CHAPTER 7

KIERKEGAARD AND GREEK PHILOSOPHY

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REFERENCES to ancient Greek philosophy can be found throughout Kierkegaard's writings, and they include general remarks and observations as well as highly specific quotations and allusions. His enthusiasm for classical thought is evident to any careful reader of his work, and it has been increasingly recognized as one of the distinguishing features of the Kierkegaardian corpus—that is, both the pseudonymous texts and those to which he signed his own name. But what is the significance of this? Is it just one of the many inexplicable peculiarities of an idiosyncratic author? What I will argue in this chapter is that Kierkegaard uses classical thought as an essential point of reference in defining his own intellectual project: hence, if we understand what it is that he admires about the Greeks, and what he learns and appropriates from them, then we will have an excellent key for interpreting his entire body of work. We will also be able to appreciate a defining feature of what has come to be known as 'existential' philosophy, because a number of other thinkers who share a family resemblance with Kierkegaard also regard themselves as inheriting the legacy of ancient philosophy.

I. Ethics and Existential Thought

Kierkegaard studied some classical authors and texts in a scholarly manner, giving sustained attention to these works in the original languages and consulting the secondary literature by leading historians of philosophy such as Schleiermacher, Hegel, W. G. Tennemann, P. M. Møller, and F. C. Sibbern. In other cases, his engagement with ancient philosophy was more in the manner of an enthusiast who selected favourite ideas without paying much heed to their context. Yet he was always reading with an interest in finding resources that could inform his own thinking. Searching for alternatives to the prevailing trends in the intellectual climate of his time, Kierkegaard was

encouraged by the examples of unconventional figures such as Hamann and Jacobi, which aided him to some degree as he developed and clarified his own sense of purpose. However, none of the more recent thinkers who inspired Kierkegaard were fully acceptable as role models (at least, not in his eyes), so he had to look further back into the history of ideas in order to find examples of the radically different kind of philosophy that he wanted to pursue.[1] Only in classical thought did he find sufficient philosophical inspiration for his own projects, and this is why both he and his pseudonyms frequently refer to the ancient Greeks as a standard against which modern philosophers can be measured. As Louis Mackey has observed, Kierkegaard's 'veneration for the Greeks' is opposed to his 'vitriolic critique' of the speculative philosophy that was predominant during the nineteenth century, and a major goal of his authorship is to reinstate a classical model of philosophical thought and practice (Mackey 1971: 268). As we shall see, this project involves appropriating numerous themes and ways of thinking from the ancients; but none of these is as important as the classical Greek conception of philosophy itself.

In particular, what appeals to Kierkegaard is the way that ancient philosophy was not 'a merely theoretical discipline', but an integrated mode of life in which theoretical reflection was meant to affect one's character (Nehamas 1998: 2). It is beyond my scope at present to evaluate whether Kierkegaard's view of modern philosophy is entirely fair or accurate, but it is well worth noting that the 'primacy of practical reason', as Kant describes it, was implicit in the very idea of Greek philosophy (Hadot 2009: 113–14). Whatever it may have become in the modern era, the philosophical life in ancient times was a practice guided by the love of wisdom; a reflective discipline oriented towards the goal of living with insight and understanding. And even if this notion of philosophy has gone missing, Kierkegaard suggests that it is still available to us today. He claims that those who 'loved wisdom' in the 'old days' can give us a model from which to learn (SKS20/KJN4: NB5:144 [JP3: 3314]); for this reason, he refers to 'the Greeks' as 'my consolation' during a time when the philosophical tradition has drifted away from its original ideals (SKS18/KJN2: JJ:288 [JP3: 3300]). 'Greek philosophy', according to the pseudonymous author of Kierkegaard's *Prefaces*, 'did not abandon people for the purpose of sounding like a voice from the clouds', but 'remained on the earth, in the marketplace, among the occupations of people' (SKS4: 503/P: 41–2). In other words, the arguments of the ancient philosophers were intended to address the most urgent concerns of human beings, and the practice of philosophy consisted not only in developing and memorizing these arguments, but in allowing them to influence one's way of life.[2] When the Stoic Epictetus distinguishes between a mere 'grammarian' and a philosopher, he defines the former as someone who analyses philosophical texts without any interest in putting abstract ideas into practice.[3] Theorizing

[1] Cf. Sløk 1972: 457. See also Evans 2009: 4, on why 'taking Kierkegaard seriously as a philosopher' may involve restoring the 'conception of philosophy that inspired the Greeks.'

