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Journal of the History of Ideas, Vol. 44, No. 2. (Apr. - Jun., 1983), pp. 255-276.

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REFLECTIONS ON KIERKEGAARD'S SOCRATES

BY HAROLD SARF

I have admired that noble, simple wise man [Socrates] of ancient times, my heart too has beat violently as that of the young man [Alcibiades] when he conversed with him, and the thought of him has been the enthusiasm of my youth and filled my soul to overflowing. I have longed for conversation with him as I never longed to talk with any man with whom I have talked; in the society of those who have comprehended everything and know how to talk about every possible subject I have many, many times longed for his ignorance and to hear him. . . . (Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, 1849)

I. Kierkegaard's images of Socrates as noble and simple, as honest and thoughtful, as a penetrating conversationalist who filled the hearts of youths with passionate enthusiasm for wisdom, and as a philosopher who humbly admitted his ignorance among the cultured, are clearly based on Plato's *Symposium*, where Alcibiades extols Socrates' personal virtues while telling of the ecstatic rapture that he feels in his presence.¹ Given the great power and richness of the Platonic testimony, it was inevitable that Socrates served as a magnificent symbol for Kierkegaard, indeed, for every ancient and modern thinker who came under his magnetic spell.² But Socrates remains a lasting enigma because he wrote nothing and created new moral and philosophical developments through his striking conversations. He fascinated his detractors and apologists through his force of character

¹ The moving eulogy of Alcibiades in the *Symposium* (215-228b) is one of the important sources of Kierkegaard's image of Socrates.

² The literature that discusses the thorny problem of how to separate Plato's philosophical and moral ideas from those of Socrates in the dialogues, and that evaluates the respective merits and vices of the primary testimonies of Plato, Xenophon, Aristophanes, and Aristotle is voluminous and somewhat controversial. The following are examples of the diverse perspectives on the "Socratic problem" and also offer plausible sketches of Socrates' historical identity: H. von Arnim, *Xenophons Memorabilien und Apologie des Sokrates* (Copenhagen, (Royal Danish Academy of Science, Philos.-Hist. sec.,) 1923), (no. 8.1); J. Burnet, *Greek Philosophy: Thales to Plato* (London, 1928); A. H. Chroust, *Socrates, Man and Myth* (London, 1957); Th. Deman, *Le Témoignage d'Aristote sur Sokrate* (Paris, 1942); G. C. Field, *Plato and his Contemporaries* (London, 1930); G. Grote, *Plato and Other Companions of Socrates* (London, 1885); W. C. K. Guthrie, *Socrates* (Cambridge, 1968); W. Jaeger, *Paideia* (Oxford, 1943); V. De Magalhaes-Vilhena, *Le Problème de Sokrate* (Paris, 1952); H. Maier, *Sokrates, Sein Werk und seine geschichtliche Stellung* (Tübingen, 1913); C. Ritter, *Sokrates* (Tübingen, 1931); G. Rogers, *The Socratic Problem* (New Haven, 1933); A. E. Taylor, *Socrates* (New York, 1953) and *Varia Socratica* (Oxford, 1911); G. Vlastos, ed., *The Philosophy of Socrates* (New York, 1971); and E. Zeller, *Socrates and the Socratic Schools* (London, 1887).

and unusual manner of living, and because he claimed communion with a deity that no one else heard. Socrates remains controversial because he thought that his practice of ethical inquiry was a divinely inspired mission sanctioned by Apollo, the Delphic god. His complexity of personality and his unique vocation of “caring for souls” and for the welfare of Athens; his ambiguous, sometimes strained, relations with ordinary citizens and close companions; and his being brought to trial and judged guilty of the charges of corrupting the young and of impiety towards the gods, reveal a person who required clarification of his contemporaries and inspired Kierkegaard’s reflections.

Socrates was for Kierkegaard the archetype of the life devoted to thinking and to ethical improvement; he wished to elaborate Socrates’ historical significance for Western culture because Kierkegaard also wished to perfect the moral condition of humanity and to bring his own profound reflections to bear on the enigmas of life. His meditations on Socrates are really attempts to make that ancient philosopher a living presence, that is, to recapture something of the elemental power and urgency of Socrates’ ethical mission to the Athenians. He pursued in his own mind an intense dialogue with Socrates about how life ought to be conducted, about the nature of the knowledge that can improve man’s moral character, and point out factors that account for health and illness in the soul and the state. He found in Socratic discourse a living language relevant to the dilemmas of the modern era.³

My paper does not treat Kierkegaard’s views on Socrates in a chronological fashion or pass judgment on the historical and philosophical soundness of his image of Socrates.⁴ My major aims are to

³ Kierkegaard argues persuasively in his master’s dissertation on Socrates, *The Concept of Irony* (1841), trans. L. Capel (New York, 1965), that the testimonies of Xenophon and Aristophanes stand, for divergent reasons, far lower in rank than the Platonic evidence. The central importance of Socrates for Kierkegaard’s intellectual development and self-conception as a thinker with a special mission to humanity, are unthinkable without his encounter with, and love of, the Platonic dialogues.

⁴ Kierkegaard in high school began forming his pictures of Socrates when he read Plato’s *Crito* and *Euthyphro* in Greek. In addition, Kierkegaard was fluent in German and at times used the following works for his researches on Socrates and Plato: *Platonis Opera quae exstant*, ed. F. Astius, I-XI (1819-1832) along with the appended *Lexicon Platonicum*; *Platons Werke*, I-VI (1817-1828), trans. into German by F. W. Schleiermacher; *Udvalgte Dialoger of Platon*, I-III, (1830-1838), trans. into Danish by C. J. Heise; and *Unterredungen über die Gesetze*, I-II, trans. into German by J. G. Schulthesz and revised by S. Vöglin (1842). Kierkegaard also read the most significant scholarly works of his time that treated Socrates and Plato in the context of the development of Greek philosophy as a whole: F. Ast, *Grundriss einer Geschichte der Philosophie* (1807); J. Bruckeri, *Historia critica philosophiae* (Leipzig, 1767), I-V; G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, ed. K. L. Michelet

understand the nature of Kierkegaard's personal and intellectual identification with Socrates and to appreciate how the Danish thinker's commitment to the Christian faith influenced his evaluations of him. Once these general goals are presented we can inquire into Kierkegaard's reasons for thinking that Socrates' philosophizing and ways of interacting with others may still serve as the highest and truest model of moral and social order. To understand fully Kierkegaard's claim it is necessary to illuminate his view of Socrates' irony which through his indirect method of questioning would impart moral principles by proclaiming his ignorance of the meaning of wisdom and virtue. In addition, I discuss Kierkegaard's images of Socrates as a teacher who used the perplexity and ignorance of his students to excellent effect in order to ensure their moral independence, as a philosopher who showed that seeking truth contains fascinating paradoxes about how perishable, finite minds can gain absolute, eternal knowledge, and as a thinker who prefigured Kierkegaard's own existential philosophy because Socrates presumably believed that only the certainty based on self-knowledge is the ultimate test of having the truth. My essay closes with a brief examination of how Kierkegaard distinguished Plato from Socrates in the dialogues.

