

Kierkegaard Studies

Edited on behalf of the
Søren Kierkegaard Research Centre
by Niels Jørgen Cappelørn and Hermann Deuser

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Kierkegaard's Concept of Irony

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Socratic Irony, Plato's *Apology*, and Kierkegaard's *On the Concept of Irony*

By PAUL MUENCH

Abstract

In this paper I argue that Plato's *Apology* is the principal text on which Kierkegaard relies in arguing for the idea that Socrates is fundamentally an ironist. After providing an overview of the structure of this argument, I then consider Kierkegaard's more general discussion of irony, unpacking the distinction he draws between irony as a figure of speech and irony as a standpoint. I conclude by examining Kierkegaard's claim that the *Apology* itself is "splendidly suited for obtaining a clear concept of Socrates' ironic activity," considering in particular Kierkegaard's discussion of Socrates' remarks about death and his use of Friedrich Ast's commentary to help his readers to discover the irony that he contends runs throughout Socrates' defense speech.¹

Introduction

Kierkegaard's *magister* dissertation, *On the Concept of Irony, with Continual Reference to Socrates*, remains one of the best books ever written about Socrates. In this work Kierkegaard offers an original answer to what ancient philosophy scholars call "the Socratic problem": Kierkegaard argues that we can make best sense of the competing representations of Socrates that have come down to us from antiquity if the fundamental stance that Socrates adopted in life was a stance of irony.² In the process of developing this argument, Kierkegaard not only convincingly defends the value of the portrait of Socrates that we find in Aristophanes' *Clouds*, but more importantly he provides us with a provocative discussion of Plato's *Apology* together with a searching and at times quite chal-

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- 1 My citations frequently include line numbers from the Danish edition and are formatted as follows: *CI*, page number(s) / *SKS* 1, page number(s), line number(s). The present citation is thus: *CI*, 37 / *SKS* 1, 99,5–6 (trans. modified).
 - 2 For a concise, helpful discussion of "the Socratic Problem," see Deborah Nails "Socrates" in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/socrates>).

lenging account of Socratic irony more generally. Despite the philosophical richness of Kierkegaard's text and the originality of his argument, *On the Concept of Irony* has been largely ignored by philosophers, including by those who focus on Socrates and Plato.³ This neglect by philosophers is not simply a part of a larger pattern of neglect from scholars of other academic fields. Literary critics, for example, routinely hail Kierkegaard's dissertation as a groundbreaking work on irony. Wayne Booth calls *On the Concept of Irony* "a splendid book, not likely to be improved on, a book which...has in effect influenced every line" of his own well-known treatise on irony.⁴ Paul de Man goes even further in his praise, claiming that Kierkegaard "wrote the best book on irony that's available."⁵ Nor can the neglect of Kierkegaard's dissertation by philosophers be explained by suggesting that its chief topic – Socratic irony – is such a well understood phenomenon that philosophers simply have no use for a sustained examination of how and to what extent Socrates was an ironist. Gregory Vlastos, for example, once argued that there is "nothing" about Socrates that has been "less well understood" than his irony.⁶ And it remains true that there is very little that has been written on this topic

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- 3 On those rare occasions in which Kierkegaard's dissertation is not ignored by ancient philosophy scholars, it is usually dismissed without argument or serious engagement with Kierkegaard's text. C. D. C. Reeve, e.g., relegates Kierkegaard to a footnote in his work on Plato's *Apology*, calling Kierkegaard's dissertation "a famous but idiosyncratic and unreliable discussion of Socratic irony" (*Socrates in the Apology*, Indianapolis: Hackett 1989, p. 5).
- 4 Wayne Booth *A Rhetoric of Irony*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press 1974, p. xiii.
- 5 Paul de Man "The Concept of Irony" in his *Aesthetic Ideology*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1996, p. 163. See also, e.g., D. C. Muecke *The Compass of Irony*, London: Methuen 1969; J. A. Dane *The Critical Mythology of Irony*, Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1991.
- 6 Gregory Vlastos *Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press 1991, p. 13. In Vlastos' own case, Alexander Nehamas has argued that though Kierkegaard receives little explicit discussion in Vlastos' groundbreaking work on Socrates, his conception of Socrates as an ironist through and through seems to remain an implicit target: "Kierkegaard [...] is not often mentioned in Gregory Vlastos' *Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher*. Nevertheless, the portrait Vlastos paints in this work seems at times to have been composed specifically in order to dispute Kierkegaard's picture" ("Voices of Silence: On Gregory Vlastos' Socrates" in his *Virtues of Authenticity*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1999, p. 83).

that is illuminating.⁷ Why then hasn't *On the Concept of Irony* been given more attention by philosophers?

I discuss in the main body of my paper some of the reasons why I think that Kierkegaard's dissertation may have been neglected by philosophers. It is against this backdrop of neglect, in fact, that I want to suggest that *On the Concept of Irony* deserves to be given a closer look. In my view Kierkegaard's dissertation is an incredibly rich work of philosophy that has much to teach us about Socrates and about Socratic irony.⁸ My aim here is to motivate this claim with the hope of stimulating further reflection about this unusual, sometimes profound work on Socrates. In the process, I will also argue that despite Kierkegaard's celebration of the image of Socrates that we find in Aristophanes' *Clouds*, it is Plato's *Apology* above all that guides his thinking about Socrates throughout his dissertation. My paper has three parts. In the first part I examine the structure of Kierkegaard's argument for his view that Socrates is first and foremost an ironist. I contend that at each stage of this argument Plato's *Apology* is the principal text on which Kierkegaard relies. In the second part I examine Kierkegaard's more general account of irony, and unpack the distinction he draws between irony as a figure of speech and irony as a position or standpoint.⁹ In the third part I examine Kierkegaard's claim that the *Apology* itself is "splendidly suited for obtaining a clear concept of Socrates' ironic activity," considering in particular Kierkegaard's discussion of Socrates' remarks about death and his use of

7 There are, of course, notable exceptions. See, e.g., Gregory Vlastos "Socratic Irony" in *Classical Quarterly* 37, 1987; reprinted in Vlastos *Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, pp. 21–44; Alexander Nehamas *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press 1998; Iakovos Vasiliou "Conditional Irony in the Socratic Dialogues" in *Classical Quarterly* 49, 1998, pp. 456–472. John Lippitt helpfully draws on Vlastos and Nehamas in his discussion of Kierkegaard's conception of Socrates as a subjective thinker. See his "Irony and the Subjective Thinker" in his *Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard's Thought*, London: Macmillan Press 2000, pp. 135–157.

8 For the best recent discussion of *On the Concept of Irony*, see K. Brian Söderquist *The Isolated Self: Truth and Untruth in Søren Kierkegaard's On the Concept of Irony*, Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzel 2007.

9 The Hongs regularly translate "Standpunkt" as "position"; throughout this paper I instead translate this term as "standpoint," though I also sometimes employ the term "stance" to pick out the same thing.

Friedrich Ast's commentary to help his readers to discover the irony that he contends runs throughout Socrates' defense speech.¹⁰

*1. The Argument of Part One of Kierkegaard's Dissertation:
The Importance of Plato's Apology*

Kierkegaard is not the first philosopher people turn to if they are looking for someone who defends his views through argument. While it may be true that the philosophical payoff of many of his texts lies elsewhere, I think his dissertation is a notable exception. There really is a complex and rewarding argument to be found in *On the Concept of Irony*, though it is not easy to discern. One potential obstacle to appreciating Kierkegaard's argument (and so perhaps one reason why his dissertation may have been neglected by philosophers) is the extent to which Kierkegaard is a product of his post-Kantian age: Kierkegaard draws heavily on Hegel in his dissertation and frequently employs Hegelian philosophical terminology. And if that doesn't make things difficult enough for readers, a number of Kierkegaard scholars have complicated matters further by arguing that we shouldn't take what Kierkegaard is doing here at face value. They claim that Kierkegaard's use of Hegel and philosophical argument is itself ironic; an ironic approach to irony. I am not convinced by this ironic reading of Kierkegaard's dissertation, and am inclined to think that this sort of approach may unduly discourage people from doing the hard work that is necessary for truly coming to grips with Kierkegaard's argument.¹¹

For ancient philosophy scholars, another potential obstacle is the superficial impression that the Socrates we find in Aristophanes' *Clouds* is the Socrates most dear to Kierkegaard. One hears that Kierkegaard has championed an ironic Socrates (which sounds fishy) and then one hears further that he has argued that Aristophanes' conception of Socrates is more accurate than either Xenophon's or Plato's conception. Outrageous. Perhaps good for a laugh, but clearly not something worth bothering over, especially if one's main focus is Plato's Socrates. To be sure, there is some

10 *CI*, 37 / *SKS* 1, 99,5–6 (trans. modified).

11 The most plausible defense of the ironic reading of *On the Concept of Irony* can be found in Louis Mackey "Starting from Scratch: Kierkegaard Unfair to Hegel" in his *Points of View: Readings of Kierkegaard*, Tallahassee, Florida: Florida State University Press 1986, pp. 1–22.

textual basis for this impression, and it is not uncommon for Kierkegaard scholars also to be under the false impression that Kierkegaard thinks Aristophanes' *Clouds* is our best source on Socrates. Among the fifteen theses that Kierkegaard attached to his dissertation, those numbered three and seven do jointly seem to support just such a claim:

III. If a comparison is made between Xenophon and Plato, one will find that the first takes too much from Socrates, the second raised him too high; neither of them finds the truth.

VII. Aristophanes has come very close to the truth in his depiction of Socrates.¹²

Yet, as provocative as this claim may seem, I think Kierkegaard makes very clear in his dissertation that he does not in fact think that the *Clouds* is the best text we have for understanding Socrates. Instead, as I'll try to illustrate below, the most important text by Kierkegaard's lights for understanding Socrates is Plato's *Apology*.¹³ Whether or not most scholars who work on Plato's Socrates wind up agreeing with Kierkegaard about how he interprets the *Apology*, I suspect that the vast majority of them would agree that this text is centrally important for our understanding of Socrates. If I am right about the importance of the *Apology* for Kierkegaard's own thinking about Socrates, then I think this provides reason enough for why philosophers might want to consider giving Kierkegaard's dissertation a closer look.

The special status that Kierkegaard assigns to Plato's *Apology* rests on two claims:

- (1) "The *Apology*...precisely as a *historical* document must be assigned a pre-eminent place when the purely Socratic is sought";

12 *CI*, 6 / *SKS* 1, 65,6–8 and 15. At the suggestion of his dissertation committee, Kierkegaard attached fifteen theses to his dissertation that he agreed to defend as part of his overall dissertation defense.

13 Interestingly, while there are a small handful of references to Aristophanes in Kierkegaard's later writings, Kierkegaard never again discusses the *Clouds* in any detail or appeals to this work in his later reflections on Socrates; Plato's *Apology*, on the other hand, arguably remains Kierkegaard's chief Socratic touchstone throughout his life. I consider the importance of the *Apology* for Kierkegaard's manner of conceiving his own Socratic undertaking in "Kierkegaard's Socratic Point of View" in *Kierkegaardiana* 24, 2007, pp. 132–162; an abridged version of this article with a different opening section appeared in *A Companion to Socrates*, ed. by Sara Ahbel-Rappe and Rachana Kamtekar, Oxford: Blackwell 2005, pp. 389–405.

(2) “The whole *Apology* in its entirety is an *ironic* work.”¹⁴

It is the *historical* character of the *Apology* that sets it apart from the other works of Plato, and so in my view excludes it from the scope of the third thesis cited above. While Kierkegaard may think that Aristophanes has come closer to the truth than Xenophon or Plato, Plato’s *Apology* is of an entirely different order for Kierkegaard due to its historical nature (I say more about this below). That the *Apology* is a historical work, however, is not something that Kierkegaard tries to establish; he simply takes this for granted, repeatedly appealing to the fact that “most scholars agree in assigning historical significance in the stricter sense to the *Apology*,” where “we do have, according to the view of the great majority, a historical representation of Socrates’ actuality.”¹⁵ Kierkegaard’s claim that the *Apology* is a thoroughly *ironic* work, on the other hand, is of course quite controversial and goes to the heart of the main argument in his dissertation. If Kierkegaard can convince us that the *Apology* is both a historical work (something that aims at truly representing Socrates) and a work that thoroughly exhibits Socrates’ fundamental stance of irony, then he will have gone a long way towards establishing his main thesis that “irony constituted the substance of [Socrates’] existence.”¹⁶

Kierkegaard’s dissertation divides into two parts of unequal length: “The Standpoint of Socrates, Conceived as Irony” and “On the Concept of Irony.”¹⁷ Part One, which will be my focus here and which Kierkegaard claims deals “solely with Socrates,” is a little more than two-and-a-half times as long as Part Two.¹⁸ It is primarily in this part of his dissertation that Kierkegaard develops his solution to the Socratic problem. Part One has a short introduction, three main chapters, and an appendix entitled “Hegel’s Conception of Socrates.”¹⁹ It’s difficult to find a satisfactory English translation of the titles of the three main chapters, in part, as I’ve gathered from native Danish speakers, because Kierkegaard’s Dan-

14 *CI*, 76 / *SKS* 1, 134,30–32; *CI*, 37 / *SKS* 1, 99,25 (both trans. modified; italics mine). On the historical character of the *Apology*, see also, e.g., *CI*, 160 / *SKS* 1, 210,20–21: “The *Apology*, [...] on the whole, may be assumed to be historically reliable”; *CI*, 66 / *SKS* 1, 126,4–5; *CI*, 79–80 / *SKS* 1, 138,7–12.

15 *CI*, 120 / *SKS* 1, 172,12–13; *CI*, 126 / *SKS* 1, 177,32–33.

16 *CI*, 12 / *SKS* 1, 74,22–23.

17 *CI*, 7 / *SKS* 1, 69; *CI*, 239 / *SKS* 1, 279 (both trans. modified).

18 *CI*, 241 / *SKS* 1, 281,16.

19 *CI*, 219 / *SKS* 1, 263. I have slightly modified the translation, translating “opfattelse” as “conception” rather than “view”; I do this throughout the paper.

ish is a bit unusual here. The best I've been able to come up with is "The Conception's Making Itself Possible," "The Conception's Making Itself Actual," and "The Conception's Making Itself Necessary."²⁰ While this may be overtranslating a bit, I think this helps to bring out Kierkegaard's idea that his conception of Socrates as someone whose existence is "constituted" by irony not only in effect comes into existence over the course of the book, but in some sense brings *itself* into existence before the reader's eyes.²¹ There is a definite movement from the introduction, where Kierkegaard suggests that "it seems impossible" to "secure" a picture of Socrates (or "at least as difficult as to picture a pixie with the cap that makes him invisible"), to the conception's becoming first possible, then actual, then finally necessary.²²

In the introduction to Part One, Kierkegaard claims that what he seeks is "a reliable and authentic conception of Socrates' historical-actual, phenomenological existence."²³ But he thinks that achieving an authentic conception of Socrates is no easy task: Socrates provides anyone who tries to comprehend him with special "difficulties."²⁴ For one thing, he left no writings of his own to which we might turn for help in filtering through the different, often conflicting accounts we have of him. More importantly, he belongs to "the breed of persons with whom the outer as such is not the stopping point."²⁵ Socrates is "not like a [typical] philosopher delivering his opinions in such a way that just the lecture itself" suffices to make clear what he means. Instead, according to Kierkegaard,

20 The Danish titles are: "Opfattelsens Muliggjørelse," "Opfattelsens Virkeliggjørelse," "Opfattelsens Nødvendiggjørelse" (*SKS* 1, 67). The Hongs translate these titles as "The View Made Possible," "The Actualization of the View," and "The View Made Necessary" (*CI*, v). Translating "Virkeliggjørelse" as "actualization" works well, but we then lose the parallel that exists in Danish among the three chapter titles since there do not exist corresponding terms in English with respect to what is possible or necessary (we would need something like "possible-ization" and "necessary-ization").

