

Method and Perspective when Reading Kierkegaard

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I.

Kierkegaard is nearly universally acknowledged among philosophers as an interesting, if sometimes tendentious thinker. He is not so universally accorded the distinction of philosopher. That there is philosophical content in his work is readily admitted, yet this is only incidental, it is said, to his primary import as a religious thinker. Such commentators can point to numerous places throughout Kierkegaard's authorship where he makes it unquestionably clear that his overwhelming concern, both personally and *qua* author, is with the problem of becoming a Christian. This problem, according to Kierkegaard, is one of *fidus* not *intellectus* and one of the greatest weaknesses within the professed community of faith was their all too willing acceptance of the philosophical systems of Kant and Hegel. Thus, it could seem easily concluded, Kierkegaard's authorship is fundamentally non-philosophical, his spurious critique of certain theological applications of philosophy aside. His profundity lies in his deft analysis of that significant range of human experience surrounding personal faith but this – and on his own ground – is outside the purview of reason and is therefore, *ipso facto*, outside philosophy. Briefly stated this viewpoint finds Kierkegaard a religious irrationalist, if not voluntarist, who constituted faith and reason as separate and immisible domains, the first of ultimate concern and the latter of only minor interest.

As a religious thinker concerned with the thus formulated problem of Christian faith, it is similarly sometimes said that Kierkegaard's ethics are private and aesthetic and that he therefore has little or nothing to contribute

to the arena of social and political philosophy.¹ While I would argue against this conclusion, it can be substantiated with reference to Kierkegaard's texts. As John Wild, in an essay which generally praises Kierkegaard as a profound ethicist and penetrating social and cultural critic, points out:

His attack on mass standardization and his passionate concern for the individual person often led him toward an existential solipsism which seemed to deny the possibility of inter-subjective communication. He sometimes confused his attack on Hegelian rationalism with an attack on human reason itself.²

Wild has correctly indicated a problem in the Kierkegaardian authorship, but to conclude that this is the main thrust of his position, as some others have done, represents a fundamental misunderstanding of Kierkegaard. In some cases this misunderstanding can be attributed simply to an incomplete reading of Kierkegaard, but it seems to me more often to be the result of the lack of a systematic method by which one correlates and evaluates the many different kinds of texts one encounters in the Kierkegaardian canon.

The problem of an incomplete reading is fully understandable, but not excusable. Kierkegaard's writings in the present definitive Danish editions fill thirty-five volumes, and this is not absolutely complete.³ Furthermore since Danish is not a world language translations assume critical importance and the whole authorship is not translated into English, French or German, or a combination of them. Yet one is not required to read every single text of

¹ Bolin, Torsten, *Søren Kierkegaards etiske åskådning med särskild hänsyn til begreppet 'den enskilde'*, academic dissertation, Stockholm, 1918, *passim*.

Buber, Martin, *Between Man and Man*, Routledge Kegan Paul, London, 1947, p. 40.

Mackey, Louis, "The Loss of the World in Kierkegaard's Ethics," *The Review of Metaphysics*, XV, 1961-62, pp. 602-620.

Moore, Stanley R., "Religion as the True Humanism: Reflections on Kierkegaard's Social Philosophy," *Journal of The American Academy of Religion*, XXXVII, 1969, pp. 15-25.

Niebuhr, H. Richard, *Christ and Culture*, Harper, New York, 1951, p. 80.

Ruttenbeck, Walther, *Søren Kierkegaard: Der Christliche Denker und Sein Werk*, Trowitsch und Sohn, Berlin, 1929, p. 134.

² Wild, John, "Kierkegaard and Contemporary Existentialist Philosophy," in Johnson, H. A. and Niels Thulstrup, *A. Kierkegaard Critique*, Henry Regnery Co., Chicago, 1962, pp. 22-39. (Hereafter *Critique*).