Finally, the reader should be aware that sometimes I paraphrase Kierkegaard's opinions and interpretations about Socrates, whereas at other points I engage in my own reflections and speculations on Kierkegaard's views, attempting to clarify and extend his thoughts, while endeavoring to remain faithful to his spirit and intentions.

II. Kierkegaard spoke of Socrates as that "man with whom I have had an inexplicable rapport from a very early age . . .,"⁵ adding that his own philosophical vocation was deeply inspired by the model of Socrates: "The only analogy I have before me is Socrates. My task is

(Berlin, 1836), I-III; W. T. Krug, *Allgemeines Handwörterbuch der philosophischen Wissenschaften nebst ihrer Litterature und Geschichte* (Leipzig 1827-1829), I-V; G. O. Marbach, *Geschichte der griechischen Philosophie* (Leipzig, 1838); H. Ritter, *Geschichte der Philosophie alter Zeit*, 2nd ed., I-IV, (Hamburg, 1836); and W. G. Tennemann, *Geschichte der Philosophie*, I-XI (Leipzig, 1789-1819). For a detailed account of Kierkegaard's relationship to the critical-historical scholarship of his day, see Niels Thulstrup's excellent commentary on the *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. by D. F. Swenson and H. V. Hong (Princeton, 1962), 164ff.

⁵ *Soren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, edited and translated by H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong in six volumes plus index (Bloomington, 1967-1977), entry 6839. Subsequent references to the *Journals and Papers* will be indicated by the letter (J) followed by the entry number. The materials of the *Journals and Papers* are arranged by the editors both topically and in numerical sequence. Volume four (4243 through 4304) contains the main entries on Socrates, although the index should be consulted to obtain scattered but important references to him throughout the six volumes.

a Socratic task. . . .”⁶ The powerful combination of deeply felt reverence and intellectual respect naturally led Kierkegaard to regard Socrates as the “only *man* I admiringly recognize as a teacher,”⁷ a claim that carries great significance given the magnificent array of intensely moving and interesting philosophers in Western thought with whom he might have chosen to identify himself. But what qualities of intellect and character did Kierkegaard attribute to Socrates that led him to elevate that enigmatic ironic philosopher to the highest rank of thinkers?

Kierkegaard perceived in Socrates the traits of virtuous simplicity and moral passion, epic heroism and martyrdom in the service of honest thinking, and a seeker of hitherto undiscovered, rare ethical ideals on which people might fashion the best possible ways of living. Socrates was that “simple wise man . . . who knew best of all how to speak about the love which loves the beautiful and good.”⁸ And for Kierkegaard the philosopher Socrates, who always spoke with elemental passion and directness about the most decisive ethical questions, clearly possessed self-knowledge, having penetrated through inner reflection to the boundaries of his being, rarely allowing himself to be swayed by trivial matters or by elementary passions and transient pleasures to forego his mission of caring for souls.⁹ Socrates’ inquiries into the meanings of virtue and courage, statesmanship and justice, piety and love, were animated by a powerful will to reform the moral life of humanity; he supposed that becoming a fully virtuous human being is a hard-earned achievement, and what “occupied Socrates, what he sought, was the ideality of being human.”¹⁰

Socrates was a truly epic symbol because apart from Christ he was “the only man of whom it may be said: he explodes existence.”¹¹ If Kierkegaard thought Socrates an “enthusiast” akin to a striking “meteorite,”¹² then perhaps Socrates’ life constituted a powerful, very clear demand that people admit having some unhealthy, self-destructive illusions after arriving at some insight into the true worth of their values. Kierkegaard’s Socrates was indeed an explosive presence if his provocative questioning drove home to the Athenians that they knew nothing of lasting importance, and that they could not give justifiable accounts of their lives. We can speculate that Socrates freed his mind from the clutter of unexamined, often prejudicial common-sense values and sentiments as a prelude to asking critical questions and revealing to others the exact nature of their moral

⁶ *Attack upon Christendom* (1855), trans. W. Lowrie (Princeton, 1944), 283.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Works of Love* (1847), trans. H. Hong (Princeton, 1962), 341.

⁹ *Letters and Documents*, vol. XXV of Kierkegaard’s Writings, trans. H. Rosenmeier, (Princeton, 1978), 263.

¹⁰ *J* 1767.

¹¹ *J* 4301.

¹² *J* 4302.

confusion and lack of conceptual consistency. And if Kierkegaard is right that the "hero and the heroic is essentially . . . unpopular in every generation,"¹³ then Socrates may have understood his own life as a sacrifice in the cause of human self-improvement, perhaps sensing early that his efforts at moral regeneration might lead to his death. Kierkegaard claimed that it was truly a unique paradox that reason or "thought could have such a power over a man that he went to his death for thought . . .,"¹⁴ that is, for the sake of preserving the life of reason.

Kierkegaard's admiration for Socrates was patently unlike the romantic idealization that some moderns, depressed about their lives and times, showed in turning back to the supposedly more perfect and wiser ancients, by looking to the golden age of the past in the hope of finding human models symbolizing a world of harmony, unity, and fulfillment. Instead of sharing such nostalgic fantasies about Socrates, Kierkegaard translated his deep respect for the ancient philosopher into active identification with him. He perceived Socrates' moral mission to Athens as a living model to be applied to the problems of the modern era: "Oh, that there might be such a gadfly [as Socrates] in the confused struggle of our times . . . who would directly oppose the whither of modern haste. . . ."¹⁵ If ancient Athens appeared to Kierkegaard's Socrates as an empire without virtue, filled with citizens who cared for transient pleasures and material possessions above the right formation of their moral character, and lacking in thoughtfulness and passion for wisdom, then Kierkegaard viewed his own era as decadent and misguided, hasty and stupid.¹⁶ It was to him an age of narrow-minded, homogenized people who with blind optimism entrusted their worldly welfare to the progress of science and technology, and their spiritual salvation to a watered-down and comfortable Christianity that had lost its power to make hard ethical demands on its believers, while forsaking its originally professed aim of living in the image of Christ.

Despite the passage of over two thousand years from Socrates' Athens to Kierkegaard's modern Europe, with its complex cultural, political, religious, and scientific changes, the Danish philosopher thought that little of real significance had altered for the better in the ethical sphere, and that the struggles of Socrates to help men acquire virtue and wisdom were needed as much in the modern era as in the ancient world. Kierkegaard wrote that what the "world now needs as confused as it is by much knowing is a Socrates,"¹⁷ while explaining

¹³ J 4271.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Letters and Documents*, 263.

