeks to provide his reader with a more general understanding of his overall point of view and how he, the writer and thinker, thinks that his books should be read. Obviously the mere fact that Kierkegaard claims that his books mean thus and so, or that they ought to be read in the light of such and such, etc., does not guarantee that he is right.<sup>40</sup> The proof lies in how illuminating we find such orienting remarks to be. Do they reveal to us ways of approaching his texts that make those texts interesting to read, and do they help us to discern patterns of argument and literary nuance that we otherwise might not properly appreciate?

The main aim of »My Task« is to provide us with a point of view from which, according to Kierkegaard, his activities as a writer and thinker become intelligible. As should have become clear by now that point of view might be called a Socratic point of view, and it remains Kierkegaard's chief contention that Socrates is the one individual prior to him whose activity sheds any light on his task. By making such pronouncements Kierkegaard in effect presents himself as the best qualified person to offer a critical account of his authorship, and suggests that if you want to become a good reader of his texts then you should look to him and remarks of this sort for help.<sup>41</sup> His claim to be the »one single person who is qualified to give a true critique of [his] work« partly rests on his belief that none of his contemporaries has properly appreciated his endeavor (*M* 343; *SVI* 14, 353). He contends that »there is not one single contemporary who is qualified to review [his] work« and argues that even those who sit down and try to offer a more detailed analysis only arrive at the most superficial of readings:

Even if someone considerably better informed takes it upon himself to want to say something about me and my task, it actually does not amount to anything more than that he, after a superficial glance at my work, quickly finds some earlier something or other that he declares to be comparable.

In this way it still does not amount to anything. Something on which a person with my leisure, my diligence, my talents, my education...has spent not only fourteen years but essentially his entire life, the only thing for which he has lived and breathed—then that some pastor, at most a professor, would not need more than a superficial glance at it in order to evaluate it, that is surely absurd (*M* 343-344; *SVI* 14, 354 [tran. modified]).

In the face of all the pastors and theologians who claim to find all sorts of things that are analogous to his task, Kierkegaard declares that »a more careful inspection« by them would reveal that there is nothing analogous within Christianity—and then adds, »but this is what [they do] not find worth the trouble« (*M* 344; *SVI* 14, 354-355).

Kierkegaard wants us to be better readers than he thinks his contemporaries have been, to take the trouble to give his work that »more careful inspection« he claims it requires; and he encourages us to carry out this activity in the light of his suggestion that his task is a Socratic task. But this is not to say that we should expect such an inspection to be an easy one. If Kierkegaard is right and none of his contemporaries has understood him and his task, why should we think that it will necessarily fare any better in our own case? Kierkegaard is a strange, somewhat hybrid figure. He presents himself as a Socrates, someone skilled in the art of indirection and so seemingly forever elusive; and yet he demands that we try to understand him and offers us tools to assist us in our attempt. Anyone who embarks on such an enterprise should be warned up front that she is repeatedly likely to encounter moments of seeming clarity and a kind of shared intimacy with Kierkegaard (this most personal of philosophers), followed by moments of utter incomprehension and the anxiety that he is far too profound a character for our more

limited sensibilities. Trying to bring Kierkegaard into focus can often seem akin to what it is like when one encounters irony in a text or meets face to face with an ironist herself:

Just as irony has something deterring about it, it likewise has something extraordinarily seductive and fascinating about it. Its masquerading and mysteriousness, the telegraphic communication it prompts because an ironist always has to be understood at a distance, the infinite sympathy it presupposes, the fleeting but indescribable instant of understanding that is immediately superseded by the anxiety of misunderstanding—all this holds one prisoner in inextricable bonds (*CI* 48-49; *SKS* 1, 109).<sup>42</sup>

Sometimes we will feel certain we have gotten hold of Kierkegaard, only in the next moment to have the familiar experience of having him slip away yet again. Despite these difficulties, I remain convinced that there is much to be gained from taking Kierkegaard up on his suggestion that we view his activity as a writer and thinker as a Socratic task. Readers of »My Task« who share my conviction will be aware, however, that I have been operating at a fairly general level of description in this paper. Kierkegaard's main claim is that the refusal to call himself a Christian is analogous to Socrates' stance of ignorance. He claims that so adopted, this stance gives him the ability to make his fellow citizens aware of a deeper sense in which they are not Christians, while also allowing him at the same time to pursue an authentic ethical and religious life.

With Kierkegaard's Socratic point of view now hopefully before us, the next natural step would be to turn to other texts in the corpus in order to consider further how Kierkegaard conceives of what he calls his Socratic method and where in the corpus we should look if we want to discover concrete examples of this method actually at work. But that will have to wait for another occasion.<sup>43</sup> Let me close by noting that there is perhaps a touch of irony in Kierkegaard's suggestion that it is only the activity of Socrates that sheds any meaningful light on his own activity. For Socrates, of all people,

is about as enigmatic and elusive a character as we can find within philosophy, and is the very person whom Alcibiades claims is utterly *unlike* any other human being:

[Socrates] is unique; he is like no one else in the past and no one in the present—this is by far the most amazing thing about him....[He] is so bizarre, his ways and his ideas are so unusual, that, search as you might, you'll never find anyone else, alive or dead, who's even remotely like him. The best you can do is not to compare him to anything human, but to liken him, as I do, to Silenus and the satyrs....<sup>44</sup>