21 *CI*, 12 / *SKS* 1, 74,22–23. I am indebted to K. Brian Söderquist for helping me to appreciate this point.

22 *CI*, 12 / *SKS* 1, 74,25–27 (trans. modified). On the self-generation of Kierkegaard's conception of Socrates, see especially *CI*, 155–156 / *SKS* 1, 206,5–6 and 24–25 (trans. modified): "In a certain sense [the final conception] has come into existence by means of this reflecting [...];" "This [next] section could be called 'The Conception's Making Itself Actual' because it makes itself actual [*virkeliggjør sig*] through all these historical data."

23 *CI*, 9 / *SKS* 1, 71,17–18 (trans. modified); cf. *CI*, 80 / *SKS* 1, 138,21–23.

24 *CI*, 11 / *SKS* 1, 74.

25 *CI*, 12 / *SKS* 1, 74,7–8.

What Socrates said meant something different. The outer was not at all in harmony with the inner but was rather its opposite, and only under this angle of refraction is he to be comprehended.²⁶

Leaving aside what exactly Kierkegaard means here by the outer and the inner (terms the Hongs, for example, tie to Hegel's *Logic*),²⁷ what is clear is that there is supposed to be something in the nature of Socrates' very existence that makes him especially difficult to comprehend; so difficult, in fact, that Kierkegaard will conclude the introduction to Part One by suggesting that it "seems *impossible*" to secure a satisfactory picture of him.²⁸ Of course, if Kierkegaard is right about there being something about Socrates' nature that makes him especially difficult to comprehend, and he can convince us that he has nevertheless managed to comprehend him (and that he can also help us to achieve a better grasp of this frequently elusive man), then his own achievement will be all the more impressive.

Like the lack of proportion in length between the book's two parts, the chapters of Part One also vary significantly in length (with an approximate proportion of 7:2:1). Together these three chapters present us with several conceptions of Socrates: (1) three contemporary conceptions of him (those of Xenophon, Plato, and Aristophanes); (2) the Athenian state's conception of him; and (3) world history's conception of him. Kierkegaard hopes that by getting us to consider each of these conceptions in turn, we will come to appreciate in an ever increasing fashion just how difficult Socrates is to comprehend: what sort of nature could be the source of all these different conceptions? He will argue that his conception of Socrates' nature is the only one that can satisfactorily answer this question.

Chapter One addresses contemporary writings that fictionally dramatize Socrates in one respect or another (those of Xenophon, Plato, and Aristophanes). Socrates is nearly always a leading character, if not the outright hero. Kierkegaard argues that each of these literary representations of Socrates rests on a "misunderstanding" of his true nature: "Even though we lack direct evidence about Socrates, even though we lack an altogether reliable conception of him, we do have in recompense all the various nuances of misunderstanding."²⁹ For this reason he says that

26 *CI*, 12 / *SKS* 1, 74,9–14.

27 *CI*, 468, footnote 21.

28 *CI*, 12 / *SKS* 1, 74,26 (*italics mine*).

29 *CI*, 128 / *SKS* 1, 180,1–4. See also *CI*, 155 / *SKS* 1, 205,31–32.

“we must use [these sources] rather cautiously, must take care to stop them the instant they carry us away.”³⁰ Kierkegaard, as narrator, acts as a kind of check on any tendency to excess in a given author's writings: “I have myself continually tried to be a third party against each one.”³¹ He does, however, contend that, jointly, these three conceptions do enable us to engage in a kind of triangulation, allowing

...the lines (which in this discussion are always drawn with a sharp eye on the calculation grounded in the reciprocal relation of these three authors) to emerge more clearly and set the limits of the unknown quantity, that position that simultaneously fits and fills the intervening space.³²

By sketching the distortions that he thinks lie in each contemporary representation, Kierkegaard tries to get us in effect to extrapolate backwards from these three fictional dimensions or manifestations of Socrates towards their factual source. This activity gets us to join with him in the search for a conception of Socrates' true nature that could supply us with the “unknown quantity” that would explain such diverse and contradictory depictions.

Kierkegaard's different treatments of Xenophon, Plato, and Aristophanes vary significantly, both in length and in manner of approach.³³ Xenophon receives the briefest consideration since, by Kierkegaard's lights, he is too shallow to detect Socrates' ironic nature:

Xenophon stopped with Socrates' immediacy and thus has definitely misunderstood him in many ways; whereas Plato and Aristophanes have blazed a trail through the tough exterior [recall the contrast between the outer and the

30 *CI*, 155 / *SKS* 1, 205,12–14.

31 *CI*, 155 / *SKS* 1, 205,16–17 (trans. modified).

32 *CI*, 154 / *SKS* 1, 204,8–12 (trans. modified).

33 Kierkegaard justifies why he begins with Xenophon, then treats Plato and closes with Aristophanes as follows: “Some readers may upbraid me for having become guilty of an anachronism by classifying these three conceptions more according to their relation to the idea (the purely historical – the ideal – the comic) than according to time. I think, however, that I am correct in suspending the chronological consideration. But this does not necessarily mean that I want to deprive the Aristophanic conception of the weight it does have because it is closest to Socrates in time. The historical importance it derives from that is increased even more by the report that Plato sent the *Clouds* to Dionysius the Elder and also gave him to understand that he could become acquainted with the Athenian state from it” (*CI*, 154 / *SKS* 1, 204, 24–34; trans. modified).

inner] to a view of the infinity that is incommensurable with the multifarious events of his life.³⁴

Aristophanes, as I noted above, is thought by Kierkegaard to have come close to the truth in his depiction of Socrates. Kierkegaard maintains that “the comic conception” that Aristophanes employs “is an element, in many ways a perpetually corrective element, in making a personality or an enterprise completely intelligible.”³⁵ While Kierkegaard’s treatment of Xenophon is perhaps a bit too quick (and so also a bit unfair), I think his discussion of Aristophanes and the way he incorporates this comic material into his conception of Socrates are part of what is most valuable about Kierkegaard’s contribution to our understanding of Socrates.

Plato receives by far the most detailed treatment by Kierkegaard, and this is one place where the *Apology* plays a central role in his interpretative strategy.³⁶ Kierkegaard raises a question concerning Plato’s relationship to Socrates that is akin to what has often concerned Plato scholars, namely “in the Platonic philosophy, what belongs to Socrates and what belongs to Plato?”³⁷ It is Kierkegaard’s view that Plato himself frequently found it “impossible not to mistake the poetic image [of Socrates] for the historical actuality”; he notes further that “even the ancients were aware of this question of the relation between the actual Socrates and Plato’s poetic version.”³⁸ Kierkegaard contends that within Plato’s dialogues there is a series of what he calls “duplexities” that textually registers a

34 *CI*, 13 / *SKS* 1, 75,7–11. Cf. Kierkegaard’s discussion of Alcibiades’ comparison of Socrates to a Silenus statue (*CI*, 50–51 / *SKS* 1, 110–112; see also Plato *Symposium*, 215A–B; 216D–217A; 221D–222A).

35 *CI*, 128 / *SKS* 1, 179–180 (trans. modified).

36 *CI*, 27–126 / *SKS* 1, 89–177. Kierkegaard’s discussion of Plato has five main sections: (i) “Introductory Observations” (*CI*, 28–41 / *SKS* 1, 90–102); (ii) “In the Earliest Platonic Dialogues the Abstract Terminates in Irony” (*CI*, 41–96 / *SKS* 1, 102–150); (iii) “The Mythical in the Earlier Platonic Dialogues as a Token of a More Copious Speculation” (*CI*, 96–109 / *SKS* 1, 150–162); (iv) “*Republic*, Book One” (*CI*, 109–119 / *SKS* 1, 163–171); (v) “A Justifying Retrospection” (*CI*, 119–126 / *SKS* 1, 171–177). Formatting in the Hong edition obscures the fact that Kierkegaard’s discussion of the first book of the *Republic* is a distinct section (as opposed to being merely a discussion of yet another dialogue). Unlike the individual dialogues discussed in section two, the heading here should be centered to indicate the parallel with the sections that precede or follow it.

37 *CI*, 31 / *SKS* 1, 93,7–8.

38 *CI*, 30 / *SKS* 1, 92,13–14 and 17–18.

tension or seeming ambiguity between Socratic and Platonic elements.³⁹ He thus invites us to approach Plato's dialogues with the idea that it is possible in effect to catch sight on occasion of the "purely Socratic" within Plato's larger corpus, providing us with glimpses of something that may ultimately remain alien to Plato and so may not have been completely absorbed into Plato's thought.⁴⁰ Above all Kierkegaard stresses what he calls "a double kind of irony and a double kind of dialectic" that he thinks are exhibited in Plato's dialogues.⁴¹ Kierkegaard maintains that if we learn to detect these duplexities, then this will aid us in our search for the purely Socratic. After walking his readers through several dialogues that he says are "most kindred to [Socrates] in spirit" and so are good places to seek out these duplexities (the *Symposium*, the *Protagoras*, and the *Phaedo*), Kierkegaard then turns to the *Apology* "in order to consolidate whatever was wavering and unstable in the course of the previous argumentation."⁴² Since he conceives of the *Apology* as a historical document (as opposed to a dramatic/fictional piece of writing), this work is supposed to be one place where we don't have to seek for the Socratic amidst the Platonic. There are no duplexities to speak of here since the *Apology*, on Kierkegaard's view, provides us with a "reliable picture of the actual Socrates," with no extra Platonic elements mixed in or playing the potentially distorting role that he alleges they play in Plato's other dialogues.⁴³ We will consider in more detail Kierkegaard's discussion of the *Apology* in the third part of this paper.

39 *CI*, 40 / *SKS* 1, 102,3–5; see also *CI*, 46 / *SKS* 1, 107,31. Kierkegaard also characterizes these places in Plato's dialogues as "points of coincidence" (*CI*, 47 / *SKS* 1, 108,3; trans. modified; see also *CI*, 75 / *SKS* 1, 134,21).

40 *CI*, 40 / *SKS* 1, 102,5 (trans. modified).

41 *CI*, 121 / *SKS* 1, 172,23. See also *CI*, 87 / *SKS* 1, 144,1–3.

42 *CI*, 120 / *SKS* 1, 171,26; *CI*, 96 / *SKS* 1, 150,13–15. Kierkegaard's discussion of the *Apology* completes section two of his account of Plato's conception of Socrates, entitled "In the Earliest Platonic Dialogues the Abstract Terminates in Irony." He then briefly discusses the role of myth in what he is calling the early Platonic dialogues before closing with a discussion of the first book of the *Republic* and some concluding remarks. It's worth noting that it is important for how Kierkegaard's argument unfolds that while he claims that the first book of the *Republic* is "vividly reminiscent of the earlier dialogues" (notably the *Protagoras* and the *Gorgias*), he also conceives of this as an integral part of the *Republic* and so as something that Plato composed much later, after a "whole intermediate cycle of dialogues" (*CI*, 112 / *SKS* 1, 165,3; *CI*, 119 / *SKS* 1, 171,11).

43 *CI*, 80 / *SKS* 1, 138,22–23 (trans. modified).

By the end of Chapter One, Kierkegaard claims to have shown that his conception of Socrates as ironist provides us with at least a *possible* explanatory account of the different representations of Socrates from antiquity:

I have thereby procured a possibility of being able to explain the discrepancy among these three conceptions....But with all this I still have come no further than the possibility, for even though the explanation propounded is able to reconcile the opposing powers, it by no means follows that this explanation is therefore entirely correct. If, however, it could not reconcile them, then it could not possibly be correct. Now, however, it is possible.⁴⁴

Kierkegaard suggests in fact that in the process of having shown that his conception of Socrates is possible, so too has this conception in effect come into existence; it has made itself possible. It is important to keep in mind that while Kierkegaard's focus in Chapter One is on the different dramatic or fictional portrayals of Socrates from antiquity, he also draws on Plato's *Apology* qua historical work in his account of Plato and in doing so prepares the way for the next stage of his argument.⁴⁵

Beginning with Chapter Two, Kierkegaard claims that his investigation takes a different form. Instead of examining distorted literary representations of Socrates, he says he "shall deal with some phenomena that as *historical facts* do not need to be provided through a mistaken conception but merely need to be kept in their inviolate innocence and thereupon explained."⁴⁶ Chapter Two addresses what Kierkegaard takes to be some of the historical facts surrounding Socrates' relationship to the Athenian state. For example, what relationship does Socrates' *daimonion* have to the different forms of state-sanctioned Athenian religion? Kierkegaard here draws a distinction between the conceptions he's been discussing in Chapter One and what he maintains is more straightforward historical fact:

It will be obvious at the outset that I have now entered a different sphere. Here the issue is not Plato's or Xenophon's conception of Socrates....It must now be taken as a *fact* that Socrates has assumed such a daimon....⁴⁷

44 *CI*, 155 / *SKS* 1, 205,18–25.

45 For another discussion of the mode of argument that Kierkegaard employs in Chapter One of the dissertation, see Tonny Aagaard Olesen "Kierkegaard's Socratic Hermeneutic in *The Concept of Irony*" in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Concept of Irony*, ed. by Robert L. Perkins, Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press 2001, pp. 101–122.

46 *CI*, 156 / *SKS* 1, 206,18–22 (trans. modified; italics mine).

47 *CI*, 157 / *SKS* 1, 207,4–8 (trans. modified; italics mine).

Kierkegaard considers further what Socrates' relationship more generally was to the Athenian state, and how this was made manifest at his trial. While he continues to rely on contemporary representations of Socrates (principally Plato's *Apology*, but also to a lesser extent Xenophon's *Apology*), Kierkegaard draws a contrast between those primarily dramatic works that draw on a given author's conception of Socrates and those that are "historical writings in the stricter sense of the word":

Everyone will promptly perceive that here we are dealing with something *factual*, and therefore the issue cannot be a conception as with Xenophon, Plato, and Aristophanes, for whom the actuality of Socrates was the occasion for and a moment in a presentation that sought to round off and to transfigure his person ideally – something that the solemnity of the state could not possibly enter into, and therefore its conception [of Socrates] is *sine ira atque studio* [without anger and partiality].⁴⁸

By getting us to consider this factual dimension of Socrates, Kierkegaard hopes to bring us to a point where his conception itself will begin to take on the status of fact as opposed to mere possibility. His thinking seems to be that a conception that explains what we take to have actually been the case with Socrates is itself entitled to be deemed *actual*, and it is his claim that his conception "makes itself actual [*virkeligjgør sig*] through all these historical data."⁴⁹

Throughout this chapter, the chief text upon which Kierkegaard relies is Plato's *Apology*. In addition to the significance that he attaches to the historical document which records the indictment against Socrates,⁵⁰ he also assigns special historical weight to the *Apology*: "The *Apology*,...on the whole, may be assumed to be historically reliable. This must be kept in mind so that one may be convinced that I am not dealing here with a Platonic conception but work on a *factual* basis."⁵¹

Chapter Three addresses Socrates' historical significance more generally and considers how he serves as a "turning point" in world history.⁵² Kierkegaard thereby addresses such questions as: What is Socrates' rela-

48 *CI*, 157 / *SKS* 1, 207,23–24; *CI*, 167 / *SKS* 1, 215,15–20 (trans. modified; first italics mine).

49 *CI*, 156 / *SKS* 1, 206,24–25 (trans. modified).

50 *CI*, 168 / *SKS* 1, 216,13: "The accusation against Socrates is a historical document."

51 *CI*, 160 / *SKS* 1, 210,20–23 (trans. modified; italics mine). See, e.g., *CI*, 170 / *SKS* 1, 218–219; *CI*, 193–194 / *SKS* 1, 240–241.