¹⁶ See Kierkegaard's *The Present Age* (1846), trans. W. Dru (New York, 1962), for one of his penetrating, critical examinations of modern life.

¹⁷ *The Sickness unto Death*, trans. W. Lowrie (Princeton, 1969), 223.

that he learned from the ancient master the task of “making men aware so that they do not waste and squander their lives.”¹⁸ If it is in an “abyss of sophistry Christianity is lying—far, far worse than when the sophists flourished in Greece,”¹⁹ then Kierkegaard saw himself as a Christianized analogue of Socrates, caring for souls and doing battle with the sophists—whether in the guises of educators, theologians, politicians, or philosophers—who falsely claimed to import genuine virtue and understanding within their domains. For Kierkegaard, a “gadfly” in the spiritual lineage of Socrates was required to sting people into perceiving the negative consequences of their indolence and hypocrisy, of their superficial materialism and misguided values, and to reveal their ignorance about how to fashion the best possible lives while helping them to ask decisive questions and to feel perplexity about “obvious” things.

Kierkegaard refused to call himself a Christian because he lacked certain knowledge of exactly what it meant to profess that faith, for much the same reason that Socrates disclaimed being a teacher of virtue for lack of understanding the true nature of that concept.²⁰ And if Socrates’ experience of ignorance led him to search for wisdom, taking nothing for granted, while forever pointing out the conceptual contradictions in the definitions of moral terms given by his interlocutors, then Kierkegaard made a vocation of showing that persons who thought themselves authentic Christians were rent by incompatible impulses, conduct, and ideas. He perceived Socrates clearly as a model for the right conduct of philosophy.

Kierkegaard’s identification with Socrates has still another side, namely, that the practice of philosophy inherently involves personal discomforts and even dangers, from being misunderstood to the outright making of enemies, and from the need to resist worldly pleasures and compromises that lessened the ability to speak truthfully to the risk of being martyred. Perhaps it is the case, as Kierkegaard claims, that philosophers who serve the cause of truth-seeking must inevitably collide with powerful contemporaries who have stakes in maintaining older, unexamined values.²¹ Few people enjoy having their cherished values and beliefs tested by thinkers who offer no definitive answers to their own questions because they claim ignorance, and this situation leads the philosopher into great danger: “Now exactly the same thing happened to Socrates in his day as happened to me. He was looked upon as representing evil; for, in the eyes of that age, ignorance was evil—and yet Socrates was indeed the doctor.”²² Prac-

¹⁸ *J* 5979.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 280.

¹⁹ *Attack upon Christendom* (1855), 283.

²¹ *J* 6839.

²² I have used the translation by A. Dru of the *Journals* (New York, 1959), 183, preferring the English rendering to that found in *J* 4555.

ticing philosophy for Kierkegaard's Socrates involves exhortation, relentless criticism, and the diagnosis of moral ills—often making people insecure, even violently upset—and we can speculate that Socrates understood that the stakes of philosophizing are desperately high precisely because it involves the supremely important issues of how people ought to live rightly and how it is possible to find wisdom in this transient existence. Does the philosopher of merit necessarily risk his personal comfort, even his physical life, by calling forth fundamental value decisions from people?

III. It would be a serious error in understanding Kierkegaard's relationship to Socrates to leave aside the significant fact that the Danish philosopher was a man of deep religious feeling and a devoted, if unorthodox, Christian: "I can very well call Socrates my teacher—whereas I have only believed, and only believe, in one, the Lord Jesus Christ."²³ Kierkegaard's love of Socrates was a conditional love that one sometimes feels in the presence of epic greatness and true nobility; however, his love of Christ was unconditional and of supreme importance, for as "soon as I reflect on the matter of my salvation, then is he [Socrates] the simple wise man, a person highly indifferent to me, an insignificance, a naught."²⁴ The appearance of Christ in history meant to Kierkegaard a new beginning and a decisive break with the Greek and Roman worlds; a path to the eternal was revealed in the cosmic drama of the death and resurrection of the god-man who symbolized that mankind might achieve lasting unity and peace in a higher, more perfect realm.

Kierkegaard subjected certain elements of Socratic teaching to pointed criticism with the aim of correcting it by recourse to Christian theological categories. Socrates believed that a man acts wrongly only from ignorance, for ignorance is being destitute of the truth—a state of not knowing—or from having an incomplete, error-laden knowledge, with the result that one always chooses the good only if its nature is wholly known.²⁵ There is no intrinsic attraction to the doing of evil, for ignorance alone is its source, and there is an unconscious element in people who engage in harmful acts. Kierkegaard's Socrates thought that wisdom alone banishes the ignorance that is at the root of the destructive, negative elements in human life, for wisdom directs people to will what is beneficial to themselves and to others.

According to Kierkegaard, Socrates proposed something of "an intellectual categorical imperative"²⁶ when he claimed that virtue is knowledge, a standpoint that revealed the master, and the Greek spirit

²³ *The Point of View of My Work as an Author*, trans. W. Lowrie (New York, 1962), 41.

²⁴ *Christian Discourses* (1848), trans. W. Lowrie (Oxford, 1940), 246.

²⁵ *The Sickness unto Death*, 223-25.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 221.

as a whole, to “be too happy, too naive, too aesthetic” to have the “courage to assert that a man knowingly does what is wrong, with knowledge of the right does what is wrong.”²⁷ The Socratic equation of moral error and evil with ignorance is the basic problem, and the master “lacks a dialectical determination for the transition from having understood something to the doing of it.”²⁸ There is something in the human psyche that accounts for the failure to act on what we truly know to be best, and if ignorance is not the real source of doing evil, then evil can only be derived from “will, defiant will.”²⁹ Kierkegaard claimed that given Socrates’ premises “sin . . . does not exist,” since the condition of being in sin is found in actively willing evil and forsaking good while knowing that to do so is wrong.³⁰ The disjunction between knowing the good and willing its opposite is explained, for Kierkegaard, by original sin, the situation caused by primeval Adam’s using his freedom to defy divine command with the resultant fall of humanity from unity with the godhead. The rebellion of Adam against his Creator led him and countless generations into a condition of self-division wherein knowledge is not always a guide to righteous action because passions, temptations, and self-love infect the will and direct it toward the doing of evil, even against the better judgment of reason. Socrates failed to understand that sin and evil are ontologically real categories that characterize human nature, with the result that he “failed to have the true ideal, neither the conception of sin nor that the salvation of man requires a crucified god.”³¹

Kierkegaard counted it “neither wise nor profound to institute a comparison between him, the simple wise man, and Him in whom I believe . . .”³² because Socrates’ heroic efforts to gain absolute insight into the nature of the Good were too human-centered, being far lower in rank than the activity of Christ who appears mysteriously at a sacred moment in historical time to suspend the ordinary laws governing human and cosmic reality and to reveal fundamental truths to despairing, confused, and lost souls. Socrates’ basic error for Kierkegaard was to elevate humans too high: “In the Socratic view each individual is his own center, and the entire world centers in him, because self-knowledge is a knowledge of God.”³³ If we suppose with Kierkegaard’s Socrates that people carry within themselves the standpoint of eternity, which is akin to being god-like, then potentially everyone, by searching and questioning under the guidance of dialectical reason, and through inner reflection, might experience absolute truths while reshaping their practical conduct. It follows that Socrates legislates no novel truths but merely helps souls to position them-

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 225.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 224.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 220.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *J* 4279

³² *Christian Discourses*, 246.