If Kierkegaard's claim bears out, then a proper investigation of his writings will reveal that Alcibiades was mistaken in his claim about Socrates' uniqueness by one person. When investigating further Kierkegaard's claim that Socrates provides his only analogy and that his task is a Socratic task, it's worth keeping in mind that Kierkegaard devoted the bulk of his first mature work, *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*, to developing an account of who he thinks Socrates is. Despite the prominence given in the title to the concept of irony, Kierkegaard spends nearly three quarters of his discussion examining the very individual he will later model himself upon and toward whom he now points us.<sup>45</sup> In this way Kierkegaard brings us full circle from his last words in »My Task« to the first words of his dissertation. His first true act as a writer and thinker was to stake his claim as the best interpreter of Socrates; in the end of his life he maintains that if we want to become interpreters of him who avoid the superficial readings he attributes to his contemporaries, then we should take his suggestion and examine his writings in the light of Socrates. In effect Kierkegaard suggests that one riddle, the riddle of Socrates (which he once thought he had solved in his dissertation and which continued to occupy him throughout his life), is the key to our trying to solve a second riddle, the riddle of Søren Kierkegaard.<sup>46</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* [CUP], 2 volumes, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1992; *Søren Kierkegaards Papirer* [Pap.], second edition, 16 volumes, edited by Niels Thulstrup and Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Copenhagen, Gyldendal Forlag, 1968-1978. Cf. JP, 2:1962 (p. 386); Pap. X.4 A 553. All references to Kierkegaard's published writings are to *Kierkegaard's Writings*, 26 volumes, edited by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1978-2000; all references to Kierkegaard's unpublished writings are to *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers* [JP], 7 volumes, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1967-1978. Citations of the English translation in question are then followed (where available) by the new scholarly edition of Kierkegaard's writings, *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter* [SKS], 55 volumes, edited by Niels Jørgen Cappelørn and others, Copenhagen, Gads Forlag, 1997-; otherwise I cite either *Søren Kierkegaards Samlede Værker* [SVI], first edition, 14 volumes, edited by A. B. Drachmann and others, Copenhagen, Gyldendalske Boghandels Forlag, 1901-1906 or *Søren Kierkegaards Papirer*.

<sup>2</sup> *The Moment and Late Writings* [M], edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Kierkegaard defended his *magister* dissertation on September 29, 1841. In general, when Kierkegaard discusses his activities as a writer and thinker he excludes from consideration his dissertation and the juvenilia that preceded it (including his first published book, *From the Papers of One Still Living*, a critique of Hans Christian Andersen's *Only a Fiddler*). While scholars generally mark the beginning of his authorship proper with the publication of *Either/Or* (February 15, 1843), Kierkegaard makes clear in the text we are considering here that he conceives of what he is calling his task as something upon which he »has spent not only fourteen years but essentially his entire life« (M 343-344; SVI 14, 354). If we focus on the first half of this quotation, it appears that Kierkegaard thinks that what he is describing in the fall of 1855 has been going on for fourteen years (which would take us back to the fall of 1841 and to the time when he defended his dissertation). For Kierkegaard, as with many graduate students, the completion and defense of his dissertation marks both the end of his apprenticeship and the beginning of his mature work.

<sup>4</sup> Excluding the many reflections of a critical nature that can be found in Kierkegaard's journals, the chief examples in Kierkegaard's corpus of this sort of critical, methodological text include (1) An appendix (entitled »A Glance at a Contemporary Effort in Danish Literature«) found in the middle of the 1846 pseudonymous work *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (CUP 251-300; SKS 7, 228-273), in which the pseudonymous author Johannes Climacus discusses all of the previous works that have been published (those by the other pseudonymous authors, his own earlier book *Philosophical Fragments*, and works that appeared under Kierkegaard's own name) and that Kierkegaard calls »a section with which [he] would ask the reader to become familiar« (*The Point of View for My Work as An Author* [PV], edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1998, 31; SVI 13, 523); (2) a short document entitled »A First and Last Explanation« that Kierkegaard attached without page numbers to the end of the *Postscript*, where he acknowledged for the first time that he was the creator of the various pseudonymous authors and their respective books (CUP 625-630; SKS 7, 569-573); (3) *The Point of View*, written in 1848 but not published until after Kierkegaard's death, and the most substantial of this group of texts; (4) *On My Work as an Author* (PV 1-20; SVI 13, 489-509), a short pamphlet published in 1851 (partly an extract of the longer *Point of View*); (5) *Armed Neutrality* (PV 127-141; Pap. X.5 B 107, pp. 288-301), another short pamphlet that remained unpublished during Kierkegaard's lifetime; and (6) the text we are examining here, »My Task.« For a discussion of the dangers of attaching too much significance to any one of these texts, see Joakim Garff, »The Eyes of Argus: *The Point of View* and Points of View on Kierkegaard's Work as an Author« in *Kierkegaard: A Reader*, edited by Jonathan Rée and Jane Chamberlain, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 1998, pp. 75-102.

<sup>5</sup> For one recent discussion see Bruce Kirmmse, »'I am not a Christian'—A 'Sublime Lie'? Or: 'Without Authority,' Playing Desdemona to Christendom's Othello« in *Anthropology and Authority: Essays on Søren Kierkegaard*, edited by Poul Houe, Gordon D. Marino, and Sven Hakon Rossel, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2000, pp. 129-136.

<sup>6</sup> There are, however, other places within Kierkegaard's corpus where the significance of denying that one is a Christian is discussed further. This position is most notably associated with the pseudonymous author Johannes Climacus as he presents himself in his second book *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (cf. PV 43, SVI 13, 532; PV 8, SVI 13, 497). Among Kierkegaard's methodological texts, the other main place where he ties the denial of being a Christian to his own stance is in the text *Armed Neutrality* (see, e.g., PV 138-139; Pap. X.5 B 107, p. 298).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. JP 6:6872 (p. 508); Pap. XI.1 A 136.

