KIERKEGAARD'S UNDERSTANDING OF SOCRATES

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ABSTRACT

What does Socrates represent to Kierkegaard? And what can account for this devout Christian's 'palpitating' enthusiasm and respect for a Pagan thinker? In this thesis I attempt to provide an explanation for this unexpected enthusiasm by clarifying the nature of Kierkegaard's understanding of Socrates.

My thesis contains the following central claims. A) There are two distinct conceptions of Socrates in Kierkegaard's thought. Socrates is at times no more than a symbol of Idealism. But Kierkegaard also understood Socrates to be an historical figure in his own right. The 'actual' Socrates, as Kierkegaard refers to him in *The Concept of Irony*, is an understanding of Socrates that develops throughout the course of Kierkegaard's work until Socrates emerges as an authority figure second only to Christ himself. B) This conception of an 'actual' Socrates is only partially developed in *The Concept of Irony* and must be augmented by piecing together remarks scattered throughout Kierkegaard's work. C) The 'actual' Socrates represents a transitional stage between a Humanist philosophy, represented by Idealism in particular, and Christianity. Essentially, the 'actual' Socrates prepares one for the adoption of the Christian life as Kierkegaard understands it. D) Finally, I suggest that Kierkegaard sought to reproduce the effects of the 'actual' Socrates in his literary project.

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INTRODUCTION

Any reader of Kierkegaard will have noticed the many glowing references he makes to the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates. Indeed, the vast majority of Kierkegaard's references to Socrates are as positive as his references to Hegel are negative. For instance, we are told in the moral inserted at the end of the *Philosophical Fragments* that Kierkegaard approaches "the simple wise man" "with a palpitating enthusiasm that yields to none." But there is a curious aspect to this professed enthusiasm: in the same moral, which serves as a kind of summary of the preceding work, we read not only of Kierkegaard's high regard for Socrates, but also of his attempt to "make[s] an advance upon Socrates...." Much of the *Fragments* is concerned specifically with the conceptual adjustments a thinker is required to make to allow for the possibility of such an advance. This desire to go beyond Socrates raises a series of questions. What can account for Kierkegaard's life-long admiration of Socrates on the one hand, and the simultaneous desire to go beyond him on the other? If Socrates had reached the highest degree of perfection possible for mankind, as Kierkegaard maintains, why would he want, or even think about making an advance beyond him? And if Kierkegaard succeeded in making the advance he was considering, and I say "if" advisedly, which implies some sort of improvement having been made on the Socratic position, why did his enthusiasm, and more importantly, his humility before Socrates, never subside? An adequate

response to these questions is possible, I would suggest, only if we can come to an understanding of Kierkegaard's understanding of Socrates, and the use to which this understanding was put.

Before I can offer an answer to these questions several more basic issues must be addressed. In particular we must know what Kierkegaard thought of Socrates. This is a matter of gathering all the remarks and views which Kierkegaard expresses in this regard and making some sense of them as a whole. We must also determine why Socrates appealed to Kierkegaard, why he was considered an ally and not a figure to be criticised. We must also know what Kierkegaard did with this understanding, i.e., what the effect of Socrates was on Kierkegaard in terms of his own philosophical project and the means by which it was to be carried out. These issues are obviously related and difficult to treat separately. Nonetheless it is these issues that will occupy me for the most part as they are crucial to my understanding of the motivation behind the attempt at an advance beyond Socrates. The task I have set for myself is, in a sense, a variation on the traditional problem of understanding the historical Socrates. Unlike those who attempt to secure, as an end in itself, an understanding of Socrates by examining the relevant texts for themselves, I want to understand Socrates through the eyes of Kierkegaard in order to achieve a better understanding of Kierkegaard. I would suggest, however, that the mark of a good interpretation of Kierkegaard's understanding of Socrates is its ability to answer the principal questions concerning the reasons for his enthusiasm and the motivation for the move beyond.

In the secondary literature on Kierkegaard there is, so far as I have discovered, rather little by way of sustained discussion or

exposition on this aspect of his thought. This is surprising given the fact that no other philosopher receives more attention than Socrates, with the possible exception of Hegel, and that Kierkegaard states explicitly that Socrates was his only real teacher. As a result of this relative lack of secondary literature I will not spend much time discussing in any systematic way the views to be found there. The most common fault of many of these efforts seems to be their incompleteness rather than anything else. Many of them do not consider all that Kierkegaard has to say about Socrates. However, I am not the first, by any means, to be struck by the importance of Kierkegaard's desire for the advance beyond Socrates.[1] Most commentators also agree that Kierkegaard saw Socrates as living the paradigmatic life of the subjective philosopher and existential hero.[2] But there is little indication that anyone has seriously considered the importance of Socrates for Kierkegaard's thought in general, or isolated the role of Socrates in Kierkegaard's theory of the stages of personal development. But perhaps my most serious complaint about these efforts, with which I am usually in agreement despite their incompleteness, is their insistence that Kierkegaard's Socrates was a proponent of the Doctrine of Recollection. To support this claim the commentators point to Kierkegaard's portrayal of Socrates in the *Philosophical Fragments*, where Kierkegaard takes Socrates' commitment to the "recollection-principle" as the point of

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[1]See Fred Holder's article, "An Advance Beyond Socrates." *Encounter* no. 31 (Summer 1970), 235-240. The first line of this article reads: "If I ever decided to write a book dealing with the thought of Soren Kierkegaard, I would entitle it, *An Advance Beyond Socrates*, since I have come to believe that this is his central, or at least most important thought." I entirely agree with Holder on this point.

[2]Levi, Sarf, Barrett and Brandt, among others, all share this view.

departure. I will try to show, however, that this conception of Kierkegaard's Socrates makes little sense when placed in the context of Kierkegaard's entire literary production. Consequently, this conception, if not rejected entirely, must be complemented by the results of further study.

My account of Kierkegaard's understanding and use of Socrates is based on his views as we have them in the Kierkegaardian "literature", as well as his Doctoral thesis, *The Concept of Irony*. My aim has been to make a systematic study of all relevant passages wherever they might occur to avoid the mistake of concentrating on one work in isolation. This is particularly important from a methodological point of view because, as we will see, Kierkegaard's understanding of Socrates developed between *The Concept of Irony* and the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Remarks made later in his life in both his journal and those works which follow the *Concluding Postscript* also serve to clarify the nature of his understanding of Socrates.

This study of Kierkegaard's understanding of Socrates helps one to get a clearer appreciation of the Kierkegaardian literary project as a whole. It is no exaggeration to say that the aim of all of Kierkegaard's philosophical and aesthetic writing was to encourage his readers to move beyond a purely human understanding of life, be it of the aesthetic or ethical variety, and into the religious life as he understood it. How and why this was attempted becomes clear when his understanding of Socrates is kept in mind. The study of the reasons behind the move beyond Socrates is informative primarily because this move involves all the essential features of Kierekgaard's work, its content, motivation, and method. But this move also deserves study because it is the most

important move an individual can make, as far as Kierkegaard is concerned, in terms of an individual's progress through the stages of life.

I will begin, in Chapter One, with a discussion of Kierkegaard's stated views on Socrates with the intention of demonstrating why it is that we cannot be satisfied with the position that Kierkegaard's Socrates was a proponent of the recollection-principle. I will then proceed, in Chapters Two and Three, to outline in more detail Socrates as he is presented in *The Concept of Irony* and the *Concluding Postscript*, which I see as containing, respectively, Kierkegaard's first and last major statements on Socrates. At this point I will be able to place Socrates into the theory of the stages, and see how he might be used to encourage movement from Humanism to Christianity. Finally, in Chapter Four I will comment on Kierkegaard's identification with Socrates before returning to the questions that prompted this study.

CHAPTER I

SOCRATES AND THE DOCTRINE OF RECOLLECTION

My aim in this Chapter is to determine the precise relationship of Socrates to the doctrine of Recollection. This is in order because the doctrine of Recollection according to Kierkegaard, as is made clear in the *Concluding Postscript*, is the distinguishing mark of the speculative idealist.[1] Now given that Socrates has traditionally been credited with the introduction of this doctrine into Western philosophy, and that Kierkegaard himself presents Socrates as a proponent of this doctrine in the *Philosophical Fragments*, one could easily conclude that Kierkegaard considers Socrates to be a speculative idealist. Then, having identified Kierkegaard's Socrates as an idealist, I could reformulate my original question and ask why Kierkegaard desired to move beyond speculative Idealism in general, and consider the matter of Kierkegaard's understanding of Socrates closed. However, I would submit that this line of thinking is open to question as the initial coupling of Kierkegaard's Socrates with the recollection-principle does not fit well with other known facts about Kierkegaard's thought. For instance, it is well known that Kierkegaard spent much of his time attacking speculative Idealism. Next to the organized Church of Denmark,

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[1]"The recollection-principle belongs to speculative philosophy,..." *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 184.

no institution or philosophical position is as misguided in Kierkegaard's opinion as is speculative Idealism. How, in that case, are we to make sense of Kierkegaard's life-long admiration of Socrates if we are bound to say at the same time that Socrates was in fact a speculative idealist himself? What could lead us to think that the only person Kierkegaard ever recognized as his teacher could possibly be a speculative idealist when Kierkegaard's whole project as stated *directly* in *The Point of View for my work as an Author* is to lead aesthetes on the one hand and speculative philosophers on the other, *away* from where they are *to* Christianity?[2] And when we further consider that Kierkegaard says he will use the category of "the individual" that he acquired from Socrates to help in his bid to "reintroduce Christianity into Christendom"[3], we have an alleged speculative idealist curiously involved in a project completely antithetical to his assumed philosophical position, and no sign that Kierkegaard saw this as in any way ironic!

These reflections alone should be enough to lead us to re-examine the relationship between Kierkegaard's Socrates and the theory of Recollection. But given that the coupling of Kierkegaard's Socrates with the recollection-principle is a common place among many commentators, and that this coupling appears to be supported by the *Fragments*, any summary rejection of this view will require further comment. However, there is evidence in Kierkegaard's other writings which supports the separation of Socrates from the doctrine of Recollection. This separation allows us to attribute another conception of Socrates to Kierkegaard, one

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[2]Soren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, Translated by Walter Lowrie, (London: Oxford University Press, 1939) 41-42.

[3]*Ibid.*, 138.

with no positive relation to the recollection-principle. In the process of determining the relation between Kierkegaard's Socrates and the doctrine of Recollection, hints as to the nature of this 'other' Socrates will be found. I will begin with an examination of why one might be led to think that Kierkegaard's Socrates is an idealist at all, which involves consideration of the *Fragments*. I will then consider what Kierkegaard has to say about Socrates in *The Concept of Irony*. And finally I will consider the evidence from the *Concluding Postscript*.

Any investigation of Kierkegaard's understanding of Socrates is bound to be heavily influenced by the *Philosophical Fragments* simply because it seems to be the work most occupied with the "Socratic" position. However this is doubly mistaken. First, while it is the work most concerned with the "Socratic" within the recognized Kierkegaardian literature, it is not the most extensive work that Kierkegaard undertook in his efforts to come to terms with the historical Socrates. The results of these efforts were published in his doctoral dissertation, *The Concept of Irony: with constant reference to Socrates*, which is not usually included within the list of works said to make up the Kierkegaardian literature. Second, the "Socratic" position in the *Fragments* is really just a starting point from which Kierkegaard begins to outline in detail the thought experiment that goes beyond the Socratic. His main concern is to describe this position, not the pagan-philosophical position. Nonetheless, one might say that the Socratic is defined negatively in the *Fragments* as it is constantly juxtaposed with the thought experiment. It could be argued that this juxtaposition allows us to determine what the Socratic is not. While there might be something to this claim, it does not

change the fact that it is in *Irony* that we get Kierkegaard's positive determination of Socrates.

However, there has traditionally been a bias against *Irony* which has had the effect of turning the reader's eyes from *Irony* to the *Fragments* and the *Concluding Postscript*. This tradition dates back to at least 1892 when Harald Hoffding published his book, *Soren Kiekegaard som Filosof*, in which he ignores *Irony* completely in favour of the *Fragments* and *Concluding Postscript*.[4] My point for the moment is that, despite the fact that in *Irony* we find Kierkegaard's most extensive and positive study of Socrates, it is easy to ignore or pass over Irony in favour of the *Fragments*. This concentration on the *Fragments* leads inevitably to the conclusion that Kierkegaard's Socrates was an idealist. This is so for at least two reasons, a) because the Socrates of the *Fragments* is unquestionably a proponent of the recollection-principle, and b) the reading of the *Fragments* is not balanced by consideration of *Irony*.

There are various reasons why one might feel that one's neglect of *Irony* is justified or of little consequence. Perhaps the easiest objection to be raised against *Irony* is that it is not part of the Kierkegaardian literary project, a project which some feel started with *Either/Or*.[5] The point could be made that if it is not included in the

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[4]Soren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, Translated by Lee M. Capel, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1965), 351. This information is provided by Capel in the notes that accompany the text.

[5]"Kierkegaard's first two books, *From the Papers of One Still Living* and *The Concept of Irony*, are included in the study of the works, since they can help enlighten us on the extent to which Kierkegaard, *prior to beginning the actual authorship*, had achieved clarity on certain fundamental features in his method." Gregor Malantschuk, *Kierkegaard's Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 8.

literature - and Kierkegaard himself does not include it when he offers his review of his own work in the *Concluding Postscript* or *The Point of View* - then it is somehow unrelated to Kierkegaard's thought or can be ignored if it conflicts with later works.[6] Even if one were to consider it of some consequence, however, it is unlikely that most readers would see it as being of equal importance to Kierkegaard's thought as his great works, of which the *Fragments* is unquestionably one. But perhaps the most important criticism that has been brought against *Irony* is that it is not one of Kierkegaard's mature works, and in particular, that Kierkegaard was unduly influenced by Hegel at the time of its composition. Those who seek to maintain this line of argument might point to a footnote in the *Concluding Postscript* where Kierkegaard appears to disparage the interpretation of Socrates given in *Irony*.[7] It is not within the scope of this Chapter to treat this question with the detail that it deserves, but I will merely point out here that this is far

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[6]This is not everybody's view of course. Hermann Diem, for example, sees *The Concept of Irony* as important to one's understanding of Kierkegaard (See his *Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Existence*). Malantschuk also treats *The Concept of Irony* seriously in his *Kierkegaard's Thought*. What is troubling, however, is that there have been studies of Kierkegaard's Socrates that do not take *The Concept of Irony* into account at all. See T.F. Morris', "Kierkegaard's Understanding of Socrates", Fred Holder's, "An Advance Beyond Socrates", and Albert Levi's, "The Idea of Socrates: The Philosophic Hero in the Nineteenth Century".

[7]Kierkegaard writes:"Socrates does absolutely nothing. He does not even speak to God inwardly, and yet he realizes the highest of human actions. Socrates has doubtless himself been aware of this, and has known how to emphasize the comic aspect. Magister Kierkegaard, however, to judge from his dissertation, has scarcely understood it. He mentions this negative attitude of Socrates towards prayer, citing the dialogue *Alcibiades II*; but as might be expected from a positive candidate in theology of our own day, he cannot refrain from instructing Socrates in a note that this negativity is only to an extent true." *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Translated by Swenson and Lowrie, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 83.

from being the unanimous opinion of all Kierkegaard scholars. Some of them have pointed to the criticisms of Hegel's conception of Socrates that appear in the dissertation, (especially in the supplement to part one) and the fact that while Hegel and Kierkegaard are in agreement on many of the details of the nature of Socrates, their final assessments of the pagan philosopher differ in important ways. But a discussion of the extent to which Kierkegaard was influenced by Hegel at the time of the dissertation will lead us too far afield. Moreover, this issue may or may not be all that relevant to the task at hand, namely, developing an understanding of Kierkegaard's Socrates. It seems to me that one can admit without contradiction that, a) Kierkegaard was under the influence of Hegel when he wrote the dissertation, b) that *Irony* is not Kierkegaard's last word on Socrates, and c) still maintain that the views expressed in *Irony*, however immature and incomplete, are nevertheless fundamental to his final assessment of Socrates. What is required to support this view is evidence which suggests that there is a continuity between the allegedly immature views of the dissertation and those of later works. I hope to show that such a continuity does indeed exist.

There are also other compelling reasons for this view, which, if accepted, lead us to take *Irony* seriously despite its alleged immaturity. First and foremost, my purpose is to understand Kierkegaard's view of Socrates, not to make a final judgment on the mature thought of Kierkegaard, (althought I do think this study will provide some insight into the mature Kierkegaard). Second, *Irony* is the only work in which Kierkegaard is completely occupied with understanding the actual Socrates. For this reason alone I think it would be very odd indeed not to consider it crucial to our project, even if it proves to offer only the

beginning of a view that was revised and developed as Kierkegaard matured. There is also the consideration that the Socrates of *Irony*, despite later modifications, is not only consistent with Kierkegaard's overall project, but, as I hope to show, served him as a guide and authority figure throughout his literary career. This suggestion is supported by the intriguing claim made by Georg Brandes that Kierkegaard's only close friend, Emil Boesen, had reported that it was while writing his dissertation that Kierkegaard came to understand what he wanted to do in the world.[8] It is interesting to note that Kierkegaard's literary career followed promptly upon the completion of *Irony*. All of this suggests that while *Irony* might not be part of the literary production proper, it might be crucial to the interpretation of it. In any case, I hope that this thesis will produce a conception of Kierkegaard's Socrates that will itself justify the use of *Irony*.

The second reason why the *Fragments* is often read without consideration of *Irony* is the fact that what is found in the *Fragments* supports the view of many commentators that Kierkegaard's Socrates was positively related to the doctrine of Recollection. Thus when a newcomer to Kierkegaardian studies innocently takes up a book or essay by one of these commentators and sees that Kierkegaard's Socrates is intimately connected to the doctrine of Recollection, he is bound to accept this view for the simple reason that the *Fragments* would appear to justify this interpretation entirely. The error on the part of both the reader and the commentator is the same: both have neglected what Kierkegaard has said elsewhere. Both have neglected the fact that nothing in the work of

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[8]Capel in his notes that accompany the text of *Irony*. 351.

Kierkegaard is as straightforward as it might appear, his estimation of Socrates being no exception. Kierkegaard's words of warning in the *Concluding Postscript* must never be forgotten; "So it is left to the reader to piece things together by his own endeavors, if he so desires, but nothing is done for the reader's indolence."[9] We are also told in his Journals not to expect that understanding him will be easy; "The task must be made difficult--for only the difficult inspires the high-minded."[10]

Nevertheless, anyone who wishes to challenge the view that Kierkegaard's Socrates was intimately connected with the doctrine of Recollection, and by extention with speculative Idealism, must provide another account of Kierkegaard's understanding of Socrates and explain what we are to make of the *Fragments*. To illustrate this second problem clearly we need only read a few of the opening lines of the *Fragments*:

> In so far as the Truth is conceived as something to be learned, its non-existence is evidently presupposed, so that in proposing to learn it one makes it the object of an inquiry. Here we are confronted with the difficulty to which Socrates calls attention in the Meno (80, near the end), and there characterizes as a "pugnacious proposition"; one cannot seek for what he knows, and it seems equally impossible for him to seek for what he does not know. For what a man knows he cannot seek, since he knows it; and what he does not know he cannot seek, since he does not even know for what to seek. Socrates thinks the difficulty through in the doctrine of Recollection, by which all learning and inquiry is interpreted as a kind of remembering; one who is ignorant needs only a reminder to help him come to himself in the consciousness of what he knows. Thus the truth is not introduced into the individual from without, but

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[9]Gregor Malantschuk, *Kierkegaard's Way to the Truth*, Translated by Mary Michelsen, (Montreal: Inter Editions, 1987), 118.

[10]*Ibid.*, 118.

from within him.[11]

After reading these lines it is no wonder that the doctrine of Recollection has been attributed to Kierkegaard's Socrates. Thus it is clear that some explanation is required as to how one can deny the relationship between Socrates and the doctrine of Recollection; in fact one could hardly ask for more convincing evidence for the tradional account of Kierkegaard's Socrates than these lines at the beginning of the *Fragments*. Nonetheless such an explanation is possible.