[2] Cf. Hadot 2002: 172–3; and Hadot 1995: 60. On Kierkegaard's relation to ancient thought, see also Furtak 2007, 2010c.

[3] Epictetus, *Encheiridion* 49; see also *Discourses* I.4.6–8 and I.4.13–14. Even if theory alone is insufficient, theoretical discourse is regarded by the Greeks as a valuable guide to practice.

on its own is pointless, of course, if philosophy is not viewed as a 'narrowly technical or academic' pursuit, but as offering 'a comprehensive outlook on the world' (Long 2002: 18). In so far as Kierkegaard is an advocate of philosophy in this broader sense, we should expect him to be drawn to ancient thinkers that exemplify it, from the Presocratics through to the Hellenistic sages.

It is important to see why Socrates is an exemplary figure for Kierkegaard, in his own right and also as the epitome of Greek philosophy at its best. Rather than speaking in an impersonal philosophical jargon that 'explains nothing and understands nothing' (SKS18/KJN2: JJ:230 [JP4: 4536]), which Kierkegaard accuses some modern philosophers of doing, Socrates distrusts 'the crowd' and addresses himself to individuals, allowing the problems of philosophy to arise out of the context of ordinary life (SKS20/KJN4: NB2:16 [JP5: 5979]; SKS24/KJN8: NB21:35 [JP4: 4281]). As Aristotle and Cicero would later point out, Socrates brought philosophy down to earth, leaving aside cosmological inquiries and investigating ethical questions instead.[4] Socrates 'inaugurated a new era' in philosophy 'by abandoning cosmology and physics', and making 'ethics the first and central subject to which anyone who aspired to the name of philosopher had to turn', in such a way that his successors 'all gave precedence' to 'ethical thought' in one form or another (Cooper 1999: p. ix). Thus, what it would mean to become 'a little more Greek' in the modern age, Kierkegaard says, would be to become 'more human', more concerned about matters of practical reason.[5] The 'Socratic ideal' is 'a life that aims at cultivating the self while also serving as an occasion for one's fellow citizens to examine themselves more closely' (Muench 2009: 390). Socrates is indisputably a premier representative of the Greek notion that truthfulness should be attributed to persons, not to propositions,[6] since his beliefs were expressed in his life in such a way that 'theory and practice were in harmony', on Kierkegaard's view, and his understanding was embodied in his existence (SKS1: 112/CI: 51).[7] Yet Socrates is not the only one who epitomizes the classical standard of philosophy that Kierkegaard holds in such high esteem. Many other ancient Greek thinkers are singled out for praise at one point or another in Kierkegaard's writings, and ancient philosophy is repeatedly cited as a model of what philosophy ought to be.

Socrates is, however, an all-important figure for Kierkegaard, in his own right and as an emblematic representative of the classical ideal of philosophy as a way of life. So although such a figure as Heraclitus is admired for his unique voice and his focus on the

[4] See, e.g. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 987b; Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* V.4. See also Plato, *Phaedo* 96a–99e: this is where Socrates narrates his own intellectual biography, then explains why he abandoned his early interest in natural science. On his distrust of the crowd, see Plato, *Apology* 31e–32a.

[5] From an unpublished 1844 fragment (Pap. V B 53: 29/PF: 191). See also SKS7: 140/Hannay 2009: 161: 'I believe every Greek as well as every rational human being will understand what I am saying.' As Johannes Climacus adds, defining *existential thought*, 'the stamp of ethical approval is what everyone existing has a right to demand of anything calling itself wisdom' (SKS7: 233–4/Hannay 2009: 259).

[6] On the kind of truth that is embodied in a person, see the pseudonymous *Practice in Christianity* (SKS12: 201–2/PC: 205), and compare Barrett 1958: 171: 'subjective truth is not a truth that I *have*, but a truth that I *am*.'