<sup>8</sup> On Kierkegaard's conception of Socrates see, e.g., Jens Himmelstrup, *Søren Kierkegaards Opfattelse Af Sokrates*, Copenhagen, Arnold Busck, 1924; Winfield Nagley, »Kierkegaard's Early and Later View of Socratic Irony« [»Kierkegaard's Views of Socratic Irony«], *Thought* 55, 1980, pp. 271-282; Harold Sarf, »Reflections on Kierkegaard's Sokrates«, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 44, no. 2, 1983, pp. 255-276; Mary-Jane Rubenstein, »Kierkegaard's Sokrates: A Venture in Evolutionary Theory« [»Kierkegaard's Sokrates«], *Modern Theology* 17, 2001, pp. 442-473. On Kierkegaard's Socratic method see, e.g., Mark C. Taylor, »Socratic Midwifery: Method and Intention of the Authorship« in *Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship: A Study of Time and the Self*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1975, pp. 51-62; Pierre Hadot, »The Figure of Sokrates« in *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, edited by Arnold I. Davidson, translated by Michael Chase, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 1995, pp. 147-178; Paul Muench, »The Socratic Method of Kierkegaard's Pseudonym Johannes Climacus: Indirect Communication and the Art of 'Taking Away' « [»Climacus' Socratic Method«] in *Søren Kierkegaard and the Word(s)*, edited by Poul Houe and Gordon D. Marino, Copenhagen, C.A. Reitzel, 2003, pp. 139-150.

<sup>9</sup> That, however, is a much larger project which lies beyond the scope of this paper. I've made a start on this project in »Climacus' Socratic Method«, where I argue that Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author Johannes Climacus represents Kierkegaard's »idealization of the Socratic within the context of nineteenth century Danish Christendom« (p. 139).

<sup>10</sup> This claim may come as a surprise to those readers who are familiar with Kierkegaard's dissertation and the special role he assigns to Aristophanes' depiction of Sokrates. Thus the third and seventh theses that Kierkegaard attached to his dissertation read: »III. If a comparison is made between Xenophon and Plato, one will find that the first takes too much from Sokrates, the second raised him too high; neither of them finds the truth; VII. Aristophanes has come very close to the truth in his depiction of Sokrates« (*The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Sokrates [CI]*, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1989, 6; *SKS* 1, 65). Without wanting to detract from Kierkegaard's very provocative discussion of Aristophanes' *Clouds* (*CI* 128-153; *SKS* 1, 179-203), where he convincingly makes the case that this text has things to teach us about Sokrates, it's worth keeping in mind that the scope of these two theses about the relative merits of Xenophon vs. Plato vs. Aristophanes does not arguably extend to the whole of Kierkegaard's discussion of Sokrates within the dissertation. Rather, these theses only concern the first chapter (»The Conception Made Possible«), wherein Kierkegaard seeks to show that his own conception of Sokrates is capable of accounting for the differences found in the three principal contemporary depictions of him, each of which Kierkegaard believes is ultimately a *distortion* of the truth (whether this distortion results from Xenophon's shallowness, Plato's desire to idealize his teacher, or Aristophanes' aims as a comic playwright). He writes, »even though we lack an altogether reliable conception of [Sokrates], we do have in recompense all the various nuances of misunderstanding« (*CI* 128; *SKS* 1, 180 [tran. modified]). Kierkegaard argues that by tracing these various distortions and their interrelationships we place ourselves in a position where we can in effect triangulate back to their common Socratic source, arriving at what he takes to be the truth about Sokrates, namely that his standpoint is best understood to embody a radical kind of irony (see *CI* 154; *SKS* 1, 204-205; for some significant respects in which Kierkegaard later modifies this view, see Nagley, »Kierkegaard's Views of Socratic Irony«; Rubenstein, »Kierkegaard's Sokrates«). Thus while Aristophanes may be held to be *closer* to the truth than either Xenophon or Plato, Kierkegaard nevertheless does not think that *any* contemporary of Sokrates has accurately depicted him; nor, for that matter, that anyone else has an accurate conception of him: the ultimate aim of his dissertation is to argue that it is only Søren Kierkegaard who has actually arrived at the truth about Sokrates.

But where does this leave my original claim about Plato's *Apology*? Interestingly, Kierkegaard places the *Apology* in a special class of its own, apart from Plato's other writings (and so, I would argue, apart from the criticism raised against Plato in the third thesis), calling it »an historical document« that »must be assigned a preeminent place when the purely Socratic is sought« (*CI* 76; *SKS* 1, 134). Kierkegaard's whole argument depends on the not unreasonable view that there is something special about the *Apology* when it comes to our understanding of who Sokrates is. For Kierkegaard, this text is akin to a kind of window through which we actually are brought face to face with Sokrates himself. He writes, »For me the most important point is that a reliable picture of the *actual* Sokrates is seen in the *Apology*...in this work we do have, according to the view of the great majority, a historical representation of Sokrates' *actuality*« (*CI* 80, *SKS* 1, 138; *CI* 126, *SKS* 1, 177 [italics mine; both trans. modified]). As the argument of *The Concept of Irony* unfolds (proceeding from Kierkegaard's treatment of the contemporary sources, to his discussion of Sokrates' trial, to his discussion of Sokrates' world-historical significance), Kierkegaard repeatedly appeals to the *Apology* and treats it as something like the final authority upon which any conception of Sokrates must rest. This means in effect that whether we are ultimately convinced by Kierkegaard's overall argument in his dissertation will in large part depend on whether we are convinced by his reading of Plato's *Apology* itself, which he provocatively claims »is in its entirety an ironic work« (*CI* 37; *SKS* 1, 99 [tran. modified]). But until we arrive at an understanding of what he could possibly mean by such a claim, we won't be in a position either to agree or disagree with him. For

another discussion of the strategy of argument Kierkegaard makes use of in the first chapter of *The Concept of Irony*, see Tonny Aagaard Olesen, »Kierkegaard's Socratic Hermeneutic in *The Concept of Irony*« [»Kierkegaard's Socratic Hermeneutic«] in *The Concept of Irony (International Kierkegaard Commentary, vol. 2)*, edited by Robert L. Perkins, Macon, Georgia, Mercer University Press, 2001, pp. 101-122.

<sup>11</sup> All references to Plato's writings are to *Complete Works / Plato*, edited by John M. Cooper, Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 1997.