52 *CI*, 199 / *SKS* 1, 245,12; *CI*, 200 / *SKS* 1, 245,23. Cf. *CI*, 260 / *SKS* 1, 298,19–21; *CI*, 261 / *SKS* 1, 299,22–23.

tionship to the age that precedes him (exemplified by the phenomenon of sophistry)? What is his relationship to the age that follows him (characterized by the development of a genuine speculative philosophy and a “subjectivity [that] asserts its rights in world history for the first time”)?⁵³ Here Kierkegaard invites his readers to join him in making Socrates

...become visible in his ideal form – in other words, to become conscious of the thought that is the meaning of [Socrates’] existence in the world, of the moment in the development of the world spirit that is symbolically indicated by the singularity of his existence in history.⁵⁴

This activity does not consist so much in examining contemporary representations of Socrates (whether primarily dramatic or historical); instead, we are invited to adopt the idealized perspective of (a Hegelian-conceived) world history and to make a judgment about Socrates’ world-historical significance. Unlike the impact that Socrates had on his contemporaries or on the Athenian state (which is brought to a head in his trial and death), he can also be said to have had a more long-lasting impact on the world. If we can be brought to acknowledge that it was necessary for Socrates to arise and play such a world-historical role (thereby sustaining our idealized perspective of world history), then Kierkegaard hopes we can also be brought, with further reflection, to deem his conception of Socrates to be the one best suited to explain such world-historical significance. This will lead us ultimately to certify that his conception of Socrates has become not only possible and actual, but also necessary.

In this chapter Kierkegaard again appeals to Plato’s *Apology*, claiming that what above all marks Socrates as a turning point in world history is the idea of his being a “divine gift”:

This expression, that Socrates was a divine gift, is indeed especially significant in that it points out that he was altogether appropriate for his age, for why should the gods not give good gifts, and also recalls that he was more than the age could give to itself.⁵⁵

Kierkegaard conceives of Socrates as what the age needed, and ties this to Socrates’ own self-understanding as expressed in the *Apology*:

Early Greek culture had outlived itself, a new principle had to emerge, but before it could appear in its truth, all the prolific weeds of misunderstanding’s pernicious anticipation had to be plowed under, destroyed down to the deepest

53 *CI*, 242 / *SKS* 1, 282,4–6. Cf. *CI*, 264 / *SKS* 1, 302,5–7.

54 *CI*, 198 / *SKS* 1, 244,13–16 (trans. modified).

55 *CI*, 199 / *SKS* 1, 245,13; *CI*, 200 / *SKS* 1, 245,18–22. Cf. Plato *Apology*, 30D; 31A.

roots...[W]orld history needs an *accoucheur* [obstetrician]. Socrates fills this place....In the *Apology* he has himself interpreted this with the correct irony, where he says that he is like a gift of the gods and more specifically defines himself as a gadfly, which the Greek state, like a great and noble but lazy horse, needed.⁵⁶

Thus for Kierkegaard the *Apology* also serves to highlight a world-historical dimension of Socrates, bringing into view another respect in which he thinks that Socrates is best understood as someone whose fundamental stance is a stance of irony.

Throughout Part One of his dissertation, whether Kierkegaard is addressing dramatic, historical or world-historical dimensions of Socrates, Plato's *Apology* remains the principal text to which he appeals. It is this text that he thinks provides us with a historical portrait of Socrates and this text that he thinks best illustrates Socrates' ironic nature. Learning to detect irony, however, can be difficult, especially perhaps in the case of the *Apology* where there may be a standing resistance to there being any irony worth detecting. For these reasons, I think we will place ourselves in a better position to appreciate some of Kierkegaard's claims about irony in the *Apology* if we first consider the more general account of irony that Kierkegaard develops in Part Two of his dissertation. Once we've equipped ourselves with this account of irony, then we'll take a closer look in the third part of this paper at Kierkegaard's discussion of the *Apology* itself.

2. Irony as Figure of Speech and as Standpoint

Apart from the difficulties related to discerning the structure of Kierkegaard's argument in Part One of his dissertation, a further difficulty in grappling with this argument is Kierkegaard's strategy of withholding from his readers a proper definition of irony until Part Two. Kierkegaard claims that this approach allows him to keep his focus in Part One on the phenomenon of Socrates, while also allowing him to avoid simply presupposing that Socrates' existence is best characterized as ironic in nature:

In the first part [of my dissertation] I have not so much assumed the concept [of irony] as I have let it come into existence while I sought to orient myself in the

56 *CI*, 211 / *SKS* 1, 255–256 (trans. modified; the Hong translation is incomplete and omits the crucial qualification that Socrates has interpreted his singular importance to Athens “with the correct irony”).

phenomenon. In so doing, I have found an unknown quantity, a standpoint that appeared to have been characteristic of Socrates. I have called this standpoint irony, but in the first part of the dissertation the term for it is of minor importance; the main thing is that no element [*Moment*] or feature has been slighted, also that all the elements and features have grouped themselves into a totality. Whether or not this standpoint is irony will first be decided now [in Part Two] as I come to that point in developing the concept in which Socrates must fit if his standpoint was really irony at all.⁵⁷

While the focus was on Socrates in Part One and the concept “hovered in the background,” in Part Two the concept is brought forward and Socrates ceases to be a major topic.⁵⁸ The overall aim of Part Two might be characterized as an attempt by Kierkegaard to achieve a “thorough and coherent development” of the concept of irony.⁵⁹

Part Two of Kierkegaard’s dissertation has a short introduction and four main chapters, entitled “Observations for Orientation,” “The World-Historical Validity of Irony, the Irony of Socrates,” “Irony after Fichte,” and “Irony as a Mastered Moment, the Truth of Irony.”⁶⁰ As with the lack of proportion in length of Part One’s three chapters, these four chapters also vary significantly in length (with an approximate proportion of 2:2:8:1, where the bulk of Part Two is devoted to a discussion of post-Fichtean or romantic irony). Part Two begins with a discussion of irony as a figure of speech. From here Kierkegaard gradually leads his readers to a more comprehensive view of irony as a standpoint or fundamental outlook. He then considers in greater detail what role (if any) that irony as a standpoint should play in world history. This allows him to return briefly to Socrates (and to the criticism of Hegel’s conception of Socrates that he raised in the appendix to Part One) before he considers the other major manifestation of irony on the world-historical stage (romantic irony). Kierkegaard argues that with respect to world history, while Socratic irony was “world-historically justified,” romantic irony was “totally unjustified.”⁶¹ He then concludes his dissertation with

57 *CI*, 241 / *SKS* 1, 281,5–15 (trans. modified).

58 *CI*, 241 / *SKS* 1, 281,22–23. The one sustained place where Kierkegaard discusses Socrates in Part Two is at *CI*, 264–271 / *SKS* 1, 302–308.

59 *CI*, 243 / *SKS* 1, 282,33–34.

60 I have changed the translation of the title of the final chapter. Unlike the chapters of Part One, the chapters of Part Two are not labeled as chapters in Kierkegaard’s table of contents but are instead merely set off as distinct sections with their respective titles. See *SKS* 1, 67.

61 *CI*, 271 / *SKS* 1, 308,2–3; *CI*, 275 / *SKS* 1, 311,27. On romantic irony’s being world-historically unjustified, see also *CI*, 242 / *SKS* 1, 282,27.

a brief discussion of what role irony can play – world-historical considerations aside – in an individual human life.

In the introduction to Part Two, Kierkegaard notes that though irony has been a frequent topic of discussion – especially during the post-Fichteian time when the romantic outlook arises, an outlook which is “clearly and definitively conscious of irony and declares irony as its standpoint” – there still surprisingly does not seem to be a good discussion of what the term means:

In the period after Fichte, when [irony] was especially current, we find it mentioned again and again, suggested again and again, presupposed again and again. However, if we are looking for a clear exposition, we look in vain.⁶²

Kierkegaard argues that what is needed is an approach grounded in ordinary usage: “the point is that one is not to use [the concept of irony] altogether arbitrarily either knowingly or unknowingly; the point is that, having embraced the ordinary use of language, one comes to see that the various meanings the word has acquired in the course of time can still all be included here.”⁶³ He then proceeds to give us an example of what he has in mind in the next chapter, entitled “Observations for Orientation.”

The main distinction that Kierkegaard draws in this chapter is between what he calls “irony as a momentary manifestation” or “a figure of speech,” and “pure irony” or “irony as a standpoint.”⁶⁴ In general, when Socratic irony gets discussed by philosophers, it is conceived by them primarily in Kierkegaard’s first sense, as a figure of speech;⁶⁵ whereas for Kierkegaard it is the second sense of irony, as a standpoint, that goes to the heart of his conception of Socrates as ironist:

Socrates...really would not deserve the name of ironist if his distinguishing trait were merely the brilliant knack he had for speaking ironically....⁶⁶

62 *CI*, 242 / *SKS* 1, 282,20–21 (trans. modified); *CI*, 243 / *SKS* 1, 282–283.

63 *CI*, 245 / *SKS* 1, 284,29–32.

64 *CI*, 253 / *SKS* 1, 292,6; *CI*, 247 / *SKS* 1, 286,10; *CI*, 253 / *SKS* 1, 292,7–8 (trans. modified).

65 Nehamas *The Art of Living* is a notable exception.

66 *CI*, 45 / *SKS* 1, 106,25–27. Cf. *CUPI*, 503–504 / *SKS* 7, 457,4–8 (trans. modified): “Irony is an existence-determination, and thus nothing is more ludicrous than when it is thought to be a style of speaking, or when an author considers himself lucky to express himself ironically once in a while. The person who has essential irony has it all day long and is not bound to any style, because it is the infinite within him.”

Kierkegaard is aware, however, that acquiring a grasp of what he means by irony as a standpoint is a difficult undertaking, especially since he seems to think that “irony is far from being the distinctive feature of [the present] age.”⁶⁷ For this reason, he begins his discussion of irony by providing his readers with some reminders about irony’s most basic features, with his ultimate aim being to lead his readers to a point where they will be in a better position to appreciate irony conceived as a fundamental stance or standpoint that one adopts to the world.⁶⁸ He starts by offering his readers something that might appear in an ordinary dictionary definition of irony: “In oratory...there frequently appears a figure of speech with the name of irony and the characteristic of saying the opposite of what is meant.”⁶⁹ Kierkegaard singles out two common forms this can take:

It is the most common form of irony to say something earnestly that is not meant in earnest. The second form of irony, to say as a jest, jestingly, something that is meant in earnest, is more rare.⁷⁰

Kierkegaard claims that “here we have a determination that permeates all irony – namely that the phenomenon is not the essence but the opposite of the essence.” In the case of irony as a figure of speech, “when I am speaking, the thought, the meaning, is the essence, and the word is the phenomenon.”⁷¹ What is important for Kierkegaard is the more general relationship of opposition (or contrariness of some sort) that exists between what he is calling essence and phenomenon. Once Kierkegaard’s readers learn to recognize this pattern, it will become easier to extend the sense of what counts as irony beyond figures of speech.

In addition to reminding his readers of this opposition between meaning and speaking, Kierkegaard also draws attention to several features that concern who is speaking and who is listening. One consequence of speaking ironically, according to Kierkegaard, is that the speaker remains free in a certain sense from the ordinary obligations of non-ironic speech. He contrasts being “negatively free” in this way with being “bound” or “positively free”:

67 *CI*, 247 / *SKS* 1, 286,4.

68 For a helpful discussion of the general account of irony that Kierkegaard develops in Part Two of his dissertation, see K. Brian Söderquist “Irony Defined: The Isolated Subject” in his *The Isolated Self*, pp. 85–111.

69 *CI*, 247 / *SKS* 1, 286,9–12.

70 *CI*, 248 / *SKS* 1, 287,9–12.

71 *CI*, 247 / *SKS* 1, 286,12–13 and 14 (trans. modified).

When I am aware as I speak that what I am saying is what I mean and that what I have said adequately expresses my meaning, and I assume that the person to whom I am talking grasps my meaning completely, then I am bound in what has been said – that is, I am positively free therein. Here the old verse is appropriate: *semel emissum volat irrevocabile verbum* [the word once let slip flies beyond recall]. I am also bound with respect to myself and cannot free myself any time I wish. If, however, what I said is not my meaning or the opposite of my meaning, then I am free in relation to others and to myself.⁷²

A simple example of what Kierkegaard means here by being “positively free” might be what is involved when we make a promise – whether to another person or to ourselves. To say and mean that you promise to do such and such is to bind yourself in various ways: not only with respect to future actions but also concerning the sort of person you claim to be (do you keep your promises? can you be relied on?). What we then can later say and do and even turn out to be are all no longer as unrestricted as they would otherwise have been. Alternatively, to be negatively free is a way of withholding a commitment to what you say or do; never *really* to make promises or bind yourself in other ways that will restrict you in the future. Kierkegaard calls this a “subjective freedom [or freedom of the subject] that at all times has in its power the possibility of a *beginning* and is not handicapped by earlier situations.”⁷³

This negative freedom, however, only exists to the extent to which the person speaking is *not* understood to be speaking ironically. For if an audience recognizes the oppositional pattern between meaning and word, then the speaker becomes positively bound at least to that audience (and to the degree to which she or he is understood). Kierkegaard claims that in such a case an “ironic figure of speech cancels itself...inasmuch as the one who is speaking assumes that his hearers understand him...”⁷⁴ Here, while it is true that there exists an initial opposition between essence (the meaning) and the immediate phenomenon (the words spoken), the more sophisticated audience, appreciating the presence of irony, is able “through a negation of the immediate phenomenon” to make “the essence...identical with the phenomenon.”⁷⁵ To put this a bit less abstractly: “the hearer in the know shares the secret lying behind [the remark]...[T]he ironic figure of speech...is like a riddle to which one at

72 *CI*, 247–248 / *SKS* 1, 286,22–30.

73 *CI*, 253 / *SKS* 1, 291,23–24 (italics mine).

74 *CI*, 248 / *SKS* 1, 286,31–32.

75 *CI*, 248 / *SKS* 1, 286–287.

the same time has the solution.”⁷⁶ In this way, the ironic speaker can be assimilated to the straightforward speaker: in both cases, insofar as the speaker is capable of being understood (whether through there being a straightforward relationship between what is meant and said or an oppositional relationship that is appreciated by the listener), she or he will be positively bound by what she or he says and so to that extent will no longer be negatively free.

The connection between negative freedom and the degree to which a person is understood brings into view a third feature that Kierkegaard claims “characterizes all irony.”⁷⁷ Unlike “plain and simple talk that everyone can promptly understand,” the ironic figure of speech is characterized by “a certain superiority, deriving from its not wanting to be understood immediately, even though it wants to be understood.” From this standpoint of superiority, “this figure [of speech] looks down, as it were, on plain and simple talk...it travels around, so to speak, in an exclusive incognito and looks down from this high position with pity on ordinary, prosaic talk.”⁷⁸ Kierkegaard reminds his readers that this sort of exclusive speech often characterizes social and intellectual elites:

In everyday affairs, the ironic figure of speech appears especially in the higher circles as a prerogative belonging to the same category as the *bon ton* [good form] that requires smiling at innocence and looking upon virtue as narrow-mindedness, although one still believes in it up to a point.

Just as kings and princes speak French, the higher [intellectual] circles... speak ironically so that lay people will not be able to understand them, and to that extent irony is in the process of *isolating* itself; it does not wish to be generally understood.⁷⁹

This process of isolation creates a gulf of understanding between an exclusive group and the ones who are excluded. Those who understand the speaker’s irony will be part of “the inner circle,” whereas those who do not remain “the uninitiated.”⁸⁰ Since it is only to the extent that a person is not understood by who is listening that she or he remains negatively free, the more exclusive the irony, the greater the freedom. This can lead in the direction of a point where there may be no one else other than the one using irony herself or himself who understands what is being said. Then the speaker will be completely isolated from

76 *CI*, 248 / *SKS* 1, 287,7–8 and 12–14.

