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A Companion to Socrates

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Kierkegaard's Socratic Point of View

PAUL MUENCH¹

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.²

—Johannes Climacus

Shortly before he died, the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) composed a brief essay entitled “My Task.”³ In this relatively neglected work he argues that if we want to understand him and the philosophical activities he has been engaged in, then there is only one instructive object of comparison: Socrates and the role he played as philosophical gadfly in ancient Athens. In this chapter 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.

Kierkegaard held a lifelong interest in Socrates and wrote about him extensively. He is perhaps best known for his 1841 *magister* dissertation, *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*. Notoriously (and much to the chagrin of his dissertation committee), Kierkegaard argues in his dissertation that Socrates is not the ethical and religious figure he is usually taken to be but instead an ironist through and through. This work contains Kierkegaard's most scholarly discussion of Socrates and includes an analysis of the writings of Xenophon and Plato together with an examination of Aristophanes' *Clouds*, while also engaging the philosophical and philological scholarship of his day (primarily from Germany), including most notably the writings of Hegel.⁴ Though Kierkegaard is usually represented in the history of philosophy as a great foe of Hegel's, he nevertheless inherits Hegel's philosophical vocabulary and makes use in his dissertation of a recognizably Hegelian framework.⁵ Arguing that the three main depictions of Socrates that have come down to us from antiquity are each ultimately *distortions* of the truth (resulting from Xenophon's shallowness, Plato's desire to idealize his teacher, and Aristophanes' aims as a comic playwright), Kierkegaard maintains that by tracing these various distortions and their interrelationships we should be able in effect to triangulate back to their common Socratic source and so come to appreciate, on his view, the fundamentally ironic nature of Socrates' overall position.⁶

Although Kierkegaard seems to argue at times in his dissertation that none of the sources from antiquity provides an accurate depiction of Socrates, he actually allows for one exception: Plato's *Apology*. Calling the *Apology* "a historical document" that "must be assigned a preeminent place when the purely Socratic is sought," Kierkegaard holds both that "a reliable picture of the actual Socrates is seen in the *Apology*" and that "in this work we do have, according to the view of the great majority, a historical representation of Socrates' actuality."⁷ As the argument of *The Concept of Irony* unfolds (proceeding from Kierkegaard's treatment of the ancient sources, to his discussion of Socrates' trial, to Socrates' significance as world-historical figure), Kierkegaard repeatedly appeals to the *Apology* and not unreasonably treats it as the final authority upon which any conception of Socrates ultimately must rest. In my view Plato's *Apology* remains the single most important text for Kierkegaard's thinking about Socrates. This is a text to which Kierkegaard returns again and again in his writings about Socrates and which dramatizes for him the Socratic ideal: a life that aims at cultivating the self while also serving as an occasion for one's fellow citizens to examine themselves more closely.

After the completion of his dissertation Kierkegaard opted not to pursue a university career and instead devoted himself to writing, publishing 31 books and numerous articles over a 14-year span before he died in 1855 at the age of 42. While he never again was to devote as many continuous pages to Socrates as he did in his dissertation, Kierkegaard frequently returns to him in his later writings and continues to refine and deepen his conception of Socrates' philosophical method.⁸ Although Socrates forever remains an ironist in his eyes, Kierkegaard later comes to think that his dissertation suffers from a certain one-sidedness that neglects Socrates' significance as an ethical and religious figure.⁹ In addition, Kierkegaard also comes to conceive of himself as a kind of Christian Socrates who seeks by means of his various writings to make his contemporaries aware of what it is to live an authentic Christian life while simultaneously trying to draw their attention to the various respects in which their own lives may fail to live up to this Christian ideal.

Many of Kierkegaard's texts are designed to have an existential impact on the reader and involve the use of a whole host of fictional characters, including most notably Kierkegaard's so-called pseudonymous authors, each of whom is presented as the author of his respective book or books and as someone who possesses a specific outlook on life, whether this be a commitment to aesthetic detachment, ethical fortitude or religious passion. Perhaps acknowledging the difficulty that his reader may have in keeping straight all these different voices and life-outlooks, Kierkegaard also wrote several works that seek to illuminate the overall aim and purpose of his authorship as a whole.¹⁰ "My Task" falls into this latter category of writings and represents Kierkegaard's final attempt 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.¹¹ 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. 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."¹² Despite the fact that 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 Kierkegaard has openly avowed that this is his position.¹³ Furthermore, 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.¹⁴

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."¹⁵ 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.