<sup>12</sup> In the *Apology* [*Ap.*] Socrates singles out by name Gorgias, Prodicus, and Hippias (Protagoras is notably absent from this list) as examples of those who »can go to any city and persuade the young, who can keep company with anyone of their own fellow-citizens they want without paying, to leave the company of these, to join themselves, pay them a fee, and be grateful besides« (*Ap.* 19e-20a). Socrates contrasts any wisdom he might be said to possess (what he terms »human wisdom«) with that of the Sophists in question: »those whom I mentioned just now may be wise with a wisdom more than human, or else I don't know what to say about it« (*Ap.* 20d-e; tran. modified following *Apology / Plato*, edited by James J. Helm, Wauconda, Illinois, Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 1997, p. 20).

<sup>13</sup> On the oracle at Delphi: »You know Chaerephon.... Surely you know the kind of man he was, how impulsive in any course of action. He went to Delphi at one time and ventured to ask the oracle... if any man was wiser than I, and the Pythian [priestess] replied that no one was wiser« (*Ap.* 21a; cf. 33c). On Socrates' *daimonion*: »I have a divine or spiritual sign which Meletus has ridiculed in his deposition. This began when I was a child. It is a voice, and whenever it speaks it turns me away from something I am about to do, but it never encourages me to do anything« (*Ap.* 31d; cf. 40a-c).

<sup>14</sup> See *Ap.* 21b-23b.

<sup>15</sup> On the young men: »The young men who follow me around of their own free will, those who have most leisure, the sons of the very rich, take pleasure in hearing people questioned.... They enjoy hearing those being questioned who think they are wise, but are not. And this is not unpleasant« (*Ap.* 23c; 33c).

<sup>16</sup> *Ap.* 21d; 28e-29a. Socrates claims that it is because he has pursued this god-given task that he has not been a conventionally model public servant and that his own personal affairs have been neglected: »Because of this occupation, I do not have the leisure to engage in public affairs to any extent, nor indeed to look after my own, but I live in great poverty because of my service to the god« (*Ap.* 23b; cf. 31b-c). On being a gadfly: »I was attached to the city by the god—though this seems a ridiculous thing to say—as upon a great and noble horse which was somewhat sluggish because of its size and needed to be stirred up by a kind of gadfly. It is to fulfill some such function that I believe the god has placed me in the city« (*Ap.* 30e).

<sup>17</sup> Myles Burnyeat, e.g., argues that »readers are invited... to reach a verdict on the case before [them]« (»The Impiety of Socrates,« *Ancient Philosophy* 17, 1997, pp. 1-12, p. 2). If we were to imagine Socrates' defense as a monologue he performed on stage, then it might be natural for him to speak to the audience as though they constituted his jury (where Plato, of course, would be the playwright/director). With the invention of paper and the printing press, this audience becomes more and more the isolated, individual reader, thus perhaps better approximating the individual interlocutors whom Socrates seeks to engage qua individuals: »For I do know how to produce one witness to whatever I'm saying, and that's the man I'm having a discussion with. The majority I disregard. And I do know how to call for a vote from one man, but I don't even discuss things with the majority« (Plato, *Gorgias* [*Grg.*], 474a-b). One of the devices that helps draw the reader into a dialogue with the text of the *Apology* is Socrates' frequent personification of one or more members of his jury and his subsequent interaction with this imagined figure or figures. So, for example, after he denies that he engages in activities comparable to those practiced by the Sophists, he says, »One of you might perhaps interrupt me and say: 'But Socrates, what is your occupation? From where have these slanders come? For surely if you did not busy yourself with something out of the [ordinary], all these rumors and talk would not have arisen.... Tell us what it is, that we may not speak inadvisedly about you.' Anyone who says that seems to be right, and I will try to show you what caused this reputation and slander« (*Ap.* 20c-d; see also, e.g., 28b, 29c-e, 34c, 37e). It will be quite natural, as a reader, to slip into a frame of mind in which one treats Socrates' use of the second person »you« as also directed at oneself. For example, »I shall not cease to practice philosophy, to exhort you and in my usual way to point out to any one of you whom I happen to meet: 'Good Sir, you are an Athenian, a citizen of the greatest city with the greatest reputation for both wisdom and power; are you not ashamed of your eagerness to possess as much wealth, reputation and honors as possible, while you do not care for nor give thought to wisdom or truth, or the best possible state of your soul?' Then, if one of you disputes this and says he does care, I shall not let him go at once or leave him, but I shall question him, examine him and test him, and if I do not think he has attained the goodness that he says he has, I shall reproach him because he attaches little importance to the most important things and greater importance to inferior things.... Be sure that this is what the god orders me to do, and I think there is no greater blessing for the city than my service to the god« (*Ap.* 29d-30b).

<sup>18</sup> In general Plato does not cast himself as a character in his writings. The *Apology* is one of two places within his corpus where he is mentioned by name, and the one place where Plato stresses that he—the author of the text

in question—was present at the set of events his text purports to represent (see *Ap.* 38b, 34a; Plato, *Phaedo*, 59b). While this device in no way ensures that what is represented is somehow more veridical (for there are plenty of uses of this device by ancient authors where we have independent reasons for thinking that the author in question could not have been present), the fact that Plato only avails himself of this device once in his entire corpus surely suggests that he attaches a special significance to asserting that he was in fact a first-hand witness of Socrates' defense.

<sup>19</sup> The one exception being perhaps the young men who follow Socrates around and who enjoy listening to him examine those reputed to be wise. Kierkegaard does not present himself as someone who has had such followers, but he remains deeply interested in the youth and the problems a Socrates faces when seeking to interact with them. See, e.g., his discussion of Alcibiades at *CI* 47-52, *SKS* 1, 108-113; *CI* 187-192, *SKS* 1, 234-239; *Philosophical Fragments [PF]*, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1985, 24, *SKS* 4, 231-232; *JP* 4:4300 (p. 221), *Pap.* XI.1 A 428.