My argument begins with some observations made by Hong and Thulstrup which hint at a possible solution to the problem posed by the *Fragments*. It is perhaps ironic that the the authorities I call upon are those that wrote the introductions to the English translation of the *Fragments*, and that perhaps much of this chapter would be unnecessary if readers had given these comments sufficient attention. Howard Hong, the translator of the edition I am using, while making a few remarks on problems facing the translator, says that one must recognize that the *Fragments* "... is cast in the language and thought of Idealism (with Socrates as representative)", and that "the language at this crucial point is Socratic-Platonic". We are also warned of the "Platonic cast", and "Platonic background of the work".[12] It is clear from Hong's remarks that as far as he is concerned the *Fragments* is at most a "Socratic-Platonic" work, if it is not entirely Platonic in nature. It would seem prudent in

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[11]Soren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, Translated originally by David Swensen and revised by Howard Hong, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 5.

[12]*Ibid.*, ix-xiv.

this case that at the very least we ought to be suspicious of the idea that the *Fragments* is presenting a "pure" Socrates at all, if indeed such a thing exists. This is the beginning of my argument against the traditional account: we must be sensitive to the distinction between the historical Socrates and the Socrates as presented in the Platonic dialogues, and remain open to the possibility that Kierkegaard was equally aware of this distinction. It is my opinion that the commonly accepted view that the historical Socrates differed in important respects from the Socrates as presented in Plato's later dialogues[13] was shared by Kierkegaard. Furthermore, it appears to me that both the Platonic Socrates and what I will be referring to as the "actual" Socrates make their separate appearances in Kierkegaard's work. If this is so, we are then required to distinguish between the two Socrates and determine the characteristics of both. I will be concentrating on the actual Socrates since the Platonic Socrates is represented, at least negatively, in the *Fragments*. From this point forward I will be relying on this distinction between the actual Socrates, which I take to be Kierkegaard's most revealing conception of Socrates, and the "Platonic" Socrates of the *Fragments*, which Hong has called the "representative" of Idealism. Recognizing this distinction furnishes us with the possibility of escaping the contradictions that arise when we consider Kierkegaard's life-long admiration of an idealist.

This basic idea of there possibly being two Socrates to contend with, and in particular, that the *Fragments* is wholly Platonic rather than Socratic in nature, receives further support from Thulstrup. In his

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[13]The Socrates of the *Timeaus*, for example, bears little resemblance to the Socrates of the *Apology*.

introduction to the same work he writes: "The main theme of the book is the relationship between philosophical Idealism and Christianity. The point of departure is the *Platonic* understanding of how men come into the right relationship to the highest truth."[14] [my italics] This Idealism is recognized to be that of Plato or of Hegel, it being a matter of indifference really as the key point is the *origin of the truth* to which we are to be related. All forms of Idealism maintain that truth is within us or within our grasp, whereas the Christian position, and that to which Kierkegaard is committed, is precisely the opposite: truth is not within us or within our grasp, but must be revealed to us by an external source. The first point to be drawn out here is that Thulstrup states clearly that the starting point of the *Fragments* is Platonic rather than Socratic. He indicates that the Socrates described in this work is not the historical-actual Socrates but the Socrates who is the spokesman for Plato's own philosophy. The other key point Thulstrup makes is that Kierkegaard's main problem in the *Fragments* is "the relationship between Platonism and Christianity".[15] The point is that this is not a work in which Kierkegaard would be interested in presenting his understanding of the historical Socrates even if he had a conception of a Socrates separate from the Platonic spokesman. The problem of this book is the relationship between Plato and Christianity, not Socrates and Christianity. In Thulstrup's words Socrates here "symbolizes" an Idealism that was "formulated by Plato"[16]. And as if to make absolutely

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[14] *Ibid.*, xlv.

[15] *Ibid.*, lxvi.

[16] *Ibid.*, lxviii.

sure that we have not missed the point he writes; "Since the problem is not set forth in 'historical costume' but is presented systematically, 'algebraically' it is self-evident that Socrates is of interest as a principle, not as a person".[17] These remarks in themselves do not prove that Kierkegaard had another conception of Socrates. But they do indicate, if Thulstrup is right, that we will get no impression of Kierkegaard's views of the actual Socrates (if they exist) from the *Fragments,* since the Socrates depicted here is essentially a symbol of a position, a symbol of Idealism, and not the actual Socrates at all. Now, if the Platonic Socrates were the only Socrates that Kierkegaard knew, it would seem reasonable to expect that Kierkegaard would be equally hostile toward Socrates as he is to Hegel. Given that this is not the case, we are forced to conclude that we do not have an adequate understanding of Kierkegaard's understanding of Socrates. However, if it could be established that Kierkegaard himself recognized that there are two Socrates, and that he has a different relation to each, one being used as a symbol, the other recognized as a teacher, we could escape this apparent contradiction. The important question to be answered then is, Did Kierkegaard ever present Socrates in 'historical costume'? Did he ever take interest in Socrates as a person and not just as a representative of Platonism?

Readers of *The Concept of Irony* will probably agree that there is no difficulty in answering these questions in the affirmative. Much of the dissertation is concerned with making just this distinction between the actual and the Platonic Socrates. Kierkegaard's main point, that

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[17] *Ibid.*, lxxxvii.

Socrates is the embodiment of irony, depends on this very distinction. The first half of this work consists of Kierkegaard sifting through all the historical texts concerning Socrates (Plato's dialogues, Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, and Aristophanes' *The Clouds*) with the intention of distilling, as it were, from all of them an accurate impression of the actual Socrates. He writes in the introduction: "Before proceeding to the discussion of the concept of irony... it will be necessary for me to secure a dependable and authentic conception of the historical-actual, phenomenological existence of Socrates with reference to the question of its possible relation to the transfigured conception which has fallen to his lot at the hand of an enthusiastic and envious age."[18] He also mentions that finding the actual Socrates will be difficult, and by no means straightforward: "... one easily sees how difficult it becomes to secure an image of him, yes, that it seems impossible, or at least as baffling as trying to depict an elf wearing a hat that makes him invisible."[19] These statements indicate that Kierkegaard was fully aware of the subtleties of the Socratic problem, and that he was careful not to adopt any interpretation of Socrates as the "real" Socrates without careful consideration of all the available evidence.

That Kierkegaard is prepared to distinguish the actual Socrates from the Platonic Socrates, if such a distinction proves necessary, is evident as soon as he begins his study of Plato's contribution to our understanding of the historical Socrates. In fact he asks himself the very question one would expect of someone concerned with this problem:

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[18] *Irony*, 47.

[19] *Ibid.*, 50.

"...what is the relationship between the Platonic Socrates and the actual Socrates? This is a question which cannot be dismissed."[20] This marks the beginning of a discussion bent on making the distinction we have been considering. Kierkegaard mentions that this problem of distinguishing the actual Socrates from the Platonic Socrates has been recognized for some time: " After this general consideration it seems appropriate to recall the fact that even in antiquity men were aware of this problem concerning the relation between the actual and the poetic Socrates in Plato's representation."[21] We also read: "With this we approach the important problem of what in the Platonic philosophy belongs to Socrates and what to Plato, a question we can scarcely refuse however distressing it may be to separate two so intimately united."[22]

I will take it as established at this point that Kierkegaard was definitely aware of the possibility of there being an actual Socrates who differs not only from Plato's "poetic representation", but also from the Socrates presented by Aristophanes and Xenophon. What I wish to consider now is the question whether this possibility of an "actual" Socrates was realized: in other words, did Kierkegaard arrive at a conclusion as to the character of the actual Socrates, and further, does this conception differ from the conception of the "Socratic" position we find in the *Fragments*? Once again the answer to all these questions is an emphatic: yes. This will become obvious as I continue to piece together the Socrates found in these pages. The actual Socrates of

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[20] *Ibid.*, 67.

[21] *Ibid.*, 68.

[22] *Ibid.*, 69.

Irony is definitely not the Socrates of Plato, nor the Socrates of the *Fragments*. However, as I am not concerned here to give a summary of Kierkegaard's doctoral thesis, nor to evaluate it, I will not go through all the arguments that Kierkegaard brings forward to support his views of the actual Socrates. I am not interested in defending Kierkegaard's views on the actual Socrates against those of other Plato scholars. I am concerned merely with determining the content of Kierkegaard's understanding of Socrates, not the validity of the estimation itself, nor the method whereby it was reached.

However, a word should be said about the source of Kierkegaard's view on the actual Socrates. After considering the authorities of his day on the question of the character of the actual Socrates, Kierkegaard decides that the actual Socrates is to be found in the early dialogues of Plato, specifically the ones that end negatively: "The constructive dialogues will therefore concern me very little, since they contribute nothing to the conception of the personality of Socrates, either as it was in actuality or as imagined by Plato."[23] Kierkegaard considers in some detail the *Symposium*, the *Protagoras*, the *Pheado* and the *Apology* and decides that while each contribute something to his conception of Socrates, it is the *Apology*, which is in his opinion an historical document, that "must be accorded pre-eminent place when one is in search of the purely Socratic."[24] He writes: "The main thing for me, however, is that one comes to see in the Apology an authentic image of

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[23]*Ibid.*, 91.

[24]*Ibid.*, 112.

the actual Socrates.[25] After consideration of the *Republic*, Kierkegaard decides that the first book of this work also is Socratic: "I must place emphasis, however, upon the first book of the Republic. In one way or another Plato must have been conscious of the difference between this first book and those that follow.... The result is that it is through these earlier dialogues, together with the first book of the Republic, that we can most reliably make our way to a conception of Socrates."[26] This is very important information, especially the knowledge that it is in the *Apology* above all that Kierkegaard thinks we find the actual Socrates. The *Apology* serves Kierkegaard as a criterion by which to distinguish the Socratic from the Platonic. Yet when we look at the dialogues Kierkegaard uses as the basis of his understanding of the "Socratic" position in the *Fragments*, we see that the *Apology* is conspicuously absent. Absent also are the other texts that Kierkegaard considers the source of our understanding of the actual Socrates, with the exception of the *Protagoras*. In the first paragraph of the *Fragments*, some of which has been quoted above, we see that Kierkegaard appeals to the *Protagoras, Gorgias, Euthedemus*, but above all the *Meno* which was the source of the quotation, cited above, linking Socrates and the doctrine of Recollection.[27] Only one reference is made to the *Apology*, and it concerns Socrates' divine mission, not his connection to the doctrine of Recollection.[28] We can understand, therefore, why the Socrates

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[25] *Ibid.*, 116.

[26] *Ibid.*, 149.

[27] *Fragments*, 11.

[28] *Ibid.*, 13.

presented in the *Fragments* is bound to differ from what Kierkegaard terms the 'actual' Socrates. The dialogues themselves present two Socrates that must be distinguished, which means the various Socrates one can gleen from the pages of Plato will differ according to the dialogues consulted. We see here that Kierkegaard consulted one set of dialogues for his conception of Socrates that appears in the *Fragments*, and a different set in *Irony*. Furthermore, our idea that the Socrates in the *Fragments* is a symbolic Socrates gains credibility from Kierkegaard himself as he refers to the Platonic Socrates as a "poetic representation". We also find him saying that in the Platonic dialogues, "the name 'Socrates' has almost become a *nomen appelativum* merely designating the speaker or lecturer."[29] This discrepancy between the dialogues used lends credibility to the idea that at the very least we must remain open to the possibility of two Socrates in the work of Kierkegaard. This possibility is confirmed, however, by a brief account of some of the main features of the Socrates presented in *Irony*. I believe that this Socrates is incommensurate with the Socrates of the *Fragments*.

The basis of this incommensurability stems from the most important feature of the Socrates found in *Irony*: his total ignorance in the philosophical sense. Kierkegaard will not allow Socrates any positive knowledge whatsoever as is clear from statements like the following:

> "Socrates' ignorance: it is the nothingness whereby he destroys every knowledge."[30]
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> "... he [Socrates] is dead serious about he fact that he is

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[29]Irony, 91.

[30]*Ibid.*, 287.

ignorant."[31]

> "As the philosophy of Socrates began with the presupposition that he knew nothing, so it ended with mankind in general knowing nothing."[32]

> "Ignorance is at once a philosophic standpoint and also thoroughly negative. The Socratic ignorance was not an empirical ignorance, for he was in possession of much information, had read a great many poets as well as philosophers, and was highly experienced in the affairs of life. No, he was not ignorant in any empirical sense. He was, however, ignorant in a philosophic sense. He was ignorant of the reason underlying all things, the eternal, the divine; that is to say, he knew that it was, but he did not know what it was."[33]

'Socratic' ignorance is the most significant feature of Socrates as presented in *Irony* and it colours all of the remaining features that separate or distinguish the actual Socrates from the Platonic Socrates. In particular it affects Kierkegaard's interpretation of the well known Socratic expression, 'know thyself'. The important point to be made is that while an idealist will look upon the self as the source of the knowledge and truth to which we wish to be related, it being recollected or dug out as it were, from within, this is not the case for Kierkegaard's Socrates. Kierkegaard says that the expression 'know thyself' has been frequently misinterpreted and misused, and that these mistakes "have long wandered like a vagabond through literature unchallenged."[34] Kierkegaard attempts to correct these errors and to rediscover the

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[31] *Ibid.*, 287.

[32] *Ibid.*, 74.

[33] *Ibid.*, 195.

[34] *Ibid.*, 202.

meaning this expression had for Socrates.[35] Kierkegaard's view of this expression, as we might expect, is in marked contrast to that of the idealist:

> "... in the case of Socrates this self-knowledge was scarcely full of content, for it properly contained no more than the separation and differentiation of that which only subsequently became the object of knowledge. The expression 'know thyself' means: separate yourself from the 'other'."[36]

The point is clear: the self might become an object of knowledge, but it is never a source of knowledge as it was for the idealist. Socrates was philosophically ignorant, and, unlike the idealist, without recourse to the doctrine of Recollection whereby he might have come by some "positive content". The quotation just cited above will loom large in later discussions concerning the importance of 'the individual' in the thought of Kierkegaard; but for now it is important to recognize that from the expression 'know thyself' we get no more than the separation of the self from other selves.

Socrates' ignorance extends as well to claims about life after death and the nature of the soul. We have already noted that Kierkegaard has given the *Apology* the pre-eminent place in the hierarchy of texts that display the actual Socrates; but it is the views on death expressed in the *Apology* that Kierkegaard has the most difficulty squaring with Platonism because "all passages exhibit Socrates'

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[35] *Ibid.*, 202.

[36] *Ibid.*, 202.

total uncertainty".[37] This would be peculiar indeed if Socrates were a Platonist, as theoretically it is during that time after death and before reinstantiation, when one is not in any way hampered by the body, that one becomes 'acquainted' with the Forms. This acquaintance is said to be the source of positive philosophical knowledge that one might attempt to recall during one's life here in this realm of particular instantiations. But in that case there should be no entertaining the possibility that death is an undisturbed sleep, which is what we find Socrates doing in the *Apology*.[38] Another peculiar passage concerning death which further serves to underline Socrates' uncertainty arises when Socrates discusses his views of the soul and immortality in the *Pheado*. There he says, "A man of sense ought not to assert that the description which I have given of the soul and her abode is exactly true. But I do say that, inasmuch as the soul is shown to be immortal, *he may venture to believe*, not improperly or unworthily, that something of this kind is true."[39] [my italics] These are not the words of the philosopher king as presented in the *Republic* by any means, and when I come to discuss Kierkegaard's notion of truth (Chapter Three) it will become readily apparent why this

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[37] *Ibid.*, 117.

[38] *Apology*, 40 c-d.

[39] *Ibid.*, 140. This passage is found in the *Phaedo*, 114 d. Hugh Tredennick's translation of this passage is slightly different: "Of course, no reasonable man ought to insist that the facts are exactly as I have described them. But that either this or something very like it is a true account of our souls and their future habitations - since we have clear evidence that the souls is immortal - this, I think, is both a reasonable contention and a belief worth risking, for the risk is a noble one. We should use such accounts to inspire ourselves with confidence..." Here the emphasis on 'risk' and 'inspiration' is interesting. In Chapter Three I contend that risk and edification are essential elements of truth as Kierkegaard understands it.

willingness to believe would have appealed to Kierkegaard.

Socratic ignorance extends its influence into another area of thought that serves yet again to distinguish the actual Socrates from the Platonic Socrates. And again this serves to distance the actual Socrates from the doctrine of Recollection in particular. Essential to the Socratic method and the form of the Platonic dialogues themselves is the posing of questions. Now Kierkegaard says that there are two aims one may have in mind when one asks a question of another. First, one may proceed with the questioning in order to get an answer, or second, one might engage in a dialogue of this sort with the intention of showing that the other person does not know of what he/she speaks. The first type of questioning presupposes that either the person to whom the question is addressed is in possession of the desired answer, or that together, the two participants in the discussion might be able to come to an understanding of the question at issue. The second type of questioning, that which Kierkegaard attributes to the actual Socrates, presupposes an emptiness on the part of both participants. It is this emptiness that is in direct opposition to the view one has of a participant if one holds to the doctrine of Recollection. Kierkegaard expresses this in these words:

> "One may ask a question for the purpose of obtaining an answer containing the desired content, so that the more one questions, the deeper and more meaningful becomes the answer; or one may ask a question, not in the interest of obtaining an answer, but to suck out the apparent content with a question and leave only an emptiness remaining.... Now it was the latter method which was especially practiced by Socrates."[40]

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[40] *Ibid.*, 73.

The sum of these reflections on Socrates' philosophical ignorance and its effects on his understanding of key ideas like the expression, 'know thyself', on death and on the nature of asking questions, is caught in this significant passage:

> "Socrates, like Samson, seizes the columns bearing the edifice of knowledge and plunges everything down into the nothingness of ignorance. That this is authentically Socratic will certainly be admitted by all - Platonic, on the other hand, it will never be. I have, therefore, arrived at one of those duplicities in Plato indicating precisely the course I shall follow in order to discover the purely Socratic."[41]

There would seem to be a 'duplicity' in Kierkegaard's own work as regards what he is referring to when he speaks of the Socratic. On the one hand the Platonic Socrates of the *Fragments* is engaged in his maieutic practice of drawing truth out of his interlocutors. But here in *Irony*, not only is Socrates ignorant, but he assumes that everyone else is as well, and his questioning rather than leading to the recollection of truth, leads only to the recognition of ignorance. It now becomes a matter of determining which of these Socrates is the most important to the thought of Kierkegaard, which of these Socrates is the one before whom he has this palpitating enthusiasm. It seems obvious to me that it is the actual Socrates that must be given pre-eminenence in this regard, as it is more in keeping with Kierkegaard's over-all project as I will demonstrate in Chapter Two. But there is an extremely important passage in the *Concluding Postscript* that demands our attention. It confirms all my speculations so far, and serves to guide my line of

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[41] *Ibid.*, 77.

thought as I proceed to deliniate the character and importance of Kierkegaard's Socrates:

> "In order if possible clearly to exhibit the difference between the Socratic position (which was supposed to be the philosophical, the pagan-philosophical position) and the experimentally evoked thought-determination which really makes an advance beyond the Socratic, I carried the Socratic back to the principle that all knowledge is recollection. This is, in a way, commomly assumed, and only one who with a specialized interest concerns himself with the Socratic, returning again and again to the sources, only for him would it be of importance on this point to distinguish between Socrates and Plato. The proposition does indeed belong to both, only that Socrates is always departing from it, in order to exist. By holding Socrates down to the proposition that all knowledge is recollection, he becomes a speculative philosopher instead of as existential thinker, for whom existence is the essential thing. The recollection-principle belongs to speculative philosophy, and recollection is immanence, and speculatively and eternally there is no paradox. But the difficulty is that no human is speculative philosophy; the speculative philosopher himself is an existing individual, subject to the claims that existence makes upon him. There is no merit in forgetting this, but a great merit in holding it fast, and this is precisely what Socrates did. To accentuate existence, which also involves the qualification of inwardness, is the Socratic position; the Platonic tendency, on the other hand, is to pursue the lure of recollection and immanence. This puts Socrates fundamentally in advance of speculative philosophy; he does not have a fantastic beginning, in which the speculative philosopher first disguises himself, and then goes on and on to speculate, forgetting the most important thing of all, which is to exist. But precisely because Socrates is thus in advance of speculation, he presents, *when properly deliniated*, a certain analogous resemblance to that which the experiment described as in truth going *beyond the Socratic*."[42] [my italics]

There is much in this long quotation that requires comment. First, it is interesting that Kierkegaard says that only one with a specialized interest in Socrates would concern himself with maintaining

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[42] *Concluding Postscript*, 184-185.

a distinction between Socrates and Plato. This might explain why Kierkegaard did not hesitate to use Socrates as a representative of Idealism in the *Fragments* while knowing full well that much of what he attributed to Socrates there he would not do in different circumstances. Second, it is clear that the distinction I have been making all along between the actual and Platonic Socrates on the basis of their relationship to the recollection-principle, is a distinction that Kierkegaard himself recognizes as the basis for his admiration of Socrates. This of course makes perfect sense if we understand Socrates to have given up the recollection-principle. For if Socrates had *not* abandoned the recollection-principle, he would not have made the advance beyond speculative Idealism and would consequently be philosophically aligned with Hegel. But if this were the case, we would not expect such differing opinions of these two men - one being an object of scorn, the other the recipient of Kierkegaard's highest praise. If we can safely assume that Kierkegaard's animosity towards Hegel was not personally motivated, we can assume that Socrates and Hegel are separated in Kierkegaard's mind by their relationship to the recollection-principle just as Socrates is separated from Plato; and knowing as we do that Hegel was an idealist, we can safely assume that the Socrates that enjoyed Kierkegaard's admiration was not.