³ There are some omissions from the *Papirer*, although these should not be of any decisive importance. There are also marginal notations made by Kierkegaard in some of the books in his personal library which he used most often. Such comments might serve to annotate the development of Kierkegaard's critical thinking. In this respect see: Dewey, Bradley R., "Kierkegaard's Blue Testament," *Harvard Theological Review*, Cambridge.

Kierkegaard's before he can be understood. Indeed in several cases it seems that if the author had read just one additional major work, available in a fully competent English translation, *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard would not have been accused of such serious deficiencies in social ethics.

Kierkegaard is often read incompletely in good faith, by students with no dogmatic viewpoint, who wish to honestly interpret him. Their errors along with those of their more assiduous colleagues are most often due to the absence of an appropriate method. I propose here to suggest the main features of a systematic method appropriate to the study of Kierkegaard. As a direct corollary I hope to tentatively indicate that such a methodological reading of Kierkegaard, by allowing the correct perspective on his work, would tend to dissolve those criticisms which find him an anti-intellectual, non-political, religious solipsist.

II.

The proper method of approaching Kierkegaard has been much discussed and what I suggest on these pages will consist mostly of summary and synthesis. Interest in the question is certainly provoked by Kierkegaard's own consciousness of the peculiar status of his work. He clearly recognized his own position as a reaction-philosopher, although he sometimes had doubts about its worthiness, and defined his own role as that of a corrective.

This well known fact, that Kierkegaard produced his enormous authorship specifically to provide what he judged to be an essentially needed corrective, is the key principle to be remembered when reading any of the published works (SV). They were published by Kierkegaard for one particular reason: to stand as a corrective. The same cannot be said of the *Papirer* simply because they were not made public by Kierkegaard. Perhaps he would have made some of them public, had he only time to 'polish' the manuscript. One thinks in particular of "De Omnibus Dubitandum Est" (Pap. IV B 1) in this respect. But the irreversible fact is that they were not, and rather than trying to piece together evidence as to Kierkegaard's motives in not having published them, a task which unavoidably involves some second-guessing, one should apply the

methodological principle that the unpublished (by Kierkegaard) *Papirer* should not be understood as corrective in the same sense as the published works.

If this sounds either arbitrary or insignificant we need only reflect a moment on the content of the idea, corrective. For something to be a corrective it must necessarily be bound to the public domain, as a polemical assertion against either public actions or statements. This involves the centrality of verifiable facts: this was either said or done and needs to be corrected. If there were not something factual, concrete, what possible content could a corrective have? A reflection on one's own inner experiences cannot, of itself, be presented as a corrective. The *Papirer* contain without question entries which would otherwise be described as corrective, the polemic tone perhaps reaches its sharpest edge therein, except that Kierkegaard chose that they should remain private. He did not wish to submit them to the market place of ideas, perhaps partly because of purely personal and contingent factors, but primarily they were not the corrective he wished to apply. This is to say that as regards the *Papirer* we do not have the author's assurance that they fit into the context he felt duty-bound to challenge and correct. I must hasten to add that this on no account diminishes the significance of the *Papirer* for understanding the philosophy of Kierkegaard, but only stipulates that the *SV* and *Papirer* can not be read as one continuous authorship. Their great value in a systematic endeavor is that they often illuminate otherwise obscure passages.

Thus our first consideration when reading Kierkegaard is that he is a polemic writer through and through. In recognizing this we can avoid the errors of some who have dismissed Kierkegaard's highly topical and perhaps overstated later polemical writings as the diatribe of a disturbed man or the hateful expletive of a morbid individual. Kierkegaard's polemics must be read against the background of his entire published authorship as phases integral to the give and take of applying a public corrective. The now no longer prevalent reading of *Øieblikket* as anti-Christian by some, and as the result of insanity by others (depending only upon one's personal emotions toward the specific themes discussed) is a clear example of this error. The error is simply a taking out of context, but the problem, difficult enough in 1855 Copenhagen and more than doubly so today, is finding the context. For it is not enough to say that the context of any given work is the published author-

ship as a whole, or at least that portion which preceded it, but, precisely because every work is polemic, every work has referents outside of itself which form its nucleus. These referents are carried forward weaving a maze more difficult than most to untangle. When Kierkegaard asks, e. g., "Was Bishop Mynster a 'witness to the truth,' one of 'the genuine witnesses to the truth' – is this the truth?" his answer is more than he gives in the article.⁴ When Kierkegaard says "You who read this must surely know what is to be understood by a witness to the truth,"⁵ it is a tacit reference to the numerous discussions of truth and discipleship already in his published authorship, each with referents outside the authorship, and the description which follows is only a poetic-homiletic summary of what he had developed at great length otherwise.