<sup>20</sup> In general when Kierkegaard speaks of the Sophists he primarily has in mind, above all, Protagoras as he is portrayed in Plato's *Protagoras* (see, e.g., *CI* 33, *SKS* 1, 94-95; *CI* 52-62, *SKS* 1, 113-122), together with Hippias and Prodicus (as also portrayed there: see *CI* 203; *SKS* 1, 248), Gorgias, Polus and Callicles as portrayed in Plato's *Gorgias* (see, e.g., *CI* 33, *SKS* 1, 94; *CI* 33-34, *SKS* 1, 95-96; *CI* 36, *SKS* 1, 98), and Polemarchus and Thrasymachus as portrayed in the first book of Plato's *Republic* (see *CI* 109-119; *SKS* 1, 163-171). His more general discussion of Socrates' relationship to the Sophists can be found at *CI* 201-214; *SKS* 1, 246-259. That being said, a word of caution may be in order concerning the term »Sophist.« Henry Sidgwick famously argued that this term does not have a univocal application (»The Sophists« in *Lectures on The Philosophy of Kant and Other Philosophical Lectures and Essays*, London, Macmillan, 1905, pp. 323-371). He claims that even within Plato's corpus we ought to distinguish between (1) Sophists like Protagoras who claim to teach the art of virtue and who prefer delivering speeches to the give and take of Socrates' question-and-answer approach and (2) those Sophists who more closely »ape« Socrates' own methods and so represent a »post-Socratic Sophistry« (caricatured in Plato's *Euthydemus*) where »instead of pretentious and hollow rhetoric we have perverse and fallacious dialectic« (pp. 343, 334). Sidgwick further calls into question the legitimacy of assimilating Callicles and Thrasymachus (open defenders of an egoistic moral skepticism) to the first group of Sophists. It may be worth noting, however, that this latter claim seems partly to rest on Sidgwick's being under the impression that Plato does not portray Protagoras as someone Socrates attacks because his doctrines are »novel or dangerous« but only because they are »superficial and commonplace,« a view Kierkegaard surely would not be alone in rejecting (p. 360; cf. Plato, *Meno*, 91e).

<sup>21</sup> It should be noted, however, that one dissimilarity between the pastors and theologians under criticism by Kierkegaard and the Sophists of Socrates' day is that while the former are part of the official establishment and as such were generally recognized as legitimate authorities, the latter were usually outsiders who traveled to Athens and who were often viewed with considerable suspicion by those in power. Cf. Anytus' discussion of the Sophists in Plato's *Meno* (91b-92c).

<sup>22</sup> At the close of »My Task,« Kierkegaard addresses the common man (*menige Mand*) and warns him to »avoid the pastors, avoid them, those abominations whose job is to hinder you in even becoming aware of what true Christianity is and thereby to turn you, muddled by gibberish and illusion, into what they understand by a true Christian, a contributing member of the state Church, the national Church, and the like. Avoid them; only see to it that you willingly and promptly pay them the money they are to have. One must at no price have money differences with someone one scorns, lest it be said that one was avoiding them in order to get out of paying. No, pay them double so that your disagreement with them can become obvious: that what concerns them does not concern you at all, money, and that, on the contrary, what does not concern them concerns you infinitely, Christianity« (*M* 347; *SVI* 14, 357).

<sup>23</sup> In the *Apology* Socrates makes clear that independent of any danger the Sophists may represent, he takes it to be the case that the Athenian populace as a whole (which after all, in the form of the jury, will put him to death) is itself a significant force: »Do not be angry with me for speaking the truth; no man will survive who genuinely opposes you or any other crowd and prevents the occurrence of many unjust and illegal happenings in the city. A man who really fights for justice must lead a private, not a public, life if he is to survive for even a short time« (*Ap.* 31e-32a). In Plato's *Republic*, this topic of the relationship between the individual Sophists and the larger Athenian society is returned to: »Do you agree with the general opinion that certain young people are actually corrupted by sophists—that there are certain sophists with significant influence on the young who corrupt them through private teaching? Isn't it rather the very people who say this who are the greatest sophists of all...?...Not one of those paid private teachers, whom the people call sophists..., teaches anything other than the convictions that the majority express when they are gathered together. Indeed, these are precisely what the sophists call wisdom. It's as if someone were learning the moods and appetites of a huge, strong beast that he's rearing—how to approach and handle it, when it is most difficult to deal with or most gentle and what makes it so, what sounds it utters in either condition, and what sounds soothe or anger it. Having learned all this through

tending the beast over a period of time, he calls this knack wisdom, gathers his information together as if it were a craft, and starts to teach it. In truth, he knows nothing about which of these convictions is fine or shameful, good or bad, just or unjust, but applies all these names in accordance with how the beast reacts—calling what it enjoys good and what angers it bad« (492a-493c).

<sup>24</sup> Thus refusing to call himself a Christian is, in part, an expression of Kierkegaard's religious convictions and may be tied to his idea that one never *is* a Christian in this life, though each person certainly can embark on the lifelong task of *becoming* a Christian.

<sup>25</sup> The Danish verb phrase »indbilde sig« can also mean to be under an illusion or under a delusion. Those who are under the illusion that they already *are* something will not be in the practice of examining whether they *really* are that, nor will they set about trying to *become* something that they think they already are.

<sup>26</sup> Kierkegaard frequently characterizes his task in terms of these two dimensions, so that one and the same activity is partly constitutive of what in his own case he takes to be an authentic life while also being directed at helping others to gain a greater awareness of the lack of fit between their avowed commitments and how they actually live. As a result, he argues that his method of approach has an intrinsic worth to it independent of how successful it is with his interlocutors, since it helps constitute his own life whether or not, in the end, it manages to make the others more aware: »That is why this approach has intrinsic worth. Ordinarily it holds true that an approach has worth only in proportion to what is achieved by it. One judges and condemns, makes a big noise—this has no intrinsic worth, but one reckons on achieving a great deal thereby. It is different with the approach described here. Assume that a person had devoted his whole life to using it, assume that he had practiced it all his life, and assume that he had achieved nothing—he nevertheless has by no means lived in vain, because his life was true self-denial« (PV 44; SVI 13, 532-533; cf. CUP 277-278; SKS 7, 251-254).