77 *CI*, 248 / *SKS* 1, 287,15.

78 *CI*, 248 / *SKS* 1, 287,15–20 (trans. modified).

79 *CI*, 248–249 / *SKS* 1, 287,20–29 (italics mine).

80 *CI*, 249 / *SKS* 1, 288,8–9.

the community of potential listeners.⁸¹ In fact, Kierkegaard claims that irony is “*isolation* according to its concept.”⁸² This is why he thinks there is a kind of contradiction involved in the situation where someone uses irony but also “desires witnesses” to confirm that, yes, she or he really is being ironic.⁸³

The ironic speaker, then, will be isolated in varying degrees (with the limiting case being the situation where no one else understands her or him). Among the listeners, there will be those who do not grasp the irony (those who are not, as we say, “in the know”). Part of what is attractive to someone who uses irony, according to Kierkegaard, is the lengths to which she or he can go in interacting with these listeners while not being understood by them and so remaining negatively free. This is especially the case when a person or persons are discovered who engage in an activity or practice that the one using irony is against. What better source of contrast between what you mean and what you say could there be than in those situations where you mingle with those with whom you are already deeply opposed? Kierkegaard says that there are two main modes of expression for irony to take in this sort of situation:

Either the ironist identifies himself with the odious practice he wants to attack, or he takes a hostile stance to it, but always, of course, in such a way that he himself is aware that his appearance is in contrast to what he himself embraces and that he thoroughly enjoys this discrepancy.⁸⁴

In both cases, the discrepancy between what a person appears to believe and what she or he really believes serves to heighten the basic enjoyment that comes from remaining negatively free, where the more ludicrous the behavior is that is being targeted, the greater the enjoyment.

Kierkegaard singles out two types of person that he claims especially open themselves up to being targeted by the ironist: (1) someone who displays “a silly, inflated, know-it-all knowledge,” and (2) someone who displays “an insipid and inept enthusiasm.”⁸⁵ In either case, one way for the ironist to respond is to go along with whatever is being trumpeted. When, in the first case, a conceit of knowledge is encountered, “it is ironically proper...to be enraptured by all this wisdom, to spur it on with jubilating applause to ever greater lunacy, although the ironist is aware that the

81 See, e.g., *CI*, 182 / *SKS* 1, 229,10–15 and 19–22; *CI*, 195 / *SKS* 1, 241,32–33.

82 *CI*, 249 / *SKS* 1, 288,3 (italics mine).

83 *CI*, 249 / *SKS* 1, 288,1.

84 *CI*, 249 / *SKS* 1, 288,11–15.

85 *CI*, 249 / *SKS* 1, 288,16 and 20–21. Cf. *CI*, 288 / *SKS* 1, 322–323.

whole thing underneath is empty and void of substance.”⁸⁶ When, in the second case, a misguided enthusiasm is met, “it is ironically proper to outdo this with scandalous praise and plaudits, although the ironist is himself aware that this enthusiasm is the most ludicrous thing in the world.”⁸⁷ Kierkegaard claims that in both of these cases “it is the ironist’s joy to seem to be caught in the same noose in which the other person is trapped.”⁸⁸ Alternatively, instead of taking the form of an exaggerated applause and praise, irony can also take the form of an exaggerated deficiency:

Faced with a superfluity of wisdom and then to be so ignorant, so stupid, such a complete Simple Simon as is possible, and yet always so good-natured and teachable that the tenant farmers of wisdom are really happy to let someone slip into their luxuriant pastures; faced with a sentimental, soulful enthusiasm, and then to be too dull to grasp the sublime that inspires others, yet always manifesting an eager willingness to grasp and understand what up until now was a riddle – these are altogether normal expressions of irony.⁸⁹

The effect of such irony is twofold. The more the one using irony can increase the discrepancy between how she or he appears (enraptured, or stupid but striving) and how she or he is, the greater her or his experience of joy and pleasure. But since this irony is targeted at those suffering from various conceits and false emotions, a further consequence is that these individuals wind up disclosing more and more of themselves, opening themselves up to the one using irony as well as to anyone else who might have an eye for such disclosures. In such cases Kierkegaard claims that the emphasis of the one using irony is “not so much to remain in hiding [oneself] as to get others to disclose themselves.”⁹⁰

To this point in his discussion of irony, Kierkegaard has mainly focused on irony as a figure of speech or “as a momentary manifestation.”⁹¹ He has highlighted the oppositional relationship between meaning (essence) and word (phenomenon), and the normal dynamics in which a per-

86 *CI*, 249 / *SKS* 1, 288,16–20. Cf. *CI*, 257 / *SKS* 1, 295,21–22.

87 *CI*, 249 / *SKS* 1, 288,21–23.

88 *CI*, 250 / *SKS* 1, 289,1–2.

89 *CI*, 250 / *SKS* 1, 289,16–24.

90 *CI*, 251 / *SKS* 1, 289,33–34. Kierkegaard also mentions the case where someone “tries to mislead the outside world concerning himself” or concerning the significance of one’s literary creation. Here the emphasis is less on opening up the world to scrutiny and more on really, truly keeping something secret from the world. See *CI*, 251–252 / *SKS* 1, 289–291.

91 *CI*, 253 / *SKS* 1, 292,6.

son using irony retains a negative freedom to the extent that her or his words are not understood. The exclusiveness of irony divides those who appreciate it from those who do not, where the former tend to adopt a superior attitude to what is straightforward and everyday, while the latter tend to provide the ironist with plenty of opportunities to exercise her or his irony while they themselves often wind up disclosing the many conceits that govern how they live. You might think that this does a pretty good job of bringing some of irony's basic features into view. And while I would agree, I also think that these remarks and reminders remain preliminary in nature for Kierkegaard. What he really wants his readers to achieve is a grasp of what he means by irony when it is conceived of as a fundamental standpoint or outlook that one adopts to life as a whole.

Kierkegaard offers his readers an analogy to help make the transition from irony as a figure of speech to irony as a standpoint. A diplomat, like the rest of us, can speak ironically on this or that occasion. But we also sometimes characterize "a diplomat's conception of the world" as ironic.⁹² Here the emphasis shifts from a particular situation or occasion where a person speaks ironically to a more general attitude or stance she or he takes to the world. Whatever the particular occasion where diplomacy is called for, the diplomat has an overall outlook upon which to draw. This is akin to what Kierkegaard means by irony as a standpoint. Yet, while the diplomat's conception of the world may be ironic in many ways, Kierkegaard takes it to be the case that there are still some things she or he "earnestly wants to affirm."⁹³ That is, while irony can seem to color whole regions of existence for the diplomat, "this does not necessarily mean that the diplomatic world views [all of] existence ironically."⁹⁴ (Presumably, for example, most diplomats do not approach their friends and loved ones from this habitual diplomatic outlook, nor their favorite sports teams, artwork, or a good bottle of wine; if, at any rate, they were to draw on this outlook on such occasions, we certainly would not treat this as exemplary diplomatic behavior.) Kierkegaard claims that insofar as there are some things that a diplomat still holds dear, then the irony underlying the outlook we were willing to attribute to her or him really is not different in kind from the local manifestations

92 *CI*, 253 / *SKS* 1, 292,12 (trans. modified).

93 *CI*, 254 / *SKS* 1, 292,18–19.

94 *CI*, 254 / *SKS* 1, 292,17–18.

of irony he has been discussing; instead, the difference is strictly “a quantitative difference.”⁹⁵

This quantitative difference nevertheless points the way to irony as a standpoint, to what Kierkegaard calls “irony *sensu eminentiori* [in the eminent sense],” a form of irony which he claims “qualitatively differs” from the irony that manifests itself in a single turn of phrase or a habitual outlook directed at part of existence.⁹⁶ Here, rather than singling out a meaning that the ironist’s words do not directly express or targeting a particular practice that the ironist does not endorse, Kierkegaard seems to have in mind something much more radical and far reaching:

Irony *sensu eminentiori* is directed not against this or that particular existing entity but against the entire given actuality at a certain time and under certain conditions...It is not this or that phenomenon but the totality of existence that it contemplates *sub specie ironiae* [under the aspect of irony].⁹⁷

Irony as a fundamental standpoint, then, is an irony directed at every aspect of the world in which the ironist finds herself or himself. It is not one attitude among many that a person adopts, where the attitude expressed varies depending on the circumstances and what she or he deems to be important. It is rather a single, context-independent, life-shaping outlook that governs all of a person’s behavior and colors every relationship that she or he enters into with the world.

To help bring out the all-encompassing nature of irony understood as a standpoint, Kierkegaard approvingly quotes Hegel’s definition of irony: “infinite absolute negativity.”⁹⁸ This may not immediately seem to clarify things. Let’s consider each feature in turn, beginning with negativity. To characterize irony as “negativity” is to draw attention to what effect irony has on whatever it is at which irony is directed. As Kierkegaard conceives things, irony “only negates”; this is what lies behind the idea of calling the one who uses irony negatively free.⁹⁹ By avoiding a commitment, something that binds and so creates something positive, irony reveals itself to be an entirely negative force. To characterize irony as “infinite” is to pick out the scope of the irony. A finite irony would be one that is limited to a particular turn of phrase or context, where we could always appeal to a contrast class of non-ironic phrases and non-ironic

95 *CI*, 254 / *SKS* 1, 292,20.

96 *CI*, 254 / *SKS* 1, 292,21.

97 *CI*, 254 / *SKS* 1, 292,23–30.

98 *CI*, 254 / *SKS* 1, 292,31.

99 *CI*, 261 / *SKS* 1, 299,17.

contexts. By characterizing irony as a standpoint as infinite, Kierkegaard denies that it is directed at “this or that phenomenon”; rather it is directed at each and every part of existence, at the “entire given actuality.”¹⁰⁰ To characterize irony as “absolute” is to pick out the source of irony’s telos or end. Instead of being an irony that takes aim at whatever it targets relative to some other part of the existing order (where the ironist remains committed to a part of what Kierkegaard calls “actuality”), it is absolute “because that by virtue of which it negates is a higher something that still is not.”¹⁰¹ But what exactly is this something that will only come into existence after the ironist has prepared the way by standing against how the world is at present? Kierkegaard seems to be invoking here the Hegelian idea of a world-historical process, where as human societies develop and people become ever more conscious of themselves as free and rational beings, so too by this very process does God or what Hegel also sometimes terms “the absolute” or “spirit” or “the idea” become conscious of itself and fully realize its essential, ideal nature in reality. Michael Inwood claims that for Hegel, “‘the absolute’ is the philosophical expression” for God “shorn of its anthropomorphic presuppositions.”¹⁰² Throughout his dissertation Kierkegaard frequently invokes this Hegelian idea of a world-historical process and draws attention to how this process is typically punctuated by “turning points” in which the existing order comes into conflict with an emerging order:

In any such turning point in history, two movements must be noted. On the one hand, the new must forge ahead; on the other, the old must be displaced.¹⁰³

Kierkegaard claims that the ironist can serve as such a “turning point” in this process (and furthermore, as I noted in the first part of this paper, Kierkegaard also maintains that Socrates himself was such a turning point). He contrasts the “prophetic individual,” the “tragic hero” and the ironist. While the prophetic individual is someone who “spies the new in the distance” and the tragic hero is someone whose “task” is “not so much to destroy [the old] as to advance the new,” for the “ironic subject, the given actuality has lost its validity entirely” while, at the same time, “he does not possess the new.”¹⁰⁴ The new or the “higher something that still is not,” then, might be understood as a development of the ab-

100 *CI*, 261 / *SKS* 1, 299,17–18; *CI*, 254 / *SKS* 1, 292,25.

101 *CI*, 261 / *SKS* 1, 299,18–19.

102 Michael Inwood *A Hegel Dictionary*, Oxford: Blackwell 1992, p. 27.

103 *CI*, 260 / *SKS* 1, 298,19–21.

104 *CI*, 261–262 / *SKS* 1, 298,22–35.

solute, but the way that this appears to the ironist is in the form of “nothing”:

The ironist...is very casual even with the idea; he is completely free under it, for the absolute to him is nothing.

Irony is a healthiness insofar as it rescues the soul from the snares of relativity; it is a sickness insofar as it cannot bear the absolute except in the form of nothing....¹⁰⁵

That the absolute appears to the ironist as nothing nicely lines up with irony’s negating quality. Kierkegaard claims that irony “establishes nothing, because that which is to be established lies behind it.”¹⁰⁶ Irony is absolute, then, in that it represents a position or stance from which the ironist can infinitely negate the existing order, but the ultimate nature of what makes it absolute remains “hidden” from the ironist.¹⁰⁷

To conclude his discussion of irony, Kierkegaard draws a number of useful contrasts in order to make his view of irony stand out against the background of several related but distinct phenomena. In particular, he identifies five members of the “conceptual milieu to which irony belongs” from which he thinks it is worth distinguishing irony: (1) dissimulation; (2) hypocrisy; (3) mockery, satire, and persiflage; (4) skeptical doubt; and (5) religious devotion.¹⁰⁸

Kierkegaard contrasts dissimulation and hypocrisy with what he terms the “executive” dimension of irony, which emphasizes settings that seem to concern a person’s character.¹⁰⁹ Whereas dissimulation “denotes more the objective act that carries out the discrepancy between essence and phenomenon,” irony “denotes the subjective pleasure as the subject frees himself by means of irony from the restraint in which the continuity of life’s conditions holds him.”¹¹⁰ Perhaps sensing that this distinction is not immediately helpful, Kierkegaard ties this contrast to the nature of the purpose for which one maintains an opposition between essence and phenomenon. In the case of dissimulation, Kierkegaard claims that the purpose “is an external purpose foreign to the dissimulation itself,” whereas irony has no further purpose:

105 *CI*, 145–146 / *SKS* 1, 196,6–8; *CI*, 77 / *SKS* 1, 136,19.

106 *CI*, 261 / *SKS* 1, 299,19–20.

107 *CI*, 261 / *SKS* 1, 299,8.

108 *CI*, 254 / *SKS* 1, 292–293.

109 *CI*, 254 / *SKS* 1, 293,2.

110 *CI*, 255–256 / *SKS* 1, 294,2–6.

[Irony's] purpose is immanent in itself....If, for example, the ironist appears as someone other than he actually is, his purpose might indeed seem to be to get others to believe this; but his actual purpose still is *to feel free*, but this he is precisely by means of irony – consequently irony has no other purpose but is self-motivated.¹¹¹

This contrast between an external purpose and one that is immanent to the activity itself becomes clearer in an earlier passage where Kierkegaard distinguishes between doing something for a “finite reason” and for what he calls the “urge to be a human being once in a while”:

The more it is a finite reason that makes someone decide upon a mystification such as this, as when a merchant travels incognito to promote the closing of a business venture, a king in order to take his pursers by surprise...etc. – the more it approaches outright dissimulation. However, the more it is an urge to be a human being once in a while and not always and forever [e.g.] the chancellor, the more poetic infinity there is in it...the more pronounced is the irony.¹¹²

With respect to hypocrisy, Kierkegaard draws attention to the moral nature of this characteristic: “the hypocrite is always trying to appear good, although he is evil.”¹¹³ While irony is akin to hypocrisy in that it too requires “an external side [the phenomenon] that is opposite to the internal [the essence],” Kierkegaard suggests that where it may differ from hypocrisy is that it seems to have a more metaphysical cast to it than a moral one.¹¹⁴ He explains this somewhat cryptically as follows: “the moral categories are actually too concrete for irony.”¹¹⁵ Perhaps we could say that in the cases of dissimulation and hypocrisy, the agent remains committed to at least a part of the world: one dissimulates to achieve some finite aim, whereas one's hypocrisy often reflects the importance that one attaches to the possession of moral authority. The ironist, in contrast, is in effect too removed from all of actuality to let these sorts of motivations shape her or his behavior.