Within the article itself are specific references to events outside the authorship, Professor Martensen's address and the preaching career of Bishop Mynster being the two which have occasioned the response, each being a public example of what Kierkegaard felt needed correcting. In a sense the article resembles a roadsign erected by Kierkegaard, pointing in one direction toward events in the public community and in the other toward his own previously articulated thoughts. Without attempting to further demonstrate this may I assert that this double-pointing relationship may be seen in each of Kierkegaard's published works. Of-course in most cases the context is removed from daily-life Copenhagen. *Philosophical Fragments*, e. g., is a polemical response to German speculative idealism. A first methodological principle must then be to discover the coherence between the work in question and the other published works on the one hand and the concrete events in the public domain on the other. I will call this the polemical context and it is the most significant factor for understanding Kierkegaard.

The polemical context represents one aspect of the historical antecedents which stand related to each of Kierkegaard's works. Professor Thulstrup has divided these into special and general historical antecedents.⁶ The polemical context as I have defined it corresponds roughly to the special historical

⁴ SV XIV, p. 11. (All references to SV are to the second edition).

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁶ Thulstrup, Niels, "A Complex of Problems Called Kierkegaard," in *Critique*, pp. 286–296.

antecedents.⁷ We shall now consider the general historical antecedents. Briefly stated they comprise the history of philosophy and Christianity. No one contests that everything that Kierkegaard said (or did, but that is outside our sphere of interest) must be understood in terms of its relation to Christianity. There are, however, numerous problems in delineating just what that relation was. There are questions about the orthodoxy of his doctrine, whether he was more Lutheran or Roman Catholic, etc. I find that most of these questions have little more than parochial-historical interest and may furthermore tend to obfuscate the radical kind of Christianity Kierkegaard was trying to present. This is to say that as a methodological principle one needn't be involved with the detailed antecedents of Kierkegaard's Christology (except when they form the polemical context, e. g. much of Martensen's work), but recognize it as an attempt to present a pure Christianity which rests on the Bible and in particular the New Testament.

With the history of philosophy the case is quite different. He is related in numerous ways, influenced by a great many thinkers. His knowledge of the history of philosophy was large but uneven. He grasped onto various positions and thinkers which appealed to him as vigorously as he attacked those which he felt jeopardized the individual's way to the truth. Most briefly and dogmatically stated Kierkegaard's relation to the history of philosophy is that he took up the philosophical standpoint of Socrates and polemically addressed it to Hegelianism. This statement is an obvious oversimplification, but it suggests the passion and intimacy with which Kierkegaard was involved with the history of philosophy and, because it points to a movement which persisted throughout his authorship, suggests the basis of a methodological principle. The "Preliminary Remark" to *For Self Examination*⁸ provides in a religious discourse published under Kierkegaard's own name a confession of his own

⁷ It is not important enough to quarrel over terms, but it seems to me that the polemical context is so overwhelmingly significant in understanding Kierkegaard, precisely because it is so polemical, that it should be given special attention. The polemical context also stands apart from the private biographical information which also would come under the rubric of special historical antecedent. For example in the article, "Was Bishop Mynster a Witness to the Truth?" Kierkegaard mentions his personal relation to Mynster and indicates that he would have spoken out sooner except for this relationship. While interesting, this fact is apart from the essential spirit of the polemic and does nothing to clarify it.