³³ *Philosophical Fragments* (1844), trans. D. Swenson, 2nd ed. rev. H. Hong (Princeton, 1962), 14.

selves to recollect within themselves the common, already existing truths. If recollection is the only path to knowledge of eternally existing truths, then Christ's appearance is made meaningless to Kierkegaard, since the god-man could offer no ontologically new wisdom about the highest things, people already containing all significant knowledge within themselves.³⁴ In Kierkegaard's judgment, it is Christ who through divine revelation and ineffable grace consoles us in our condition of earthly torment and confusion born of original sin, and offers insight leading to redemption from finitude and death, but only on the condition that we affirm our radical dependence on, and faith in, Him. The experience of the mystery of the god-man as a powerful act of faith on the part of believers is the requisite condition for authentic knowing.³⁵ If a person "who is born anew owes nothing to any man, but everything to his divine saviour,"³⁶ then Socrates' idea that people can search together, and into themselves, to discover ultimate ontological truths is a pagan vanity.

Kierkegaard as a pious man would be expected to elevate his love of the crucified god over his great admiration for, and identification with, Socrates; to choose the promise of eternal life in a higher, more perfect world over the Socratic drive to improve ethical life in the human sphere; and to affirm the paradoxes of invisible faith over the wisdom to be gained through dialectical reason—at least when these alternatives seem to conflict. However, his wish to correct some elements of Socratic teaching in the light of Christian views about human nature and the godhead must be taken in a constructive spirit, for "outside of Christianity, Socrates stands alone—noble, simple, and wise."³⁷ Socrates was to Kierkegaard the highest embodiment of humanity that had hitherto been attained. In my view, he perceived Socrates as a model to combat dogmatism that compromise the exercise of reason on matters within the sphere of human cognition; as an example of bringing ethical conduct into symmetry with well-tested ideas and ideals; and as a guide to help people perceive that the attainment of wisdom about human things is a hard-earned struggle in a world of confusions, conflicts, and ambiguities. And Kierkegaard likely thought that Socrates' tragic martyrdom in the service of perfecting the moral condition of man was a sacrifice that foreshadowed the grander sacrifice of Christ himself.

If Christ is a judge and savior who appears from a transcendent realm to make visible normally invisible truths, then Socrates is the eternal archetype to Kierkegaard of the virtuous teacher, for "between *man and man*, the Socratic relationship is the highest and truest."³⁸ May I speculate that in the domain of the purely human where finitude and conditionality reign supreme, Socrates' way of

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 72-3.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 18-19.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

³⁷ J 6871.

³⁸ *Philosophical Fragments*, 68.

conducting philosophy contains the deepest appreciation of the manner in which people ought to relate to each other in the common activities of improving their moral character and seeking truth, along with having the most perfect image of the correct nature of the student-teacher relationship.

IV. Kierkegaard's Socrates is an ironic philosopher who found his highest joy in helping those he questioned to acknowledge, and to explore, the perennial ethical issues posed by existence, and it is with "Socrates that irony had its inception in the world."³⁹ The ironic standpoint of Socrates was "absolutely polemical toward the older Hellenism,"⁴⁰ and the philosopher used it as a powerful means to seize "the column bearing the edifice of knowledge and plunge everything down into the nothingness of ignorance."⁴¹ If Socrates tore all things apart through his criticism, he probably stood at a skeptical distance from the preferred ethical orientations of his interlocutors, while challenging openly their conditions of existence. In my view, he used his ironic demeanor as a tactical weapon to help people see that their ways of living rested on serious conceptual contradictions, and perhaps the exposure to irony was their first step on the path to finding cures for the moral illnesses within their psyches. While the discourse of Kierkegaard's Socrates was largely negative, he held the conviction that a new positive principle is present as a possibility.⁴²

Socrates' commitment to teaching through irony suggested to Kierkegaard that Socrates experienced his contemporary world of Athens, indeed, the whole of Greek life, as distant and strange. If in Kierkegaard's words the "established actuality had become unreal,"⁴³ he conjectured that Socrates had an intense feeling of inner exile because he failed to absorb fully, and identify himself with, the beliefs, values, and practices that made up the "common-sense" outlook of his fellow citizens. Perhaps Socrates chose to appear on an exoteric level as a model of the virtuous citizen, always upholding traditions and laws, and civic religion, whereas behind the mask of normality he was an "ironic observer" who hovered in "ironic satisfaction above all the determinations of substantial life,"⁴⁴ surveying the whole of human reality from rounded, critical perspectives while avoiding one-sidedness in his thinking and questioning. Kierkegaard's implication is that Socrates was incapable of being a partisan; his experience of inward exile meant that he was un beholden to institutions and persons, or to doctrines that might limit his possibilities for searching for the nature of the Good, and Socrates refused to allow his

³⁹ *The Concept of Irony*, 47.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 279.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 287.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 240.

thinking to run along the lines of the many, no matter how comforting that might be.

Kierkegaard viewed Socrates as an ironic individual who reveled in paradox and mystery.⁴⁵ We can imagine that Socrates was as elusive as old Proteus because he could project with equal conviction many images of himself, and that perhaps his outward demeanor always intimated more than met the eye, with the result that he was easily perceived from incompatible angles of vision. If the "outer and the inner do not form a harmonious unity," then Socrates for Kierkegaard always remained inwardly aloof, watching the effects that his exoteric presentations of self had on others from the viewpoint of his esoteric, inner identity.⁴⁶ The successful ironist began by "shutting himself in within himself . . . shutting his door against men and making jest of those who stood outside, in order to talk in secret. . . ."⁴⁷

To Kierkegaard the rich and profound interior life of Socrates implied that he had learned the difficult art of self-mastery; he felt at home with himself, and he looked to no other person to tell him who he was and to what values he ought to aspire. Socrates also appeared to have an aristocratic spirituality even if he was seen sometimes in public conversing with Athenians from lowly walks of life. The aristocratic quality appeared in Socrates' ability to stand off and discern things in their enduring and significant features—as an aristocrat of the intellect—and it is truly a rare occurrence that the philosopher rises higher and "lighter as he rises, seeing all things . . . beneath him from his ironical bird's view perspective."⁴⁸ Yet Socrates denied being a man standing on some rarified mountain peak of esoteric thought, for in order to have real impact and an "ethical significance, he did not want to be admired as a genius who stood apart from others. . . ."⁴⁹ Was Socrates not deeply aware of the need for being conceptually clear as the precondition of his acting as "gadfly" to the Athenians, always exhorting them to care for the right formation of their moral character over the accumulation of material possessions?