Turning to what he calls the “theoretical or contemplative” dimension of irony, which emphasizes situations where the world discloses itself, Kierkegaard notes two roles that irony can play: as an element or, again, as a fundamental standpoint or outlook.¹¹⁶ In the first case, irony with its “unerring eye for what is crooked, wrong, and vain in existence”

111 *CI*, 256 / *SKS* 1, 294,7–16 (trans. modified; italics mine).

112 *CI*, 252 / *SKS* 1, 291,8–18.

113 *CI*, 256 / *SKS* 1, 295,2–3.

114 *CI*, 256 / *SKS* 1, 294,20–21.

115 *CI*, 256 / *SKS* 1, 295,8–9.

116 *CI*, 256 / *SKS* 1, 295,10.

can appear to be identical with “mockery, satire, and persiflage, etc.”¹¹⁷ Kierkegaard claims that irony is similar to these comic forms in that it too detects the world’s vanity. But while these other forms try to “destroy the vanity” and are in effect “what punitive justice is in relation to vice,” irony “reinforces the vanity in its vanity and makes what is lunatic even more lunatic.”¹¹⁸ So again, we can see that for Kierkegaard irony is distinguished by a kind of otherworldliness or lack of commitment to the world. The ironist’s pleasure is to feel free, and discovering vanity in the world and even spurring it on to a greater and greater vanity is done merely in order to heighten her or his sense of negative freedom. Activities aimed at things like genuine moral reform by means of, for example, satire remain tied to the world in a way that is alien to the ironist as Kierkegaard conceives her or him.

In the case where irony as a standpoint is emphasized with respect to the contemplative dimension of irony, Kierkegaard claims that it might appear to be similar to either a thorough-going skeptical doubt or to the kind of religious devotion that typically results in a renunciation of the world. In both of these latter cases, a contrast is maintained between the way things appear and the way they actually are. While the nature of skeptical doubt is that “the subject continually wants to [go beyond appearances and] enter into the object, and his unhappiness is that the object continually eludes him,” Kierkegaard claims that with irony “the subject continually wants to get outside the object” and “is continually retreating, talking every phenomenon out of its reality in order to save himself – that is, in order to preserve himself in negative independence of everything.”¹¹⁹ In this way, Kierkegaard claims that this sort of skeptical doubt stresses our conceptual failure to grasp what lies in the world, whereas irony stresses our ability as subjects to separate ourselves from what lies in the world.

Kierkegaard argues further that irony’s negative stance to the existing order can also seem akin to the otherworldliness of some forms of religious devotion. Both in effect renounce or deny the significance of all that lies before us. But there remain two crucial differences. First, the religious denial of the worldly stands in relation to an affirmation of the otherworldly:

117 *CI*, 256 / *SKS* 1, 295,11–14.

118 *CI*, 256–257 / *SKS* 1, 295,16–20.

119 *CI*, 257 / *SKS* 1, 295–296 (trans. modified).

[I]n religious devotion the lower actuality [*Virkelighed*], that is, the relationships with the world, loses its validity, but this occurs only insofar as the relationships with God simultaneously affirm their absolute reality. The devout mind also declares that all is vanity, but this is only insofar as through this negation all disturbing factors are set aside and the eternally existing order comes into view.¹²⁰

Whereas Kierkegaard claims that with irony, instead of a higher, eternal reality emerging, all that emerges is *nothing*: "...the dead silence in which irony walks again and haunts...."¹²¹ To return to a passage I quoted earlier, Kierkegaard thus claims that "[i]rony is a healthiness insofar as it rescues the soul from the snares of relativity; [but] it is a sickness insofar as it cannot bear the absolute except in the form of nothing...."¹²²

Second, Kierkegaard claims that the religiously devout individual and the ironist adopt fundamentally different attitudes to their own finite personalities:

[I]f the devout mind finds everything to be vanity, it makes no exception of its own person...; on the contrary, it also must be set aside so that the divine will not be thrust back by its opposition....Indeed, in the deeper devotional literature, we see that the pious mind regards its own finite personality as the most wretched of all.¹²³

Once the finite personality has been renounced along with the rest of the world, part of the eternal order that emerges for the religious individual will be something like a divine or eternal self.¹²⁴ According to Kierkegaard, there seems to be nothing akin to this in the ironist's case. With the discovery that everything is vain, the ironist "becomes free" and "does not become vain in his own eyes but rescues his own vanity."¹²⁵ What this really comes to, however, remains less clear. While it is true that Kierkegaard claims that irony is the "first and most abstract determination of subjectivity," he also claims here that "[t]he more vain everything becomes, all the lighter, emptier, and volatilized the subject becomes."¹²⁶ In negating the world, the ironist achieves a kind of separation from the world and thereby seems to acquire a self, but this self appears light, empty, and volatile.

120 *CI*, 257–258 / *SKS* 1, 296,10–16.

121 *CI*, 258 / *SKS* 1, 296,33.

122 *CI*, 77 / *SKS* 1, 136,17–19.

123 *CI*, 258 / *SKS* 1, 296,17–23.

124 Cf. *CI*, 76–77 / *SKS* 1, 134–135.

125 *CI*, 258 / *SKS* 1, 296,24 and 26–27.

126 *CI*, 264 / *SKS* 1, 302,5; *CI*, 258 / *SKS* 1, 296,24–25.

The life of the ironist, as Kierkegaard portrays this life, is a strange life indeed; many people, I suspect, will not think that such a life is humanly viable, let alone desirable. Consider how Kierkegaard characterizes the ironist's relationship to her or his age:

[T]he whole of existence has become alien to the ironic subject and the ironic subject in turn alien to existence...., as actuality has lost its validity for the ironic subject, he himself has to a certain degree become unactual.¹²⁷

Just as the one who speaks ironically to an uncomprehending listener remains uncommitted to what her or his words mean and so negatively free, so the one whose fundamental stance in life is a stance of irony remains uncommitted to each and every aspect of her or his life: words, relationships, values, and so on. Ideally, she or he remains negatively free in relation to all that we normally think of as constituting a human life.

*3. Socrates' Attitude to Death, Friedrich Ast,
and the Presence of Irony in Plato's Apology*

In the first two parts of this paper we considered the structure of Kierkegaard's argument for his view that Socrates is above all an ironist (including the role that Plato's *Apology* plays within this argument), and we examined Kierkegaard's more general account of irony (including his distinction between irony as a figure of speech and irony as a fundamental standpoint). In this third and final part, I want to consider in more detail Kierkegaard's discussion of Plato's *Apology* itself and why he thinks that it is "splendidly suited for obtaining a clear concept of Socrates' ironic activity."¹²⁸ Kierkegaard's principal discussion of the *Apology* occurs in Chapter One of Part One of his dissertation, in a section that is part of his account of Plato's conception of Socrates.¹²⁹ He divides his discussion into two main parts: (1) an analysis of "the passages in which Socrates develops his view of death"; and (2) "a more specific scrutiny of the *Apology* in order to show that in its entirety it is irony."¹³⁰ In the latter case, Kierkegaard draws on the writings of Friedrich Ast in order to try to reveal to his readers both what he calls the many "ironic situations" that

127 *CI*, 259 / *SKS* 1, 297,6–9.

128 *CI*, 37 / *SKS* 1, 99,5–6 (trans. modified).

129 *CI*, 79–96 / *SKS* 1, 138–150.

130 *CI*, 81 / *SKS* 1, 139,11; *CI*, 85 / *SKS* 1, 142,16–17 (second trans. modified).

can be found in the *Apology*, as well as more generally an irony that is “diffused” throughout the entire text.¹³¹

Most scholars probably would not object to the way that Kierkegaard treats the *Apology* as the closest thing we have to a historical document about Socrates; at any rate, I think most would agree that the *Apology* is centrally important for our understanding of Socrates. There is bound to be disagreement, however, over whether and to what extent irony is present in this work. While there has been an increased interest among ancient philosophy scholars in developing a better understanding of Socratic irony, there is also in general a strong resistance to the idea that Socrates employs irony in any philosophically significant sense in the speech he purportedly gave at his trial.¹³² For example, in his book on the *Apology*, C. D. C. Reeve concludes that irony plays no substantive role in Socrates' defense speech:

There is...no fundamental irony in Socrates. Rather he is – like Cassandra, that other misunderstood servant of Apollo – someone it has proved very difficult to take at his word.¹³³

Similarly, while Thomas Brickhouse and Nicholas Smith concede that Socrates may have employed irony during his trial, they also conclude that whatever irony may be present is incidental to the substance of Socrates' response to the charges that have been raised against him:

We believe that characteristic Socratic irony can be found in his speech, though never on any issue of direct substance to his defense.¹³⁴

Irony, on this sort of view, is something that may complement matters of substance but is never itself constitutive of that substance. Kierkegaard, by way of contrast, argues that the *Apology* is ironic through and through:

The whole *Apology* in its entirety is an ironic work, inasmuch as most of the accusations boil down to a nothing – not to a nothing in the usual sense of the word, but to a nothing that Socrates simply passes off as the content of his life, which again is irony, and likewise his proposal about being entertained in the prytaneum or being fined a sum of money, and mainly the fact that it really

131 *CI*, 90 / *SKS* 1, 146,7 and 14.

132 For one nice exception, see R. E. Allen “Irony and Rhetoric in Plato's *Apology*” in *Paideia* 5, 1976; reprinted in his *Socrates and Legal Obligation*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1980, pp. 3–16.

133 Reeve *Socrates in the Apology*, p. 184.

134 Thomas Brickhouse and Nicholas Smith *Socrates on Trial*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1989, p. 46.

does not contain any defense at all but is in part a leg-pulling of his accusers and in part a genial chat with his judges.¹³⁵

The idea that the *Apology* is ironic “in its entirety” is bound to strike most ancient philosophy scholars as highly implausible. In fact, Kierkegaard’s defense of such a view may indicate yet another reason for the relative neglect of his dissertation. Kierkegaard, of course, is not unaware that his readers may find this view, at least initially, to be implausible or perhaps even scandalous. Since he knows that his readers may be resistant to finding irony in the *Apology*, it is for this reason that Kierkegaard decides to make a rather unusual use of the scholarly writings of Ast.

Overall, Kierkegaard and Ast offer diametrically opposed interpretations of the *Apology*. It is true that they both reject what they take to be the common assumption among commentators that “there is nothing in the *Apology* that is alien to Plato’s spirit.”¹³⁶ But while they agree in rejecting the general idea that the *Apology* is fully in accord with Plato’s larger corpus, they nevertheless draw quite different conclusions from this purported lack of accord. For Kierkegaard, the *Apology* remains a work of Plato’s but one whose historical character precludes the distortions of Socrates that he thinks can be found in Plato’s other writings. In contrast, according to Kierkegaard, Ast argues that the *Apology* “is not by Plato but by some unknown orator.”¹³⁷ Kierkegaard characterizes the main difference between their two views as follows:

For me the most important point is that one sees a reliable picture of the actual Socrates in the *Apology*. Ast, who found loftiness and pathos predominant in [e.g.] the *Phaedo*, can, of course, only be indignant over the manner in which Socrates conducts himself here, and this is one of the reasons he declares the *Apology* to be spurious.¹³⁸

In one of the theses attached to his dissertation, Kierkegaard makes clear that he thinks that Ast’s response to the *Apology* and his own are the only two legitimate possibilities: “Socrates’ defense [*Apologia*], as presented by Plato, is either spurious or is to be interpreted altogether ironically.”¹³⁹

135 *CI*, 37 / *SKS* 1, 99,25 (trans. modified).

136 *CI*, 81 / *SKS* 1, 139,4–5.

137 *CI*, 79 / *SKS* 1, 138,7–8.

138 *CI*, 80 / *SKS* 1, 138–139 (trans. modified).

139 *CI*, 6 / *SKS* 1, 65,11–12. See also *JP*, 4:4269 / *SKS* 20, NB2:164: “If Socrates’ defense [*Apologia*] is not as I believe it to be – irony, in order to make game of everybody – then the argument against its authenticity arises: it is unlikely that Socrates would want to defend himself.” Cf. *CI*, 88 / *SKS* 1, 144,18–24:

Obviously this disjunction is not exhaustive, but I take it that Kierkegaard thinks that the natural third option – that Socrates' defense is neither spurious nor ironic – represents the consensus among ancient scholars that he is calling into question and arguing against in his dissertation.

Though Kierkegaard clearly thinks that his ironic reading of the *Apology* is correct, he admits in a footnote that he once had a response similar to Ast's:

I recall from my early youth, when the soul demands the lofty and the paradigmatical, how when reading the *Apology* I felt disappointed, deceived, and depressed. It seemed to me that all the poetry and the courage which triumphs over death was here wretchedly replaced by a rather prosaic reckoning executed in such a way that one could believe that Socrates wanted to say: "When all is said and done, this whole affair doesn't concern me much at all." Later I learned to understand it otherwise.¹⁴⁰

While Ast's confidence in his lofty, pathos-filled portrait of Socrates leads him to reject how Socrates is represented in the *Apology*, Kierkegaard suggests that his own initial experience of disappointment was eventually overcome by a new understanding of Socrates and his outlook. Yet, even as he clearly disagrees with Ast, Kierkegaard also seems to think that the vehemence with which Ast rejects the *Apology* is something he can use to help his readers discover the irony that he thinks this work contains.

Before Kierkegaard continues his discussion of Ast, however, he first considers several passages in the *Apology* where Socrates discusses death. This allows Kierkegaard to support some earlier claims that he had made about the view of death discussed in Plato's *Phaedo*,¹⁴¹ as well as providing him with an opportunity to present his readers with what he takes to be some paradigmatic instances of Socrates' irony. Before we consider these passages, it may be worth stating up front that when Kierkegaard characterizes the *Apology* as ironic "in its entirety," I do not think that he ever entertains the idea that Plato might be employing an authorial irony that could, among other things, be directed at the literary character

"What significance Socrates could attribute to an arraignment before the judgment seat of the Athenian people and how ridiculous he must have thought it would be to have to defend himself before such judges are intimated in a comment he makes in *Gorgias* [521E]: 'And what I said to Polus can be used for me, namely, that I would be judged as was a physician who was prosecuted by a cook before a jury of children.'"

140 *CI*, 81 / *SKS* 1, 139,28–34 (trans. modified; for ease of reading, I have also added quotation marks to what Socrates is imagined here to be saying).

141 See especially *CI*, 75–79 / *SKS* 1, 133–137.

Socrates who is portrayed in this work.¹⁴² Insofar as Kierkegaard thinks of the *Apology* as a historical work, he seems to think of it as in effect a transcription of what Socrates actually said at his trial, though he does add the following qualification:

[I]t is a matter of indifference for this investigation whether one maintains with Schleiermacher that this defense actually was delivered in this manner by Socrates or with Stallbaum that it presumably was not delivered in this manner but that Plato in working on this speech tried to come as close to the historical Socrates as possible.¹⁴³

This means that when looking for irony in the *Apology*, we should treat Socrates, the one delivering the defense speech, as the ironist. If he is the one speaking, then his audience of listeners consists of the jury and those present at the trial (along with, indirectly, Plato's readers).¹⁴⁴ If Socrates is an ironist in the full-blown sense we considered in the second part of this paper, then we should be on the lookout for signs that the figures of speech that he employs may give expression to an opposition (or contrariness of some sort) between what he means and what he says, and may also serve to help indicate that he occupies a standpoint of irony. Moreover, by inviting us to experience Socrates' defense speech as something that is thoroughly colored by irony, Kierkegaard is thereby also inviting us to let our approach to this text be guided by the thought that everything Socrates says and does can potentially be made sense of in terms of the joy and delight he takes in cultivating and maintaining the negative freedom and isolation that are characteristic of irony. If Socrates not only employs ironic figures of speech but also occupies a standpoint of irony, then we should be prepared to credit him with a fundamental lack of commitment to the world, where his stance of irony separates him from the existing actuality in which he finds himself.¹⁴⁵ Socrates' audience can

142 Cf. *CI*, 57 / *SKS* 1, 117,6–11 (on the use of irony in Plato's *Protagoras*): "It might seem as if it were Plato who was using the ironic lever here to tilt not only Protagoras but also Socrates up in the air in a right lively toss-in-the-blanket, and however funny this could look in such a hurly-burly, I must expressly on Socrates' behalf decline such an interpretation."