The other key feature about this quotation besides the fact that it confirms our basic point that Kierkegaard's Socrates is in no way positively related to the recollection-principle, is that he gives a very broad hint as to his final understanding of Socrates. He says that "when properly deliniated", Socrates is in fact *beyond* what he has in the *Fragments* been calling the Socratic position, and just as important,

that Socrates is related *in an analogous way* to the thought-experiment that was introduced in the *Fragments* and given historical garb in the *Concluding Postscript*. It is my contention therefore, that if we seek the Kierkegaardian Socrates we will find him in that philosophical space *between* speculative Idealism which he has left behind, and Christianity, which he was unable to contemplate given his historical circumstances. It is also my contention that we have begun to define this space already because the Socrates we found in *Irony*, and started to describe briefly, is precisely the Socrates we are looking for.

CHAPTER II

THE "ACTUAL" SOCRATES AND THE PATHETIC DIALECTIC

An attempt has been made in the last Chapter to show that there are two distinct Socrates in Kierkegaard's writings who are distinguished primarily by their relationship to the recollection-principle. I now wish to move on to examine the actual Socrates in greater detail. The purpose of this Chapter is to begin to characterize in a positive way the Socrates who fills the philosophical space between philosophical Idealism and Christianity as Kierkegaard understands them. I have already suggested that we have stumbled across the key feature of this Socrates, or at least the feature from which the rest of the figure is developed, namely Socratic, or philosophical ignorance. But my interest is not confined merely to giving a philosophical character sketch of Kierkegaard's actual Socrates; what will also require our attention is the consideration of how philosophical ignorance can motivate a move from Idealism to Christianity. It is my belief that what attracted Kierkegaard to the actual Socrates was the philosophical 'momentum' the actual Socrates gained in his movement beyond what the *Fragments* termed the Socratic. This momentum, however, is not lost once Socrates is beyond Idealism. Indeed, had the historical circumstances been different, this momentum could have carried Socrates into a position in which Christianity can be seriously considered as an alternative to Idealism. Of course this was an historical impossibility for Socrates as Christianity did not as yet exist; however,

such is not the case today nor was it for Kierkegaard's first readers. It is the momentum inherent in Socratic ignorance that is the basis for Kierkegaard's life-long attraction to the actual Socrates precisely because it can be used to encourage in the reader first the abandonment of Idealism, and secondly a movement into Christianity itself. Essentially the actual Socrates as Kierkegaard presents him is a John the Baptist figure, in the sense that the actual Socrates prepares the way for the coming of Christianity, both historically and in the life of the individual. In *Irony* we see that Kierkegaard emphasizes the historical importance of the actual Socrates, while in the *Concluding Postscript* the emphasis is rather on the role he can play in the lives of individuals. The main purpose of this Chapter, therefore, is to clarify what Socrates' preparation for Christianity amounts to and how it is achieved.

Before going further, I think it would be helpful to flesh out to a certain extent what is meant by my characterization of Socrates as a John the Baptist figure. Perhaps the easiest way to do this is again to contrast the actual Socrates with the Platonic Socrates. I regard the Platonic Socrates as representing a humanistic and essentially rational *alternative* to Christianity, as indeed he appears in the *Fragments*. The actual Socrates by contrast I see as a precursor of Christianity.[1] The

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[1]The portrayal of Socrates as a precursor of Christ and Christianity is of course not new. This idea was a common place among thinkers of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Men of both periods were wont to see the pagans as anticipating the truth of Christianity [see Jean Seznec's *The Survival of the Pagan Gods* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), in particular Chapters One and Three]. M.A. Screech's study of Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* is particularly enlightening concerning renaissance views of Socrates [see *Erasmus: Ecstacy & The Praise of Folly* (London: Penguin Books, 1980)]. However, Erasmus does not seem to have made the distinction between an actual and Platonic Socrates as

rationale behind the claim that Socrates prepares the way for the coming of Christianity, both historically and in the lives of individuals, lies in the fact that we find a 'pattern' in the Socratic life that is similar in important respects to 'the Pattern' of the Christian life as Kierkegaard understands it. For Kierkegaard Christ's life is 'the Pattern' or guide that is revealed to human beings as the model for human life.[2] Here 'the Pattern' is synonymous with 'the truth', because the truth for Kierkegaard is a life.[3] The pattern that underlies both the Socratic and Christian lives has several features or characteristics, and together they mark the beginning of the development of a religious consciousness. But the features of the pattern are not fully developed until the coming of Christianity.

These features of the Socratic life are intimately related but can nevertheless be considered separately. The first feature we must recognize is the possibility of *conscious despair* as a reaction to Socratic

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I have done. His understanding of Socrates, although similar to my understanding of the actual Socrates, especially concerning the notion of Folly, is more in keeping with the Platonic Socrates. It is interesting to note that both Socrates can be seen as precursors of Christ. This is due primarily I think to differences between Erasmus and Kierkegaard and their understandings of the Christian life.

[2]Soren Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 232, 270.

[3]*Ibid.*, 201. "...the truth, in the sense in which Christ was the truth, is not a sum of sentences, not a definition of concepts, &c., but a life.... No, truth in its very being is the reduplication in me, in thee, in him, so that my, that thy, that his life, approximately, in the stiving to attain it, expresses the truth, so that my, that thy, that his life, approximately, in the striving to attain it, is the very being of truth, is a *life*, as the truth was in Christ, for He was the truth." I will be returning to Kierkegaard's understanding of truth in Chapter Three.

ignorance.[4] This possibility is of the utmost importance because Kierkegaard sees despair as "the first element of faith".[5] The importance of despair is indeed hard to over estimate because it is an essential condition for an individual's entry into Christianity:

> It becomes clear rather that the only way in which an existing individual comes into relation with God, is when the dialectical contradiction brings his passion to the point of despair, and helps him to embrace God with the "category of despair" (faith).[6]

The second essential feature of the actual Socrates is the discovery and development of his subjectivity which is externally manifested by his separation of himself from the state and in his rejection of external authorities in general. (We will recall Kierkegaard's interpretation of Socrates' phrase 'know thyself'. This command to know oneself at first amounted to no more than "separate yourself from the 'other'".) However, as is clear from *The Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard sees despair, and the understanding of despair, and the development of subjectivity or the self as intimately connected: the

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[4]It is unclear as to whether Kierkegaard thought the actual Socrates himself came to despair on account of his ignorance. It seems clear, however, that Kierkegaard knew this effect of ignorance only too well: "The annihilating power of irony takes him deep into despair. This experience is ulitized especially in *The Concept of Irony*." Malantschuk, 174. In *Irony* it would appear that Kierkegaard thought Socrates was immune to the effects of his ignorance (see below, p.56 & 59). However, Kierkegaard was concerned primarily with despair being a possibility for those ancient Greeks who had contact with the actual Socrates, and with making despair a possibility for modern readers.

[5]Soren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, translated by H. and E. Hong, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 78.

[6]Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Translated by Swenson and Lowrie, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 179.

greater the degree of self-understanding achieved, the greater the despair, until despair is removed altogether in the highest moment of faith which coincides with the highest degree of self-understanding.[7] As we shall see, *Socratic ignorance*, *despair*, and *subjectivity* are all linked in a 'pathetic dialectic' whose movements are the subject of this chapter.

But just as important to my understanding of the actual Socrates as the inter-connectedness of despair and subjectivity is that Kierkegaard recognizes an essential difference between the stages or degrees of despair and self-understanding which are attainable by the 'natural man' and those which are available to the Christian. The pagan, or 'natural man', says Kierkegaard, is ignorant of the ubiquity of despair. He thinks there is a distinction between being in despair and not being in despair, which presupposes, incorrectly in Kierekgaard's view, that there are those who are not at all in despair.[8] For the pagan despair is considered to be a result of the hazards of fortune. Thus a man is not in despair if all is well with him, and in despair if fate should turn against him. Kierkegaard claims, however, that there is a despair to which natural man is subject of which he is entirely unaware. This despair is the despair of the self's misunderstanding of the self's relation to itself,[9] which amounts to ignorance of the nature of the self. But, and this is the importance of the actual Socrates, natural man, as I hope to show, can be made aware of this particular despair, this despair

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[7] *Sickness*, 82.

[8] *Ibid.*, 45.

[9] *Ibid.*, 15.

being a consequence of Socratic ignorance. This consciousness of despair is crucial both for the development of the individual and for the individual's possible entry into Christianity. The cure for this despair lies in coming to the correct understanding of the nature of the self, an understanding that in Kierkegaard's opinion requires the revelation of Christianity. He writes:

> The possibility of this sickness (despair) is man's superiority over the animal; to be aware of this sickness is the Christian's superiority over the natural man; to be cured of this sickness is the Christian's blessedness.[10]

Socrates' importance in this process is that he marks the beginning of the development of the self and of the sickness that goes hand in hand with this development. Thus, Socrates is, in effect, able to share in the Christian's superiority over the natural man without actually being a Christian. This marks Socrates as an unusual individual who must be placed between the natural man and the Christian, assuming that there is a development from the former to the latter. He occupies a position that is not unlike a bridge between Idealism and Christianity. Just as important, however, is that Socrates' effects on individuals can be reproduced by Kierkegaard to provoke a similar development in his readers.

That this concern for the self is in concert with Kierkegaard's philosophical agenda is clear from passages in *The Sickness Unto Death* where we find Kierekegaard saying: "The self is the conscious synthesis of infinitude and finitude that relates itself to itself, *whose task is to*

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[10] *Ibid.*, 15.

become itself,..."[11] In the closely related work, *The Concept of Anxiety*, we are treated to what might not improperly be called the Kierkegaardian manifesto. He says that the task of self-development is the very meaning of life:

> .... each person should be concerned about himself and about transforming his life into a beautiful, artistically finished whole. I believed that this was the meaning of life and the meaning of the life of the single individual, with an increase of meaning in proportion to what a person could include in his life, and with a greater concreteness of this task from age to age in the historical progression. I believed that every science should direct itself to this task and that all idle knowledge debases man and essentially wastes his time."[12]

The "sciences" he refers to are those that have to do with the study of man:

> I am nevertheless convinced that whoever is interested in human beings has chosen the better part, and I am also convinced that one thing is needful above everything else, namely, to become a little more Greek in the good sense of the term, i.e., more human, and not fantastically inordinate with systematic galimatias, something that no human being cares about. Psychology is what we need, and, above all, thorough knowledge of human life as well as sympathy for its interests. Herein lies the task, and until this is resolved there can be no question of completing a Christian view of life."[13]

In a footnote to this passage Kierkegaard remarks that although the insistance on our becoming more human might not enjoy wide spread

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[11]*Ibid.*, 29. my italics.

[12]Soren Kierkegaard, *The Concept Of Anxiety*, Translated by Reider Thomte, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 192.

[13]*Ibid.*, 191.

acceptance today, Socrates would be in complete agreement with him. In a brief summary of the meaning of Socrates' life Kierkegaard reaffirms this:

> ...his entire life was irony and consisted of this: while the whole contemporary population of farm-stewards and tradespeople etc., in brief, these thousands, while all of them were absolutely sure that they were human beings and knew what it meant to be a human being, Socrates probed in depth (ironically) and busied himself with the problem: *what does it mean to be a human being?*[14]

The point that needs formulating is that Kierkegaard shares a fundamental concern with the actual Socrates, namely, arriving at an understanding of what it means to be a human being. In particular, Kierkegaard concentrates on how being human affects our pursuit of knowledge. His actual Socrates began this study, and in so doing stumbled across some of life's essential features, features that are developed to their extreme in Christianity. In a sense then, we can say that Socrates began a process of development that Kierkegaard sees as achieving its completion in Christianity. It is in this sense that I feel we can say that the actual Socrates is a John the Baptist figure. But as we shall see there is more to this process than the mere collection of interesting facts that can be learned by rote about human beings. The understanding can certainly play an important role in the life of the individual who approaches Christianity; but one can never simply think one's way into Christianity. The movement from Idealism to Christianity has as much to do with the emotional state of the individual involved in

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[14]Soren Kierkegaard, *The Diary Of Soren Kierkegaard,* ed. Rohde, (New York: Citadel Press, 1960), 128.

the transition (in particular his passion and despair) as a set of objective facts. This is to say that, given Kierkegaard's understanding of Christianity, one cannot approach Christianity objectively. Christianity is a possibility for the subjective thinker alone. The importance of this opposition between objectivity and subjectivity will be dealt with in detail in the next Chapter.

Having outlined the rationale behind my claim that the actual Socrates is a precursor of Christianity, it is incumbent upon me to demonstrate that such a Socrates is to be found in the work of Kierkegaard. In particular, I need to show that there is a link between Socratic ignorance and despair. To do so I must begin with *The Concept of Irony*. In *Irony* Kierkegaard speaks of three different figures that have a particular role to play in the process that is undergone by a society in transition from one "substantiality" or "actuality" to another. He speaks of the prophet, the authentic tragic hero, and the ironist, each finding himself in a different relationship to the established order now in the process of passing away and the new order that has yet to be actualized. From the description of these relationships we can derive a thumb-nail sketch of the actual Socrates as Kierkegaard saw him, Socrates naturally being cast in the role of the ironist. In the chapter entitled 'The world historical validity of irony. The Irony of Socrates', Kierkegaard has this to say about the ironist and his place in history:

> With every turning point in history there are two movements to be observed. On the one hand, the new shall come forth; on the other, the old must be displaced...

Now the prophet envisages the new 'in the distance' and the tragic hero 'fights for' and 'asserts' the new. But:

> ... Still, the old must be displaced and seen in all its imperfection, and here we meet the ironic subject. For the ironic subject the given actuality has completely lost its validity; it has become for him an imperfect form which everywhere constrains. He does not possess the new, however, he only knows the present does not correspond to the Idea. He it is who has come to render judgment. The ironist is in one sense prophetic, to be sure, for he constantly points to something future; but what it is he knows not...

We see here that the actual Socrates of *Irony* engages in negating not only knowledge claims, but all of Hellenism itself. This complete negativity of the actual Socrates is the defining feature of irony:

> ...Thus we here have irony as infinite absolute negativity. It is negativity because it only negates; it is infinite because it negates not this or that phenomenon; and it is absolute because it negates by virtue of a higher which is not.[15]

These words capture the essense of the actual Socrates as Kierkegaard understood him at the time of the writing of the dissertation. We see that the actual Socrates as an ironist is explicitly placed between an actuality, in this case Hellenism, and a possibility to be actualized, which never is named but merely hinted at in *Irony*. As said earlier, in *Irony* Kierkegaard is concerned to show the historic importance of the first instance of irony in the West, which appears at first to have been entirely destructive and negative in its effect. He is less concerned here with, or as some have suggested, he completely

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[15]Soren Kierkegaard, *The Concept Of Irony*, translated by Capel, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1965), 277-278.

failed to appreciate, the positive aspects of the Socratic position.[16] If this is so, and I am highly doubtful that it is, this "oversight" was corrected in the *Concluding Postscript*. But for the moment we must concentrate on understanding the Socrates of *Irony*, which means coming to an understanding of his position which is described as 'infinite absolute negativity', and the pathetic results of such a position.

As stated in Chapter One the key feature of the Socrates of *Irony* is his ignorance in the philosophical sense. We saw that this ignorance can be used to distinguish the Socratic from the Platonic. This ignorance colours Socrates' attitude to various philosophical questions on which he differs markedly from Plato. But it remains for us to delve into this ignorance itself and see its effects on those who came into contact with Socrates. The first effect of Socratic ignorance is the severing of the individual from all forms of authority, in Socrates' case that of the state. All forms of authority in some way or another make some appeal to truth as a justification of the established order. But it is from the truth first and foremost that the individual is separated once he has been introduced into Socratic ignorance. This feature of being separated from the truth is the first of several that allow us to place Socrates in that philosophical space between philosophical Idealism and Christianity, both of which Kierkegaard characterized by their understanding of the source of truth. In the former one is not separated from eternal truth, although one is in a sense without it until one makes the effort to recall it. In contrast to this, Christianity teaches that we are not in possession of the truth and that a revelation

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[16]Harold Hoffding thought that in *Irony* Kierkegaard "misunderstood completely the positive character of Socratic irony...". *Irony*, 352.

is required for us to be able to come into a relation with it. In both cases, however, there is a truth to be had, albeit very different truths achieved in radically different ways. The actual Socrates is found in an intermediate position. He had rejected the doctrine of Recollection, thus giving up one source of truth, and he was not able to approach an external source of truth, for Christianity had yet to make its entry onto the world stage. Thus we find Socrates in epistemological limbo, as it were, isolated from any source of truth, and forced to adopt a position of complete scepticism. (It is not until the *Concluding Postscript* that Socrates is linked to the thesis that truth is subjectivity. This stage of Kierkegaard's developed understanding of Socrates will be the subject of the next Chapter.)

It is because of the actual Socrates' lack of any philosophical knowledge that Kierkegaard saw Socrates as having attained the highest wisdom possible for an existing human being who has no recourse to the revelation of Christianity. Here we can recall Kierkegaard's opinion of the sources of human knowledge. He was confident that the the ancient Greek sceptics had satisfactorily demonstrated that the senses are not a reliable source of knowledge.[17] As for our historical knowledge, he thought that at its very best it can offer only approximations of the past. Approximations, in Kierkegaard's view, are unsatisfactory for his purpose and can only lead to despair for the infinitely interested individual; "... an approximation, when viewed as a basis for an eternal happiness, is wholly inadequate...", and, "an approximation is essentially incommensurable with an infinite personal interest in an eternal

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[17] *Concluding Postscript*, 38.

happiness."[18] The basis of this incommensurability is that historical studies can never claim to infallibly report the past since later generations of scholars often uncover mistakes in the work of their predecessors, or uncover new information that was not available to them. Thus historical studies can never offer more than an approximation of the truth and therefore cannot serve as the basis for an infinitely important decision. It is in part because of these problems facing historical studies that Kierkegaard refuses to approach Christianity from the point of view of the Biblical scholar. The scholar's efforts to determine the exact nature of Christ and the true doctrine of Christianity are large 'parentheses' that only serve to delay the individual's making a decision concerning his acceptance or rejection of Christianity.