⁸ SV XII, p. 337.

dedication to the ideals of Socrates. There are numerous other similar references to Socrates. Kierkegaard tried to conduct his own enterprise in a manner as much like Socrates as possible, commensurate with the differences inherent in his own historical situation and his Christianity. One can compare Kierkegaard's polemic with Socrates' role as gadfly, Kierkegaard's indirect method with Socrates' dialogue, and the model of that single individual (*hiin Enkelte*) with Socrates himself. These themes are as closely inter-related in the authorship of Kierkegaard as in the life of Socrates. Together they form part of the philosophical foundation for Kierkegaard's polemic. Consequently a philosophical understanding of Kierkegaard requires familiarity with his own understanding of Socrates, an abstruse and often ambiguous topic. However because of its centrality to the problem of approaching Kierkegaard philosophically I shall attempt a few remarks on this theme shortly.

But first, under the topic of the general historical antecedents – the history of philosophy, I should like to suggest what I feel is a striking parallel to the Kierkegaardian enterprise found in the history of philosophy. This stands as an historical antecedent not because of its direct influence on Kierkegaard's authorship (as far as I know there was none), but because it aptly characterizes a typical, we may say primordial, movement in the history of philosophy and thus at least symbolically represents what may be called, for want of a better name, the philosophical tradition.

The parallel I wish to draw is with Parmenides' poem of two sections called 'The Way of Truth' and 'The Way of Seeming.' On three distinct levels this poem provides an instructive parallel with Kierkegaard. The first is that the philosopher must withdraw from the realm of ordinary discourse among men in order to approach the truth. His departure is absolutely requisite to the apprehension of philosophical modalities unrecognizable from within the realm of the many. Furthermore, perhaps ironically, the philosophical understanding achieved apart from the realm of the many is to form the basis of the philosopher's relation to the many. Parmenides described the search for truth as an activity within the experience of private withdrawal. (The poem in the section "The Way of Truth" is a careful logical deduction but still replete with religious symbols, suggesting that Parmenides understood the search for truth as religious activity). The parallel with Kierkegaard is precise;

the withdrawal from the realm of the many because of religious concerns – religion being the inward apprehension of truth –, then having one's relation to the many determined by the demands of truth-seeking.

This leads directly to the second level on which one finds a parallel between the ancient Parmenides and the pre-eminently modern Kierkegaard: both – and in respect of their withdrawal in the name of truth – turn polemicist. The poem's most obviously polemical remark, which may or may not have been partially directed toward Heraclitus, reads "... mortals knowing nothing wander two-headed; ... they were born along both deaf and blind, mazed, crowds with no judgement."⁹ This sounds too much like statements of Kierkegaard about the crowd (*mængden*) to escape notice. There is also a third level on which Parmenides' poem proves elucidating. This is to be found in his distinction between the eternal and the everlasting. Parmenides distinguished between time and eternity insofar as he recognized the eternal as a different and separate category from the everlasting. To describe something as everlasting is to place it within the extendedness of time. Of something which is everlasting one says that it was in the past just as it is now and will continue to be in the future. The everlasting is a category of temporality. The eternal, conversely, is a concept outside of all temporal possibilities so that the sequential categories of past and future are completely inapplicable. This distinction, in some ways the hallmark of "modern" existentialism, plays a significant role in Kierkegaard especially in terms of the individual's relation to the temporal, public world.

The reason I have suggested this example is because I feel it suggests a methodological clue for understanding Kierkegaard, namely, that his vision is remarkably akin to the spirit of ancient philosophy. The theme of withdrawal in ancient philosophy is not unique to Parmenides (nor is it unique to Kierkegaard among the moderns), but represents a bend of mind so fundamental that we could expect to find a kinship of spirits which goes far beyond the level of isolated examples between the ancient philosophers and Kierkegaard. Indeed this is the case. A similar parallel has been noted between Kierkegaard's standpoint and Plato's simile of the cave.

⁹ Diels-Kranz, *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, Weidmann, Dublin/Zürich, 1967, Fragment number 6.