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.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

Let's consider further Kierkegaard's comparison of himself to Socrates in "My Task." As readers 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*.¹⁸ 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 (19e–20a; 20d–e); (2) *the god*, who manifests himself through the oracle at Delphi (21a; 33c) and perhaps through the related phenomenon of Socrates' *daimonion* or divine sign (31d; 40a–c); (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 (21b–23b); (4) *the young Athenian men* who follow Socrates around and who enjoy listening to him question those reputed to be wise (23c; 33c); 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 (21d; 28e–29a; 30e). 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;¹⁹ and (7) *Plato*, who is represented as one of the young men in attendance at Socrates' trial (38b, 34a) and who, in turn, is also the writer and thinker who has composed the text in question.

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).²⁰ 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*, who 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 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.²¹

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.²² 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*).

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.²³

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.²⁴ 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 [*Afinagt*], would wash his hands of me and let me go my own way.²⁵

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, or they falsely ascribe to themselves that they are that.

I do not call myself a Christian (keeping the ideal free), but I can make it manifest that the others are that even less.²⁶

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.²⁷

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.

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, 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 which 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. (*Ap.* 31a)

Kierkegaard ties Socrates' ability to awaken his fellow citizens to his stance of ignorance, and invites us to compare this stance with his own stance of refusing to call himself a Christian.²⁸ 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.²⁹

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.¹⁰ 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.

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. (*Ap.* 22e-23a; cf. 23c-24b; *Th.* 151c)

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.¹¹

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. 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. 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,¹² 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.³³

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 (Ap. 20e-21b). 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." (Ap. 23a-b)

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 prephilosophical 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.³⁴ 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.³⁵

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. . . . 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.³⁶

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 admiringly 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!³⁷

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.

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."³⁸ 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.³⁹ 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, this 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. 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.⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹

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."⁴²

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.⁴³

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 chapter. 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.⁴⁴ 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 who 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. . . . (*Smp.* 221c–d)

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. 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; at 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.¹⁵

Notes

- 1 This chapter is an abridged version of a paper that originally appeared in *Kierkegaardiana* 24 (2007); I have rewritten the opening section. It is reprinted by permission of *Kierkegaardianum*. All references to Kierkegaard's published writings are to the English translations published by Princeton University Press, *Kierkegaard's Writings*; all references to Kierkegaard's unpublished writings are to the English translations published by Indiana University Press, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*. Citations of the English translation in question are then followed (where available) by the new scholarly edition of Kierkegaard's writings, *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*; otherwise I cite either *Søren Kierkegaards Samlede Værker* or *Søren Kierkegaards Papirer*. Full references to these editions and the standard abbreviations for Kierkegaard's texts can be found in the bibliography.
- 2 *CUP* (vol. 2) 77; *Pap.* VI B 98: 62. Cf. *JP* 2:1962 (p. 386); *Pap.* X.4 A 553.
- 3 *M* 340-7; *SVI* 14, 350-7. "My Task" appeared in the tenth issue of Kierkegaard's serial *The Moment* and was dated September 1, 1855 (just over two months before Kierkegaard died).
- 4 See especially Hegel (1995).
- 5 Some scholars have argued, unconvincingly in my view, that Kierkegaard's frequent appeals to Hegel in his dissertation and apparent reliance on aspects of his philosophical methodology should not be taken at face value, but rather treated as an ironic endorsement of something he means to discredit. See, e.g., Mackey (1986). For a recent reassessment of Kierkegaard's relationship to Hegel, see Stewart (2003).
- 6 See, e.g., *CI* 154; *SKS* 1, 204-5. Cf. Olesen (2001).
- 7 *CI* 76; *SKS* 1, 134, *CI* 80; *SKS* 1, 138. *CI* 126; *SKS* 1, 177 (italics mine; second and third trans. modified). Kierkegaard also, however, somewhat provocatively maintains that the *Apology* "is in its entirety an ironic work" (*CI* 37; *SKS* 1, 99; trans. modified).
- 8 See especially the two books by Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author Johannes Climacus, *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, and Anti-Climacus' "The Socratic Definition of Sin" (*SUD* 87-96; *SVI* 11, 199-207).
- 9 See, e.g., *CUP* 503; *SKS* 7, 456.
- 10 See especially Kierkegaard's *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*. For a discussion of the dangers of attaching too much significance to any one of these texts see Garff (1998).
- 11 For one recent discussion, see Kirmmse (2000).
- 12 *M* 340; *SVI* 14, 350 (trans. modified). *M* 342-3; *SVI* 14, 353.
- 13 *M* 340; *SVI* 14, 350 (italics mine; trans. modified). This stance is also adopted by Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author Johannes Climacus in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. See *PV* 43; *SVI* 13, 532. *PV* 8; *SVI* 13, 497.