The final source of knowledge that Kierkegaard considers is that of speculative philosophy which he makes the object of his sustained attack in the *Concluding Postscript*. This quick review of Kierkegaard's own scepticism is enough to make it clear that he is in agreement with the Delphic oracle's proclamation that Socrates who claimed to know nothing was the wisest man of all. Perhaps the remark Kierkegaard most often makes about Socrates is that he knew how to distinguish between what he knew and what he did not know. We find this comment in many places but here is how he expresses it in *The Concept of Anxiety*:

> The age of distinction is long past, because the system abrogates it. He who loves it must be regarded as an oddity, a lover of something that vanished long ago. This may well be; yet my soul clings to Socrates, its first love,

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[18] *Postscript*, 25 & 26.

> and rejoices in the one who understood him, Hamann; for he has said the best that has been said about Socrates, something far more remarkable and rare than that he taught young people and made fun of the Sophists and drained the poisoned cup: Socrates was great because he distinguished between what he understood and what he did not understand.'[19]

Kierkegaard commented on this epigraph as follows; "For Socrates, this saying was the whole meaning of his life, and I know of no epitaph more fitting for him than this."[20] We also find in the *Concluding Postscript* that ,"... Socrates was in the truth *by virtue* of his ignorance, in the highest sense in which this is possible within paganism"[21]. A passage from the Journals also confirms Kierkegaard's unparalleled regard for Socrates. He writes: "Oh, of all human beings the greatest is old Socrates, hero and martyr of intellectuality. You alone, Socrates, knew what it meant to be a reformer, understood your own self in so being; you were one."[22]

In these quotations are the beginnings of the complete picture of Kierkegaard's actual Socrates. First, the actual Socrates' position is one of complete philosophical uncertainty, 'infinite absolute negativity'. Second, it is this ignorance itself that Kierkegaard sees as being the "meaning of his [Socrates'] life", and the reason for his greatness. Third, we again see that Kierkegaard's Socrates was a reformer of sorts, some one who had an effect on the actuality in which he found himself, which is consistent with Kierkegaard's comments concerning the

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[19] *Anxiety*, Draft of epigraph, 178.

[20] *Ibid.*, 198.

[21] *Postscript*, 183. my italics.

[22] *Diary*, 170.

relationship of the ironist to his actuality.

But why would Kierkegaard have this reaction to Socrates? Why is Socrates' negativity so highly valued by Kierkegaard? We are given a clue in the quotation from the Journal that makes reference to Socrates' role as a reformer, but we find the response to these questions only hinted at in *Irony*, hints that we shall examine shortly; but there is a clear answer given in the *Concluding Postscript*. In the section where Kierkegaard discusses the point that an existing subjective thinker is as negative as he is positive in his relation to the truth, and that such a thinker is always in the process of becoming, he begins to deal with the importance of the subjective thinker's appreciation of the negativity of existence. He writes:

> He (the subjective thinker) is conscious of the negativity of the infinite in existence, and he constantly keeps the wound of the negative open, which in the bodily realm is sometimes the condition for a cure. The others let the wound heal over and become positive; that is to say, they are deceived.[23]

What we need to emphasize here is the notion of a 'cure'. It is with the cure for the human condition, i.e., for despair, that sickness unto death, that Kierkegaard is most concerned. And it is here that the cure begins, with Socratic ignorance, the wound, without which we are "deceived". The need for the study of human life so highly emphasized can now be seen as analogous to the role of the physician who is faced with a patient, an analogy Kierkegaard himself uses in *Sickness*. In both situations a close knowledge of the condition of the patient is required

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[23] *Postscript*, 78.

if any meaningful and useful help is to be offered, and often, Kierkegaard remarks, the physician will have a better idea of the condition of the patient than the patient himself. He writes:

> A physician's task is not only to prescribe remedies but also, first and foremost, to identify the sickness, and consequently his first task is to ascertain whether the supposedly sick person is actually sick or whether the supposedly healthy person is perhaps actually sick. Such is also the relation of the physician of the soul to despair. He knows what despair is; he recognizes it and therefore is satisfied neither with a person's declaration that he is not in despair nor with his declaration that he is.[24]

Kierkegaard, for his part, is convinced that one aspect of the human condition that cannot be escaped as long as we continue to exist in time and as finite creatures, is philosophical uncertainty; "The incessant becoming generates the uncertainty of the earthly life, where everything is uncertain."[25] It remains to be seen if there is a link between this ignorance, this uncertainty, and the despair that Kierkegaard hopes to cure, but we can rest assured that Kierkegaard sees this negativity as a healthy thing. But let me point out that we have yet another suggestion that Kierkegaard's Socrates is important as a transitional figure, the transition here being from sickness to health.

But let us consider the physician/patient analogy further. There are at least two steps that must be taken in the relationship between a doctor and a patient. First there must be an accurate diagnosis of the condition to be dealt with, and second, some form of treatment is administered. It appears to me that in *Irony* we have the first of the

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[24] *Sickness*, 23.

[25] *Postscript*, 79.

movements in this relationship, in other words, a study of one of the essential features of the human condition, namely philosophical uncertainty and its effects. It is not until we get to the *Concluding Postscript* that we begin to get a picture of the "prescribed remedy". Let us therefore proceed by characterizing the human condition as we find it in *Irony*, and then move on to consider the possible courses of action to be taken in response. In both movements, that of diagnosis and that of treatment, we find that Kierkegaard's understanding of Socrates is revealing because he understands himself to be in agreement with Socrates. Thus in understanding Kierkegaard's Socrates we come to understand Kierkegaard himself. It is only in the recommended treatment for the human condition that Kierkegaard differs from Socrates, yet even here, as we shall see in the next chapter, there are important agreements.

Again, the position in which we find Socrates in *Irony* is one of philosophical scepticism. But this scepticism extends to more than just knowledge claims; it extends also to the value of Hellenism itself. This is the meaning of Socrates' infinite absolute negativity, and it is with this position that everything truly Socratic begins. What this means is that the given actuality in which Socrates found himself had become alien to him, that he had become "estranged" from existence, that it had lost its validity for him.[26] This he expressed in his life by consulting a personal oracle instead of a public one, and by engaging in discussions with his fellow Athenians, principally by addressing questions to those who made claims to philosophical knowledge with the intention of

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[26] *Irony*, 276.

ultimately showing that these claims were hollow.[27] Those who felt the sting of Socrates' ironic onslaught in particular were the Sophists, the state, and Kierkegaard claims, Hellenism itself, the substantiality that had lost its validity for him. As we saw in the description of the role of the ironist, Socrates' principle activity was to bring about the displacement of the old order by bringing to light its imperfections. Nowhere, however, does Kierkegaard discuss the substance of Socrates' critique of Hellenism; he merely describes the activity of the actual Socrates and the effects of infinite absolute negativity on the life of the individual.

The first effect of this position, a position that Brandt translates into modern terms as 'Nihilism',[28]is what Kierkegaard refers to as "negative freedom", the state of not feeling any obligation to respect the demands placed on one by the state or by the culture one finds oneself in. Kierkegaard writes: "With irony the subject is negatively free. The actuality which shall give him content is not, hence he is free from the restraint in which the given actuality binds him, yet negatively free and as such hovering, because there is nothing that binds him."[29] This characterization of irony is very close to that given by Aristophanes of Socrates in his play *The Clouds* in which Socrates is found hovering above the earth in a basket, symbolically separate from those on the ground.[30] Kierkegaard also likes the analogy between clouds and the

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[27]*Ibid.*, 74.

[28]Frithiof Brandt, *Soren Kierkegaard: His Life Works*, Translated by Ann R. Born, (Copenhagen: Frede Rasmussen Bogtrykkeri, 1963), 19.

[29]*Irony*, 279.

[30]Aristophanes, *Five Comedies of Aristophanes* (New York: Doubleday, 1955), 159. Central to the play *The Clouds* is the characterization of Socrates as a Sophist who instructs his students, for a fee, in the art of

position of the ironist, a position that by its very nature is void of all positive content or determination; "What remains when one allows the various shapes assumed by the clouds to disappear is nebulosity itself, which is an excellent description of the Socratic Idea."[31] The effect of this freedom, however, is the realization in the individual of the "infinity of possibles" from which the individual is free to construct a new actuality.

This negative freedom, or freedom from the state and customary morality, was expressed in Socrates' life by his consulting his personal daimon in times of decision. The daimon is significant in Kierkegaard's opinion because it marks the beginning of the movement away from older Hellenism with its oracles and customary morality to which the Hellens deferred in such situations. In this matter Kierkegaard follows Hegel and Rotscher. He quotes Hegel about the importance of the daimon: "Socrates, in assigning to insight and conviction the determination of men's actions, posited the individual as capable of decision in opposition

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argumentation in general, and in particular, of making the weaker argument defeat the stronger. Behind the whole production, however, is perhaps the more important theme of the struggle between the traditional Hellens who held to time honoured values of duty, honour, reverence and modesty, and the Sophists who were willing to put these traditions into question. This theme of old vs new is brought out explictly in the debate between Right Logic and Wrong Logic, which are personifications of the traditional and Sophistic views repectively. Wrong Logic expresses views such as "There never was Justice or Truth" (186), and in general attacks all the beliefs dear to Right Logic. The debate soon degenerates into name calling: Wrong Logic: You're a useless old drone with one foot in the grave! Right Logic: You're a shameless, unprincipled, dissolute knave! (187) Although Socrates does not deliver the lines of Wrong Logic it is understood that they express his views since they are in keeping with those of the school he founded. In any case, it is clear that the Socrates of *The Clouds* is negatively free since he no longer considers himself bound by the traditional values of his community.

[31]*Irony.*, 166.

to fatherland and cunstomary morality, and thus made himself an oracle in the Greek sense. He claimed that he had a daimon within, councelling him what to do and revealing to him what was advantageous to his friends."[32] Rotscher expresses much the same idea: "Related to this principle of the free decision of the mind in itself, and the momentous consciousness that everything must be drawn before the forum of thought and there be ratified, is the phenomenon of the daimon of Socrates which was so much discussed in antiquity."[33] It was in making decisions that Socrates made his new found subjectivity apparent to those around him. This is in general agreement with Kierkegaardian existentialism: "All decisiveness, all essential decisiveness, is rooted in subjectivity."[34] What is fundamental here is the independence and self-determination of Socrates. He no longer feels the need to consult others but has now come into his own by moving the origin and source of decisions from the collective, represented by the state, customary morality, and the oracles, to the individual himself. That Socrates would be prepared to do this, however, seems only natural given that the actuality in which he found himself had lost all validity for him and thereby its status as a source of decisions. But Socrates still felt the need, at least in public, to speak of a daimon, his internal oracle, who guided him, albeit only negatively as the daimon never commanded but merely warned. It is because of this need that he can be understood yet again as filling the space between two extremes. Kierkegaard quotes

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[32] *Irony*, 189.

[33] *Ibid.*, 189.

[34] *Concluding Postscript*, 33.

Hegel who writes that, "The daimon is intermediate between the externality of the oracle and the pure inwardness of mind."[35] It is also interesting to note here, given that I am ultimately concerned with determining the role of Socrates in in Kierkegaard's thought, that the arrival of negative freedom in the form of Socratic ignorance is accompanied by personal decisions and responsibility which so characterize Kierkegaardian existentialism. Personal decisions and thus responsibility are the inevitable result of negative freedom since the effect of freedom is the realization in the individual of a) the "infinity of possibles", and b) that he alone will bear the responsibility for the new actuality he creates.

However, this is just the beginning of the string of reactions that follow in the wake of this realization of one's negative freedom. As Socrates was portrayed by Aristophanes as being separate from the rest of Athenian society, so too are all individuals who follow in his path. However, the individual who in the initial stages of his recognition of his freedom is "intoxicated" by the promise of new possibilities, now must come to terms with the fact that he is alone, figuratively speaking, as he has abandoned the world picture of the society in which he finds himself. This 'being alone' marks the beginning of subjectivity for Kierkegaard who regards Socrates as the first individual, the first self, precisely because he was the first to undergo this separation. Kierkegaard's theses state this idea plainly: "As philosophy begins with doubt, so also that life which may be called worthy of a man begins with irony..." and, "Irony as infinite and absolute negativity is the lightest

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[35] *Irony*, 191.

and weakest intimation of subjectivity."[36] It is important to note that again we see the beginning of a development, in this case the development of subjectivity that we isolated as one of the features found in the Socratic life that achieves its end in Christianity. The connection between irony and the arrival of subjectivity and Socrates is expressed as follows:

> But if irony is a determination of subjectivity, it must exhibit itself the first time subjectivity appears in world history. Irony is itself the first and most abstract determination of subjectivity. This points to the historical turning point at which subjectivity appears for the first time, and with this we have arrived at Socrates.[37]

Now this 'being alone', which initially intoxicates with its the 'infinity of possibles', in time can bring forth another reaction. Existing without external authorites and without a world picture, intoxication can quickly turn into anxiety when the individual comes to realize that he is faced with the prospect of constructing a new actuality out of this infinity of possibles. (It is this capacity for 'being alone' and anxiety, however, that distinguishes the life that is 'worthy of man' from the lives of animals. Human beings can exist as *individuals* within the human race, whereas animals are never more than members of a species.[anx,34] Anxiety, says Kierkegaard, is a feature of human life unknown to other animals, [anx,185] a feature which, significantly enough, can be closely linked to our capacity for 'being alone'. We must remember that our being alone entails a negative freedom from the actuality the individual

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[36] *Ibid.*, 349.

[37] *Ibid.*, 281.

no longer considers valid. This negative freedom allows the individual to entertain an 'infinity of possibilities' in terms of how he will approach the questions that were formerly answered by the old actuality. It is this freedom and these possibilities envisaged by the individual that are responsible for the individual's anxiety.) Kierkegaard connects anxiety with negative freedom explicitly in *The Concept of Anxiety*; "... anxiety is freedom's actuality as the possibility of possibility."[38], and, "anxiety is the dizziness of freedom..."[39] Thus there is a link, at least in the mind of Kierkegaard, between the recognition of possibility which results from the achievement of negative freedom and the arrival of anxiety in the life of the individual. This is in fact part of his explanation of the biblical story of the fall. He writes:

> When it is assumed that the prohibition awakens the desire, one acquires knowledge instead of ignorance, and in that case Adam must have had knowledge of freedom, because the desire was to use it. The explanation is therefore subsequent. The prohibition induces in him anxiety, for the prohibition awakens in him freedom's possibility. What passed by innocence as the nothing of anxiety has now entered into Adam, and here again it is a nothing - the anxious possibility of *being able*.[40]

Again I want to underline the importance of these remarks. Since my ultimate goal here is to put forward a convincing interpretation of Kierkegaard's understanding of Socrates, it seems to me highly significant that a concept as central to Kierkegaard's thought as anxiety should be seen as being closely linked to the philosophical position he

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[38] *Anxiety*, 42.

[39] *Ibid.*, 61.

[40] *Ibid.*, 44.

attributes to the actual Socrates. The link being that the negativity of the actual Socrates can arouse anxiety in individual's who are faced with the infinity of possibles.

But let us return to the diagnosis of the condition in which we find Socrates in *Irony* and review what we have discovered. The key point to be emphasized at this moment is that anxiety is the result of Socrates' "human wisdom", the highest wisdom available to natural man. It is true that Socrates appears to contrast this human wisdom with that wisdom which is "more than human"[41], but this distinction of two types of knowledge is an instance of the Socratic irony as both Kierkegaard and Socrates deny that such superhuman knowledge is possible. However, in the *Apology* Socrates merely says that he does not possess such a wisdom, while Kierkegaard denies that such wisdom is possible for an existing individual. In any case, it is Socrates' recognition of this limitation on human knowledge that is the meaning of the distinction that so much pleases Kierkegaard: the distinction between that which he knows and that which he does not. Both Socrates and Kierkegaard take this to be a fundamental characteristic of the human condition, namely that as humans we cannot hope to understand any wisdom that is more than human, and that the highest human wisdom is the recognition of our ignorance. Kierkegaard writes as follows about this distinction:

> The predicate 'human' here attributed to wisdom in opposition to a wisdom greater than human, is of the utmost significance. When subjectivity with its negative power has broken the spell in which human life reposed under the form of substantiality, when it has emancipated man from his relationship to God just as it liberated him from his

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[41]*Apology*, 20 d.

> relationship to the state, the first form in which this appears is ignorance. The gods flee away taking with them all content, and man is left standing as the form, as that which is to receive content into itself. In the sphere of knowledge such a condition is correctly apprehended as ignorance. Again, this ignorance is quite consistently designated as human wisdom, for with this man has come into his own right...[42]

The designation of recognized ignorance as the highest human wisdom is crucial to the Kierkegaardian project. As we have seen, once one becomes negative in the Socratic sense, i.e., once one has achieved the highest wisdom humanly possible, the individual recognizes his autonomy, his own subjectivity, and he comes into his own, or rather, is forced to come into his own because all the external authorities that make up the collective that constitutes the given actuality are no longer able to perform their former function, namely, to serve as a source of decisions on important matters. But it is decisions and responsibility that are the birthright of every individual. It is before the private individual that the possibilities arising from negative freedom are presented. Thus it becomes clear that philosophical ignorance, subjectivity, and their effect, the beginning of anxiety, are the essential features of that life that Kierkegaard would regard as human and 'worthy of a man'. This is the understanding of the human condition we can derive from *Irony*. The importance of this knowledge should not be forgotten: as Kierkegaard said, a thorough knowledge of human life is necessary before a Christian understanding of life is possible.[43] Or to continue the metaphor of the physician/patient relationship, this understanding is the diagnosis that the physician of the soul requires before he can be of use to his patient.

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[42] *Irony*, 179.

[43] *Anxiety*, 191.

We are now in a position to consider the possible courses of action which Socrates and the other Hellenes could have taken in response to the anxiety to which they had been exposed. Kierkegaard presents these possibilites in the form of an either/or:

> In the last analysis the ironist must always posit something, but what he posits in this way is nothingness. Now it is impossible to take nothingness seriously without either arriving at something (this happens when one takes it speculatively seriously), *or without despairing* (this happens when one takes it personally seriously). But the ironist does neither of these, and to this extent one may say he is not really serious about it. Irony is the infinitely delicate play with nothingness, a playing which is not terrified by it but still pokes its head into the air.[44]

There are a number of important points in this quotation. The first point is that we know that of the two possible reactions to anxiety, one of them, namely the return to speculative thought, or taking nothingness speculatively seriously, is entirely unacceptable to Kierkegaard. In fact it could be said that the strictly philosophical works of Kierkegaard were written with the intention of blocking precisely this side of the either/or. On the other hand, the second possibility, that of despair, has already been linked to his overall philosophical agenda as a physician of the soul as the essential condition whereby an individual can come to 'embrace' God. The second point is that we now have evidence that Kierkegaard recognized that the link I required between philosophical ignorance and despair exists: the despair follows when we

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[44] *Irony*, 286. my italics.

take this ignorance personally seriously. My understanding of what Kierkegaard means by taking nothingness 'personally seriously' is that this nothingness is not considered as a temporary state to be rectified by study or recollection (this is to take it speculatively seriously), but as a final statement concerning the ability of human beings to escape ignorance. Although Kierkegaard does not go on to explain in detail how despair comes about as a result of ignorance, we can with reference to his other works extrapolate a line of reasoning to account for this connection. Here we must recall that there are degrees or stages of despair, the first of which is marked by the complete absence of the consciouness of despair. However, that which characterizes the state of despair in all its forms is the self's ignorance of the its own essential nature. With the arrival of the Socratic ignorance two steps in the direction of despair have been taken, although technically we should say that these steps merely *intensify* the despair that already existed but was not recognized, and that therefore no further connection between Socrates and despair need be sought. The essential contribution of Socrates to despair, however, comes from the fact that with Socratic ignorance the despair that was formerly unrecognized is revealed and experienced for the first time. As we have already established, there is a connection between despair and consciouness of self, the intensification of the latter leading to the intensification of the former, and we have seen that Kierkegaard regards Socrates as having been historically the first self. It follows quite naturally then that Socrates and those that were exposed to Socratic ignorance would experience some despair as a result of their budding subjectivity. One might continue this line of reasoning and suggest that this despair might be further intensified by

the fact that the philosophy that brought them into consciouness of self could offer no instruction on the nature of the self so newly discovered. Thus the self's alienation of itself from itself would be the new actuality brought about first by the very discovery of a self, and secondly by the recognition that this self is a mystery to itself, which is the essence of despair. As Kierkegaard says in the *Fragments*, when one loses one's understanding of oneself, which was part of what was lost when Socrates rejected the recollection-principle, one becomes "bewildered with respect to himself."[45]

Here it is interesting to note in passing that Kierkegaard says that Plato's reaction to the either/or was to return to speculative thought. Much earlier in the dissertation when Kierkegaard is still grapling with the question of the possibility of making a distinction between the actual Socrates and Plato he says that if we were to think that all the dialogues contained the views of Plato alone, we would be driven to the conclusion that there were stages in the philosophical life of Plato, the first stage being marked by scepticism, to which the second, being marked by the results of the doctrine of Recollection, would be a reaction.[46] Now Kierkegaard does not believe this to be the case; he does believe that the Socratic dialogues do present the views of the actual Socrates; what is interesting nonetheless is the idea that Plato's use of the doctrine of Recollection was his way of reacting to either his own ignorance or the ignorance of Socrates. The hope that Kierkegaard attributes to Plato and others who choose this route springs

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[45] *Fragments*, 64.