<sup>27</sup> Ap. 31a. The idea that a philosopher's primary role is to serve as a gadfly for her fellow citizens is rather removed from how philosophy tends to be thought of these days. Reminding ourselves that Socrates thought of his philosophical activity in these terms will better position us to appreciate the sense in which Kierkegaard might readily call himself a philosopher in spite of his general tendency to ridicule and set himself against most modern forms of philosophy.

<sup>28</sup> Socrates' ignorance has remained an enduring source of puzzlement; this is especially so for philosophers since ignorance is normally thought to be a condition that philosophy helps one to overcome. It might seem that insofar as Socrates remains ignorant he lies outside the proper province of philosophy. One might even feel like asserting, »If Socrates is still ignorant after seventy years isn't this reason enough to admit that his method is inadequate at best and ultimately a failure?« In his essay, »Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge,« Gregory Vlastos nicely captures this sentiment and brings into view the seemingly inherent tension between Socrates' unvarying stance of ignorance and his presentation of himself as a virtuous person: »If after decades of searching Socrates remained convinced that he still knew nothing, would not further searching have become a charade—or rather worse? For he holds that virtue 'is' knowledge: if he has no knowledge, his life is a disaster, he has missed out on virtue and, therewith, on happiness. How is it then that he is serenely confident he has achieved both? [In a footnote to this passage:] His avowals of epistemic inadequacy, frequent in the dialogues, are never paralleled by admission of moral failure; the asymmetry is striking« (in *Socratic Studies*, edited by Myles Burnyeat, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 39-66, p. 43). Socrates' stance of ignorance is sometimes treated as a rhetorical device that he uses to draw out his interlocutor. Norman Gulley, e.g., claims that Socrates' profession of ignorance is »an expedient to encourage his interlocutor to seek out the truth, to make him think he is joining with Socrates in a voyage of discovery« (quoted by Vlastos, p. 39). Hence his stance of ignorance is sometimes called a mere ironic pose; consider this common dictionary definition of Socratic irony: »pretense of ignorance in a discussion to expose the fallacies in the opponent's logic« (*Webster's New World College Dictionary*, 4th edition, edited by Michael Agnes, Cleveland, Wiley Publishing, 2002, p. 755). In the *Republic*, Thrasymachus is just as suspicious of Socrates' claim to be ignorant, only he treats it as a tactic adopted by Socrates to avoid having to be questioned by others: »By Heracles, [Thrasymachus] said, that's just Socrates' usual irony. I knew, and I said so to these people earlier, that you'd be unwilling to answer and that, if someone questioned *you*, you'd be ironical and do anything rather than give an answer« (337a). In contrast to these positions Kierkegaard, who is best known for having argued in his dissertation that Socrates is an ironist through and through, never conceives of Socrates' ignorance as feigned or merely tactical, as though it did not go all the way down. See, e.g., CI 169-177, SKS 1, 217-224; CI 269-271, SKS 1, 306-308. Among modern commentators who discuss Socrates' irony, Alexander Nehamas seems to come closest to Kierkegaard's position. Commenting on Vlastos' discussion, he calls the relationship between Socrates' disavowal of knowledge and his conviction that he has lived a virtuous life »Socrates' final and most complex irony. He disavows the knowledge he himself considers necessary for a life of *aretê*. But he is also 'serenely' confident in thinking that he has actually lived such a life....[If we suppose] he did live a good life, does he or does he not think that he really has that knowledge? Does he or does he not mean his disavowal seriously?...Plato's early works do not answer [these questions], and they thus endow Socrates with a further ironical dimension. Not just

ironical with his interlocutors, he is ironical toward Plato himself (and so towards Plato's readers) as well, for even Plato cannot answer the question Socrates poses for him. Though Socrates is Plato's creature, his own literary character, he remains opaque to him: he is a character his own creator admits he cannot understand« (*The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* [*The Art of Living*], Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998, pp. 86-87).

<sup>29</sup> A passage in Plato's *Laches* nicely brings out the connection between Socrates' interest in what an individual knows and his deeper interest in examining how that person lives: »You don't appear to me to know that whoever comes into close contact with Socrates and associates with him in conversation must necessarily, even if he began by conversing about something quite different in the first place, keep on being led about by the man's arguments until he submits to answering questions about himself concerning both his present manner of life and the life he has lived hitherto. And when he does submit to this questioning, you don't realize that Socrates will not let him go before he has well and truly tested every last detail« (187e-188a; cf. *Ap.* 29e-30a).

<sup>30</sup> One definition of sophistry might be any approach to ethical and religious matters that fosters the illusion that a theoretical knowledge of such matters is possible independent of the practical understanding that one only acquires by living a certain kind of life. Kierkegaard believes that with the rise in his day of Hegelian philosophy a new species of sophistry is born, a sophistry that holds out the promise of a systematic, theoretical comprehension of ethical and religious matters while at the same time leading individuals to neglect the proper realm of ethics and religion: namely the individual herself qua ethical and religious agent. Within Kierkegaard's corpus, the main attack against this Hegelian species of sophistry is launched by the pseudonymous author Johannes Climacus in his two books *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.

