

The Pageant of Philosophy: Søren Kierkegaard

(*Simplicio stands alone on the stage, holding his Bible. Kierkegaard enters, wearing a clerical collar and carrying a sign that reads “Søren Kierkegaard, 1813-1855.”*)

Simplicio: Good day, sir.

Kierkegaard: Good day. If you can call it good. Which I doubt.

Simplicio: Well, that’s a gloomy answer! Who are you?

Kierkegaard: Who am I? Søren Kierkegaard, of Denmark.

Simplicio: That doesn’t tell me all that much. What are you?

Kierkegaard: What am I? I suppose I am a poet, more than anything. But **what is a poet? An unhappy man who conceals profound anguish in his heart, but whose lips are so fashioned that when sighs and groans pass over them they sound like beautiful music.**¹

Simplicio: He is?

Kierkegaard: Yes, and then **people flock about the poet and say to him: do sing again; Which means, would that new sufferings tormented your soul, and: would that your lips stayed fashioned as before, for your cries would only terrify us, but your music is delightful.**²

Simplicio: How awful!

Kierkegaard: Yes, and how lonely! Behold, **I would rather be a swineherd on an island and be understood by the swine than a poet, and misunderstood by men.**³

Simplicio: Lonely? Have you no friends?

Kierkegaard: Friends? Acquaintances, perhaps. Many acquaintances, I suppose, **yet in addition to my numerous other acquaintances I have still one more intimate friend—my melancholy. In the midst of pleasure, in the midst of work, he beckons to me, calls me aside, even though I remain present bodily. My melancholy is the most faithful sweetheart I have had—no wonder that I return the love!**⁴

Simplicio: Is there nothing you can do to shake your melancholy? Perhaps you just need something to do to take your mind off of it.

Kierkegaard: Something to do? **Of all ridiculous things the most ridiculous seems to me, to be busy—to be a man who is brisk about his food and his work.**⁵

Simplicio: Really?

Kierkegaard: Oh yes! And **therefore, whenever I see a fly settling, in the decisive moment, on the nose of such a person of affairs; or if he is spattered with mud from a carriage which drives past him in still greater haste; or the drawbridge opens up before him; or a tile falls down and knocks him dead, then I laugh heartily.**⁶

Simplicio: You do?

Kierkegaard: Yes! **Who could help laughing? What, I wonder, do these busy folks get done? Are they not to be classed with the woman who in her confusion about the house being on fire carried out the firetongs? What things of greater account, do you suppose, will they rescue from life’s great conflagration?**⁷

¹ Søren Kierkegaard, “Diapsalmata,” in *Either/Or*.

² Diapsalmata.

³ Diapsalmata.

⁴ Diapsalmata.

⁵ Diapsalmata.

⁶ Diapsalmata.

⁷ Diapsalmata.

Simplicio: For one so melancholy, you seem to laugh a lot.

Kierkegaard: **When I was very young I forgot how to laugh; but when I grew older and opened my eyes and contemplated the real world, I had to laugh, and have not ceased laughing, ever since.**⁸

Simplicio: Laughing at what?

Kierkegaard: Laughing at life! I have been laughing at it ever since **I beheld that the meaning of life was to make a living; its goal, to become Chief Justice; that the delights of love consisted in marrying a woman with ample means; that wisdom was what most people supposed it to be; that it showed enthusiasm to make a speech, and courage, to risk being fined 10 dollars; that it showed piety to partake of the communion once a year. I saw that, and laughed!**⁹

Simplicio: Really! But how could you forget to laugh, when you were young?

Kierkegaard: **As a child I was strictly and earnestly brought up to Christianity, humanly speaking, insanely brought up.**¹⁰

Simplicio: Insanely?

Kierkegaard: Yes, **even in my earliest childhood I had been overstrained by impressions which were laid upon me by my father, a melancholy old man who was himself oppressed by them—I was a child, insanely travestied as a melancholy old man.**¹¹

Simplicio: Oh dear!

Kierkegaard: Yet **I owe everything to my father from the very start.**¹²

Simplicio: You do?