Irony for Kierkegaard rests on double, apparently opposite movements of consciousness, and Socrates was judged to be at once playful and serious, deep and superficial, lucid and ambiguous, truthful and fanciful.⁵⁰ Socrates understood the art of using paradox and contradiction, and subtlety in his communications, for his discourse contained many levels of meaning, and he never expressed his ideas and values directly, for the nature of irony is to leave something unsaid or

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 85-6.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁴⁷ *The Concept of Dread* (1844), trans. W. Lowrie, 2nd ed. (Princeton, 1962), 120, 120.

⁴⁸ *The Concept of Irony*, 221.

⁴⁹ *J* 4265.

⁵⁰ *Stages on Life's Way* (1845), trans. W. Lowrie (Princeton, 1962), 335.

“merely to hint at it elusively.”⁵¹ Kierkegaard perceived the ironist as always enigmatic and unfathomable because his discourse rests on a deliberate split between the esoteric and exoteric levels of language. If Kierkegaard’s Socrates “was . . . the unity of the comic and the tragic,” and if “his seriousness was hidden in jest,” then he might be a complete fool, babbling nonsense and treating serious matters with a grain of salt, but only to reverse himself at the next moment, projecting the image of being gravely earnest about apparently simple and settled questions.⁵²

Socrates was in reality for Kierkegaard “the most serious man in Greece”⁵³ because “what he is dealing with is simultaneously a matter of life and death,”⁵⁴ and we can imagine that his conversations for all their jest were based on the premise that the souls of the Athenians were endangered due to their lack of wisdom about the nature of living the good life. While Socrates’ irony led him to avoid direct assaults on his interlocutors’ beliefs and values for fear of driving them away, he was still, against his best intentions, “the most unpopular man in Greece,”⁵⁵ for he was demanding that people become infinitely thoughtful about the veracity of their moral ideas and conduct.

Kierkegaard commented that Socrates “makes use of a form of speech which sounds in the first instance like the speech of a madman,” while adding that “just as existence is treacherous, so is the speech of Socrates.”⁵⁶ One may speculate that discourse that affirms and negates itself through irony can appear threatening or simply devoid of meaning but, on occasion, it can have a striking effect because it upsets the habitual ways in which language is used, preparing people to see moral terms in a new light while altering their self-understanding as agents. However, Kierkegaard’s Socrates did not expect to be understood by everyone with whom he spoke, for the hearer must be “ready” to perceive the meaning of what he was driving at because of the paradoxical, multi-leveled nature of his communications.⁵⁷

Perhaps the freedom that Kierkegaard’s Socrates found through ironic discourse allowed him to use language constantly to make new beginnings, always refusing to let his speech bind him to ideas and moral sentiments which could be reduced to simplistic, readily assimilable axioms. The creation of ambiguity may be necessary if the hearer of Socratic discourse is to sharpen his capacity to think and to let go eventually of his favorite illusions for, in my view, a truth worth

⁵¹ *The Concept of Irony*, 86. ⁵² *Stages on Life’s Way*, 335. ⁵³ *Ibid.* ⁵⁴ J 4301.

⁵⁵ *Stages on Life’s Way*, 377.

⁵⁶ *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. D. Swenson and W. Lowrie (Princeton, 1940), 77. ⁵⁷ *The Concept of Irony*, 50.

having must be earned, and that requires passing beyond habitual, easy forms of knowledge. Ironic discourse for Kierkegaard not only “severs the bonds restraining speculation,” but is an “emancipating activity in the negative sense.”⁵⁸ Kierkegaard implies that the manner of achieving an insight is just as important as, if not more important than, the content of the insight, and that Socrates used irony to help others acquire a sense of philosophical wonder, such wonder being a preparation for people to search earnestly for the truth, hidden as it might be.

Kierkegaard's Socrates' love of irony was intimately connected to Socrates' stance of ignorance: a strong dose of ignorance helped people see that they often suffered from the vanity of having elevated their mere opinions about ethics to the status of being incontrovertible wisdom, having failed to test through philosophical reflection the true value of their moral ideas and actions.⁵⁹ And Kierkegaard thought that the Athenians of Socrates' age did not perceive that their moral notions derived from well-established ethical traditions and from the “common-sense” of the time; that these sources provided axiomatic, semiconscious guides to living the “good life;” and that the word “virtue” was often associated with the art of knowing how to achieve social status and political power, and material possessions—advantages which may have little or nothing to do with being virtuous.⁶⁰

Socrates, for Kierkegaard, refused to allow tradition and common-sense, or the poets and the Sophists, to act for him as exemplary sources for the understanding of the nature of morality. And if we agree with Kierkegaard that “ignorance is the restoration to health,”⁶¹ then the condition of “not knowing” helps remove the clutter of unexamined, perhaps unhealthy, values and beliefs from the psyche, while being the essential first step in reopening the search for the true meanings of such terms as wisdom, virtue, piety, justice, and courage. In all ethical issues, Socrates' aim was to learn to separate opinion from knowledge; knowledge alone allows people to discern the true difference between good and evil, to endow life with its highest possible personal fulfillment, and to form rightly their moral character.

“For what was the Socratic ignorance if not an expression of his love for the learner, and for his sense of equality with him?”⁶² Kierkegaard implies that Socrates' affirmation of ignorance in an age when vain, authoritative teachers and untested if venerable traditions eagerly dispensed “easy” wisdom, showed him to be a humble man, for

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁶⁰ *Stages on Life's Way*, 377. Also, *J* 4294, 4296.

⁶² *Philosophical Fragments*, 37.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 281.

⁶¹ *J* 4555.

he acknowledged that wisdom is the most difficult of things to obtain and that every person is at bottom fallible and uncertain. Was it out of genuine respect for his fellow-learners' abilities to think and search that Socrates denied consistently being a teacher of special moral insights?