<sup>31</sup> *Ap.* 22e-23a; cf. 23c-24b and Plato, *Theaetetus*, 151c, where Socrates claims that »people have often before now got into such a state with me as to be literally ready to bite when I take away some nonsense or other from them.« Recall that in the *Apology* Socrates claims that his life as a philosopher was given a certain impetus by the oracle's claim that no one is wiser than he is. Socrates finds this a puzzling remark and treats it as a kind of riddle set him by the god. He doesn't think he is an especially wise person but he also thinks he ought to take quite seriously the god's pronouncement. Accordingly, after remaining puzzled for quite a while, he reluctantly turns to what seems to come quite naturally to him, to the activity of questioning and refuting, thinking that in this way he might arrive at some kind of an answer to the god's riddle. Socrates claims that he then proceeded to seek out people who were reputed to be wise, initially with the idea that he might discover someone who is wiser than he is. But we all know how the story goes. Instead of making this kind of discovery, Socrates repeatedly encounters people who think they know things they do not and then tries to show this to the individuals in question. This does not always make him the most popular of individuals. Consider his description of his first such encounter, whose generic form nicely captures the basic type of exchange that he claims has led to a climate of hostility in which people have repeatedly slandered him: »When I examined this man...my experience was something like this: I thought that he appeared wise to many people and especially to himself, but he was not. I then tried to show him that he thought himself wise, but that he was not. As a result he came to dislike me, and so did many of the bystanders« (*Ap.* 21c-d). It is this condition of being »unpopular with many people« that Socrates says will lead to his »undoing, if [he] is undone, not Meletus or Anytus but the slanders and envy of many people« (*Ap.* 28a).

<sup>32</sup> Given the inductive nature of Socrates' enterprise, the strength of his convictions will partly rest on the quality of the interlocutor he encounters, providing him perhaps with further reason for trying to foster a philosophical culture in Athens in which someone might arise who could truly test him, a Socrates who could test Socrates (Plato arguably tries to fulfill that very role over the course of his writings): »These conclusions, at which we arrived earlier in our previous discussions are, I'd say, held down by arguments of iron and adamant, even if it's rather rude to say so. So it would seem, anyhow. And if you [Callicles] or someone more forceful than you won't undo them, then anyone who says anything other than what I'm now saying cannot be speaking well. And yet for my part, my account is ever the same: I don't know how these things are, but no one I've ever met, as in this case, can say anything else without being ridiculous« (*Grg.* 508e-509a). This picture of Socrates being tested by others, however, remains somewhat of an anomaly within Plato's corpus; his fundamental role is to be the one who asks questions. In the *Theaetetus* Socrates notes that this is how he is commonly thought of and readily ties this view of him to his stance of ignorance: »The common reproach against me is that I am always asking questions of other people but never express my own views about anything, because there is no wisdom in me; and that is true enough. And the reason of it is this, that God compels me to attend to the travail of others, but has forbidden me to procreate. So that I am not in any sense a wise man; I cannot claim as the child of my own soul any discovery worth the name of wisdom« (150c-d).

<sup>33</sup> In his dissertation Kierkegaard assigns Socrates an essential role in the development of a proper speculative philosophy, but contends that he should only be conceived of as someone who prepares the way for speculative philosophy without himself becoming a speculative philosopher: »In the world-historical sense [Socrates'] significance was that he set the boat of speculation afloat....He himself, however, does not go on board but

merely launches the ship. He belongs to an older formation, and yet a new one begins with him« (*CI* 217; *SKS* 1, 261 [tran. modified]).

<sup>34</sup> On the idea of Socrates' activity being a kind of preliminary cleansing of the soul, consider this passage from Plato's *Sophist*: »They set out to get rid of the belief in one's own wisdom in another way. How? They cross-examine someone when he thinks he's saying something though he's saying nothing. Then, since his opinions will vary inconsistently, these people will easily scrutinize him. They collect his opinions together during the discussion, put them side by side, and show that they conflict with each other at the same time on the same subjects in relation to the same things and in the same respects. The people who are being examined see this, get angry at themselves, and become calmer toward others [ideally speaking: cf. *Ap.* 23d]. They lose their inflated and rigid beliefs about themselves that way, and no loss is pleasanter to hear or has a more lasting effect on them. Doctors who work on the body think it can't benefit from any food that's offered to it until what's interfering with it from inside is removed. The people who *cleans the soul*, my young friend, likewise think the soul, too, won't get any advantage from any learning that's offered to it until someone shames it by refuting it, removes the opinions that interfere with learning, and exhibits it cleansed, believing that it knows only those things that it does, and nothing more« (230b-d [italics mine]). By denying that Socrates' life should be understood as incomplete, Kierkegaard radicalizes this activity of cleansing the soul, insisting that this activity is never finished, never perfected but instead is of such a nature that an individual must conceive of it as a task to which she must devote her entire life.

<sup>35</sup> *Ap.* 20e-21b.

<sup>36</sup> *Ap.* 23a-b.

<sup>37</sup> Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author Anti-Climacus puts it this way: »Let us never forget—but how many ever really knew it or thought it?—let us never forget that Socrates' ignorance was a kind of fear and worship of God, that his ignorance was the Greek version of the Jewish saying: The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Let us never forget that it was out of veneration for God that he was ignorant, that as far as it was possible for a pagan he was on guard duty as a *judge* on the frontier between God and man, keeping watch so that the deep gulf of qualitative difference between them was maintained, between God and man, that God and man did not merge in some way, *philosophice, poetice* [philosophically, poetically], etc., into one. That was why Socrates was the ignorant one, and that was why the deity found him to be the wisest of men« (*The Sickness Unto Death*, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1980, 99; *SVI* 11, 209-210 [underlining mine]).

<sup>38</sup> Cf. two passages from Kierkegaard's journals: »During the most developed period of the most intellectual nation Socrates attained ignorance (ignorance, with which one [normally] begins in order to know more and more) and how? Because in radical ethicality he took his task to be that of preserving himself in ignorance, so that no temptation without and no temptation within would ever trick him into admitting that he knew something, he who nevertheless in another sense did know something....The significance of Socratic ignorance was precisely to keep ethics from becoming scholarly knowledge—instead of practice. There is nothing more dangerous than to transform into scholarly knowledge something which should be practiced« (*JP* 1:972 [p. 424], *Pap.* X.1 A 360; *JP* 4:3871 [p. 23], *Pap.* XI.2 A 362).