[46] *Ibid.*, 152.

from the idea that if we know that we are ignorant, then we must have some idea of what knowledge is to know that we do not possess it. But that this route is a 'deception' as far as Kierkegaard is concerned is clear from the *Concluding Postscript* where speculative thinkers are constantly ridiculed for failing to take into account that they are existing human beings and thus subject to the 'wound of the negative'. We could say that the problem with speculative thinkers for Kierkegaard is that they fail to take the nothingness of Socrates "personally seriously", prefering rather to lose themselves in objectivity, which is a form of despair in itself. In the language of *Sickness* this condemnation is intensified as the speculative thinker's refusal to take himself seriously is tantamount to sin understood as defiance.

Furthermore, from the above quotation we have another indication of the nature of Socrates as an ironist who is rather peculiar in that he has neither of these reactions but is content to remain with his ignorance. Kierkegaard accounts for this by referring to Socrates' "divine mission" which satisfied his needs; "What restrained Socrates from immersing himself speculatively in the dimly intimated positivity behind this ignorance was naturally his divine call to convince each individual of his ignorance."[47] and, "When he had done this to the individual (revealed his ignorance to him), the consuming flame of envy (this word taken in a metaphysical sense) was temporarily sated, the destructive enthusiasm of negativity momentarily quenched, and he enjoyed the pleasure of irony to the fullest extent, doubly enjoyed it

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[47] *Ibid.*, 198.

because he felt divinely authorized, felt busy in his calling."[48] This talk of the divine mission should recall my earlier characterization of the actual Socrates as a John the Baptist figure, a characterization I felt comfortable in making because there are features of the position of the actual Socrates that are developed in Christianity. But there is evidence that Kierkegaard was aware of this characterization because he makes the comparison himself, albeit indirectly, between Socrates and John the Baptist. Kierkegaard was already aware of Hamann's characterization of Socrates as a precursor to Christianity rather than its rational alternative.[49] That Kierkegaard accepted this idea is suggested by the nature of the many allusions to Biblical passages that surround the actual Socrates. For example we find Kierkegaard playing on that famous verse from the Gospel of John when he says of Socrates that, "He came not to save the world, but to condemn it"[50] which places Socrates in a definite relation to Christ. Kierkegaard also says that Socrates was sent by the Gods to extract what was owed to the divine, which recalls Mathew 5:26.[51] This idea of Socrates as a preparer of the way for the coming of Christianity receives further support from suggestive passages like the statement that Socrates marks "a moment of transition", that he is, "the nothingness from which a beginning must be made" and the revealing statement that the fact that Socrates "drove away the

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[48]*Ibid.*, 200.

[49]*Anxiety*, 222.

[50]*Irony*, 198. The verse referred to is John 3:17. "For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved."

[51]*Ibid.*, 198. "Verily I say unto thee, Thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing."

Pagan gods" was "itself the condition for a deeper relationship."[52] The parallel is clearly made, however, on page 280 where Kierkegaard speaks of the destruction of Judaism in which John the Baptist played the part of the ironist; in exactly the same way as Socrates destroyed Hellenism but was unable to see the future, we see Kierkegaard saying of the Baptist that, "He was not the one who should come, did not have a knowledge of what should come, and yet he destroyed Judaism." Thus it is a safe assumption that Kierkegaard understood the arrival of Christianity historically to have been prepared for by the Baptist, who disposed of Judaism, and by Socrates who cleared away Hellenism by revealing its imperfections. Neither the Baptist nor Socrates had any positive contribution to make that might have filled the void left by the fall of the old actualities. Kierkegaard says of Socrates that,

> the enthusiasm for knowledge was his on an extraodinary scale; in short, he possessed all the seductive gifts of the spirit. But communicate, fill, enrich, this he could not do. In this sense one might possibly call him a seducer, for he deceived the youth and awakened longings which he never satisfied, allowed them to become enflamed by the subtle pleasures of anticipation yet never gave them solid and nourishing food.[53]

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> ... one is forcefully reminded of the art of midwifery which he claimed to possess. He assisted the individual to an intellectual delivery, severed the umbilical cord of substantiality. As an accoucheur Socrates was unsurpassed, but more than this he was not.[54]

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[52] *Ibid.*, 199.

[53] *Ibid.*, 213.

[54] *Ibid.*, 215.

It is clear that Kierkegaard sees Christianity as the source of the new actuality, as the source of the "solid and nourishing food" required by the admirers of Socrates, and that it is the relationship of the self to the self that can be developed with help of a relationship to Christ that is the "deeper relationship" hinted at.

Here is a summary of the movements involved in the pathetic dialectic I have been tracing:

Hellenism --> Negated by actual Socrates --> Recognition of negative freedom --> Infinity of possibles --> Anxiety --> Speculation or Despair

It is this final possibility, that of despair, that makes the actual Socrates of *Irony* so central to the Kierkegaardian project. In *Sickness* Kierkegaard traces the beginning of despair back to the natural man who was at that point unaware of his subjectivity and the accompanying anxiety. But despair continues its development once the revelation of Christianity is made known as despair is intensified and transformed into sin:

> Sin is: before God, or with the conception of God, in despair not to will to be oneself, or in despair to will to be oneself. Thus sin is intensified weakness or intensified defiance: sin is the intensification of despair.[55]

This classification of despair at its highest level as sin is of the utmost

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[55] *Sickness*, 77.

importance because sin as the intensification of despair is the necessary condition an individual must be in before a move into Christianity is possible. In *Training in Christianity* this is made very clear:

> But if the Christian life is something so terrible and frightful, how in the world can a person get the idea of accepting it? Quite simply, and, if you want that too, quite in a Lutheran way: only the consciousness of sin can force one into this dreadful situation - the power on the other side being grace.... Looked at from any other point of view Christianity is and must be a sort of madness or the greatest horror. Only through the consciousness of sin is there entrance to it, and the wish to enter in by any other way is the crime of lese-majeste against Christianity.[56]

What is so pivotal about the arrival of Socrates, that which makes him a turning point in the history of religious consciousness, is that for the first time in the Greek world the self, the private individual, becomes a question, and with this the pathetic dialectic in the direction of despair has started. World historically Socrates' ignorance is important because of the role it played in the destruction of Hellenism which is paralleled by the Baptist's destruction of Judaism. But the effect of Socratic ignorance on the individual is essentially alienation from that actuality which he once took for granted, an actuality the individual was able to rest in with some degree of comfort. Now the individual is forced to make a new beginning out of the infinity of possibles starting with the a new understanding of the self itself. It is not by chance that Socrates began a study of human life and adopted the motto 'know thyself', nor is it odd that he was able to say that he did not know if he was a human being or something else because his ignorance was

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[56]Soren Kierkegaard, *Training In Christianity*, translated by Lowrie, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 71.

complete, extending even to himself. The attention of the individual is thus diverted away from the external world which has lost its validity, and it is redirected onto the individual for whom the self has become the most important question. Thus the effect of irony is a turning inward.

We have now reached the completion of the characterization of the actual Socrates as he appears in *Irony*. We have seen how he can be placed in the philosophical space between philosophical Idealism and Christianity and how he can be seen as a transitional figure between these two positions. Thus far the actual Socrates has been of great use in the first of the movements that characterize the relationship between a physician and his patient, i.e. he has led us to an understanding of the condition of the patient. We have also had to consider what Kierkegaard regards as the cure for this condition, the condition he calls despair, and we have seen that this cure is Christianity. The investigation into Kierkegaard's understanding of the cure was required in order to make sense both of the metaphor of the physician/ patient, and to make sense of our characterization of the actual Socrates as a John the Baptist figure. But we would do an injustice to the actual Socrates if we thought that this was the end of his development, and if we thought that he made no attempt whatsoever to treat the condition he had discovered. Kierkegaard himself soon came to the realization that there was more to the actual Socrates than his infinite absolute negativity. In the next Chapter I will trace the development of the actual Socrates which we find in the *Concluding Postscript*.

CHAPTER III

TRUTH AS SUBJECTIVITY

In the *Concept of Irony* I found that Kierkegaard's understanding of the actual Socrates was characterized most significantly as being the point of departure for what I have been calling the "pathetic dialectic". Following the unfolding of this dialectic, I came to an understanding of the human condition as being characterized by the various degrees of conscious or unconscious despair present in each individual. It is this condition that is of particular interest because Kierkegaard can be understood to be a physician of the soul who feels that the treatment for this despair is Christianity. However, as mentioned at the close of the last Chapter, at some point Kierkegaard realized that Socrates himself had made an effort to treat the condition in which he found himself. We find this developed view of Socrates in the *Concluding Postscript.* It is a view dependent upon the famous thesis that truth is subjectivity. It is my intention to show that this developed Socrates serves yet again as a transitional figure between Idealism and Christianity, and in particular, that it is the thesis that truth is subjectivity that is the root of the pattern of the Socratic and Christian lives.

However, before proceeding to investigate the developed Socrates presented in the *Concluding Postscript*, I want to deal briefly with some objections that might be raised at this point. 'Is it not a source of difficulty,' it might be asked, 'to claim that Kierkegaard's actual Socrates

in *Irony* was a complete sceptic, that is without positive philosophical truth of any kind, and then to claim that this same Socrates is linked to the theory that truth is subjectivity? Have you not repeatedly stressed that Kierkegaard's actual Socrates is in 'epistemological limbo', as you put it, and that it is precisely this lack of truth that has been the driving force behind the pathetic dialectic? Furthermore, before you begin to deal with the *Concluding Postscript*, you must set us at ease concerning your use of *The Concept of Irony*. Is it not the case that as Kierkegaard shed the influence of Hegel he came to lose respect for his doctoral thesis, and that he said as much in the *Concluding Postscript*? If this is so, would it not undermine your thesis that in *Irony* we identify the condition for which a remedy is provided or at least suggested in the *Concluding Postscript*? Indeed, we know that Kierkegaard never spoke disparagingly of the *Postscript*, but that he appears to have done so concerning *Irony*. Is it not odd then to think that these two works can be made to fit together so neatly?'

The best way to respond to these questions is to examine the statements Kierkegaard made concerning *Irony*. After determining the nature of his alleged change of heart I will move on to deal with the possibility that there is a contradiction between one's being a sceptic and at the same time linked to the position that truth is subjectivity. This latter question which deals with the nature of truth defined as subjectivity will take us into the heart of the problem of this Chapter and will serve as a good introductory discussion.

As to my first problem, that is, Kierkegaard's backing away from the dissertation, I believe that a change in attitude towards the actual Socrates presented there did take place. However, it should be

emphasized that the change lies in Kierkegaard's attitude to an otherwise fundamentally unaltered view of Socrates. The essential features of the actual Socrates remain the same; what has changed is that Kierkegaard came to see that there was *more* to Socrates than his infinite negativity. In other words, he came to see that Socrates himself had reacted or responded to his infinite absolute negativity. It is the reaction Kierkegaard attributed to the actual Socrates that is of interest to me since this reaction determines the pattern of the Socratic life which prefigures the life of the Christian as Kierkegaard understood it.

The first passage that concerns me is the following:

> Socrates does absolutely nothing. He does not even speak to God inwardly, and yet he realizes the highest of human actions. Socrates has doubltess himself been aware of this, and has known how to emphasize the comic aspect. Magister Kierkegaard, however, to judge from his dissertation, has scarcely understood it. He mentions this negative attitude of Socrates towards prayer, citing the dialogue Alcibiades II; but as might be expected from a positive candidate in theology of our own day, he cannot refrain from instructing Socrates in a note that this negativity is only to a certain extent true.[1]

This can hardly been seen as damaging to my primary thesis: that the actual Socrates begins the pathetic dialectic. Nor does it put in question my secondary thesis: that the *Concluding Postscript* provides a developed view of Socrates that can be understood as an attempt to address the despair that characterizes the human condition. In this passage Kierkegaard seems to be chastizing himself for his error of having attempted to correct that aspect of Socrates that he now fully

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[1]Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 83.

embraces, namely, his negativity. It is clear that the negativity of the actual Socrates now finds complete favour in the eyes of the Kierkegaard of the *Concluding Postscript*. (It is interesting to note that the passage containing the words 'the wound of the negative', which is the condition required for the cure, is taken from the *Concluding Postscript*.) There is, as Kierkegaard came to see, more to the actual Socrates than pure negativity, namely, the thesis that truth is subjectivity. However, the nature of this addition to the Socratic negativity is not positive in the sense that would have appealed to a positive candidate in theology, even if he had recognized it. The adoption of the thesis that truth is subjectivity is positive in the sense that it allows for a move beyond the purely destructive negativity of the actual Socrates. However, neither the adoption of this thesis nor the move it allows is positive in the sense that it can be accepted by objective thinkers. That is to say, neither the thesis nor the move can be supported rationally and objectively. But as to the import of this passage, it appears to me that the later Kierkegaard is chastizing himself for not having been entirely satisfied with the actual Socrates. This is however no indictment of the actual Socrates, nor an indication that the actual Socrates of *Irony* has been rejected.

In another passage where we find Kierkegaard modifying his understanding of the concept of irony he writes:

> What then is irony, if we wish to call Socrates an ironist, not like Magister Kierkegaard consciously or unconsciously

presenting only one side of him?[2]

This particular passage, rather than posing any difficulties, confirms my view that the observations of *Irony* are not discarded but rather are still taken to be representative of the actual Socrates. What is being modified here is his understanding of irony, which, no doubt, affected his understanding of Socrates; but at no time does Kierkegaard give up the essential feature of the actual Socrates, that being his complete ignorance in the philosophical sense.[3] And as we will recall, it was this feature of the actual Socrates that marked him as the point from which a beginning must be made. The crucial difference is that now Kierkegaard realizes that in *Irony* he saw 'only one side of him'. It is in the *Postscript* that the developed view of Socrates, complete with the other side, is given. The understanding of the other side was made possible when Kierkegaard linked Socrates to the thesis that truth is subjectivity. Kierkegaard now recognizes that Socrates, who externally contented himself with his divine mission of introducing everyone into his negativity, nevertheless had *inwardly* reacted to his own ignorance and developed his own method of treating the wound of negativity.

Finally, in an entry in his Journal Kierkegaard explicitly states that it was his own misunderstanding of the Socrates of *Irony* that marked his relationship to this Socrates. However, it was not that the content of the conception was wrong, but rather that Kierkegaard failed to appreciate the significance of this content:

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[2]*Ibid.*, 449.

[3]We still find Kierkegaard saying and emphasizing that Socrates "discredited the common human knowledge". *Ibid.*, 502.

> Influenced as I was by Hegel and all the Modern thinking, not mature enough properly to grasp the Great, there is a place in my dissertation where I could not help showing it up as an imperfection in Socrates that he had no eye for Totality but, numerically, only saw Individuals.
>
> Oh, what a Hegelian fool I was; this precisely provides the great evidence of what a great teacher of ethics Socrates was.[4]

In light of these remarks I cannot but agree with Lowrie's view of Kierkegaard's relationship to Socrates. Lowrie writes; "His first considerable work was characterized in the sub-title as having 'constant reference to Socrates'. This might well have stood in front of the whole great literature he created, for he became constantly more and more engrossed with the figure of Socrates, *learning gradually to know him better and to revere him more highly than when he wrote The Concept of Irony.*"[5] What is of importance here is that Kierkegaard's view of Socrates developed. But, from these passages referred to above, it becomes clear that the changes that took place in this understanding were of two kinds. First there is the recognition that the Socrates of *Irony* did not capture the complete picture of the actual Socrates. It is important to note, however, that nothing is taken away from the conception given in *Irony* but that it is merely added to and developed. The second change takes place within Kierkegaard himself who chastizes himself for not having appreciated Socrates in the dissertation, having been confused by Hegelian nonsense. Again it is clear that the actual

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[4]Soren Kierkegaard, *The Diary of Soren Kierkegaard*, Peter Rohde ed., (New York: Citadel Press, 1960),92.

[5]Soren Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 35. My italics.

Socrates of *Irony* is not rejected by the later Kierkegaard in any way that would pose difficulties for my thesis. Rather, it is the case that he is seen with new eyes, as Kierkegaard discovered that an entire dimension of Socrates, his inwardness, had been missed at the time of the dissertation. Consequently, I think it entirely plausible that the *Concluding Postscript* builds on the incomplete yet useful understanding gained in *Irony* in the manner I have suggested. At least this cannot be ruled out on the grounds that Kierkegaard rejected his dissertation. It appears to me that one can plausibly argue that *Irony* captured the actual Socrates as viewed from the outside, and that it was not until the *Concluding Postscript* that Kierkegaard felt that he had penetrated to the essential feature of the developed Socrates, namely, his inwardness.

Now let me turn to the question of the meaning of the thesis that truth is subjectivity and how this can be seen as a crucial aspect of the preparation of an individual on the way to an encounter with Christianity. A good way to start this exposition is to tackle the question my imaginary interlocutor raised earlier[6] concerning the apparent contradiction between the claim that Socrates was a sceptic in *Irony* but now is linked to a position that professess access to truth through subjectivity. This question could only be asked by someone unfamiliar with the meaning of the thesis that truth is subjectivity. The nature of the truth Kierkegaard is concerned with in the *Concluding Postscript* is not that which would lead a sceptic to reevaluate his scepticism in the sense that he might consider dropping scepticism and embracing some form of cognitivism. In other words, truth as

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[6]See page 66.

subjectivity is that kind of truth that can be accepted by a sceptic without contradiction by virtue of the nature of this truth. It is not truth understood as correspondence, as is the case with truth understood along empiricist lines. Nor is it the truth which is characterized by the compatibility and coherent ordering of propositions within a given system. These are objective approaches to truth, whereas Kierkegaard wishes to explore the possibilities of a subjective approach.

Perhaps the easiest way to characterize subjective truth and to bring out its essential difference from the objective understandings of truth is to quote the last lines of *Either/Or*: "... only the truth which edifies is truth for you."[7] This kind of truth is entirely in keeping with Socratic ignorance. Or perhaps more emphatically, it is the only kind of truth Socrates could ever have experienced while remaining true to his scepticism. His scepticism and negativity were manifested in his discussions with Athenians who, he found, were unable to give coherent *arguments* for the beliefs they held. But those who accept the thesis that truth is subjectivity make no appeal to arguments. In fact it is fully acknowledged that this type of truth is unsupportable by rational argument. But by not acknowledging the importance of rationality, or rather, because proponents of subjective truth are aware of the failure of reason to provide knowledge that can survive Socratic scrutiny, they evaluate their truth by different criteria, criteria independent of those of rationality whose standards are brought into question. As the young man from *Either/Or* might say regarding the issue of standards, "Is reason then alone baptized, are the passions pagan?" One could say that

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[7]Soren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), 356.