[7] See also SKS21/KJN5: NB10:68 (JP6: 6360) and SKS26/KJN10: NB31:94 (JP4: 4301).

realm of change, it is nonetheless fair to say that 'Kierkegaard's attraction to Heraclitus is basically the same as to other Greek philosophers', as a 'hero of engaged existential living' and an alternative to merely theoretical philosophy.[8] The idea that insight into the nature of reality could inform a life of wisdom, already present in Heraclitus and other Presocratics, is prominent in the writings of Plato and Aristotle and survives into the late ancient period through authors such as Marcus Aurelius and Plotinus.[9] Abstract inquiry into the structure of the universe and of the human soul is justified, for these thinkers, in terms of how this kind of knowledge would enable us to live well. Ethics is thus grounded in epistemology and metaphysics—or 'logic' and 'physics', as these areas were often called—in such a way that all realms of philosophy would inform ethical practice. If one believes, with Heraclitus and the Stoics, that a cosmic principle of reason is echoed within the human mind, then the best life one can lead will be based upon abiding by this principle. The idea that philosophical inquiry provides each individual with the resources for living well, and that it addresses urgent questions that pertain to human life, is prominent throughout the classical period. So when contemporary scholars refer to the 'existential' character of ancient philosophy, regardless of whether they have in mind Socrates, Epictetus, or Sextus Empiricus, what they are emphasizing (albeit anachronistically) is the classical notion that philosophical reflection can lead to insight about the meaning of existence, and that this insight will issue in a way of living.[10]

Because of the emphasis on ethics and the care of the soul that is so widespread in the classical era, it is accurate to say (as 'Johannes Climacus' does) that 'Greek philosophy always had a relation to ethics' (SKS7: 117/Hannay 2009: 104), although not to the exclusion of more abstract inquiries. Kierkegaard could point to any number of ancient thinkers as examples of 'existential' thought, in the sense of *thinking which pertains to existence*. Since the philosophical approach that Kierkegaard advocates is so prevalent in ancient philosophy, we can grasp his meaning when he praises Fichte as 'a thinker in the noble Greek sense' (SKS15: 91/BA: 226), or when his pseudonym calls Trendelenburg a 'Greek thinker' who has 'sound' and 'sober-minded' ideas, adding that to 'live like a Greek philosopher' in current times would be a matter of 'expressing existentially' a 'life-view'.[11] This is not to say that *all* Greek philosophers or philosophical

[8] Jensen 2010: 159–60. On Heraclitus, see, e.g., SKS18/KJN2: JJ:69 (JP2: 2285) and SKS19/KJN 3: Not1: 41. See also *Fear and Trembling* (SKS4: 210/FT: 123), and compare Kahn 1979: 5–22, on the *logos* as 'the universal principle in accordance with which all things come to pass', which is mirrored in the human psyche.

[9] Neither the Roman emperor and Stoic philosopher, nor the Alexandrian Neoplatonist, qualifies as Greek in the strict sense, of course. Yet throughout this chapter, I follow Kierkegaard's practice in using 'Greek' to designate all the ancient philosophers whose writings survive in the Greek language.

[10] The 'existential' or 'existentialist' aspects of ancient philosophy are noted by Hadot (1995: 155 and 271), Long (2002: 34), and Stewart (2010: 90–2), among others. Thomas Flynn points out that 'existentialism represents a long tradition in the history of philosophy', extending back 'at least to Socrates' (2006: 1–3).

[11] SKS7: 106–7, 32/Hannay 2009 93 and 295–6. On the Greek idea of a 'life-view', see SKS3: 229–30/EO2: 240–1. Kierkegaard mentions his own goal of 'remaining intellectually true in the Greek sense to my existence-idea', after the *Corsair* incident (COR: 211). See also SKS24/KJN8: NB23:134.

views are regarded with equal admiration by Kierkegaard. He displays mild derision toward absent-minded thinkers such as Thales and Anaxarchus, who fall into ditches after losing sight of human life in order to theorize about higher realities.[12] He has little use for the Atomists and is largely critical of the Eleatics—and, as we shall see, he has significant disagreements with Aristotle and with Platonism, some of which has to do with Plato's alleged tendency to 'lose himself in speculation' about 'universal concepts' such as 'the in-and-for-itself good' and the notion of 'recollection'.[13] The overall tone and focus of Hellenistic schools such as Stoicism and Scepticism impress Kierkegaard more than any Stoic or Sceptic principles (as we shall also see), and even Socrates does not escape criticism: for often leaving his interlocutors 'empty-handed' and sometimes being 'cold' to them, in addition to seeming occasionally 'less virtuous' than a sincere lover of wisdom ought to be.[14] Greek concepts such as Aristotle's *kinêsis* are more valuable to Kierkegaard than ideas such as the reality of 'that which always is', as one might expect;[15] so he can be found responding to metaphysical speculation among the ancients with some of the same objections that he raises against modern philosophy. On the whole, however, Kierkegaard tends to adopt a charitable attitude toward Socrates and the rest of the Greek philosophers.