The upward journey out of the cave is managed through dialectic, the existential dialectic of Kierkegaard, which once again calls the individual out of the masses and places him before God as an individual. And the arrival outside the cave is the 'pathos of existence' which Kierkegaard and every authentic and prophetic existence must assume in relation to mass man. It is standing as an individual before God. Only then do the sun of the divine Agathon and the true objects of perception come into view.¹⁰

We may summarize the general historical antecedents as: 1) Most decisively New Testament Christianity, 2) the example of Socrates as an ethical individual, dialectician (ironist) and social-political critic (gadfly), 3) the spirit of ancient philosophy.

A closely related question, because of its connection with Socrates, is that of Kierkegaard's frequently noted method of indirect communication. Kierkegaard used a total of nineteen pseudonymous designations which stood in various relations to each other and special relation to him. He did not use them to hide his identity from the public but rather, in some cases, to underline the polemic and to establish a negative relation between himself and the positions presented.

So in the pseudonymous works there is not a single word which is mine, I have no opinion about these works except as a third person, no knowledge of their meaning except as a reader, not the remotest private relation to them, since such a thing is impossible in the case of a doubly-reflected communication.¹¹

The different authors present different positive positions, but Kierkegaard's only knowledge or opinion of these opinions is as a reader or, as in a dialogue, listener. The situation simulates what Kierkegaard understands the dynamic of a Socratic dialogue to be. In a sense he has done nothing but, ironically, he has been the agent which has caused the opinions to come forth. Kierkegaard, in other words, understands himself as ironist. Kierkegaard's indirect communication and irony are perhaps the most noteworthy aspects of his indebtedness to Socrates. In Kierkegaard's understanding of Socrates his most salient feature is his irony.

¹⁰ Richter, Liselotte, "Kierkegaard's Position in His Religious-Sociological Situation," in *Critique*, p. 71.

¹¹ SV VII, p. 616.

In his academic dissertation, *The Concept of Irony – With Constant Reference to Socrates*, Kierkegaard develops the notion of Socrates conceived as irony, in contrast to and critique of the notion of Socrates conceived as a practitioner of irony. If he were only a practitioner of irony his daimon would be false. (Socrates' daimon is the determination which fully accounts for his relation to the state and the public. His relation to his own daimon are those inward structures of the relation of man to oracle, i.e. piety. Socrates is an example of the pious man's relation to the public.) In his analysis Kierkegaard is interested in the actual historical Socrates and thus for his sources depends not only on Plato, but on Xenophon and Aristophanes as well.

Kierkegaard contends in his portrayal that Socrates' entire life was (in terms of practical concerns) one of indirection, simply because he didn't know anything. Socrates could not realize the good, the beautiful, or the realm of the eternal forms for the reason that he did not know them. Kierkegaard argues that Socrates had conceived infinity in this form of ignorance and that he must have had this conception with him everywhere. For Kierkegaard ignorance was not merely a technique assumed by Socrates; nor could it be if he conceived the infinite in this way. Socrates is most well known for his technique of asking questions, presumably to bring his partner in discussion to the realization of an underlying philosophical principle. In his analysis of this Kierkegaard maintains that the purpose of asking questions may be either speculative or ironic. If it is speculative one asks a question in order to get an answer that contains what the questioner is looking for. It follows that a skillful questioner with this purpose, by asking successive questions, could draw out from his respondent a "deep" and meaningful answer. In this way questioning is instructive and results in positive knowledge. The other possibility, according to Kierkegaard, is to ask a question with no intention of obtaining a satisfactory answer, but rather to use the question to remove apparent content and thereby leave the respondent with nothing.¹² The first of the alternatives obviously presupposes that there is a content to be drawn out, the second that there is not. Kierkegaard maintained that because Socrates was so pervaded by irony his questions were not to discover or draw out any information, but rather to undermine and even destroy the position being

¹² *Pap.* III A 7.

questioned. Kierkegaard specifically states about the two methods: "Now it was the latter method which was especially practiced by Socrates."¹³ In other words Socrates was a negative force undermining the accepted beliefs including, significantly, the belief in the traditional gods.