Socratic scepticism retains its validity insofar as it is brought against knowledge claims that have pretentions to objectivity. But given that subjective truth makes no such claim to objectivity, it escapes the scepticism of Socrates by not acknowledging the standards by which the critique is mounted.

Subjective truth is also in keeping with the last stage of the pathetic dialectic. If the human condition is characterized by despair, then it seems entirely in order that the cure for the human condition be one that has an effect on the affective well-being of the individual. Indeed, as we shall see, subjective truth is intimately and inseparably connected to the emotions and the will of the individual, while it has rather strained relations with the intellect. With regard to the linking of truth and the emotions, we would do well to recall that Kierkegaard insisted that Modern philosophy was misguided when it spoke of 'doubt' as being the first stage of the philosophical enterprise. Kierkegaard insisted that Modern philosophy spoke of 'doubt' when it should have spoken of 'despair', or 'offense',[8] both of which are clearly related to the emotional state of the individual and make no pretense to abstract from the concerned and interested individual.

It is this approach to truth, characterized so far merely by its rejection of objective standards, that is the point of departure for my investigation of Socrates as Kierkegaard came to see him and present him in the *Concluding Postscript*. This approach to truth is the essential link that connects the Socratic life to the life of the Christian because

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[8]Soren Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 83.

truth as subjectivity is the root of the patterns of both the Socratic and Christian lives. It is because these lives have a common pattern that Kierkegaard can say that the Socratic life, "when properly deliniated," is "analogous" to that of the Christian.[9] It is in coming to terms with this approach to truth that the individual is prepared for the Christian life.

What then is subjective truth? It would appear that truth so understood has two essential components that are interrelated. The first component is that of the *transformation of the self*, an idea quite foreign to those who favour an objective approach to truth. This component is in keeping with one insight we have gained in our investigation of Kierkegaard's Socrates, namely, that he was the first self, the first subjectivity, a fact directly related to his philosophizing. Kierkegaard expresses this central idea of self-transformation in these words:

> The Socratic secret, which must be preserved in Christianity unless the latter is to be an infinite backward step, and which in Christianity receives an intensification, by means of a more profound inwardness which makes it infinite, is that the movement of the spirit is inward, that the truth is the subject's transformation in himself.[10]

We saw at the end of Chapter Two that the effect of the Socratic ignorance was a turning inward of the interest of the individual. This we see manifested in Socrates' desire not to waste time on external matters like the study of Hebrew, solo dancing or world history; Socrates

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[9] *Concluding Postscript*, 185.

[10] *Postscript*, 38.

was concerned only with himself. This first component of the truth as subjectivity is a continuation of the movement of self-development that gained momentum as the pathetic dialectic unfolded and which will be intensified further by a move into Christianity.

The second essential component of truth understood as subjectivity sheds light on the nature of the transformation that Kierkegaard is most concerned to effect in his readers. This component is that aspect of the truth that prepares one for 'the venture', because the idea of *risk* and *uncertainty* is essential to this understanding of truth:

> The truth is precisely the venture which chooses an objective uncertainty with the passion of the infinite.[11]

It is interesting to note that this passage uses the same language Socrates uses in the *Phaedo* when he is discussing the immortality of the soul. The idea of the 'venture' is common to both.[12] What also needs to be noted here is that truth so understood is not something that can be contained in a proposition. Subjective truth is not an idea but an emotion, a passion, that leads one to choose to take action.[13] This aspect of subjective truth should not be overlooked as it involves the unavoidable difficulty of the essential uncommunicability of subjective truth. Kierkegaard writes that the chief feature of subjective truth is

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[11]*Ibid.*, 182.

[12]See Chapter One, p. 25.

[13]"...the truth, in the sense in which Christ was the truth, is not a sum of sentences, not a definition of concepts, &c., but a life." *Training in Christianity*, 201.

that "one must be alone about it".[14] This aloneness of the individual with his subjective truth is in keeping with the fact that the beginning of subjectivity was marked by the instance in which the individual came to see himself as isolated from his community. The fact that subjective truth is not an idea as such further accentuates the isolation of the individual precisely because his truth is not directly communicable to others.

Another result of this truth that is related to the fact that it cannot be expressed in a proposition is that the subjective individual's interest in a proof or proposition does not lie in the same area as that of the objective individual. We will recall the famous passage where Kierkegaard discusses this difference in emphasis by comparing the the two worshipers, one who prays to the true God but in a false spirit, and the other who prays to an idol but with "the entire passion of the infinite".[15] Kierkegaard says without hesitation that the truth is with the second individual who has the appropriate inwardness. He sums up the difference in emphasis in a formula: "The objective accent falls on WHAT is said, the subjective accent on HOW it is said."[16] It is this HOW that is of interest to the subjective thinker, but it is precisely this feature of subjective truth that cannot be communicated directly.

Returning to the idea of risk, Kierkegaard continues:

> I contemplate the order of nature in the hope of finding God, and I see omnipotence and wisdom; but I also see much else

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[14] *Concluding Postscript*, 65.

[15] *Ibid.*, 180.

[16] *Ibid.*, 181.

> that disturbs my mind and excites anxiety. The sum of all this is an objective uncertainty. But it is for this very reason that the inwardness becomes as intense as it is, for it embraces this objective uncertainty with the entire passion of the infinite. In the case of a mathematical proposition the objectivity is given, but for this reason the truth of such a proposition is also an indifferent truth.[17]

Here again we see the clear expression of the view that what counts in subjective truth is the emotional reaction of the individual towards the possibility of taking action on the basis of an uncertainty. It is the uncertainty in particular that heightens the 'passion' and the degree of inwardness experienced by the individual. It is this ability of a given proposition to provoke such a response that distinguishes an indifferent truth from one that potentially 'edifies'. It should be noted, however, that Kierkegaard is not saying that objective truths are not true. The problem with objective truth in general is two fold. Either the content of the proposition has no bearing on the individual's interests (as is the case with mathematical truths which are unrelated to the problems of the existing individual which concern the nature of the self and the meaning of being an individual human being). Or, objective propositions that do attempt to address the problems of the individual do not survive Socratic scrutiny, which renders them objectively worthless. Either way objective propositions fail to edify. What is required is a proposition which is both relevant to the individual in despair and capable of surviving Socratic scrutiny. This is what the subjective approach to truth hopes to offer.[18]

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[17] *Concluding Postscript*, 182.

[18] This way of thinking about truth has lead to the charge that "existential thinking" will allow anything whatsoever to be taken as true. Brandt writes: "Can existential thinking result in anything whatever?

However, there is a significant aspect of subjective truth contained in the ideas of self-transformation and risk that needs to be drawn out explicitely. The essential feature of truth understood as subjectivity is that all such truths are at the very least objectively uncertain if not objectively absurd. This objective uncertainty is necessary if they are to provoke any inward reponse.[19] Thus there is an element of risk involved if one chooses to act on them. This risk taking is, however, in some instances, nothing short of *folly*, as is the case when one is asked to believe and act upon something that goes against the understanding. But this description is accurate only in part since it presents only the objective point of view which concentrates on the WHAT of a proposition, determining it to be either uncertain or absurd, whereas the subjective truth lies not in the propositional content itself but rather in the feeling and inwardness that accompany it. The importance of the objective folly of subjective truth cannot be underestimated because it is an essential feature of the cure that Socrates presents and even more so in the case of Christianity. I believe that the particular transformation of the individual which Kierkegaard has in mind is directly related to the fact that subjective

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Yes, no doubt one must say so. Indeed, there is no objective truth in the existentialist spheres, and subjective truth consists only in the emotional and volitive." *Soren Kierkegaard: His Life and Works* (Copenhagen: Frede Rasmussens Bogtrykkeri, 1963), 111. While I agree that subjective truth consists in the emotional and volitive, it should be noted that Kierkegaardian thinking, although it is subjective, does not and cannot result in anything whatever. This becomes clear if we consider what Kierkegaard has to say about despair. I would suggest that Kierkegaardian thinking can embrace as true anything that treats the primary concern of individuals, namely the despair born of ignorance of the self. Any ideas with pretentions to essential truth must meet this requirement.

[19] *Concluding Postscript*, 182.

truths are at least objective uncertainties. The transformation needed in the individual is the development of the willingness to accept the venture, to risk, to choose to act on an objective uncertainty. This is what is meant by the idea of becoming subjective, and it is this that constitutes the beginning of the cure and the Socratic life.

To become subjective is to choose one end of an either/or. The either/or in this case is the choice presented to the individual either to remain objective, free of the dictates of passion but forced to be content with at best approximate knowledge, or to become subjective and accept a new definition of truth as subjectivity and all that this entails. Viewed objectively however, this amounts to no less than the abandonment of the dictates of reason and prudence. Becoming subjective is, in other words, *a form of madness or lunacy* since it demands the laying aside of one's rationality. The objective approach to truth has always thought that its greatest asset was precisely the security which subjectivity disregards. Kierkegaard writes:

> it [the objective way] thinks to escape a danger which threatens the subjective way, and this danger is at its maximum: madness. In a merely subjective determination of the truth, madness and truth become in the last analysis indistinguishable.[20]

It is, however, this willingness to give up the dictates of reason and prudence that is crucial if Christianity is to be accepted, because, as Kierkegaard never tires of stating, Christianity is objectively the greatest piece of lunacy imaginable. It is precisely because Kierkegaard recognizes that Christianity is madness that he cannot argue for it in a

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[20] *Ibid.*, 173-4.

straightforward rational manner. As he says, one cannot approach Christianity by means of an apologetic, i.e. objectively, because Christianity will always appear, if properly understood, as "madness or horror". It must be approached subjectively, with "the torments of a contrite heart."[21]

I took as my starting point in Chapter Two the idea that it is the lack of a positive relation to truth that moved Socrates to abandon Idealism and adopt his position of philosophical ignorance. It is the uncertainty in knowledge claims and in particular knowledge claims concerning the self that leads one into anxiety and eventually despair after the indifference of the legitimate knowledge gained through objective inquiry strikes home. The remedy for this condition would seem to be obvious. What is needed is a new truth to which to be related in order to offset the effects of the original loss of truth. This is precisely the value of Christianity in the eyes of Kierkegaard. Christianity is the cure for despair because it offers a new truth, and in particular knowledge of the self that removes anxiety and despair born of ignorance of the self. Kierkegaard is fond of this aspect of Christianity and devotes much attention to Christ's invitation, 'Come hither unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, *I will give you rest.*' Understandably however, the aspect of Christian truth that most concerns Kierkegaard is its paradoxical nature. In fact the 'Absolute paradox', that God became man, is such that it can never be less than an offense to the understanding of 'natural man'. This is the 'catch', so to speak, involved in this notion of truth as subjectivity. The patient in

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[21] *Training in Christianity*, 72.

despair is the 'natural man' who is terribly attached to his rationality. Yet the cure, both of Socrates and Kierkegaard, although Socrates to a lesser extent, is not ammenable to rationality, as the cure is in part the giving up of this rationality.

How, then, as a physician of the soul, is Kierkegaard to be able to offer this treatment to his patients if it is in its very nature contrary to the inclinations of the patient? How is he to get the patient to accept the treatment which he, the patient, rightly recognizes as absurd? Kierkegaard must do this slowly and indirectly by bringing the patient into a condition in which he will be more receptive to the paradoxical existential communication of Christianity. This process is already well underway with the pathetic dialectic whereby the patient has already become accustomed to the failings of objective knowledge - either they are illusory or indifferent. The next step is to introduce the idea of truth as subjectivity, *but in the mildest form possible.* This is precisely the position of Socrates in the *Concluding Postscript.* It is as though Kierkegaard were taking pains not to shock his patient with extremes that are sure to offend the patient's sensibilities; rather the patient is started out slowly with a mild form of the paradoxical. It is in this mild form of life which is nevertheless governed by truth as subjectivity that we see the similarities between the Socratic life and the life of the Christian. All of this effort, however, is aimed at one specific objective. Whereas the either/or that stands before the individual as a door to the Socratic life is made up of the choice between remaining objective or becoming subjective, the ultimate either/or that stands as the entrance to Christianity is that between Offense and Faith. This final either/or is far more strenuous for the understanding than that

leading to the Socratic life. The individual, if he is to have any chance of reacting favourably to this final either/or, must be prepared, and his passing through the first either/or is part of this preparation. The goal towards which Kierkegaard is tending is the bringing about of this condition that will allow for this favourable reaction to the final either/or. This condition can be called the 'happy relationship between the Paradox and Reason'.

The achievement of this happy relationship that allows for the favourable reaction to the Socratic and Christian either/ors depends on the individual's correct understanding of the Paradox and Reason:

> If the Paradox and the Reason come together in a mutual understanding of their unlikeness their encounter will be happy,... If the encounter is not in understanding the relationship becomes unhappy, and this unhappy love of the Reason if I may so call it, may be characterized more specifically as *Offense*.[22]

It is the offensiveness of Christianity, its objective absurdity, that is the crucial aspect of Christianity, when viewed objectively. Thus the task of Kierkegaard as physician of the soul lies in the attempt to make these absurdities more palatable to the individual, thereby bringing about the happy relationship. This he tries to achieve, I think, by assigning to the Paradox and to the Reason their proper domain of influence. The domain of Reason can be loosely referred to as that of social interactions which extends to cover all one's dealings with the world at large. The domain of the Paradox, by contrast, is that of the individual's relationship to God. Once these domains are established, and recognized,

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[22]Soren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 61.

their proper relationship can be worked out. Kierkegaard characterizes this relationship in terms of the individual's *absolute and relative relationships to the Paradox and the Reason respectively.* The individual must maintain an absolute relationship to the absolute telos, one's eternal happiness, which is achieved by means of the correct relationship to the Paradox, while simultaneously maintaining a relative relationship to relative ends, which are the unavoidable demands of life in society. As Kierkegaard writes, "The relative relationship belongs to the world, the absolute relationship to the individual himself."[23] Key to the acceptance of this relationship, however, is the Reason's acceptance of its own limitations. Kierkegaard expresses these ideas in part in a Journal entry where he addresses the human sciences:

> If human science refuses to understand that there is something which it cannot understand, or better still, that there is something about which it clearly understands that it cannot understand - then all is confusion. For it is the duty of the human understanding to understand that there are things it cannot understand, and what those things are.[24]

Thus Kierkegaard's approach to the problem of the paradoxical nature of Christianity is to persuade the Reason to accept a limited role in the life of the individual. Kierkegaard hopes to achieve this by making it apparent to the Reason that it cannot treat the individual's primary concern, namely his despair. This failure on the part of Reason to understand everything creates a vacuum into which truth as subjectivity

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[23] *Postscript*, 365.

[24] I am grateful to Dr. Madison for this quote which he uses as an epigraph in his book, *Understanding*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1982).

can extend its influence. The limitation of Reason, however, is implicit in the Socratic ignorance, which by discrediting all human knowledge, indirectly demonstrates that there is much that Reason does not understand. This critique of Reason leaves a void of truth which truth as subjectivity can come to occupy if the individual can avoid being offended by its irrationality. "Blessed is he whosoever is not offended in me" is the fundamental message of *Training in Christianity*.

How does the acceptance of the claim that Reason must play a limited role in the life of the individual determine the pattern of one's life? And just what are the features of the pattern of the Socratic and Christian lives, lives built around the thesis that truth is subjectivity? When faced with the task of understanding what is common to the Socratic life and the life of the Christian, we would do well to keep in mind the following words from *Training in Christianity*:

> When a man so lives that he recognizes no higher standard for his life than that provided by the understanding, his whole life is relativity, labour for a relative end; he undertakes nothing unless the understanding, by the aid of probability, can somehow make clear to him the profit and loss and give answer to the question, why and wherefore. It is different with the absolute. At the first glance the understanding ascertains that this is madness.[25]

The chief idea contained in this passage is by now familiar to us. We have come across the opposition between the understanding and madness, and the terms, 'relativity' and 'absolute'; but these ideas, when looked at closely, are seen to be an unavoidable result of our starting

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[25] *Training*, 118.

point, namely that of the philosophical ignorance of the Socrates of *Irony*. All of Kierkegaard's work, I would suggest, centers on the possibility of finding an 'absolute', an archimedian point or absolute certainty in this finite world around which one could build a life. The point of departure for all of his philosophical efforts, however, is that this possibility is the "illusion of stupidity", which he defines as "the chimerical notion that there is something certain in a finite world."[26] This does not mean, however, that his interest in an absolute is therefore abandoned. He merely - if it is appropriate to say 'merely' - he merely gives up the idea of finding an absolute by means of the understanding. This is to say no more than that he has become subjective, if only because objectivity proved unfit for his requirements. The developed Socrates of the *Postscript* is also concerned with the absolute; but what is remarkable about Socrates, and it is this that is reponsible for the similarities to be found between his mode of life and that of the Christian, is the method by which he approaches the absolute. He approaches it subjectively, with the passion of the infinite, fully aware of the fact that in so doing he was acting without the consent of the understanding, which implies the recognition of a higher standard for his life than that provided by the understanding. 'Who would abandon the Reason in this way?', it might be asked. 'Who would be willing to start along this slippery slope that ends in madness?' The answer to this question is: that person who has passed through the pathetic dialectic. What remains to be seen is how it was that Kierkegaard came to have this view of Socrates, and in particular, just

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[26] *Postscript*, 409.

how *accute* his madness or folly was in comparison to the ultimate madness, that of the true Christian.

Kierkegaard writes in the *Postscript* that, although Socrates was a wise man, "his first proposition is from the standpoint of worldly wisdom a piece of lunacy, since it executes the movement of infinity."[27] This 'movement of infinity' is undergone by that individual who has passed through irony which marks the boundary between the aesthetic and ethical stages or spheres of life. What distinguishes the ethical life from that of the aesthete is the presence of an absolute requirement which shapes the pattern of the life of the individual who recognizes this requirement. But, as already mentioned, there is no such absolute for the understanding for which all is relativity. Any recognition of an absolute will involve the element of risk that characterizes truth as subjectivity and will make of the life that follows the absolute's requirements a venture. It is this type of life that Kierkegaard sees as essentially Socratic. In *Irony* this is already noted. When speaking of proofs for the immortality of the soul Socrates says that, "he may venture to believe," and that, "he ought to charm himself... with such things."[28] In the *Concluding Postscript*, and again in the context of belief in immortality, Kierkegaard writes that Socrates

> puts the question objectively in a problematic manner: *if* there is an immortality.... On this "*if*" he risks his entire life, he has the courage to meet death, and he has with the passion of the infinite so determined the pattern of his life that it must be found acceptable - *if* there is an

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[27]*Ibid.*, 409.

[28]Soren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 140.

immortality.[29]

This willingness to risk one's entire life on an objective uncertainty was what attracted Kierkegaard to Socrates. He also saw that it was this willingness to ignore the dictates of the understanding that is crucial if one is to enter Christianity. In a revealing entry in the Journal Kierkegaard comments on this:

> Socrates could not prove that the soul was immortal. He merely said: This matter occupies me so much that I will order my life as though immortality were a fact - should it prove to be wrong, *eh bien*, then I won't regret my choice; for this is the only matter I am concerned about. What a great help it would be already in Christendom if someone said, and acted accordingly: I don't know if Christianity is true, but I will order my life as if it were, stake my life thereon - then if it proves not to be true, *eh bien*, I don't regret my choice, for it is the only matter I am concerned about.[30]

Let us now examine the features that make up the pattern of the Socratic and Christian lives in an effort to underline the essential similarities and differences. The essential similarity is that an absolute is approached subjectively. The essential difference lies in the nature of the absolute approached, the Socratic absolute being an objective *uncertainty*, that the soul is immortal, whereas the Christian absolute is an objective *absurdity*, that God became a man and yet retained his divinity. Both of these absolutes, however, are consistent with our point of departure, philosophical ignorance; the difference lies in the distance travelled from the point of departure in the direction of inwardness.