The obvious effect of Kierkegaard's Socrates' claim to ignorance about settled matters was to induce perplexity in his interlocutors, his aim being to open others to new personal experiences and thoughts. But becoming perplexed about moral terms and the value of one's everyday actions had for Kierkegaard a negative side: "In this consciousness the learner is excluded from the truth even more decisively than before when he lived in ignorance of his error."⁶³ And Socrates' questioning only indirectly helped others to perceive that their lives were premised on internally inconsistent values and outright errors, for in the end, Kierkegaard says, "my own error is something that I can discover only by myself, since it is only when I have discovered it that it is discovered."⁶⁴ If being in error is a kind of lack of freedom, then perhaps Kierkegaard meant that a person cannot be truly at home with himself when he does not know the truth, at least when he is aware that such is the situation. The awareness of being in bondage to error and unexamined values leads to the striving to become free by learning the truth, and Kierkegaard's Socrates taught nothing positive, proposing merely to ask questions and to point out contradictions, for he was unable "to beget the truth" in the sense of legislating its content for others.⁶⁵

V. To Kierkegaard Socrates' greatness as a philosopher was partly the consequence of his having raised the thorny issue of whether truth and virtue are conceptually knowable and teachable. Socrates had pointed out the "supreme paradox of all thought" when he claimed that searching for truth involves the "attempt to discover something that thought cannot think."⁶⁶ What we fail to know cannot be sought out, since we do not know what to look for, and what we do know can never be sought out, since there is no need to look for what is already possessed.⁶⁷ And how can a teacher, even of the rank of Kierkegaard or Socrates, communicate the natures of virtue and truth to a student who lacks all prior understanding of what these concepts mean, since the student could not recognize things he has not previously known, and would have no need of being taught things he already understands? Teachers appear a completely useless species.

Kierkegaard's Socrates solved this paradox about truth, and along with it the issue of whether virtue is teachable, by affirming that the only path to knowledge is through recollection. If "I have known the

⁶³ *Ibid.* 17.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 15, 76.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

truth from eternity without being aware of it,'⁶⁸ then truth is not akin to an entity external to consciousness waiting to be discovered by, and eventually transmitted from, a person who knows its nature to one who does not. How can we seek out or tell anyone about things that have no natural, intrinsic relation to ourselves? It is forgetfulness of what we carry deep within our souls that is the source of error and ignorance, and Kierkegaard's Socrates thought that "one who is ignorant needs only a reminder to help him come to himself in consciousness of what he knows."⁶⁹ If Socrates' questioning supposed that the "one who is asked must have truth within himself, and be able to acquire it by himself,"⁷⁰ then knowledge of the abiding natures of virtue and beauty, justice and courage, and of everything else of importance, is simultaneously self-knowledge.

Kierkegaard's clear implication is that Socrates' questioning can precipitate the inwardly transforming event of recollecting the absolute truth, wherein the learner leaves the stream of the play of appearances within a finite time through a sudden, illuminating perception in which he comes to recognize what is eternal, that is, what never comes into being or passes away. And if truth is always in consciousness as a possibility to be experienced, then the concrete situation in which it emerges is merely the contingent, triggering event: "from the standpoint of Socratic thought every point of departure is . . . accidental, an occasion, a vanishing moment."⁷¹ The suggestion is that the circumstances needed to gain insight into eternal things varies from soul to soul, for different people are not ready at the identical moment to abandon their transient, superficial selves to make contact with their eternal ones. Perhaps the moment of recollection may be conceived as a transcendence of the self which exists in error and ignorance, and a passage to an "eternal consciousness" where "there is neither here or there."⁷²

Kierkegaard's Socrates viewed the vocation of teaching as akin to the art of midwifery, and he "entered into the relationship of midwife and sustained it throughout . . . he perceived that this relationship is the highest one human being can sustain to another."⁷³ The midwife assists others in giving safe birth to their offspring and, by analogy, Socrates wished above all things to have his students bring to light the dormant truths within their souls, that is, to help them yield their eternal children. What is eternal has far more valid claim to recognition than what is merely fashionable, useful, or pleasurable.

Kierkegaard saw Socrates as the archetype of the virtuous teacher, and he spoke of the Greek philosopher's "rare integrity, deceiving no one, not even one who would deem it his highest happiness to be deceived."⁷⁴ There exists for Kierkegaard a profound dif-

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 13.⁷² *Ibid.*, 16.⁷³ *Ibid.*, 12.⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

ference between a Socratic teacher and an educator who offers himself as an infallible judge.⁷⁵ The judge diagnoses that souls are in ignorance and error; he prescribes what ought to be done to overcome these conditions, and he acts the part of a redeemer who leads others out of situations of untruth.⁷⁶ The problem is that the judge inevitably makes his students dependent on him; he binds them to his truths, ones taken largely on faith, and the judge cannot be forgotten by his students even after he passes on.⁷⁷ The judge in turn becomes dependent on his disciples to validate his sense of mission to the world as a superior truth-teller.

Kierkegaard's Socrates was an ethical teacher who, unlike the judge, "took cognizance of the non-existence of any direct relation between teacher and pupil,"⁷⁸ and believed that a teacher's "love would be merely that of a deceiver if he permitted the disciple to rest in the belief that he really owed him anything. . . ."⁷⁹ The implication is that a teacher who claims, contrary to the Socratic ideal, to give ready-made truths to his students offers in the end little of lasting importance, for a truth that is meaningful and abiding must rest on the freedom of subjective determination. And if Socrates really taught through paradox and irony because he affirmed that truth is inextricably bound up with inwardness, then perhaps this very inwardness made it impossible for him to imprint on the souls of his students his own special brand of knowledge. To Kierkegaard no teacher can decide justly for his students how life ought to be endowed with its highest possible value, and perhaps Socrates' commitment to the thought that knowledge is found through self-reflection signified that the "truth in which I rest was always within me and came to light through myself, and not even Socrates could have given it to me."⁸⁰ By implication, Socrates cannot possibly legislate truths for others because what is eternal exists prior to his finite appearance, whereas the judge identifies his unique temporal coming-into-being as the necessary condition for others knowing the truth.

Kierkegaard's Socrates places great emphasis on the responsibility of the teacher to help students become self-sufficient; he wanted them to thrust him aside eventually and go their own ways while affirming always the value of the idea that each person is his own center. No Socratic teacher can help a student to learn and grow beyond a certain point without inviting destructive attachments, for if the "ideal is to stand alone, then it is entirely valid to prevent the one who is being helped from becoming dependent on the helper—for in that case he is not helped."⁸¹ The nobility of Socrates consisted partly

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 21-22. In Kierkegaard's view, only the God-man (Christ) may legitimately act as a judge, for he is the mediator between the divine and human spheres. It is inherently destructive and a pure vanity for any finite person to claim to be a judge who saves others.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 221.

⁷⁹ *Philosophical Fragments*, 13.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁸¹ J 109.

in his self-understanding as a "vanishing moment" or an "occasion" in the lives of his companions, and he preached the necessity of accepting the inevitable "separation. . . with which each for himself exists in the truth."⁸² A person who offers instruction on any other basis does not truly give but takes away, and such an individual for Kierkegaard can hardly be called a friend of his students, much less their genuine teacher.