<sup>39</sup> This also arguably marks a difference between Kierkegaard and Socrates, for however isolated Kierkegaard is he still has the image and example of Socrates to help him maintain his bearings. Personal outpourings of this sort also mark his writings as much more a product of modernity and the Christian tradition of confession than anything we find written about Socrates. The ancient accounts of Socrates don't really concern themselves with what we might call Socrates' inner life, and if as an experiment you were to try to imagine a sustained inner dialogue taking place within Socrates, I think you would quickly find the whole idea somewhat uncanny. In the *Apology* Socrates claims that he is the »same man« whether in public life or in private discussion: »Throughout my life, in any public activity I may have engaged in, I am the same man as I am in private life....If anyone says that...he heard anything privately that the others did not hear, be assured that he is not telling the truth« (32e-33b). Yet we often have the feeling when reading about him that there is more there, more to him than what lies open to us. This may partly be why we continue to be fascinated by Plato's version of Socrates in particular, who seems to have a hidden depth which is never brought fully out into the open. Alexander Nehamas nicely puts it this way: »Incomprehensible and opaque, to his author as well as to us, Plato's early Socrates has acquired a solidity and robustness few literary characters can match« (*The Art of Living*, p. 91). Yet Socrates' opaqueness often acts as a spur, seemingly encouraging us to probe further and inviting us to think that progress can be made in our quest to understand him. Alcibiades nicely captures this idea with his claim that Socrates is like a Silenus statue, ugly and grotesque on the outside, while hidden inside lie little statues of the gods: »I'm going to show you what [Socrates] really is. To begin with, he's crazy about beautiful boys; he constantly follows them around in a perpetual daze. Also, he likes to say he's ignorant and knows nothing. Isn't this just like Silenus? Of course it is! And all this is just on the surface, like the outsides of those statues of Silenus. I wonder, my fellow drinkers, if you have any idea what a sober and temperate man he proves to be once you

have looked inside. Believe me, it couldn't matter less to him whether a boy is beautiful. You can't imagine how little he cares whether a person is beautiful, or rich, or famous in any other way that most people admire. He considers all these possessions beneath contempt, and that's exactly how he considers all of us as well. In public, I tell you, his whole life is one big game—a game of irony. I don't know if any of you have seen him when he's really serious. But I once caught him when he was open like Silenus' statues, and I had a glimpse of the figures he keeps hidden within: they were so godlike—so bright and beautiful, so utterly amazing—that I no longer had a choice—I just had to do whatever he told me« (Plato, *Symposium* [*Smp.*], 216d-217a). Of course, we all know that Alcibiades did not turn out so well (did not »do whatever [Socrates] told [him]«). This fact, together with Socrates' claim to be the same person both in public and private, casts doubt on whether Alcibiades is entirely clear when he attempts to draw a distinction between Socrates' outward stance of irony and his supposedly more serious inward condition. Kierkegaard discusses Alcibiades' claim to have glimpsed what lies within Socrates at *CI* 50-51; *SKS* 1, 111-112.

<sup>40</sup> Kierkegaard would not dispute this. In *The Point of View* he says he does not place a lot of stock in the mere fact that an author claims that her book has such and such significance: »I do not...think much of assurances in connection with literary productions and am accustomed to take a completely objective attitude to my own. If in the capacity of a third party, as a reader, I cannot substantiate from the writings that what I am saying [qua author] is the case,...it could never occur to me to want to win [by assurances] what I thus consider lost [with respect to the texts themselves]...qua author it does not help very much that I qua human being make assurances that I have intended this and that« (*PV* 33; *SVI* 13, 524 [tran. modified]).

<sup>41</sup> But in doing so Kierkegaard clearly is not an easy act to follow; he seems to do everything so well himself. He composes intricate, existentially challenging texts and then proceeds to develop powerful tools for reading and interpreting those texts. Anyone who wants to develop her own reading must learn to be guided by his remarks without turning them into dogma, following them as long they keep the texts fresh and alive while not being afraid to jettison them when they seem to drain the texts of their vitality.

<sup>42</sup> And to seek such an understanding, as I do, while inviting others to accompany one is to run the further risk of having one's moments of misunderstanding very much on display. As Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author Johannes Climacus puts it, »Anyone who begins to exercise himself in this understanding no doubt will frequently enough catch himself in a misunderstanding, and if he wants to become involved with others, he had better take care« (*PF* 102; *SKS* 4, 299).

<sup>43</sup> See note 9.

<sup>44</sup> *Smp.* 221c-d.

<sup>45</sup> Kierkegaard focuses on Socrates in all of Part One of the dissertation and in Part Two in the second half of the chapter entitled »The World-Historical Validity of Irony, the Irony of Socrates« (*CI* 7-237, *SKS* 1, 69-278; *CI* 264-271, *SKS* 1, 302-308). In the introduction to Part Two, Kierkegaard claims that he has »dealt in the first part of the dissertation solely with Socrates« (*CI* 241; *SKS* 1, 281). Kierkegaard's dissertation director, Frederik Christian Sibbern, suggested that he change the title of his dissertation to »Socrates as Ironist with a Contribution to the Development of the Concept of Irony in General, Particularly with Regard to the Most Recent Times« (quoted in Olesen, »Kierkegaard's Socratic Hermeneutic,« p. 103; see also *SKS* K1, 134; Bruce Kirmmse, »Socrates in the Fast Lane: Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Irony* on the University's Velocifère (Documents, Context, Commentary, and Interpretation)« in *The Concept of Irony (International Kierkegaard Commentary, vol. 2)*, edited by Robert L. Perkins, Macon, Georgia, Mercer University Press, 2001, pp. 17-99, p. 23).

<sup>46</sup> Thanks to Bridget Clarke, Ben Eggleston, Robert Haraldsson, Brian Söderquist and Jon Stewart for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.