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[29] *Postscript*, 180.

[30] Soren Kierkegaard, *The Diary of Soren Kierkegaard*, ed. Peter Rohde, (U.S.A.: Citadel Press, 1960), 125.

Both lives are characterized by their objective qualification as folly. This is so because, first of all, it is imprudent to act on an objective uncertainty or absurdity, and secondly because both positions are paradoxical. Now what needs to be recognized in regard to the paradox is that there are two levels of the paradoxical, the Socratic paradox being the milder of the two. The Socratic paradox arises from the fact that an eternal truth, the Socratic absolute, is related to an individual in time. The Christian paradox arises from the fact that it too claims to be related to an eternal truth while in time. But it goes beyond this 'first level' paradox to the second level because of the nature of the eternal truth itself. In the case of the Socratic eternal truth, there was nothing paradoxical about the eternal truth itself since there is no contradiction contained in the proposition that the soul is immortal. However, the Christian eternal truth is itself paradoxical in that it does contain a contradiction within its proposition. There is an infinite difference in quality between man and God and yet they are said to be combined in the God/man.

This paradoxical nature of both positions leads to the next similarity. To gain and to maintain the Socratic position requires a certain degree of inwardness which is born of the realization of the objective uncertainty of the truth which is taken as the absolute. This inwardness Kierkegaard sees as being analogous to the inwardness required by Christian faith. Here Kierkegaard says that Socrates has faith *sensu laxiori* while preserving faith *sensu strictissimo* for the Christian. He is quick to point out that the difference is a result of the degree to which the understanding is strained, it being far weaker in the case of Socrates than it is with the Christian:

> When Socrates believed that there was a God,[31] he held fast to the objective uncertainty with the whole passion of his inwardness, and it is precisely in this contradiction and in this risk, that faith is rooted. Now it is otherwise. Instead of the objective uncertainty, there is here a certainty, namely, that objectively it is absurd; and this absurdity, held fast in the passion of inwardness, is faith. The Socratic ignorance is as a witty jest in comparison with the earnestness of facing the absurd; and the Socratic existential inwardness is as Greek light-mindedness in comparison with the grave strenuosity of faith.[32]

The final similarity is closely related to the martyrdom that both Socrates and Christ were willing to endure. Common to both lives is the problem of Offense, which is inseparable from the problem of the relation between reason and faith. Offense, as mentioned above, is the result of the 'unhappy relationship' between the Reason and the Paradox, or in other words, the understanding and faith. This unhappy relationship, however, can arise both within an individual and between an individual and his society. The offensiveness of a position again depends on the degree to which the understanding is strained. In *Training in Christianity*, Kierkegaard outlines three types of offense contained in the God/man, one of which is shared by Socrates. Two of these types of offense, offense *sensu strictissimo*, however, are peculiar to the God/man.

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[31]Kierkegaard considers two uncertain beliefs that he thinks Socrates had adopted, one being the immortality of the soul, the other the belief in God, as is clear from this passage. I have misgivings about this belief in God that Kierkegaard attributes to Socrates because it seems inconsistent with what he says elsewhere, in particular in *The Sickness Unto Death*, where Socrates' definition of sin is considered. The difficulty I have is that Socrates' definition is rejected as being incomplete because Socrates did not consider himself as existing before God, an essential determination of sin in Kierkegaard's eyes. I cite this passage in any case as it pertains to the point I am presently making.

[32]*Postscript*, 188.

Only the last type of offense, offense '*sensu laxiori*', can be given by a simple human being with no pretensions to divinity. The first two have to do with being offended either by the fact that God has become a lowly man, or by the fact that this lowly man claims to be God. These two forms need not concern us as Socrates is not directly related to them. The offense that can be given by Socrates, and was also given by Christ, arises from the impression that an individual takes himself to be above the established order, which is seen by the establishment as a challenge to its authority. (We have already seen that Kierkegaard considers the individual's private relationship with God the absolute, whereas the individual's relationship with the world is relative.) This was indeed the impression that the Athenians had of Socrates who was charged with "corrupting the minds of the young, and of believing in deities of his own invention instead of the Gods recognized by the state."[33] Indeed, Kierkegaard makes much of the conflict that arose between Socrates and the state (we will recall Kierkegaard's three figures that are involved in the passing of one substantiality and the coming of another where Socrates was seen to be in an entirely antagonistic frame of mind with respect to the state.) Here the offense is both a political one and one that relates to the conflict between the understanding and faith. At issue here is the question that inevitably will displease the powers that be. The question: is the individual higher than the state? This question can be reformulated as: What is the highest standard for life?, or, to use the words of Tolstoy, What is it that men live by? Is it the understanding, which can be achieved through a collective effort of

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[33]*Apology*, 24 b.

reasoning individuals and represented by the state? Or is it subjectivity, complete with the perils of personal idiosyncrasies? When an individual appears to place himself above the state, as Socrates appears to have done, the natural question from the state's point of view then becomes, "What does this individual imagine he is, does he imagine perhaps that he is God, or that he has a direct relationship with God, or does he concede that he is a mere man?"[34] Such was the type of offense Christ gave when he was seen to be a challenge to the established order of the Pharisees. Again, this type of offense can be given by anyone and need not be reserved for the God/man. However it is related to the issue of the conflict between the understanding and faith, between objectivity and subjectivity, between the many, the state, and the private individual.

It should be clear by now how Kierkegaard's actual Socrates could be seen as leading a life that prefigured that of the Christian. It should also be clear how he could be used to serve as a preparatory stage in the development of the individual as he proceeds from Idealism to Christianity. Behind both these claims is the fact that the Socratic and Christian lives both demand recognition of a higher standard for life than the understanding. Once the standards of the understanding are put aside, an absolute can be approached subjectively with the 'passion of the infinite'. An absolute was impossible for the understanding to attain once the doctrine of Recollection had been abandoned. An absolute requirement then generates the other features of the Socratic and

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[34] *Training*, 87.

Christian pattern. First, the individual sees himself as higher than the state since, by virtue of his subjectivity, he possesses an absolute while the state can only boast relative requirements. Second, we have the paradoxes of increasing strenuousness. Third, there is the presence of faith *sensu laxiori* and *sensu strictissimo*. And finally, there is the offense given by this life governed by truth as subjectivity, again *sensu laxiori* and *sensu strictissimo*.

I started this Chapter with the intention of showing that Socrates himself attempted to cure the sickness he had discovered. But since I had already successfully isolated the sickness (despair) and the treatment Kierkegaard would recommend for it (Christianity), it might have appeared that the physician/patient metaphor had already served its purpose. But now that I have presented Socrates' own treatment of the sickness, I hope it is clear that Socrates had more to offer Kierkegaard than a diagnosis, helpful though it is. The remedy of Christianity, being as extreme as it is, is almost impossible for a speculative philosopher to entertain with any seriousness. (Let us not forget that the *Concluding Postscript* was written with the intent of leading speculative philosophers away from where they were, namely, in some form of Idealism, or humanism, or some such position in which the highest standard for life is provided by the understanding, into Christianity.) Socrates, in this regard, was not only useful in securing Kierkegaard a hearing for his remedy, since philosophers are more likely to consider the words of a reputable ancestor than those of a raving Apostle (consider how Paul was received by the sophisticated Roman audience). Nor was his usefulness confined to discovering and producing the essential condition in the patient, i.e. despair. He was

also useful in preparing the individual for the remedy that would otherwise most likely be ignored or scorned. By presenting a similar remedy but in a more palatable form, he provides the individual with the means to slip far more easily into a life governed by subjectivity.

CHAPTER IV

KIERKEGAARD'S IDENTIFICATION WITH SOCRATES

Kierkegaard's understanding of Socrates may appear to be just a fragment of Kierkegaard's thought. In the larger context of the whole Kierkegaardian project, however, this understanding of Socrates can help us understand Kierkegaard himself. I believe that the understanding of Socrates I have presented in Chapters Two and Three sheds much light on the Kierkegaardian project as a whole. This is so because Socrates serves as a guide and model for Kierkegaard, and because Kierkegaard wants to reproduce the effects of Socrates on modern day readers. Understanding Kierkegaard's understanding of Socrates is helpful, therefore, because *Kierkegaard's project as a whole is an embodiment of this understanding.*

To show that Kierkegaard's work is an embodiment of his understanding of Socrates we need to consider the purpose behind the Kierkegaardian literary project in general, and show that there is a link between his understanding of Socrates and the goal of his literary production. The importance of being clear as to Kierkegaard's purpose is due to the fact that Kierkegaard not only understood Socrates, but, as I will show, that he understood Socrates in the sense that he embodied, or 'reduplicated', this understanding in his own life. It then becomes important to determine how Socrates could be useful in achieving the end that Kierkegaard envisaged for his whole production. That Kierkegaard modeled himself on Socrates is in fact another

argument, perhaps my strongest argument, for my interpretation of Kierkegaard's understanding of Socrates. Throughout this thesis I have been trying to put forward my understanding of Kierkegaard's Socrates as a precursor to Christianity. The other initially plausible interpretation that stems from the *Fragments* and the linking of Socrates to the doctrine of Recollection is that Socrates is a rational alternative to Christ. Thus we have an either/or: Socrates as precursor of or as rational alternative to Christianity. I suggest that consideration of Kierkegaard's purpose and his identification with Socrates provide us with the means to choose a side of this either/or.

Consideration of Kierkegaard's purpose and identification with Socrates leads one to ask certain questions. For instance, Does it make any sense that Kierkegaard would identify with an idealist, or a Socrates that could be seen as a rational alternative to Christ, when this runs contrary to his stated objectives? On the other hand, what, after all, could be a better description of Kierkegaard than to say that he saw himself as yet another 'preparer of the way' for the coming of Christianity? My point is that if we wish to find the Socrates that Kierkegaard approached with 'palpitating enthusiasm', we should look at what Kierkegaard himself became, imitation being the sincerest form of flattery. Thus to further support my interpretation of Kierkegaard's Socrates, I will want to show first that it makes sense that Kierkegaard would model himself on Socrates as I have presented him in the preceding chapters. Then I will want to establish that he in fact did so.

To demonstrate the reasonableness of the claim that Kierkegaard modeled himself on Socrates we must be clear as to the general purpose

behind his whole literary production. I will begin this discussion of Kierkegaard's general purpose and the usefulness of Socrates in this regard with three passages from *The Sickness Unto Death*. Kierkegaard says in this work that,

> Christendom's basic trouble is really Christianity, that the teaching about the God-man... is profaned by being preached day in and day out, *that the qualitative difference between God and man is pantheistically abolished* (first in a highbrow way through speculation, then in a lowbrow way in the highways and byways.)[1]

Having found 'Christendom's basic trouble', Kierkegaard focuses on the problem of the 'qualitative difference between God and man'. The qualitative difference between God and man is a function of their respective natures, God being infinite and eternal, and man being a finite existing individual. This difference in modes of being has a direct bearing on the extent to which an Absolute truth can be known. God, being eternal, possesses truth, or rather *is* the truth, and is in no need of help with respect to the truth. Whereas man, by virtue of his finitude, is in a state of ignorance; consequently, man is in desperate need of help with respect to the truth, even if he is unaware of this need. Kierkegaard writes:

> Christianity teaches that everything essentially Christian depends solely on faith; therefore it wants to be precisely a Socratic, God-fearing ignorance, which by means of ignorance guards faith against speculation, *keeping watch so that the gulf of qualitative difference between God and man may be maintained as it is in the paradox and faith*, so

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[1]Soren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 117. My italics.

> that God and man do not, even more dreadfully than ever in paganism, do not merge in some way, philosophice, poetice, etc., into one - in the system.[2]

The first point to note here is that Kierkegaard is concerned to maintain the recognition of the qualitative difference between God and man. The second is that Socrates, or rather Socratic ignorance, is the means by which this recognition can be maintained. This quotation again confirms what we already knew, namely, that there is a direct connection between ignorance and faith, the link having been fully explored in Chapter Two and referred to as the 'pathetic dialectic'. We also see that the maintenance of the 'qualitative difference between God and man' depends upon the correct understanding of the means by which man comes to relate himself to the truth. The two competing means that have been in conflict throughout this essay are Recollection and Faith. What lies behind this conflict is the correct relationship between man and God, between man and the Absolute, a relationship which is put in jeopardy when men overestimate their innate ability to possess absolute knowledge. In effect, those who maintain the viability of the doctrine of Recollection have no need at all of a God as savior in the Christian sense. As idealists, they think they are able to relate themselves to the absolute truth without His intervention. There is certainly no need of an absurd God who poses as savior and healer if the qualitative difference between God and man has been done away with. However, by now we are all too familiar with the Kierkegaardian starting point that absolute knowledge in the objective sense is impossible for human beings, if only because of

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[2] *Ibid.*, 99. Again, my italics.

our being in time and always in the process of becoming. (We will consider the importance of Sin in a moment.) But when this fundamental fact is forgotten; when we lose sight of the distinction between what we do know and what we do not; when we do not accept the fact that there are some things which surpass human understanding and 'absent-mindedly' transform ourselves into something more than human; then, as Kierkegaard would say, "all is confusion." But who else was more aware of the limitations on human knowledge than Socrates? And if it is the recognition of this limitation on our knowledge that is so necessary to the Kierkegaardian project, how could a Socrates connected to the doctrine of Recollection be anything but a target for Kierkegaard's attacks and derision?

If the first passage from *The Sickness Unto Death* gives us the problem (maintenance of the recognition of the qualitative difference between God and man) and the second gives the solution (Socratic, God-fearing ignorance), the third passage confirms that Kierkegaard was sure about the solution required:

> Popular opinion maintains that the world needs a republic, needs a new social order and a new religion -*but no one considers that what the world, confused simply by too much knowledge, needs is a Socrates.* Of course, if anyone thought of it, not to mention if many thought of it, he would be less needed. Invariably, what error needs most is always the last thing it thinks of - quite naturally, for otherwise it would not, after all, be error.[3]

The guiding question or concern for Kierkegaard was the problem of how to become a Christian. This is made clear in the *Concluding*

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[3]*Ibid.*, 92.

Postscript and repeatedly in *The Point of View.* His study of the problem of becoming a Christain was not just a personal matter, however. It was part of his overall project of reintroducing Christianity into Christendom.[4] Furthermore, it is the 'highbrow' speculation that does away with the distinction between God and man that Kierkegaard *attacks* since it prevents the correct relationship between God and man from obtaining, thereby preventing the possibility of Christianity. The Socratic starting point of philosophical ignorance is both the essential mechanism by which to make this all important distinction, and the beginning of the pathetic dialectic that leads to the development of the condition required for the possibility of faith, namely, despair. Thus not only do we know that Kierkegaard thought the world needed a Socrates, we know how it was that Socrates could be of help. In view of this we have good reason to assume that Kierkegaard's work requires a Socrates, or some one capable of reproducing his effects. And further, we know that of the two possible Socrates, only the Socrates as precursor of Christianity is suited to bring about the end Kierkegaard desired.

Now the main point I want to make in this Chapter is that Kierkegaard took it upon himself to play the part of Christendom's Socrates. This point is not difficult to establish as Kierkegaard says as much in his famous *Attack upon "Christendom"*:

> The only analogy I have before me is Socrates. My task is a Socratic task, to revise the definition of what it is to be a Christian. For my part I do not call myself a "Christian" (thus keeping the ideal free), but I am able to make it

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[4]Soren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View* (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), 23.

evident that the others are that still less than I.[5]

Even if Kierkegaard had not said directly that his task was a Socratic one, one could hardly miss the Socratic tone of the last sentence. Kierkegaard was also aware that he was able to produce the effects associated with Socrates. In *Training in Christianity* Kierkegaard's works are said to reproduce the 'sting of the gadfly' as they disclose, to the reader's displeasure, just how difficult it is to become a true Christian.[6] He also takes care to point out at certain times just how he is similar to Socrates, purposely drawing our attention to the similarites that the reader might not notice on his own. He tells us, for example, in *The Point of View*, that this work is "a public attestation; not a defence or an apology." The significance of this is pointed out immediately: "In this respect, truly, if in no other, I believe that I have something in common with Socrates."[7] Here Kierkegaard appears to be linking *The Point of View* with the *Apology* (the dialogue we know he considers to present the purely Socratic) by drawing our attention to the common spirit in which both 'apologies' were carried out (Socrates insisted that he would not weep and wail to gain the sympathy of the jurors: in like fashion, Kierkegaard states that he is just explaining his work, not apologizing for it). Another similarity one might also attribute some importance to is that it is in these works that both thinkers 'come clean'

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[5]Soren Kierkegaard, *Attack Upon "Christendom"* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 283.

[6]Soren Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 68.

[7]*The Point of View*, 6.

as to the nature of their work. Thus from these passages alone it would appear to make sense to see Kierkegaard as Christendom's Socrates. But the stongest argument for this identification is the deep similarity and compatibility of their thought and missions.

There are at least two reasons for Kierkegaard's choosing to adopt the role of Socrates given his interest in reintroducing Christianity into Christendom. The first, and in my estimation the most important, is that the Socratic life, as we have seen, can be understood as a preparatory stage on the way to what Kierkegaard understood to be the true Christianity of the New Testament. Thus Socrates so understood serves very well as an introduction to the life of the Christian. The substance of this introduction is, in the last analysis, a reminder of what it means to be an existing individual. We will recall that Kierkegaard thought that his contemporaries had forgotten what it meant to be human beings,[8] a forgetting that led to the blurring of the distinction between God and man. However, the great merit of Socrates, of course, was that he knew better than anyone what it meant to be a human being and was thus able to guard against such a forgetting. (Kierkegaard refers to himself and to Socrates as "spys" in the service of God whose business it is to keep a watchful eye out for just such an occurrence.[9]) We will also recall from *The Concept of Anxiety* that the task Kierkegaard had set for himself was to secure a thorough knowledge of human life which was needed *before* there could be any question of completing a Christian

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[8]Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), 216.

[9]Soren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1965) 77.

view of life.[10] The fact that this Socratic understanding of human life prepares one for the life of the Christian is precisely why Kierkegaard was so enamoured with Socrates and why Kierkegaard saw him as so necessary for Modern Europe. It stands to reason, therefore, that Kierkegaard would try to provide his age with what he thought it really needed: another Socrates.

If the first reason for Kierkegaard's identification with Socrates had to do with philosophical content, the second has to do with the method whereby the content was to be communicated. The method of communication, however, was dependent upon the nature of their missions. Socrates' divine mission was to show that Athenians who thought they knew something in fact did not. His was a fight against the illusion that the Athenians had knowledge. Kierkegaard's work was similar in that he too was fighting against an illusion, the illusion that the Established Church of his day was the Church of the New Testament. In his case, however, it was a double illusion because, as we have mentioned above, he thought that his contemporaries did not understand what it meant to be human, let alone what it meant to be a Christian. Thus error was stacked upon error, the misunderstanding of the human condition leading to the misunderstanding of the relationship between God and man. But it is the fact that both Socrates and Kierkegaard were fighting illusions that led to Kierkegaard's adoption of the Socratic methods of interacting with his contemporaries. One of the chief characteristics of the Socratic method was its indirectness, its irony. As Kierkegaard writes in *The Point of View*, an indirect communication was

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[10]Soren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 191.

necessary because:

> direct communication presupposes that the receiver's ability to receive is undisturbed. But here such is not the case; an illusion stands in the way. That is to say, one must first of all use the caustic fluid. But this caustic means negativity, and negativity understood in relation to the communication of the truth is precisely the same as deception.[11]

He repeats this idea in these words: "An illusion can never be destroyed directly, and only by indirect means can it be radically removed."[12] He also writes, "A direct attack only strengthens a person in his illusion, and at the same time embitters him."[13] Thus from Socrates Kierkegaard received valuable instruction on what it means to be a human being, reason enough for his life-long admiration; but he also received intruction on how to go about putting this knowledge to work for the benefit of the community. Thus we can see why Kierkegaard would have modeled himself on Socrates both at the level of the philosophical content and at the level of the method whereby this content was communicated.