143 *CI*, 79–80 / *SKS* 1, 138,8–12.

144 For a compelling discussion of the *Apology* that suggests that Plato "puts the reader [...] in the position of juror," see M. F. Burnyeat "The Impiety of Socrates" in *Ancient Philosophy* 17, 1997, pp. 1–12 at p. 2.

145 K. Brian Söderquist notes that he is "tempted to call Kierkegaard's Socrates a 'nihilist' insofar as he is radically critical of all established norms and [seemingly] has no serious intention of finding any others to stand in their place" ("Kierkegaard's Nihilistic Socrates" in his *The Isolated Self*, pp. 53–84 at p. 56).

then be divided further into those who do and those who do not appreciate or understand his irony, where this includes being attentive or failing to be attentive to the negative freedom and isolation that he may exhibit.

When reading the *Apology*, it is easy enough to get caught up in the narrative that Socrates develops about how and why he became a philosopher and in his replies to the charges that have been brought against him. Yet hovering over the entire speech is the fact that Socrates' life is at stake. Of course, as readers of the *Apology* will eventually discover, Socrates will not only be found guilty of these charges but will also be sentenced to death. How someone comports herself or himself in the face of death is a classic test of courage. While Socrates will deny that he is afraid of death (and so seemingly present himself as someone who might possess courage), Kierkegaard thinks that the specific way in which he comports himself is a sign not so much of courage (at least as it has traditionally been conceived) but of irony. Before we consider further why Kierkegaard thinks this, it may be worth recalling how Socrates raises the topic of death at his trial. Perhaps anticipating that there might be members of the jury who are wondering about the fact that his manner of living seems to have put his life at risk, Socrates raises the issue of death in the form of a question posed by an imaginary interlocutor:

Someone might say: "Are you not ashamed, Socrates, to have been following the kind of occupation that has led to your being now in danger of death?"¹⁴⁶

Socrates responds by developing a comparison between how a person comports herself or himself on the battlefield and how she or he behaves in the courtroom. Just as Achilles, one of the traditional Greek heroes, "despised death and danger and was much more afraid to live [as] a coward who did not avenge his friends," so Socrates argues that he (who has also proven himself on the battlefield) ought similarly to remain at his god-given post as a philosopher even when faced with the threat of death:

Wherever a man has taken a position that he believes to be best, or has been placed by his commander, there he must I think remain and face danger, without a thought for death or anything else, rather than disgrace. It would have been a

146 Plato *Apology* [*Ap.*], trans. by G. M. A. Grube in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. by John M. Cooper, Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett 1997, 28B. Socrates' regular use of this technique is one way that he may try to make his speech to the jury more closely resemble a dialogue with the jury, employing a "manner of speech" akin to what he is "accustomed to use in the marketplace [...] and elsewhere" (*Ap.* 18A; 17C-D). See also, e.g., *Ap.* 20C; 34B; 37E.

dreadful way to behave, men of Athens, if, at Potidaea, Amphipolis, and Delium, I had, at the risk of death, like anyone else, remained at my post where those you had elected to command had ordered me, and then, when the god ordered me, as I thought and believed, to live the life of a philosopher, to examine myself and others, I had abandoned my post for fear of death or anything else.¹⁴⁷

By comparing his present courtroom situation with the battlefield, Socrates thereby identifies another venue where a person may potentially be tested and her or his true character revealed.

Just as people can perform disgracefully on the battlefield, Socrates notes that a corresponding type of poor behavior is sometimes observed in the courtroom. He claims to have witnessed many who are “considered superior [to most people], be it in wisdom or courage or whatever other virtue makes them so” who nevertheless often perform “pitiful dramatics” before juries that belie the character they are supposed to possess:

I have often seen them [those considered superior] do this sort of thing [begging and imploring the jury with many tears]¹⁴⁸ when standing trial...as if they thought it a terrible thing to die, and as if they were to be immortal if you [the jury] did not execute them.¹⁴⁹

On Socrates’ view, when people behave in this way they do so out of a fear of death. Yet, by his lights, people also thereby exhibit the very kind of disgraceful or “blameworthy ignorance” that philosophy (as he practices it) is especially suited to uncover and combat:

To fear death, gentlemen, is no other than to think oneself wise when one is not, to think one knows what one does not know. No one knows whether death may not be the greatest of all blessings for a man, yet men fear it as if they knew that it is the greatest of evils. And surely it is the most blameworthy ignorance to believe that one knows what one does not know.¹⁵⁰

Socrates maintains that insofar as we are able to cultivate a proper awareness of our ignorance about death and its significance, then we will not be afraid of it. His claim that the fear of death is an instance of thinking oneself wise when one is not recalls his earlier interpretation of the oracle’s claim that no one is wiser than he.¹⁵¹ After a life’s worth of examining and questioning anyone who has a reputation for wisdom, Socrates has come to think that people basically fall into two classes with respect to knowl-

147 *Ap.* 28C-D; 28D-29A.

148 *Ap.* 34C.

149 *Ap.* 35A-B.

150 *Ap.* 29A-B.

151 See *Ap.* 20E-24B. See also *CI*, 38–39 / *SKS* 1, 99–100.

edge about important life matters, those who are unaware of their ignorance of these matters (thinking they know what they do not know) and those who are aware of their ignorance about these matters (thinking that “the god is wise” and that “human wisdom is worth little or nothing”).¹⁵² This is the only sense in which Socrates claims that he may be wiser than other people; that is, he is wise only insofar as he is aware of his ignorance about important life matters. So with respect to death, Socrates denies that he has any special knowledge of death and suggests that his awareness of his ignorance about death is what keeps him from fearing it:

It is perhaps on this point and in this respect, gentlemen, that I differ from the majority of men, and if I were to claim that I am wiser than anyone in anything, it would be in this, that, as I have no adequate knowledge of things in the underworld, so I do not think I have....I shall never fear or avoid things of which I do not know, whether they may not be good[,] rather than things that I know to be bad.¹⁵³

Socrates thus presents himself as someone who does not fear death and he ties this lack of fear to an awareness of his ignorance. In place of the traditional hero, Achilles, who performs well on the battlefield and whose courage is tied to his extraordinary character, Socrates offers up by way of his own example a new kind of hero, someone whose manner of living allows him to remain aware of his ignorance and so provides us with a means of combating the kind of disgraceful ignorance that those who fear death exhibit, such that one will be ready for the tests that

152 *Ap.* 23A.

153 *Ap.* 29B–C. This passage is also one of the few places in Plato's corpus where Socrates makes a positive claim to possess knowledge about something morally important. In addition to claiming that he doesn't know anything about death (and so doesn't fear it), he also claims that he does “know, however, that it is wicked and shameful to do wrong, to disobey one's superior, be he god or man” (*Ap.* 29B). As we'll see below, Kierkegaard treats Socrates' ignorance about death to be the chief basis for his lack of fear, but it may also be important that Socrates is here making a comparative claim, insisting that he will never fear anything about which he is ignorant when he is *also* faced with something that he knows to be wrong. That is, he could be saying he won't fear something he doesn't know to be bad when also faced with something that he thinks he should fear, namely something that he does know to be bad. Cf. *Ap.* 37B, where Socrates, having been found guilty, is considering what penalty to propose. He suggests that it doesn't make sense to be afraid of choosing something (death) of which he does not know “whether it is good or bad” as opposed to choosing “something that [he knows] very well to be an evil [...]” Kierkegaard discusses this passage at *CI*, 82 / *SKS* 1, 140,22–27.

life sends one's way and be able to stay at one's post, whether in battle or in the courtroom or in life more generally. Philosophy as he practices it is thus put forward by Socrates as a kind of remedy for the poor condition many of us find ourselves in, an activity that can help us to remove our fear of death and fortify the self in the process. For Socrates seems to hold that philosophy is the best route to becoming a good person, and that such a person, or so he maintains, "cannot be harmed either in life or in death."¹⁵⁴ Though Socrates also adds, in his inimitably ironic manner, that while he does not believe that those who have brought charges against him "can harm [him] in any way" (since he does not think that "it is permitted that a better man be harmed by a worse"), he does allow that "certainly [they] might kill [him], or perhaps banish or disenfranchise [him]."¹⁵⁵

Some of what Socrates says about death in the *Apology* and the manner in which he says this might seem far removed from anything that could possibly be taken to indicate the presence of irony. Socrates seems quite serious, for example, when he passionately declares that it would have been a "dreadful way to behave" if he were to have abandoned his god-given post as a philosopher out of a fear of death.¹⁵⁶ What is important for Kierkegaard is not so much whether or not there are moments of passion or enthusiasm in Socrates' speech, but how, in his view, these moments are typically followed by what he calls a "prosaic reckoning" or a "doubting, uncertain calculation of probability" or some other use of argumentation that can seem to undercut this emotional seriousness:

[I]n the *Apology* the most pathos-filled outbursts are usually followed by argumentation that blows away the foam of eloquence and discloses that underneath there is nothing whatever.¹⁵⁷

In the case of Socrates' passionate declaration about avoiding a disgraceful, dreadful way of behaving, where one would abandon one's post for fear of death, what interests Kierkegaard is the reason Socrates offers for why he doesn't fear death:

154 *Ap.* 41c-d.

155 *Ap.* 30c-d.

156 *Ap.* 28e.

157 *CI*, 81 / *SKS* 1, 139,31–32; *CI*, 78 / *SKS* 1, 137,1–2; *CI*, 82 / *SKS* 1, 140,6–8.

Socrates feels that he has an advantage over others, for since he knows nothing at all about death he does not fear it. Now this is not only a sophism¹⁵⁸ but also irony. In other words, as he emancipates people from the fear of death, in recompense he gives them the alarming idea of an unavoidable something about which nothing whatever is known, and, to find repose in that, one certainly must be habituated to being built up by the quietude inherent in nothing.¹⁵⁹

In place of the traditional responses to death, cowardly fear and courageous endurance, Socrates seems to offer a third kind of response, one where his ignorance removes the fear as well as the felt need that death is something to endure. On Kierkegaard's view, Socrates finds a certain "repose" in being aware of his ignorance about death.

At the end of his defense speech, having been sentenced to death, Socrates returns to the topic of death and suggests why he thinks that "there is good hope that death is a blessing."¹⁶⁰ Before we examine more closely what Socrates says and Kierkegaard's interpretation of this, it may be worth considering further how Kierkegaard conceives of Socratic ignorance in order to avoid a potential confusion that might otherwise arise. While it is true that Kierkegaard ties Socratic ignorance to the irony that he claims characterizes Socrates' true nature, this does not mean that he thinks that Socrates' profession of ignorance is ironic as opposed to being genuine. This sort of view has had its defenders in the past. For example, Norman Gulley claims that Socrates' profession of ignorance is "an expedient to encourage his interlocutor to seek out the truth, to make him think he is joining with Socrates in a voyage of discovery."¹⁶¹ Hence Socrates' stance of ignorance is sometimes called a mere ironic pose; consider this common dictionary definition of Socratic irony: "pretense of ignorance in a discussion to expose the fallacies in the opponent's logic."¹⁶² Kierkegaard rejects this conception of Socrates' ignorance and never conceives of it as feigned or merely tactical. He maintains that it is a "misunderstanding" of Socrates' profession of ignorance to think that Socrates was "hiding a knowledge behind this ignorance,"

158 On why Kierkegaard's charge here of sophistry may not be as compelling as he suggests, see footnote 153.

159 *CI*, 82 / *SKS* 1, 140,16–22.

160 *Ap.* 40c.

161 Quoted in Gregory Vlastos "Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge" in his *Socratic Studies*, ed. by Myles Burnyeat, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1994, pp. 39–66 at p. 43.

162 *Webster's New World College Dictionary*, 4th ed., ed. by Michael Agnes, Cleveland, Ohio: Wiley Publishing 2002, p. 755.

and draws attention to how Socrates himself “objects to this misunderstanding and how incorrect he considers the conclusion that he must know something just because he can convince others that they know nothing.”¹⁶³ For Kierkegaard, Socrates’ ignorance is best conceived of as a theoretical, philosophic stance:

...Socrates’...whole standpoint...he himself theoretically characterized as ignorance. But ignorance is a true philosophic standpoint and at the same time is also completely negative. In other words, Socrates’ ignorance was by no means an empirical ignorance; on the contrary, he was a very well informed person, was well read in the poets and philosophers, had much experience in life, and consequently was not ignorant in the empirical sense. In the philosophic sense, however, he was ignorant. He was ignorant of that which underlies everything, the eternal, the divine – that is, he knew that it was, but he did not know what it was. He was conscious of it, and yet he was not conscious of it, inasmuch as the only thing he could say about it was that he did not know anything about it.¹⁶⁴

Kierkegaard thus takes Socrates’ ignorance to be a genuine theoretical ignorance, and so denies that this is something which Socrates merely pretends to profess for educative reasons. At the same time, Kierkegaard also thinks that it is this very ignorance that gives rise to Socrates’ irony. That is, there are many possible responses to a fundamental ignorance of this sort. One might, for example, despair over the conclusion that “human wisdom is worth little or nothing,” or treat this ignorance as a “point of departure for a more profound [philosophical] speculation,” or one might find this ignorance to be the ideal occasion for cultivating a more fundamental stance of irony.¹⁶⁵ Kierkegaard clearly thinks that Socrates’ response to his ignorance is best conceived of as a manifestation of his adopting just such a stance. For example, to return to the case of death, Kierkegaard thinks that Socrates feels “liberated” by his ignorance:

[Socrates] is ignorant of what death is and of what there is after death, whether there is anything or nothing at all; consequently, he is ignorant. But he does not take this ignorance greatly to heart; on the contrary, he genuinely feels quite li-

163 *CI*, 172 / *SKS* 1, 220,6–7; *CI*, 173 / *SKS* 1, 220,12–14. See *Ap.* 22E-23A: “As a result of this investigation, men of Athens, I acquired much unpopularity [...]; many slanders came from these people and a reputation for wisdom, for in each case the bystanders thought that I myself possessed the wisdom that I proved that my interlocutor did not have.” See also *CI*, 40 / *SKS* 1, 101,28–33.

164 *CI*, 169 / *SKS* 1, 217–218 (trans. modified).

165 *Ap.* 23A; *CI*, 175 / *SKS* 1, 222,26.

berated in this ignorance. Consequently, he is not in earnest about this ignorance, and yet he is altogether earnest about being ignorant.¹⁶⁶

Kierkegaard's claim that Socrates doesn't take his ignorance "greatly to heart" even though he is "altogether earnest" or serious about being ignorant supports the idea that he may provide us with a new type of response to death. If it is true that he feels liberated by his ignorance about death, then his response may be quite distinct from those who respond to the prospect of death either with cowardly fear or with brave endurance.