Kierkegaard: I do. **From him I learnt what paternal affection means, and thus I was given the concept of divine paternal love, the only thing in life which is firm and unshakable, the true Archimedean point.**¹³

Simplicio: Wasn't it Archimedes who said, "Give me a lever and a place to stand, and I will move the earth?"

Kierkegaard: That's him. When my father, **melancholy as he was, saw me looking sad, he would say, "See that you duly love Jesus Christ."**¹⁴

Simplicio: He told you about Jesus?

Kierkegaard: Yes. It was particularly the suffering Christ that he presented to me as a child. From boyhood upwards I was brought up to believe that the truth must suffer and be derided and scorned. My father told me, **as solemnly as possible: that everyone spat at Christ (who, indeed, was the truth), that the multitude (those who passed by) spat at him and said: 'Shame on you.' I have kept this deep in my heart. This thought is my life.**¹⁵

Simplicio: It is truth I seek.

Kierkegaard: It isn't easy to find in this world, ruled as it is by lies, meanness and injustice.¹⁶

Simplicio: Well, the times are wicked.

Kierkegaard: Wicked? **I complain that the times are paltry; for they are without passion. The thoughts of men are thin and frail like lace, and they themselves are feeble like girl lace-makers.**¹⁷

Simplicio: But you just spoke of lies, and meanness, and injustice.

⁸ Diapsalmata.

⁹ Diapsalmata.

¹⁰ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Viewpoint of My Authorship*.

¹¹ *The Viewpoint of My Authorship*.

¹² Quoted by Frithiof Brandt and Peter Rohde, in "Søren Kierkegaard - Father of Existentialism," a booklet published by The Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1986). [Hereafter, "Brandt and Rohde."] Reprinted, with permission, at <http://www.webcom.com/kierke/bio/backgr.html>.

¹³ Brandt and Rohde.

¹⁴ Brandt and Rohde.

¹⁵ Brandt and Rohde.

¹⁶ Brandt and Rohde.

¹⁷ Diapsalmata.

Kierkegaard: **The thoughts of men's hearts these days are too puny to be sinful. For a worm it might conceivably be regarded a sin to harbor thoughts such as theirs, not for a man who is formed in the image of God.**¹⁸

Simplicio: Why, what do you mean?

Kierkegaard: **Their lusts are sluggish, their passions sleepy; they do their duty, these sordid minds, but permit themselves, as did the Jews, to trim the coins just the least little bit, thinking that if our Lord keep tab of them ever so carefully one might yet safely venture to fool him a bit. Fie upon them!**¹⁹

Simplicio: Well, if you feel that way, what can you do?

Kierkegaard: **My soul ever returns to the Old Testament and to Shakespeare. There at least one feels that one is dealing with men and women; there one hates and loves, there one murders one's enemy and curses his issue through all generations—there one sins.**²⁰

Simplicio: Have you always been interested in these things?

Kierkegaard: No—as a young man, I studied all the latest ideas: German theology, German idealistic philosophy, Romantic literature.

Simplicio: Schleiermacher, Hegel, and Goethe?

Kierkegaard: The same. I studied at the University, and wrote my thesis on Irony, with constant reference to Socrates.

Simplicio: Socrates?

Kierkegaard: Yes, Socrates—a man who could be my brother. How much his times were like our own!

Simplicio: How so?

Kierkegaard: Think about life in Athens, flowering with arts and philosophy. In those days, a little familiarity with the shallow phrases of the Sophists enabled one to voice an opinion about everything on earth and in heaven.²¹

Simplicio: How is that like now?

Kierkegaard: Today, in my own Copenhagen in these eighteen-thirties, Hegel's philosophy is so popular that the very cobblers use Hegelian terminology, with "Thesis, Antithesis, and Synthesis."²²

Simplicio: Really?

Kierkegaard: Really! You can get instructions from your barber, while being shaved, on how to "harmonize the ideal with reality, and our wishes with what we have attained." Every difficulty could be "mediated," according to this recipe.²³

Simplicio: But can it?

Kierkegaard: No! Socrates would never put up with this.

Simplicio: What would Socrates do?

Kierkegaard: He provoked his neighbors. He dared them to "know themselves."

Simplicio: And you?