It is not, however, within the scope of this work to treat fully the Socratic techniques of communication. Such an exposition would require treatment of such issues as the nature of indirect communication, the use of an incognito and the element of deception, and of the guiding principle of finding one's audience where it is and beginning to lead them to Christianity from there. For our present purpose, namely,

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[11] *The Point of View*, 40.

[12] *Ibid.*, 24.

[13] *Ibid.*, 25.

establishing the motivation for Kierkegaard's identification with Socrates, it is sufficient simply to note the fact that the use of indirect communication is another instance of Kierkegaard's conscious modeling of himself on Socrates and that it is understandable that he should have done so. It is conceivable, however, that some might think that it is the maieutic method alone that Kierkegaard borrowed from Socrates, and that his admiration for Socrates could be explained solely on that basis. This would be consistent with the reading that the Socrates of Kierkegaard is the Socrates of the *Fragments*, the idealist who holds to the doctrine of Recollection. I do not think this is a tenable position, however. Apart from all the textual evidence I have presented against this understanding of Kierkegaard's Socrates, it can also be argued that these techniques of communication were *not* the essential contribution of Socrates to the Kierkegaardian project. I think this is a tenable position for the simple reason that these techniques of indirect communication were abandoned once Kierkegaard realized they were not working (no one was understanding his pseudonymous works which were thus deprived of their effectiveness.) This led to his very direct attack on the established Church. Yet despite the fact that Kierkegaard started to speak directly in his own voice, his admiration for Socrates never waned. This suggests that there was more to Kierkegaard's use of Socrates than the method of communication. Kierkegaard also began to have doubts as to the moral correctness of this method of communication which again tempered his enthusiasm; but again these doubts did not detract from Kierkegaard's enthusiasm for Socrates.

So far I have been arguing in support of the idea that Kierkegaard modeled himself on Socrates as I have presented him on the

grounds that it makes sense, given the similarity of their views and missions, and on the grounds that Kierkegaard says as much in his own words. But let me take a moment to pursue this idea of identification further just to see the extent to which Kierkegaard carried out this modeling. In the later works Kierkegaard becomes more and more attached to the idea of martyrdom, one of the features of the pattern of the Socratic and Christian lives. Martyrdom represents the last stage in the life of an individual who has now rejected all temporal concerns for those of the Absolute, and as a consequence comes to suffer at the hands of men, as did Socrates and Christ. Kierkegaard emphasizes repeatedly that he and Socrates, as religious men, were willing to take the consequences of serving their personal truths:

> [Religious men] know well that Christianity is and is commonly called the practical religion, and know too that the 'Pattern', and the relative patterns constantly being formed in correspondense with it, each of them individually, attained, at the cost of many years of exertion, of labour, of disinterestedness, the end of becoming as nothing in this world, of being derided, mocked, &c., which to a politician may seem the highest degree of unpracticality, whereas even a pagan, and precisely that 'practical philosopher' of antiquity, was one who declared himself head over heels in love with this unpracticality.[14]

Indeed, as far as Kierkegaard was concerned, the sign of having lived in accordance with the truth is that one becomes a "sacrifice".[15] Kierkegaard makes much of Socrates' martyrdom, calling him "the only

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[14] *Ibid.*, 109.

[15] *Attack Upon "Christendom"*, 290.

true martyr to intellectuality"[16], and "essentially unpopular" and heroic because he was willing to pursue an idea "to such an extent...[that] he would go to his death".[17] Kierkegaard also likes to talk of his own sufferings at the hands of the crowd, which he links to the fact that he was never like others.[18] He took comfort from the fact that he was not unlike Socrates in being considered an oddity.[19] He also appears to take pride in the fact that he never shied away from such suffering. In fact it might be thought that he actively sought it out. He writes repeatedly about the degree of 'self-denial' and 'self-humiliation' required to carry out his literary work, and never, it should be pointed out, with any bitterness or regret.[20] Thus Kierkegaard seems to have thought along similar lines to those of Socrates, and in addition, to have tried to live after the fashion of Socrates as well.

One can understand the reasons for Kierkegaard's identification with Socrates insofar as philosophical content and method are concerned. One might also see it as reasonable, and perhaps an inescapable result of his thought that he should choose to suffer for his truth as did Socrates and Christ. The extent of this identification can be taken to extremes, however, as is the case with the final instance I will mention. Kierkegaard seems to have conscientiously stuck to the example of Socrates, at least insofar as things human were concerned; but he goes

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[16]*Ibid.*, 283.

[17]Soren Kierkegaard, *The Diary of Soren Kierkegaard*, ed. by Peter Rohde (United States: Citadel Press, 1960), 122.

[18]*Attack Upon "Christendom"*, 285.

[19]*The Point of View*, 61.

[20]*Ibid.*, 8, 27, and 35.

a step beyond this type of conformity and gets Socrates to conform to him, or perhaps more correctly, to his new 'Teacher'. In *The Point of View* he writes, "It is true, he [Socrates] was not a Christian; that I know, and yet I am throughly convinced that he has become one."[21] It is as though he cannot bear to be at odds with Socrates, and to preserve their agreement he will even postulate a posthumous conversion of Socrates. Remarks like this make it difficult to understand why anyone would ever think that there was an either/or between the humanism of Socrates and the teaching of Christ as far as Kierkegaard was concerned. All that I have found leads one to conclude that Kierkegaard saw the two not only as compatible but as complementary.[22]

I have now said enough to account for Kierkegaard's life-long admiration of Socrates, to establish the motivation for his identification with Socrates, and the fact that he carried out this identification in his literary production and in his life. And given Kierkegaard's purpose

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[21]*Ibid.*, 41.

[22]There is another instance of identification that is just odd enough to warrant mention, if only in a footnote. It would seem that even the symptoms of their approaching deaths were similar. Brandt tells us in his biography of Kierkegaard that "All that seems clear is that there was a paralysis, which began in the legs and gradually spread to the rest of his body." *Soren Kierkegaard: His Life and Works* (Copenhagen: Det Danske Selskab with The Press and Information department of the Danish foreign office, 1963), 102. These symptoms are reminiscent of those that Socrates suffered after drinking the hemlock: "The man - he was the same who had administered the poison - kept his hand upon Socrates, and after a little while examined his feet and legs, then pinched his foot hard and asked if he felt it. Socrates said no. Then he did the same to his legs, and moving gradually upward in this way let us see he was getting cold and numb. Presently he felt him again and said that when it reached his heart, Socrates would be gone." [Phaedo, 117 e] I am certainly not suggesting anything sinister in the manner of Kierkgaard's death, but merely commenting on the degree to which he was able to remain true to the model of Socrates.

behind the literary production and his identification with Socrates, it seems clear that the Socrates he chose as his model was the Socrates I have been describing as a precursor of Christianity. It will not be necessary to explain further why Kierkegaard so admired Socrates as this has become abundantly clear; but before closing I do want to say a few words concerning the move beyond Socrates, although this too has received some treatment in our discussion of the cure of Christianity. Indeed, the move beyond Socrates is now understood to be the aim of the whole Kierkegaardian project, its very raison d'être. To understand this move, however, we need to be clear as to Kierkegaard's relationship to both Socrates and Christ.

I think we can safely say that the Kierkegaardian starting point of philosophical ignorance and his indirect method are wholly Socratic, but that the positive content of his work is Christian. This allows us to understand the relationship that Kierkegaard maintained both to Socrates and to Christ. They are the two authorities that guide his thought and action. Socrates taught him what it means to be human and how to communicate this understanding; Christ on the other hand provided the positive teaching that is the cure for the human condition. I think it is with this in mind that we can make sense of Kierkegaard's statement that one difference between Socrates and Christ is that Socrates did not know what his help amounted to, whereas Christ was fully aware of the value of what he had to offer, He being "the only one who is able to help, and to help with the one thing needful, to save from the sickness which is in the truest sense mortal".[23] My reading of this is that

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[23]Soren Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 19720), 11.

although Socrates helped pave the way for Christianity, by not being privy to the Christian teachings he had no idea what end he was serving, or if he was serving any end at all. If we accept this, we can say that Kierkegaard, insofar as he modeled himself on Socrates, is a Socrates who knows what his help amounts to: he serves as one who calls, or perhaps more correctly 'recalls', our attention to the cure that is Christianity. He is akin to Socrates in that he can be no more than Socrates was for other humans, i.e. another human teacher with no more claim to authority than any other. But he goes beyond Socrates insofar as he has access to a teaching that was never available to the ancient Greeks but which Socrates nevertheless anticipated. Kierkegaard summarizes his relationship to these two figures in these words from *The Point of View*:

> We are reckoning here with two qualitatively different magnitudes, but in a formal sense I can very well call Socrates my teacher - whereas I have only believed, and only believe, in One, the Lord Jesus Christ.[24]

It is not hard to imagine someone holding a similar opinion of Kierkegaard himself. One can easily imagine a reader of Kierkegaard saying these same words but substituting 'Kierkegaard' for 'Socrates'. In any case, given such an understanding of Socrates and Christ there is little mystery left in the seemingly contradictory position of desiring to go beyond Socrates and yet continuing to praise him as the highest of human beings.

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[24] *The Point of View*, 41.

I began my study of Kierkegaard's relationship to Socrates with the intention of determining why it was that Kierkegaard was so enthusiastic about Socrates. This was the first question I had to deal with before I could hope to answer the second, namely, why was Kierkegaard so intent on going beyond Socrates. We might now consider this question as already answered given the understanding of Socrates I have outlined above. If Socrates is seen as essentially a transitional figure in the stages of the life of an individual on the road to Christianity then there is nothing mysterious about the desire to move beyond, save the means by which such a transition is to be achieved. Indeed the move beyond the merely human is the central concern of the Kierkegaardian project, and the greater part of this thesis has been a description of how the move beyond is to be effected in others. But it will do us no harm to be clear as to the reasons for Kierkegaard's insistence on this move. It might be thought, however, that to give reasons for this move would be paradoxical, indeed even anti-Kierkegaardian, given that Kierkegaard insists that the acceptance of Christianity demands a leap of faith that cannot be supported by rational argument. However, it must be borne in mind that the arguments I will present are not arguments in the usual sense of the word. Arguments usually consist of one or more accepted premises from which a conclusion is derived by means of an accepted rule of inference. The value of the conclusion is then dependent upon the acceptability of the premises and the validity of the inference from the premises to conclusion. Where these arguments break down is in the acceptability of Kierkegaard's premises. No argument can be given, and none is offered, for Kierkegaard's initial acceptance of Christianity. The acceptance of

Christianity is a matter of faith and as such cannot be approached argumentatively. All that can be done is to show that given these assumptions certain conclusions follow as a matter of course.

The first and most obvious reason for the move is the view that the purely human position of Socrates, however great in terms of the human, is nevertheless still despair which, as we have seen, has been defined in terms of one's knowledge of and acceptance of one's self. It is true that in Kierkegaard's opinion Socrates was the first to be aware of his individuality, and as such represented an advancement in our conception of the self. Yet this awareness is not enough to remove despair. It is, on the contrary, as I have tried to show in Chapter Two, the very reason for the beginning of conscious despair. For all Socrates' greatness the nature of the self is still a mystery. Now if this is one's understanding of the nature of the Socratic position, and if one also believes in the Christian teaching of the self, as Kierkegaard does, and further, that it is the ignorance of the nature of the self that is the source of the despair that is the sickness unto death, one will naturally be inclined to move beyond the Socratic position and embrace Christianity. This move, however, is such that one could never come to despise the Socratic position, for it is an essential stage of development of the individual on his way to Christianity. If becoming a Christian is, as Kierkegaard says in *The Point of View*, a process of becoming what one is after having been freed of illusions as to the nature of the self, Socrates could never be forgotten. He represents a crucial part of this process.[25]

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[25] *The Point of View*, 42-43.

Although I am satisfied that the reason for the move beyond the Socratic position into Christianity has to do specifically with Kierkegaard's understanding of Christianity as a cure for the human condition, another reason we might suggest for such a move has to do with the nature of truth as Kierkegaard had come to see it. This is of course not unrelated to the idea of Christianity as cure; it is really the same idea approached from a different angle. We saw that an essential component of the idea of truth as subjectivity was the presence of passion. Passion is a product of the taking of an objective uncertainty as the guiding principle of one's life. We also saw that in its most extreme form truth as subjectivity is indistinguishable from madness. Now if one were to follow these trends to their natural conclusion; if one were to decide to pursue this kind of truth, marked by passion and madness, to the end; it would seem reasonable that one would move beyond the passion and madness of Socrates and embrace Christianity where passion and madness are found in their most developed, that is extreme, state. This want of passion, however, is not unqualified or indiscriminate. Not all passions will do. This is because not all passions are related in a meaningful way to the essential concern of the individual, namely, knowledge of an absolute and knowledge of the self. Thus, it again seems quite reasonable given the Kierkegaardian assumptions to move beyond Socrates and into Christianity. It is in Christianity that one finds the most extreme truth, but one which is at the same time a truth that is relevant to our greatest need.

The last reason I will present is again hard to separate from the central idea of Christianity as cure for the human condition. What drives a wedge between Kierkegaard and Socrates is the Christian

understanding of sin. In my view this is the only serious difference of opinion between Kierkegaard and Socrates, and yet Kierkegaard still calls Socrates' understanding of sin an "intermediate definition"[26], implying that there is, despite its problems, something to this understanding. The Socratic understanding of sin is that sin is ignorance of the good, the assumption being that no one would fail to do the good once the good was known, or conversely, that no one would knowingly do evil. The difficulty with this definition for Kierkegaard is that he came to see sin as primarily a problem of the will and only secondarily as a problem of the understanding. He also came to see sin as the opposite of faith rather than virtue, a perspective totally foreign to Socrates. These differences in their understandings of sin lead to different views on the nature and condition of mankind in general. The essential difference between the Socratic and Kierkegaardian positions is the extent to which humans are thought to be responsible for sin. Socrates was more lenient and optimistic while Kierkegaard rather harsh and pessimistic with respect to human nature and human abilities. Yet despite their differences, sin is still understood by both of them, at least partially, in terms of an individual's *knowledge* of what is good.

According to Kierkegaard[27] Socrates' understanding of sin left man essentially unblemished, '*integer*', because there was no reason as yet for Socrates to consider man inherently sinful. In Kierkegaardian terminology, Socrates was "stamped" only once by existence. This is to say that Socrates, like all humans, was denied the possibility of knowing

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[26] *The Sickness Unto Death*, 88.

[27] *Concluding Postscript*, 184.

an eternal truth objectively by the fact of his finitude alone. There are no shortcomings in man's essential nature that prevent him from recognizing an eternal truth apart from his finitude. And, it is assumed that if such a truth were known, there would be no difficulty on the part of the knower to act in accordance with this truth. Thus sin in the Socratic sense makes no reference to the goodness or badness of man in general. Kierkegaard on the other hand says that this understanding of sin is only partially true, an "intermediate definition". Sin is indeed ignorance of the good, but it is a wilful ignorance. It is this aspect of wilful defiance, completely absent in the Socratic definition, that differentiates the Socratic view of sin from that of Kierkegaard.[28] Kierkegaard writes:

> sin is not a matter of a person's not having understood what is right but of his being unwilling to understand it, of his not willing what is right.[29]

This definition is appropriate for Kierkegaard who now believes that the good has been revealed, and that therefore knowledge of the good is no longer the problem. (Except of course that it is absurd: this was the 'catch' of Chapter Three.) However, the Christian, in Kierkegaardian terminology, is "stamped" twice by existence. Christians are stamped first in Socratic fashion, and second in respect to inherent sinfulness, as it is the will of the individual that condemns him. Thus Christians recognize two obstacles in the way of our coming to an understanding of

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[28] *The Sickness Unto Death*, 93.

[29] *Ibid.*, 95.

the truth, the good, the absolute, 'understanding' here taken first in its regular sense of 'comprehension', and secondly in the Kierkegaardian sense of 'reduplication'. Humans are in 'Error' simply be virtue of their finitude, and more importantly by virtue of their wilful disobedience.

What drove Kierkegaard to a more pessimistic view of man than Socrates' was his loss of confidence in our ability to automatically do the good once the good is comprehended. It is in this transition period between comprehension and action that all manner of interesting things occur. It is here that the will asserts itself and can counteract what has been understood.[30] Basically Kierkegaard says the Greeks were "too happy, too naive,... too sinful" to believe that one could understand something to be right and yet not act accordingly.[31] In fairness to the Greeks, however, it should be said that they were never forced to consider the demands of Christianity, demands that give any reasonable person pause, even if they are accepted as ideals. But it is precisely this failure of the will when faced with the demands of Christianity that alerts the Christian to the presence of sinfulness in man, a notion that never occurred to the Greeks.

Sin in the Christian sense condemns mankind to a greater extent than Socrates had been willing to do, but sin still remains, as far as Kierkegaard is concerned, essentially a lack of faith. This is the other difference in the two understandings of sin. Kierkegaard does not define sin in opposition to virtue as the pagans did, but rather he

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[30] *Ibid.*, 93-95. For an excellent illustration of this struggle in the time between the instant of understanding and the moment action is taken see book VIII of Augustine's *Confessions*.

[31] *Ibid.*, 90.

accepts the Pauline doctrine that sin is everything that does not proceed from faith,[32] thereby broadening the extent of our sin enormously to embrace much that was never considered sinful by Socrates. But to lack faith is not to know that one is in some sense eternal, or, and this is more important, *having been told, knowingly to refuse to accept this understanding of oneself.* It would appear then that being in the state of sin is directly linked to one's refusal to believe what has been made known through the revelation of Christianity.[33] Again, given Kierkegaard's assumptions it would have been impossible for him to remain with Socrates once the revelation of Christianity had become known and accepted. Not just the extent of our sinfulness, but the entire framework for understanding sin had been changed. One cannot remain with the Socratic definition of sin if sin is now understood in terms of one's acceptance and rejection of a faith that was completely unknown to Socrates. Thus Socrates' definition of sin, and consequently, his understanding of the extent and nature of the human dilemma with respect to 'understanding' the good, must give way to a 'fuller' understanding as soon as Christianity is accepted.

This pessimistic view of man provides yet one more reason for the move beyond the Socratic position. I have already pointed out that there is a certain logic in moving from the Socratic truths to those of Christianity by virtue of the increase in passion required for such a move. Kierkegaard's pessimism on its own, however, leads to two conclusions that combined have the effect of diminishing the value of the

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[32] *Ibid.*, 82. Kierkegaard cites Romans 14:23 as his source.

[33] *Ibid.*, 82.

Socratic truths while elevating those of Christianity. All confidence in humanity and in human capabilities is lost once one accepts that human beings are inherently sinful. The importance of this loss of confidence with respect to the problem of truth is twofold. First, our sinfulness undermines the value of any truth of human origin; and second, our very ability to recognize the truth when it is presented to us is put in question. With respect to the problem of Kierkegaard's move beyond Socrates these conclusions have two results. First, the value of Socrates himself is qualified by the fact that he remains subject to the failings of all humanity. Thus whatever value we might attribute to his insights, he cannot be taken as a final authority. And second, the distinguishing feature of truth undergoes an important revision. With the arrival of the consciousness of our inherent sinfulness, all hope of finding truth is placed in the possibility of a divine revelation. But the mark of a divine revelation, a truth untainted by human sinfulness, is that its message must appear to be beyond the imagination and understanding of human beings, and this because humans are thought not to be in the appropriate condition to recognize and understand a divine truth. In other words, if a truth *is* amenable to human understanding; if a truth meets the standards human beings usually use to determine the truth value of a proposition; those are grounds in themselves to reject that truth as not divinely revealed. Another way of saying this is that, being in 'Error', human beings cannot determine what it is we really need. Given this reasoning Christianity will appear more and more attractive because of the absurdity of its doctrines, the very reason it was considered folly by the Greeks of New Testament times.

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