It is this very feeling of liberation that helps to make Socrates ideally suited to play the sort of world-historical role that Kierkegaard alleges he plays, where his theoretical stance has obvious practical consequences in his relations with the Athenian state and with the individuals with whom he converses.¹⁶⁷ Within the unfolding narrative of a Hegelian-conceived world history, Socrates and his ignorance represent a "moment of transition" in which a proper human subjectivity first begins to come into existence:

[W]hen subjectivity by means of its negative power has broken the spell in which human life lay in the form of substantiality...then the first form in which this manifests itself is ignorance. The gods take flight, taking the fullness with them, and man remains as the form, as that which is to receive the fullness into itself, but in the sphere of knowledge a situation such as this is correctly conceived as ignorance. This ignorance is in turn quite consistently called human wisdom, because here man has come into his own right, but this right is precisely the right not to be merely man as such.¹⁶⁸

Kierkegaard maintains that Socrates in effect prepares the way for a greater development of subjectivity and a proper philosophical speculation, but does not himself pursue this further development: "[I]n the world-historical sense [Socrates'] significance was that he set the ship of speculation afloat....He himself, however, does not go on board but merely launches the ship."¹⁶⁹ Kierkegaard claims that Socrates "could be satis-

166 *CI*, 270 / *SKS* 1, 307,15–21.

167 See, e.g., *CI*, 178 / *SKS* 1, 226,1–3.

168 *CI*, 173 / *SKS* 1, 221,16–17; *CI*, 171 / *SKS* 1, 219,11–20 (second trans. modified).

169 *CI*, 217 / *SKS* 1, 261,19–22 (trans. modified). In his later writings, as Kierkegaard becomes more openly critical of speculative philosophy (especially as carried out in a Hegelian manner) and its tendency to foster a kind of absentmindedness where the speculative philosopher loses track of herself or himself as an ethical and religious being, his appreciation of Socrates deepens and he comes to think that Socrates' alleged avoidance of becoming speculatively absorbed is yet an-

fied in this ignorance” because he had no “deeper speculative craving,” but instead remained occupied by his god-given task of seeking out people, individual by individual, who think they are wise, and of coming to the “assistance of the god” by showing them that they are not:

What kept Socrates from a speculative absorption in the remotely intimated positivity behind this ignorance was, of course, the divine call that he had to convince every individual of the same thing.

Socrates certainly indicated a new direction; he gave the age its direction (taking this word not so much in a philosophic as in a military sense). He went around to each one individually in order to find out if that person had a sound position; nevertheless, his activity was intended not so much to draw their attention to what was to come as to wrest from them what they had. This he accomplished, as long as the campaign lasted, by cutting off all communication with the besieged through his questions, which starved the garrison out of opinions, conceptions, time-honored traditions, etc. that up until now had been adequate for the person concerned.¹⁷⁰ ...In this way [Socrates] admittedly freed the single individual from every presupposition, freed him as he himself was free; but the freedom he personally enjoyed in ironic satisfaction the others could not enjoy, and thus it developed in them a longing and a yearning. Therefore, while his own standpoint rounds itself off in itself, this standpoint when absorbed into the consciousness of others becomes only the condition for a new standpoint.¹⁷¹

Thus for Kierkegaard, Socrates’ ignorance is both a genuine ignorance and a fundamental philosophic stance. His response to this ignorance is both to feel liberated and to treat it as a source of repose, a condition that allows him to pursue the negative freedom and spiritual isolation that are characteristic of a standpoint of irony. Even as he pursues these things for these reasons, the effect he has on others is to help make them aware of their ignorance and thereby to awaken in them a de-

other mark of his greatness as a thinker and authentic human being. See, e.g., the discussion of the difference between Socrates and Plato at *CUPI*, 206–207 / *SKS* 7, 188–190.

170 For more on how Kierkegaard conceives of Socrates’ manner of questioning and how this differs from a speculatively-directed manner of questioning, see *CI*, 36 / *SKS* 1, 97,21–29: “[O]ne can ask [questions] with the intention of receiving an answer containing the desired fullness [...]; or one can ask [questions] without any interest in the answer except to suck out the apparent content by means of the question and thereby to leave an emptiness behind. The first method presupposes, of course, that there is a fullness; the second that there is an emptiness. The first is the speculative method; the second the ironic. Socrates in particular practiced the latter method” (trans. modified).

171 *CI*, 176 / *SKS* 1, 223,10–11; *Ap.* 23B; *CI*, 173 / *SKS* 1, 220,15–17; *CI*, 175–176 / *SKS* 1, 222–223 (last trans. modified).

sire for a greater sense of the self and a greater, more theoretical knowledge of how things are.

Let's return to Socrates' final discussion of death, which takes place at the end of the *Apology*.¹⁷² Kierkegaard thinks that this discussion nicely serves to bring out the unusual manner in which Socrates responds to the prospect of death. Socrates maintains that "either the dead are nothing and have no perception of anything, or it is, as we are told, a change and a relocating for the soul from here to another place."¹⁷³ Beginning with the first disjunct, Socrates claims that death would be a "great advantage" if it is a "complete lack of perception, like a dreamless sleep." He adds: "If death is like this I say it is an advantage, for all eternity would then seem to be no more than a single night."¹⁷⁴ Without allowing the jury too much time to linger over this possibility (and whether a "dreamless sleep" from which one could never awaken would really be something to rejoice about), Socrates turns to the second disjunct: "If, on the other hand, death is a change from here to another place, and what we are told is true and all who have died are there, what greater blessing could there be, gentlemen of the jury?"¹⁷⁵ Socrates notes that if this is the case, then it's possible that people would encounter true judges in the underworld (rather than the imperfect ones found in this life) and might also have the chance to meet some of the great poets and wise people of the past (such as Orpheus, Musaeus, Hesiod and Homer). In his own case, Socrates also welcomes the idea that he might be able to exchange accounts with others "who died through an unjust conviction."¹⁷⁶ But, above all, what Socrates seems most to welcome about death under this scenario is the chance to continue his god-given task of questioning people and exposing their ignorance:

172 *Ap.* 40C-42A.

173 *Ap.* 40C-D.

174 *Ap.* 40D-E.

175 *Ap.* 40E-41A. This disjunction, of course, obviously is not exhaustive. For example, death might turn out to be a change from here to another place, where what we are told about this place is *not* true. On Kierkegaard's view, "Socrates is very aware that his syllogisms do not provide an exhaustive answer to the question" of what death is and whether or not it is in fact a "blessing." What "delights" Socrates is "the speed with which the infinite contrast [between a lack of perception and a continuation of his philosophical life in the underworld] appears and disappears" (*CI*, 81-82 / *SKS* 1, 140,1-4).

176 *Ap.* 41B.

Most important, I could spend my time testing and examining people there, as I do here, as to whom among them is wise, and who thinks he is, but is not.

What would one not give, gentlemen of the jury, for the opportunity to examine the man who led the great expedition against Troy [Agamemnon], or Odysseus, or Sisyphus, and innumerable other men and women one could mention. It would be an extraordinary happiness to talk with them, to keep company with them and examine them.¹⁷⁷

As Socrates describes things for the jury, then, death is either a lack of perception (like a dreamless sleep) or it is the relocation of the soul to a place where one might be able to converse with the great men and woman of the past.

Given that the jury had just convicted Socrates and sentenced him to death for having practiced philosophy in the manner that he has, it's not immediately clear how comforting that individual jurors would find either of these options. Under the first scenario, they are faced with the prospect of a complete loss of the conscious self; under the second, they are faced with the prospect of their souls surviving and being relocated to a supposedly better place, but to a place where they will also find Socrates waiting to greet them, and presumably ready to resume the very questioning from which they had hoped to free themselves by sentencing him to death!¹⁷⁸ In fact, part of why Socrates seems to think that this scenario would be a blessing (at least for him) is his belief that those with whom he will converse in the underworld "would certainly not put one to death for doing so." This may be because, as Socrates adds, people in the underworld are "happier" than we are, but it may also be because "for the rest of time [people in the underworld] are deathless," meaning they couldn't put him to death even if they wanted to!¹⁷⁹ Earlier in his dissertation Kierkegaard commented on this scenario as follows:

It is undeniable that here Socrates almost lapses into the ridiculous in this zeal for spying on people that does not even allow him peace after death. And who, indeed, can keep from smiling when he imagines the somber shades of the underworld and Socrates right there in the middle, indefatigably interrogating them and showing them that they know nothing.¹⁸⁰

177 *Ap.* 41B-c.

178 Cf. *Ap.* 39C-D, where Socrates warns those who voted for his conviction that they will not be able to "avoid" giving an account of their lives since there will be others who will continue to test them after he is put to death.

179 *Ap.* 41c.

180 *CI*, 40 / *SKS* 1, 101,1-6.

Kierkegaard notes that Socrates may seem to allow that he might actually encounter some people in the underworld who are in fact wise. Just as he holds out the possibility that there will be true judges there, so too he claims that his testing and examining of people in the underworld will allow him to distinguish “as to whom among them is wise, and who thinks he is, but is not.”¹⁸¹ But Kierkegaard reminds his readers not to forget that what Socrates means by wisdom is simply an awareness of one’s ignorance. Kierkegaard also thinks there is no reason to expect that people in the underworld will actually perform any better when they are examined by Socrates:

Admittedly, it might seem that Socrates himself thought that some of them [in the underworld] perhaps were wise, for he says that he will test which of them is wise and which imagines himself to be so and yet is not. But for one thing it must be remembered that this wisdom is neither more nor less than the ignorance described, and for another that he declares that he is going to test them there just as he has those here; this suggests that it presumably will go no better with those great men in that *tentamen rigorosum* [rigorous examination] than it went with the great men here in life.¹⁸²

Socrates’ suggestion that he may be able to continue his god-given task in the underworld might provide some comfort to those who voted for his innocence, perhaps holding out to them the future possibility of being able, yet again, to “take pleasure in hearing people questioned” by Socrates since, as he notes, “hearing those being questioned who think they are wise, but are not...is not unpleasant.”¹⁸³ At the same time, Kierkegaard thinks that any comfort this prospect seems to provide may need to be tempered: “[S]ince the view that death is nothing whatever” emerges as one of the two possibilities that Socrates entertains, “the extent to which one can share the joy that [seemingly] encircles both these continents like an ocean certainly becomes somewhat doubtful.”¹⁸⁴ Things appear worse, on the other hand, for those who truly seek to rid themselves of Socrates and his incessant questioning. For them, the two possibilities that Socrates entertains do not seem especially consoling in either case.

If we return to Socrates’ own attitude to death, Kierkegaard thinks we should attend to the fact that what seems to accompany everything he says about death is how, at bottom, he remains “uncertain” about death’s true nature, since the only sense in which he is wiser than others

181 *Ap.* 41b.

182 *CI*, 40 / *SKS* 1, 101,6–14.

183 *Ap.* 23c; 33c.

184 *CI*, 83 / *SKS* 1, 140,30–32.

when it comes to death is that he remains aware of his ignorance about death. But whereas some might find this uncertainty unnerving, Kierkegaard suggests that Socrates seems to take a special delight in remaining ignorant about death and its significance:

All these passages [on death] manifest Socrates' complete incertitude, but, please note, not as if this incertitude had disquieted him; no, on the contrary, this game with life, this giddiness, with death showing itself at one time as infinitely significant and at another time as nothing, is what appeals to him. On the front of the stage, then, is Socrates – yet not as someone who rashly brushes away the thought of death and clings anxiously to life, not as someone who eagerly goes toward death and magnanimously sacrifices his life. No, it is as someone who takes delight in the play of light and shadow found in a syllogistic *aut/aut* [either/or] when it almost simultaneously manifests broad daylight and pitch darkness, manifests the infinitely real and infinite nothingness....¹⁸⁵

Whether death is a relocating of the soul to another place or a lack of perception, Kierkegaard maintains that Socrates displays an attitude to these two possibilities that is distinct from the responses most people exhibit, and he suggests that the best way to make sense of this attitude is to treat it as arising from a stance of irony.

In the case where Socrates imagines death as a relocation of his soul to a place where he can continue his task of questioning those who have a reputation for wisdom, Kierkegaard argues that this is a clear example of how irony can be relentless in its tendency to negate and undermine whatever is put before it. He thinks that the joy that Socrates exhibits over the prospect of being able to question people in the underworld helps to bring into relief Socrates' stance of irony:

Here, then, we see irony in all its divine infinitude, which allows nothing whatever to endure. Like Sampson, Socrates grasps the pillars that support knowledge and tumbles everything down into the nothingness of ignorance.¹⁸⁶

Since Kierkegaard thinks that it is not unreasonable to assume that things will “go no better” for those who are examined by Socrates in the underworld, he also thinks that he is right to conclude that he has isolated something that correctly characterizes Socrates and how he conceives of philosophy but which remains alien to Plato and his thought: “That this is genuinely Socratic everyone will certainly admit, but Platonic it will never become.”¹⁸⁷ Another way that Kierkegaard tries to put this is

185 *CI*, 81 / *SKS* 1, 139,13–23 (trans. modified).

186 *CI*, 40 / *SKS* 1, 101–102.

187 *CI*, 40 / *SKS* 1, 102,2–3.

to claim that whereas “Socrates’ philosophy began with the presupposition that he knew nothing” (and so “ended with the presupposition that human beings know nothing at all”), Plato’s conception of philosophy (perhaps best exhibited in the *Republic*) has a different (and incompatible) presupposition: “Platonic philosophy began in the immediate unity of thought and being and stayed there.”¹⁸⁸ I take it that this means that while for Socrates people will continue to fall into two classes, those who are aware of their ignorance about important life matters and those who are not, this is an unacceptable disjunction for Plato (and arguably for most philosophers throughout the history of the discipline). If, on the other hand, one presupposes an immediate unity of thought and being (or can somehow establish this unity in some other way), then this suggests that with a proper upbringing and the proper use of reason it will actually be possible to get beyond Socrates’ awareness of his ignorance to a better cognitive state, such that (at least some) human beings could come to resemble the gods more closely and to have a share in the knowledge that Socrates claims is the special province of the gods alone.

In the case where Socrates imagines death as a ceasing of conscious life (where the individual is no more, is in effect nothing), Kierkegaard again draws attention to how he thinks Socrates’ response to this prospect is best understood as a sign of his stance of irony. He claims that this is an illustrative case of the ironist’s employing the absolute to undermine the existing actuality, where in doing so the absolute appears to the ironist in the form of nothing:

...[Socrates] believes that to become nothing whatever by death is *thaumasion kerdos* [a great advantage] – indeed, his words take on an intensity when he declares that not merely a private person but the Great King himself would have but few days to compare to this. A sleep of the soul such as this and a nothing such as this must eminently appeal to the ironist, who right here has the absolute face-to-face with life’s relativity, but in a form so light that he cannot overstrain himself on it since he has it in the form of nothing.¹⁸⁹

Kierkegaard had earlier drawn attention to how Socrates briefly entertains a similar possibility in the *Phaedo*. The bulk of his discussion there (which is represented to be the last philosophical discussion that

188 *CI*, 37 / *SKS* 1, 98,9–12.

189 *CI*, 84 / *SKS* 1, 141,18–25 (trans. modified). See also *CI*, 236 / *SKS* 1, 277,23–25: “[...] [Socrates] had the absolute in the form of nothing. By way of the absolute reality became nothing, but in turn the absolute was nothing.”