Kierkegaard: I must rouse my contemporaries from their philosophic complacency, from their unwarranted optimism. They must see that the spiritual life has both mountain and valley. It is no flat plain that is easy to travel.²⁴

Simplicio: But how do you do that?

Kierkegaard: Through *irony*.

¹⁸ Diapsalmata.

¹⁹ Diapsalmata.

²⁰ Diapsalmata.

²¹ From L.M. Hollander's "Introduction" to *Selections from the Writings of Kierkegaard*, found online at <http://www.ccel.org/k/kierkegaard/selections/intro.htm>

²² Hollander's "Introduction."

²³ Hollander's "Introduction."

²⁴ Hollander's "Introduction."

Simplicio: What do you mean by irony, though?

Kierkegaard: Socrates would stop his neighbors in the streets to ask them easy questions about the most universally established propositions—but he would keep asking until his neighbor discovered some unexpected contradictions in his own answers. Then he who had been so sure of his own knowledge was made to confess his ignorance, or even to doubt possibility of knowledge!²⁵

Simplicio: And that is irony?

Kierkegaard: Perhaps. But it is nothing like the irony of when I got engaged.

Simplicio: You are married, then?

Kierkegaard: No. I could not do it. I was engaged to a lovely young woman, Regine Olsen. She was 18, I was 27. For two years I had been seeking her, and then we were engaged. Yet two days after our engagement, I knew it was all wrong!²⁶

Simplicio: Why?

Kierkegaard: Ah, why? If I were not so melancholy; **if I had not had my depression—then marriage to her would have made me happier than I had ever dreamed of becoming. But being the person I unfortunately am, I must say that I could become happier in my unhappiness without her than with her.**²⁷

Simplicio: But you can't just break off an engagement for that reason!

Kierkegaard: I am ashamed of what I did to break the engagement. I knew that she would not understand me; I knew her father would never understand why I would break my word; I knew the neighbors would think she had done something disgraceful to make me break the engagement. So—I broke it off another way.

Simplicio: How?

Kierkegaard: I decided to take all the blame on myself. I wanted everyone to see that it was Regine who broke off the engagement, and could hardly do otherwise. So for several months I played the fool, and worse than a fool, showing up in public places with other women, doing everything I could to ruin my own reputation.²⁸

Simplicio: And did it work?

Kierkegaard: Yes, with everyone but Regine. She saw right through me; she knew what I was doing! The affair thus became doubly distressing for both of us.²⁹

Simplicio: How did it all end?

Kierkegaard: At the end, I wrote in my journal, **“When the bond broke, my feeling was: Either you plunge into wild dissipation, or absolute religiosity.”**³⁰

Simplicio: Which one did you plunge into?

Kierkegaard: Into religion, but not the hypocrisy of the Church of Denmark.

Simplicio: What hypocrisy?

Kierkegaard: **In the splendid Palace Chapel an imposing Court preacher, the chosen of the cultivated public, steps forward before a chosen circle of the fashionable and cultivated public and preaches emotionally on the text of the Apostle: 'God chose the mean and despised' – and nobody laughs!**³¹

Simplicio: It is—ironic, I suppose. But would you have the modern Church live in poverty, like the first disciples?

Kierkegaard: Why not? Jesus told the rich man to sell all he had, that he might have treasure in Heaven.

Simplicio: Would you have him pluck out his eye, while he is at it?

²⁵ Hollander's "Introduction."

²⁶ From Kierkegaard's journals, quoted online at <http://www.webcom.com/kierke/bio/regine.html>.

²⁷ Kierkegaard's journals.

²⁸ Kierkegaard's journals.

²⁹ Brandt and Rohde.

³⁰ Kierkegaard's journals.

³¹ Kierkegaard's journals.

Kierkegaard: Look, I don't rebuke the Church for not fulfilling the strict demands of Christianity—neither they nor I can do that! But here is my complaint: they fail to live up to Christ's commands, but they refused to admit that they neither can nor will conform to His demands. They prefer to live in domestic comfort and prosperity and worldly culture, and then they try to make themselves and the world believe that *this* is the meaning of Christianity.³²

Simplicio: So you never became a pastor?

Kierkegaard: No, a poet, not a pastor.