VI. Kierkegaard viewed Socrates as one of the spiritual fathers of existential thought because he presumably taught "that subjectivity, inwardness is the truth."⁸³ Was Socrates' great merit to show that knowledge necessarily rests in the consciousness of an existing, finite individual who is in a process of becoming? Truth for Kierkegaard is not akin to abstract propositions existing independently of a conscious subject, and he thought Socrates rejected the idea that reality is accessible only through a special cognitive faculty that has been purified of the distortions imposed by the body and unruly emotions.⁸⁴ If there is no stratum of reality that receives its identity independently of the activities of concrete knowing selves, it would follow that "being" cannot be fathomed fully by abstract categories, at least not without destroying its living, personal nature. Kierkegaard wrote that only the "systematists and objective philosophers . . . have ceased to become human beings, and have become speculative philosophy in the abstract, an entity which belongs in the realm of pure being."⁸⁵

Most philosophers for Kierkegaard are not whole people when they seek truth; they often separate reason from feeling, inner experiences from outer ones, and the infinite from the finite, becoming impersonal and unreal selves who erroneously think that their preferred cognitive categories are equivalent to the richness of concrete being.⁸⁶ If Socrates failed to think that knowing the truth is an "extremely free-and-easy relationship between consciousness and a sum of propositions,"⁸⁷ then gaining access to truth "is an inward transformation, a realization of inwardness"⁸⁸ that involves simultaneously the spiritual, intellectual, and emotional aspects of the self.

Kierkegaard's Socrates is amazed that a temporal and perishable self might come to know what is changeless and eternal, and his affirmation that gaining knowledge is inherently paradoxical showed him to be quite unlike the "speculative philosopher who forgets what it means to exist."⁸⁹ Because "knowing" for Kierkegaard is necessarily entwined with having existence, and existence itself is akin to a "child that is born of the infinite and the finite, the eternal and the temporal . . .,"⁹⁰ attaining knowledge is an enigmatic synthesis that joins apparently opposite qualities in an overwhelmingly rich and

⁸² *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 222. ⁸³ *Ibid.*, 183. ⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 183-84.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 85. ⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 280-1. ⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 37. ⁸⁸ *Ibid.* ⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 184. ⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 85.

uncertain experience. Perhaps Socrates “knew nothing” as far as others were concerned because he posited the “objective uncertainty attaching to the truth.”⁹¹ If “inwardness in existence is the truth,”⁹² then subjective certainties are constituted by powerful personal experiences that cannot be represented adequately. Kierkegaard implies that the self stands alone and is unable to say directly what it knows; and what cannot be expressed to others must be for them a nullity, an unknowable. To explicate the nature of truth through abstract, impersonal categories eliminates for Kierkegaard the paradox of knowledge, namely, the joining of the inner and the outer into a higher unity of meaning. The objective philosopher views the “inwardness of truth” as a fatal contradiction because he associates subjective experiences with the condition of being in error.

Following Kierkegaard’s reasoning, it seems plausible that Socrates thought an individual might gain objective insight into the abstract laws governing celestial change, knowledge of the mainsprings of human action, and appreciation of the forces that account for the growth and disintegration of political institutions without being inwardly changed by such knowledge. If knowing the truth involves great personal transformation, it should deeply matter to the ways a person sees the world, understands the tasks of living, and formulates values to cherish and goals to pursue. Finding truth for Kierkegaard’s Socrates tells a person who he is and what actions best fulfill his identity, and no set of objective propositions about life can offer such insight.

Some degree of personal hardship seems to follow from Kierkegaard’s view that truth rests on inwardness. There is something intensely lonely about an individual who shapes his fate mostly without recourse to instruction by others, and who has serious questions about using the authoritative institutions of his city as uncritical guides to his conduct. For Kierkegaard’s Socrates, a person’s life is his own; to attempt to live completely according to standards provided by others, or by the objective influences that form the environmental conditions of existence, is to jeopardize one’s integrity and inner freedom. If persons are truly unique to Kierkegaard because of their internal life and thought, then being at home with oneself is to strive at every moment to express that objectively unrepresentable uniqueness.

Historically, Socrates became repulsive to many of his fellow Athenians; they saw him as a destructive force in the city’s life, as a corrupter of their youth, and as an impious man whose practice of philosophy was deeply suspect. Was Socrates misunderstood and feared, and unjustly accused because he had the courage to regard moral ideals as absolutes? Kierkegaard wrote that the “willingness to

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 183.

⁹² *Ibid.*

accept an unconditional signifies the willingness to suffer,"⁹³ and added that Socrates held that "to understand, truly to understand, is to be. For us more ordinary men they divide and become twofold: it is one thing to understand and another to be."⁹⁴

Kierkegaard's Socrates achieved a rare and enviable harmony between his thought and his action; he did not understand something in one way only to contradict himself in another way by his practice, and the near-absence of self-division in his soul set him apart from most mortals. Socrates under threat of death refused to compromise certain ideals and their attendant practices: that people should admit to their moral flaws in the activity of seeking self-knowledge, no matter how painful such admissions are; that people should search for the abiding meanings of virtue and wisdom above pursuing material possessions, bodily pleasures, and social prestige; and finally, that people should use their reason to define the universal nature of the good life, even if that means critically examining the claims of authorities, tradition, and common sense. For Kierkegaard's Socrates to have renounced completely these ideals, or even to have watered them down, would have been a fundamental denial of his way of living, and he probably angered his opponents and frustrated his friends because he failed to ask for their approval in establishing the pattern of his life.

Because Socrates for Kierkegaard viewed truth as resting on inwardness and not being directly communicable to others, Socrates assumed always a great "if" in his thought and action, and "on this 'if' he risks his entire life."⁹⁵ Socrates may have gone to his death serenely with the strong conviction that the soul is immortal, and that the gods cannot permit a virtuous and just man to be harmed by vicious and evil ones. According to Kierkegaard, Socrates ended his life by probably thinking to himself: "the *possibility* of there being an immortality occupies me to such a degree that I unquestionably stake my whole life upon it *as though* it were the most certain of things."⁹⁶ Socrates did not attempt to collect infallible proofs to justify his beliefs about immortality in the hope of removing ambiguity about the outcome of his drinking the hemlock. It is risky to dwell alone in powerful convictions that are thought to be identical to incontestable truths, for there is the distinct possibility of engaging in the worst self-deception. Kierkegaard's Socrates was heroic because his deepest beliefs were tested constantly in the process of directing his ways of living, and he accepted uncertainty as part of the paradox of existence. Is it not a rare human being who understands himself as a "hypothetical experiment" while perhaps delighting in the adventurous thought that "it could be a unique experience to be condemned to death?"⁹⁷

⁹³ J 4897.

⁹⁴ J 4301.

⁹⁵ *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 180.

⁹⁶ I have used the translation by A. Dru (see n. 22 above), 184.

⁹⁷ J 4285.