Socrates had before his death) concerns trying to demonstrate the immortality of the soul, with Socrates concluding that while “no sensible man would insist that these things are as I have described them...I think it is fitting for a man to risk the belief – for the risk is a noble one – that this, or something like this, is true about our souls and their dwelling places.”¹⁹⁰ At the same time, Socrates had earlier reminded those present at his final discussion that being convinced of something isn’t praiseworthy in itself since it is possible to be convinced of things that are false. With respect to believing that the soul is immortal, he says, “if what I say is true, it is a fine thing [of which] to be convinced.”¹⁹¹ But he also considers the possibility that what he says is false. In that case, while it would not be praiseworthy to become convinced of what is developed over the course of his last conversation (since this would be false), Socrates suggests nevertheless that he still thinks that it would be better to have spent his time in this way (doing philosophy as best he is able to the end) than to burden his friends in some other way:

[I]f, on the other hand, *nothing* exists after death, at least for this time before I die I shall distress those present less with lamentations and my folly [i.e., falsely believing that the soul is immortal] will not continue to exist along with me – that would be a bad thing – but will come to an end in a short time.¹⁹²

Kierkegaard thinks we should be struck by how casually Socrates mentions the idea that nothing might exist after death, and how he doesn’t seem to be particularly troubled by this possibility. Instead of, for example, expressing horror or anxiety over this prospect, Socrates even seems to joke a bit with his companions about this possible outcome and how its being true would undermine all that they will develop over the course of their investigation:

The thought that one might become absolutely nothing through death...does not horrify [Socrates] at all. Nor, on the other hand, does he include it because, terrified by this conclusion, he wants to drive home again the eccentric thought [that the soul is immortal], but he actually does jest with it and, should worst come to worst, would rather be snatched out of this error [of believing that the soul is immortal], “for to remain in it would indeed be a bad thing,” and thereby be totally annihilated. But what expressly characterizes irony is the abstract standard by which it levels everything, by which it controls every inordinate emotion, thus does not set the pathos of enthusiasm against the fear of

190 Plato *Phaedo* [*Phd.*], trans. by G. M. A. Grube in *Plato: Complete Works*, 114D.

191 *Phd.* 91A-B.

192 *Phd.* 91B (italics mine).

death but finds that it is a curious hypothesis to surmise total extinction in this way.¹⁹³

By raising the possibility that there is nothing after death, Socrates gently and playfully makes clear that any joy one might take in the prospect of the soul's being immortal remains hypothetical to the extent that this competing possibility has not been ruled out. While Socrates' discussion in the *Phaedo* does in effect focus on developing one half of the disjunction that he raises in the *Apology* ("for Socrates believes that this is the most attractive alternative, since then a person will be less burdensome to his friends"), Kierkegaard maintains that in the *Apology* itself Socrates "makes no attempt to actualize the one half of it any more than he does the other."¹⁹⁴ This means that insofar as one finds the prospect of there being an underworld to be a potential source of joy (especially an underworld where the wise of the past could be examined, and where Socrates too might be encountered again) "this joy is very hypothetical, since the other possibility is indeed so close at hand, that is, not a hair-breadth away."¹⁹⁵

Kierkegaard closes his discussion of Socrates' attitude to death by noting that the *Apology* upholds the ambiguity about what death is (and whether or not it is a good thing) until the very end, with Socrates' final words being as follows: "Now the hour to part has come. I go to die, you go to live. Which of us goes to the better lot is known to no one, except the god."¹⁹⁶ Throughout his discussion of how Socrates comports himself in relation to death and in the light of his ignorance about death, Kierkegaard tries to get his readers to entertain the idea that everything Socrates says and does can best be made sense of if Socrates is conceived of as someone who occupies a standpoint of irony. In many ways, death is the most difficult test of one's convictions or of what one is made of. On Kierkegaard's view, the unusual composure that Socrates displays is quite distinct from either a cowardly fear or a brave endurance. Instead, Kierkegaard invites his readers to treat this composure as indicative of a deep and pervasive irony, one in which Socrates both delights in the ignorance he possesses about death and enjoys

193 *CI*, 79 / *SKS* 1, 137,22–33 (trans. modified; I have translated "et Onde" as "a bad thing" instead of as "an evil" to maintain the parallel with Grube's translation of the *Phaedo*).

194 *CI*, 84 / *SKS* 1, 142,5–7 and 3–5.

195 *CI*, 84 / *SKS* 1, 142,1–2.

196 *Ap.* 42A.

the negative freedom and isolation that are characteristic of such a fundamental stance of irony.

I want to conclude this paper by briefly considering how Kierkegaard makes use of the writings of Friedrich Ast to help his readers discover more generally the irony that he claims can be found in the *Apology*. Once Kierkegaard has completed his discussion of the passages in the *Apology* that concern death, he then proceeds to offer what he terms “a more specific scrutiny” of the *Apology* in order to try show that “in its entirety” there is irony that runs throughout this work.¹⁹⁷ Kierkegaard is aware, however, that many of his readers at this point in the dissertation may still have serious reservations about his view that Socrates is fundamentally an ironist. So far his strategy has been to try to get his readers to experience Socrates’ irony in a more piecemeal fashion, with the hope that they will grow used to the idea that there may be more to Socrates’ irony than they might first have supposed. (To help facilitate this in our own case, we helped ourselves in the second part of this paper to the more explicit account of irony that Kierkegaard doesn’t provide his readers until Part Two of his dissertation.) Ultimately, however, what Kierkegaard is trying to bring about is something like a Gestalt shift in his readers, where the irony of Socrates will dawn on them in more than a piecemeal fashion. To help bring about this shift in perspective, he adopts the interesting argumentative strategy of quoting at length from Ast’s writings about the *Apology*. Kierkegaard seems to think that by appealing to the moral force with which Ast condemns the “unknown orator” (the one who has composed the allegedly spurious *Apology*), he may be able to make a kind of contact with the moral reservations that could underlie some of his own readers’ resistance to accepting the conception of Socrates that he defends in his dissertation. But while Ast’s response may initially attract Kierkegaard’s readers, Kierkegaard ultimately hopes that in eventual reaction to Ast’s moral fervor, they may find themselves in a better position genuinely to appreciate the depth of Socrates’ irony. He says that he will “let Ast speak for a moment, hoping that, by means of the enormous pressure the weight of his comments must necessarily have, the reader’s soul will gain adequate resilience to permit the irony to surface.”¹⁹⁸ Kierkegaard then provides his readers with the first of three quotations (two of which are fairly long) taken from Ast’s book, *Plato’s Life and Writings*:

197 *CI*, 85 / *SKS* 1, 142,16–17.

198 *CI*, 85 / *SKS* 1, 142,17–20.

The speaker [Ast's unknown orator] has in his own way exaggerated this masculine steadfastness of Socrates [which Ast finds in Xenophon's presentation] so much so that it appears to be the most *spiritless and heartless indifference*. After the verdict he does not allow Socrates to wonder at the pronouncement of the judges, but merely at the number of votes on each side. He then has Socrates make the *cold-blooded calculation* that he would have been acquitted if only three votes¹⁹⁹ had gone the other way, and that if Anytus and Lycon had not come forward with their additional accusations, Meletus would have had to pay a thousand drachmas for not having obtained one fifth of the votes. But this *indifference* is even more noticeable when Socrates speaks of death. He continually asserts that he has no fear of death, but upon what is this fearlessness based?...*On nothing*; it is thus *empty ostentation*.... Could Plato, the author of the *Phaedo*, allow Socrates to speak in this way about death, and could he attribute to him such a *vulgar, spiritless and listless, almost ludicrous indifference*? And yet this listless and spiritless Socrates seeks to *play the part of the inspired enthusiast* inasmuch as he ventures to prophesy.²⁰⁰

Kierkegaard notes that it is his hope that this quotation (and others) from Ast will help to provide the "perspectival angle of perception in which the irony [in the *Apology*] will become apparent to some of [his] readers and also show to better advantage."²⁰¹ He singles out two aspects of Ast's presentation that he thinks will help to "drive the reader to the point where he must be captured" by the overwhelming presence of Socrates' irony: (1) "the earnestness that predominates in Ast," and (2) "the stridency."²⁰² (To see what Kierkegaard is driving at here, it helps to try reading Ast's words aloud with an incredulous, indignant tone of voice.) For example, Kierkegaard draws his readers' attention to the passage where Ast emphasizes what he takes to be a damning contrast that he detects in Socrates – "and yet this listless and spiritless Socrates seeks to play the part of the inspired enthusiast" – and argues that, for anyone who continues to hold that the *Apology* is genuine, this contrast ought to make the ironic reading of Socrates "absolutely irresistible."²⁰³

In a second quotation from Ast, Kierkegaard provides his readers with further examples of what Ast takes to be the presence of objectionable contrasts:

199 A manuscript variation on what in most versions is rendered as thirty votes.

200 Friedrich Ast *Platons Leben und Schriften*, Leipzig 1816, pp. 487 and 488; quoted at *CI*, 86 / *SKS* 1, 142–143 (trans. modified; italics mine; the ellipses and the second bracketed insertion are Kierkegaard's).

201 *CI*, 86 / *SKS* 1, 143,5–7.

202 *CI*, 86–87 / *SKS* 1, 143.

203 *CI*, 87 / *SKS* 1, 143,17–21.

The speaker betrays himself in his delivery not only by opposing thoughts (e.g., “but I am in utter poverty by reason of my devotion to the god,” in which the lower is set in such contrast to the high, and the *complaining tone* in such contrast to *the feeling of pride*, that the statement almost draws a smile from us), but also by opposing words; for orators at that time flattered themselves with antitheses that trifle in the manner of Gorgias and Lysias.²⁰⁴

Kierkegaard seems to agree with Ast that some of the features that he has identified truly are present in the *Apology*, and also seems to think that Ast is right in thinking that the contrasts which Socrates manifests in his delivery before the court are not easily squared with a pathos-filled, lofty portrait of him: “Thus in the *Apology* the most pathos-filled outbursts are usually followed by argumentation that blows away the foam of eloquence and discloses that underneath there is nothing whatever.”²⁰⁵ Kierkegaard seems to hope that his readers will agree with many of Ast’s observations, while he also hopes that eventually they will begin to recoil from the nature of Ast’s response to what he detects in Socrates. In general, Kierkegaard believes that reading a number of Ast’s comments “will fortify the wavering and unstable reader and will be dangerous for anyone who still crosses himself at the thought that irony is supposed to explain the *Apology*.”²⁰⁶

As his discussion shifts from a focus on more local instances of irony in the *Apology* towards a consideration of “whether there is irony in the *Apology*, not in this or that point, but in its entirety,” Kierkegaard draws attention to what he takes to be an inherent difficulty in how best to proceed:

When it comes to an account of the irony diffused in the *Apology*, to which I now turn, I find myself in a bit of difficulty. I could try to chase together a host from every corner, but, to say nothing of the fact that the lengthy argumentation necessary for each point would bore the reader, I also believe that that whole section, instead of coming like a soft whisper, as is the nature of irony, would come whistling. To have to demonstrate irony through additional research at every single point would, of course, rob it of the surprise, the striking

204 *CI*, 87 / *SKS* 1, 143,26–32 (italics mine).

205 *CI*, 82 / *SKS* 1, 140,6–8. Cf. Kierkegaard’s claim regarding Socrates’ relationship to the eloquence of the sophists: “When the Sophists, in good company, had befogged themselves in their own eloquence, it was Socrates’ joy to introduce, in the most polite and modest way of the world, a slight draft that in a short time expelled all these poetic vapors” (*CI*, 36–37 / *SKS* 1, 97–98).

206 *CI*, 87 / *SKS* 1, 143,23–25 (trans. modified).

– in short, would enervate it. Irony requires strong contrast and would utterly vanish in such boring company as argumentation.²⁰⁷

In this passage Kierkegaard raises interesting methodological questions about how exactly it is best to proceed if one is trying to establish the pervasiveness of a phenomenon like irony. He seems to think that there is something in the nature of lengthy argumentation about irony that will interfere with his readers' ability to remain in a position where they can genuinely appreciate the irony that is supposed to be being demonstrated. I think he has in mind something akin to the ludicrousness we sometimes encounter in those situations where we are trying to explain a joke to someone who doesn't get what makes it funny; frequently the attempted explanation, or worse yet series of explanations, will itself remove all that is funny, such that our audience remains puzzled and unmoved while we are reduced to muttering things like, "Well, I guess you just had to be there." Similarly, if we want to help another person come to appreciate the presence of a deep and pervasive irony, Kierkegaard suggests that straightforward, good old-fashioned argumentation can only get us so far.

For this reason, Kierkegaard closes his discussion of Plato's *Apology* with a third quotation from Ast (this is by far the longest of the three quotes, and is over two full pages of text in length).²⁰⁸ Kierkegaard once again commends the value of reading Ast, "since with extraordinary mastery he has laid his hands on all those ambiguous points in order [to try] to demonstrate, *by scaring the reader out of his wits*, that the *Apology* is spurious."²⁰⁹ In this case, however, in addition to the main text (which he takes from Ast), Kierkegaard also adds a series of footnotes (nine to be exact) where he speaks in his own voice: "Since I invest the text with [Ast's] pathos, in the notes I shall permit myself a little hint that I hope will be sufficient for the reader." He compares this approach to a dynamic found in an etching of the ascension of the Madonna:

In order to raise heaven as high as possible, there is drawn across the bottom a dark line, over which two angels peek up at her. Similarly, by quoting Ast's words in the text, I shall elevate his words as high as possible, and in order to heighten his pathos even more, I shall draw a line over which at times irony's roguish face will be allowed to peek.²¹⁰

207 *CI*, 88 / *SKS* 1, 144,16–17; *CI*, 90 / *SKS* 1, 146,14–24.

208 See *CI*, 93–96 / *SKS* 1, 146–150.

209 *CI*, 90 / *SKS* 1, 146,25–27 (trans. modified; italics mine).

210 *CI*, 90 / *SKS* 1, 146,27–35.

By means, then, of the interplay between Ast's moral outrage and his own pithy, pointed reminders, Kierkegaard hopes that his readers will have an epiphany of sorts, where the omnipresence of irony in Plato's *Apology* will dawn on them for perhaps the first time. Following Kierkegaard's lead here, I want to end this paper, however, without trying to overcome the difficulty of using a scholarly approach to capture just how this is supposed to work (though I expect that a close analysis of the back and forth that Kierkegaard establishes between Ast's text and his own footnotes would reveal much that is fruitful).

Over the course of this paper I've tried to bring out some of the respects in which I think that Kierkegaard's dissertation is a rich piece of philosophy that has much to teach us about Socrates. In this work Kierkegaard develops an original answer to the Socratic problem, and in doing so provides us with a deep and far reaching account of Socratic irony (including how irony as a standpoint may be exhibited in Plato's *Apology*). I've indicated several reasons why philosophers may have neglected *On the Concept of Irony*, and I want to close by acknowledging one last potential obstacle to reading and taking seriously Kierkegaard's dissertation, namely that the Socrates who is championed in this work may ultimately seem to be too one-sided. When it comes down to it, we may simply find ourselves unwilling or unable to accept that Socrates could be what Kierkegaard alleges, an ironist through and through. This is actually a view that Kierkegaard himself seems to have eventually come to endorse. While Socrates always remains for him an ironist above all, Kierkegaard does indicate in some of his later writings that he thinks Socrates' stance of irony is compatible with his also possessing some of the ethical and religious characteristics that seem to be under threat in the dissertation. Kierkegaard thus seems to suggest that in his own considered view there may in fact be something one-sided about the conception of Socrates that he defends in his dissertation.²¹¹ And yet, in my view, it remains well worth the effort to wrestle with this work in all its peculiarity and brilliance, trying as best we can to experience the depth and perva-

211 See, e.g., *CUPI*, 503 / *SKS* 7, 456,14–16, where Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author Johannes Climacus accuses Kierkegaard of having developed a one-sided conception of Socrates in his dissertation: "What, then, is irony, if one wants to call Socrates an ironist and does not, like Magister Kierkegaard, consciously or unconsciously want to bring out only the one side?" See also, e.g., Winfield E. Nagley "Kierkegaard's Early and Later View of Socratic Irony" in *Thought* 55, 1980, pp. 271–282.

siveness of the irony that Kierkegaard claims constituted Socrates' existence and made him the singular figure that he was.²¹²

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