- 14 *M* 344; *SVI* 14, 355. *M* 340-1; *SVI* 14, 351-2 (trans. modified). Cf. *JP* 6:6872 (p. 508); *Pap.* XI.1 A 136.
- 15 *M* 341; *SVI* 14, 352.
- 16 On Kierkegaard's conception of Socrates, see, e.g., Himmelstrup (1924); Nagley (1980); Sarf (1983); Rubenstein (2001). On Kierkegaard's Socratic method, see, e.g., Taylor (1975); Hadot (1995); Muench (2003).
- 17 That, however, is a much larger project which lies beyond the scope of this chapter. I've made a start on this project in Muench (2003) where I argue that Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author Johannes Climacus employs a Socratic method and represents Kierkegaard's "idealization of the Socratic within the context of nineteenth century Danish Christendom" (p. 139).
- 18 All references to Plato's writings are to Cooper (1997).
- 19 Myles Burnyeat (1997), e.g., argues that "readers are invited . . . to reach a verdict on the case before [them]" (p. 2).
- 20 The one exception being perhaps the young men who follow Socrates around, 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, 108-13. *CI* 187-92; *SKS* 1, 234-9. *PF* 24; *SKS* 4, 231-2. *JP* 4:4300 (p. 221); *Pap.* XI.1 A 428.
- 21 *M* 341; *SVI* 14, 352 (trans. modified). *M* 340; *SVI* 14, 351. 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. *M*, 91b-92c. On Socrates' relationship to the sophists see, e.g., *CI* 201-14; *SKS* 1, 246-59.
- 22 Cf. *M* 347; *SVI* 14, 357.
- 23 *M* 341-2; *SVI* 14, 352 (trans. modified).
- 24 See *M* 340; *SVI* 14, 350-1.
- 25 *M* 345; *SVI* 14, 356. *M* 340; *SVI* 14, 351 (trans. modified). 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.
- 26 *M* 340; *SVI* 14, 351 (italics mine; trans. modified). *M* 341; *SVI* 14, 352.
- 27 *M* 342; *SVI* 14, 352-3 (italics mine; trans. modified).
- 28 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 incompatible with this ironic stance but neither does he think that Socrates' ignorance is feigned or merely tactical. See, e.g., *CI* 169-77; *SKS* 1, 217-24. *CI* 269-71; *SKS* 1, 306-8. Cf. Nehamas (1998), pp. 86-7.
- 29 *M* 342; *SVI* 14, 353 (underlining mine; trans. modified).
- 30 Cf., e.g., *Lch.* 187e-188a; *Ap.* 29e-30a.
- 31 *M* 342-3; *SVI* 14, 353 (trans. modified).
- 32 See, e.g., *CI* 217; *SKS* 1, 261.
- 33 On the idea of Socrates' activity being a kind of preliminary cleansing of the soul, see *Sph.* 230b-d. 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.
- 34 Cf. *SUD* 99; *SVI* 11, 209-10.

- 35 Cf. JP 1:972 (p. 424); Pap. X.1 A 360. JP 4:3871 (p. 23); Pap. XI.2 A 362.
 36 M 344; SVI 14, 355 (trans. modified).
 37 M 341; SVI 14, 352 (trans. modified).
 38 M 345; SVI 14, 356.
 39 Kierkegaard would not dispute this. See, e.g., PV 33; SVI 13, 524.
 40 M 343; SVI 14, 353.
 41 M 343-4; SVI 14, 354 (trans. modified).
 42 M 344; SVI 14, 354-5.
 43 CI 48-9; SKS 1, 109.
 44 See note 17.
 45 Thanks to Bridget Clarke, Ben Eggleston, Robert Haraldsson, Brian Söderquist, and Jon Stewart for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this chapter, and to Sara Ahbel-Rappe for suggestions on how to adapt this material for the present collection.

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