VII. There is one final point to be addressed: How did Kierkegaard view the eternally thorny issue of Plato's relationship to Socrates? Kierkegaard relied heavily on the Platonic dialogues in fashioning his picture of Socrates' personal character and philosophical outlook.⁹⁸ He was acutely aware that Plato's great reverence for Socrates led him to use his teacher's figure (perhaps at times in unhistorical ways) as the leading speaker in the majority of the dialogues, thereby creating nearly insoluble analytic and interpretive problems when attempting to distinguish Socratic ideals and ideas from those belonging to Plato's genius.

Socrates was a thinker who, according to Kierkegaard, "concentrates on accentuating existence"⁹⁹ because he immersed himself in the ethical dilemmas and human problems of everyday life, believing that ideas have meaning only if they hold existential significance by transforming our self-understandings and conducts. Philosophy for Socrates has little or nothing to do with formal ontology, speculative metaphysics, and theories of knowledge, and "he had no doctrine, no system"¹⁰⁰ because the richness of being cannot be fully comprehended by recourse to systematic and abstract categories. And if the essences of lived human reality are paradox and ambiguity, as Kierkegaard maintains, then attempts to identify philosophy with the con-

⁹⁸ Kierkegaard read the works of leading classical scholars of his day who discussed the complexities of the "Socratic problem," among them: F. Hermann's *Geschichte und System der Platonischen Philosophie* (Heidelberg, 1839); F. Ast's *Platons Leben und Schriften* (Landshut, 1816); A. Trendelenburg's *Platonis de ideis et numeris doctrina ex Aristotele illustrata* (Leipzig, 1826); and F. Schleiermacher, *Platons Werke* (Berlin, 1807). Of great importance in influencing Kierkegaard's attempts to distinguish Socrates from Plato was the work of his teacher, Poul Möller, *Udkast Til Forelaesinger over den aeldre Philosophies Historie*, printed in Möller's *Eflerladte Skifter*, 1st ed. (Copenhagen, 1839). For a brief survey of Möller's views, see L. M. Capel, *The Concept of Irony*, *op. cit.*, 365ff. Kierkegaard used the above sources in forming his views on how to order the dialogues temporally, on how to separate spurious dialogues from genuine ones, and on how to establish sound criteria for distinguishing the historical Socrates' moral and philosophical tendencies from those belonging to Plato. Helpful material pertaining to Kierkegaard's views on the "Socratic problem" may be found in the articles by A. B. Drachmann, V. Anderson, and J. Himmelstrup in *Methods and Results of Kierkegaard Studies in Scandinavia*, ed. by A. Henriksen (Copenhagen, 1951). J. Himmelstrup's *Soren Kierkegaard's Opfattelse af Socrates* (Copenhagen, 1924) also should be consulted. Kierkegaard's attempts to separate the historical from the transfigured Socrates in the dialogues were made without the benefit of stylometric dating procedures, e.g., Lutoslawski's, ones that distinguish Plato's writings into early, middle, and late groups. However, a perusal of Kierkegaard's remarks on the "Socratic problem" in *The Concept of Irony*, *op. cit.*, 69ff, 74, 83, 96-7, 136 and 154, and in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, *op. cit.*, 184-85, shows that his judgments about the significant points of spiritual and philosophical cleavage between Socrates and Plato agree in large measure with those of a great many modern scholars who use stylometric evidence to help them form their pictures of the two ancient thinkers.

⁹⁹ *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 184.

¹⁰⁰ J 4275.

struction of elaborate systems are doomed to failure, since they would fail to provide real guidance to actors in concrete situations. Kierkegaard's Socrates views philosophy as a striving for self-knowledge, as concerned with moral improvement, and as the intensive criticism of concepts through which people order and understand existence. Philosophy is a fallible and uncertain vocation that involves people searching in common for an elusive wisdom, and Kierkegaard's Socrates takes nothing for granted when examining the supreme and most difficult issue of how people ought best to live. Whatever wisdom is found must grow from the lively play of concrete experience, and from arduous inquiries which prepare the mind for new insights.

Compared to Socrates, "Plato himself is a misunderstanding . . ." because with Plato "the existential disappeared from view and the doctrine grew dogmatically broader and broader."¹⁰¹ Plato's philosophical temperament, for Kierkegaard, is primarily speculative, for Plato attempted to fathom through theoretical reason the whole of ethical and cosmic reality, and he simply loved grand abstractions, elaborate proofs, and all-inclusive categories. Kierkegaard suggests that Plato sought the path to an unparadoxical eternity wherein all ambiguity is removed, thus distorting Socrates' insight that truth does not reside apart from finite and temporal knowers who perceive somewhat mysteriously within themselves the outlines of what is universal and timeless.¹⁰²

In Kierkegaard's judgment, it was Plato who first formulated the doctrine of eternal Ideas as a formal set of metaphysical propositions.¹⁰³ The realm of perfect Ideas is placed in sharp relief to the changing world of appearances, and the eternal and the finite are separated by a great cleavage, only to be bridged by a very few philosophers specially educated for the task. And did not Plato view philosophy as a rarified activity for uncommon spirits, thereby breaking with the Socratic view that every person potentially can achieve the highest insights? Irony and the affirmation of ignorance necessarily drop away in Plato's outlook, for these in Kierkegaard's judgment are possible only for a spirit who recognizes the elusive, enigmatic character of wisdom. And in Kierkegaard's view, if Plato was a prophetic philosopher who loved to reveal truths to the ignorant, Plato probably broke sharply with Socrates' view that philosophers really are unable to teach their students anything of lasting value. Finally, Plato contradicted his own statements in the *Phaedrus* and the *Seventh Letter* that the deepest things should not be said directly, let alone be committed to writing, by actually communicating in written dialogues esoteric metaphysical and moral truths; whereas Kierkegaard judged that Socrates taught that truth is inwardness, being

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*¹⁰² *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 184-5.¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 184.

experienced silently and uniquely, which makes it difficult, if not impossible, to express truth through the written word.

Kierkegaard's Socrates thought that finding truth is an event precipitated by earnest searching and questioning, and that recollection is a possibility existing at every conscious moment. However, by "holding Socrates down to the proposition that all knowledge is recollection, he becomes a speculative philosopher instead of an existential thinker. . . ." ¹⁰⁴ In Kierkegaard's view, recollection is something that Socrates desired to practice as a living, personal experience; and Plato's fundamental error was to view recollection as a problem to be clarified by formal theoretical reflection, as if the truths to be gained from that abstract experience might be stated in propositional form. ¹⁰⁵ It is clear that Kierkegaard saw Socrates and Plato as having quite different temperaments and philosophical impulses when he rendered his judgment about them:

Imagine yourself as a contemporary of Socrates. There is no science and scholarship here; this is just what he [Socrates] wants to eliminate. . . . But then he dies, in Plato the existential is diminished, then comes science and scholarship. Is Plato greater than Socrates? Yes, perhaps when assistant professors judge, but then they must be consistent and judge that a professor of theology is greater than Christ. ¹⁰⁶

University of California, Berkeley.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 184-5.

¹⁰⁶ *J* 1059.