The explanation as to why Socratic questioning was of the second type, and his standpoint that of negative undermining, according to Kierkegaard, is found in Socrates' descriptions of himself as theoretically ignorant. Kierkegaard emphasized that Socrates proclaimed himself theoretically ignorant, and not ignorant in an empirical sense. His ignorance was his philosophical standpoint, and was thoroughly negative. That is, Kierkegaard says, Socrates was ignorant of any reason (i. e. reasonable explanation) underlying things, of an eternal or a divine. However to stipulate as your philosophical standpoint your ignorance *about* such things is to paradoxically assert a knowledge of the reality *of* such entities.

... he knew that it was, but he did not know what it was. He was conscious of it, since the only thing he could predicate of it was that he knew nothing about it.¹⁴

But this knowledge, which might be called ironic knowledge, does not admit of any objective determination. Therefore Socrates does not, for example, objectively know the specific dieties. Kierkegaard argues that in Plato's *Apology* Socrates' surprise at being found guilty by such a small number of votes is a clear indication that he does not recognize in the state anything objective which could validly oppose a particular subject. Socrates, according to Kierkegaard, did not see anything qualitatively different about the fact that it was an official state decision and not simply the opinions of various individuals. Kierkegaard adds that in a sense the state does not even exist for Socrates.¹⁵ The reason the irony of Socrates causes him to reject every objective determination is that irony is the standpoint of the existing individual turned inward to seek the higher truths of subjectivity. The objective determinations which are rejected, Kierkegaard seems to suggest, are arbitrary values which arise from convention or tradition. Socrates, as genuine ironist, has recognized

¹³ SV XIII, p. 140.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 271.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 296.

the complete relativity of such objective determinations and thus is at a higher level of existence. In irony the individual does not *directly* issue a polemic against the arbitrary conventions of most people, but rather dissimulates his superiority – his wisdom – and seeks a higher absolute value. In searching the realm of the objective determination he finds nothing of such a value; he seeks this value but, Kierkegaard maintains, he knows nothing about it. Socrates' only knowledge is his ignorance, that is his knowledge of nothing.

To know that one is ignorant is the beginning of wisdom, but if one knows no more than this it is only a beginning. It is this knowledge which holds Socrates ironically aloft.¹⁶

Kierkegaard understood himself as author as standing in the same relation to the public as Socrates did. His understanding of objectivity is also virtually the same as that to which he credits Socrates. One may therefore look for irony, of the sort Kierkegaard attributes to Socrates, throughout the *SV*. Kierkegaard was obviously not completely and consistently an ironist, there are too many examples of direct, straightforward polemic to allow for that interpretation, but there are elements of irony in his authorship from beginning to end. As a methodological principle one must always be open to its likelihood.¹⁷

III.

I have suggested what may serve as the outline of a method for the systematic understanding of Kierkegaard. At the same time I hope some notion of the type of engagement Kierkegaard has with the public realm has been pointed to. It is easy to marshal citations from both *SV* and the *Papirer* to establish Kierkegaard's concern for social and political matters or to show

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 369.

¹⁷ For an interesting attempt to interpret Kierkegaard as an ironist who says the opposite of what he means see the following analysis of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*: Allison, Henry E., "Christianity and Nonsense," *The Review of Metaphysics*, XX, no. 3, 1967.

the opposite, an utter lack of concern for man's outward condition. The latter, however, can only be held when Kierkegaard's authorship is read without perspective. However Kierkegaard as a writer is peculiarly susceptible of being misunderstood, a fact he himself appreciated.

"The corrective works confusion only when it is not held in the context of that to which it is a corrective."¹⁸

The problem is that which forms the context is so complex and wide ranging, and furthermore it is never the same.

"The next generation will need the opposite of 'the corrective'."¹⁹

¹⁸ *Pap.*, XI 1A, 28.

¹⁹ *Pap.*, X 5A, 106.