Simplicio: But why a poet?

Kierkegaard: Most men live on an aesthetic plane, and that is where a poet does his work. And yet that work upon that plane leads only to despair.

Simplicio: Why despair?

Kierkegaard: Because man has within him something which will not be satisfied by a sensory life.³³

Simplicio: What is that?

Kierkegaard: The *eternal*. Man, is made up of diverse and opposing parts. He is a synthesis of body and spirit, of temporal and eternal, of finite and infinite, of necessity and freedom.³⁴

Simplicio: And the sensory life ignores that?

Kierkegaard: Yes. The aesthetic overemphasizes one side of the synthesis: the corporeal, the temporal, the finite, and the necessary. Yet the other side is none the less there, and it continually makes itself felt.³⁵

Simplicio: It does? How?

Kierkegaard: By an anxiety, **a sympathetic antipathy and an antipathetic sympathy**, which alarms and attracts at the same time.

Simplicio: How odd! I've never heard of such a thing.

Kierkegaard: We have a word for it in German: *angst*. In English, you might call it "dread."

Simplicio: How awful!

Kierkegaard: Awe-ful might be a better word. Dread shows that man has the eternal within him. Without the eternal there would be no dread.³⁶

Simplicio: But is that all we can do? Just live in dread?

Kierkegaard: No. There are those who have felt the dread within, who obstinately keep living in the sensory world. Such men are doomed to end in despair.³⁷

Simplicio: First dread, now despair! Is there no hope?

Kierkegaard: There is hope, for the man who hears despair tell him that life in the aesthetic sphere can never be enough. If such a man does not remain in defiance and despair, if he is mature enough to choose something else, he can enter into the ethical sphere.³⁸

Simplicio: What is the ethical sphere? How do you know if you find it?

Kierkegaard: You will know that the eternal has asserted its claims on a man, if he not only accepts that there is something eternal but believes it is possible to live out these eternal demands in the here and now.³⁹

Simplicio: Can a man live like that?

³² Brandt and Rohde.

³³ Brandt and Rohde.

³⁴ Brandt and Rohde.

³⁵ Brandt and Rohde.

³⁶ Brandt and Rohde.

³⁷ Brandt and Rohde.

³⁸ Brandt and Rohde.

³⁹ Brandt and Rohde.

Kierkegaard: The ethicist is a fighter and an optimist, a man who feels that he is fighting for a good cause and has no doubt that he will have the strength to convince his friends and the whole world what is the good.⁴⁰

Simplicio: And can the ethicist ever win that fight?

Kierkegaard: I thought so once—but not any more.

Simplicio: You don't?

Kierkegaard: I don't. I see now that there is still another sphere, above the aesthetic and beyond the ethical.

Simplicio: What is that?

Kierkegaard: The *religious* sphere.

Simplicio: Wait, wait. I got lost. What were those other “spheres” again?

Kierkegaard: There is the aesthetic sphere, the realm of sensuality and of despair. Man, who contains the eternal within him, can never be satisfied with the finite.

Simplicio: Right—and then the ethical sphere is where you think about the eternal and try to do the right things?

Kierkegaard: Yes, but I have realized that even the ethical sphere is not the answer. Consider Abraham, when God told him to sacrifice his son, his only son, Isaac.

Simplicio: I'm considering. (*Pauses.*) But I'm not understanding.

Kierkegaard: Is it ethical to kill your son?

Simplicio: No, I can't say it is.

Kierkegaard: But what if God Himself commands you to do it?

Simplicio: We dare not disobey God! But how do we know it is God who is speaking? How do we know there even is a God?

Kierkegaard: We cannot know the answer to the ultimate questions: whether God exists, whether He cares; yet our hearts must know the answer. And since we cannot know and yet we must know, we must make a **leap of faith**—into the dark, in fear and trembling. *If* God is there, He will catch us.

Simplicio: And if He is not?

Kierkegaard: Then He won't. But how will you know unless you take the leap?

(Kierkegaard backs up a little, runs forward, and leaps offstage. Simplicio backs, prepares to run, hesitates, stops, sighs. Curtain.)

⁴⁰ Brandt and Rohde.