When Kierkegaard wrote in his early journal entries about his quest to find 'truth which is truth *for me*', to find an idea that could guide him in life, rather than 'so-called objective truth' which held no meaning for his own existence (SKS17/KJN1: AA:12), he had in mind a variety of truth that would not be impartial or disinterested. And, based on his less than charitable interpretation of modern philosophy, this sort of truth was not to be found there. Elsewhere in his journals he laments the 'contempt for the edifying' that can be seen in Hegel's work,[16] countering that 'that which builds up' is not irrelevant for knowledge (SKS27: Pap. 264:6 [JP1: 1588]), but actually essential for some forms of knowing. Whatever may be said on behalf of philosophy as an academic enterprise involving conceptual analysis for its own sake, there are central philosophical questions that cannot be pursued in a manner that fails to take account of the individual for whom existence is

[12] See, e.g. Kierkegaard, *Johannes Climacus*, SKS15:39/PF: 146; Plato, *Theaetetus* 174a; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1141b and *Politics* 1259a.

[13] I cite *The Concept of Irony* (SKS1: 130–1/CI: 71–2); and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (SKS7: 188–90/CUP1: 206–7). In each case, a clear distinction is drawn between Socratic and Platonic views.

[14] See *The Concept of Irony* (SKS1: 221–2/CI: 173–5); and also Pap. V B 4: 3/PF: 189, where Socrates is described as being 'cold' toward Alcibiades. On Kierkegaard's sense of the 'less virtuous' or 'nihilistic' side of Socrates, see Söderquist 2007: 55–6. Far from thinking that Socrates is always in the right, Kierkegaard even claims that Aristophanes has come 'close to the truth' in his depiction of Socrates (SKS1: 65/CI: 6). Aristophanes presents Socrates in *The Clouds* as a buffoon with his head in the clouds, 'a critical, atheistic philosopher of nature and a Sophist in the pejorative sense', as Ricken (1991: 53) says.

[15] Cf. Plato, *Republic* 485a–b, on our longing to know 'that which always is', and on the security of eternal being; on our knowledge of what is unchanging see also Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1139b–1140a, and SKS19/KJN3: Not13: 17 [JP2: 2281]). On *kinêsis*, see, e.g., SKS18/KJN2: JJ:467 [JP1: 771]).

[16] For Hegel's dismissal of 'mere feeling,' and of 'unsystematic philosophizing'—which can only express personal particularities of mind—see, for instance, *The Encyclopaedia Logic* §§ 14, 19.

'at issue': questions such as the one Kierkegaard asks in his 1835 journals, about the meaning and purpose of his own life. From his earliest work, he stresses the importance of a 'life-view', or an outlook developed out of one's particular experience; and he suggests that some truths that concern each of us personally must be appropriated wholeheartedly in order to have any concrete meaning (SKS1: 32/EPW: 76; see also SKS5: 233–4/EUD: 233–4). In working out an interpretation of the oracle, Socrates follows the Delphic injunction to 'know thyself', forming a conviction about what his life means.[17] To forbid this belief from qualifying as philosophical unless it could be scientifically verified, or found to be universally valid, would be to make an assumption about the nature of philosophy which distorts the notion of wisdom that we find in ancient Greece.

So instead of regarding Socrates as a cold logician, or as a fanatical champion of abstract rationality,[18] Kierkegaard views him as the foremost exemplar of the Greek way of orienting philosophical inquiry towards existentially relevant themes. He points out in *Johannes Climacus* that 'the conduct of the Greek skeptics' is 'more consistent than the modern overcoming of doubt', since ancient scepticism recognizes that our doubts arise from an interest in knowing, and that we can 'cancel doubt by transforming interest into apathy' (SKS15: 57/PF: 170). Modern speculative thought, on the other hand, does not indicate that the search for sceptical equanimity takes place only 'within existence', for a person who practices the discipline of suspending judgement: because it tends to assume a disinterested vantage point, it struggles to make sense of scepticism as a moral undertaking that is carried out by someone in particular (SKS7: 44, 289/CUP1: 38, 318). Even Aristotle at his most theoretical speaks of contemplation as an activity practiced by human beings, and one that constitutes the best mode of existence for such creatures as we are; and he maintains that the satisfaction inherent in philosophical activity 'is not at all like the fun of doing a crossword puzzle, where there is no value in what is known'.[19] In similar fashion, when the Platonists encourage us to purify our minds by attending to universal truths, this too is a path suited for human beings, a practice whose transformative effects are described in first-personal, experiential terms.[20] In many respects, the less evidently practical aspects of ancient Greek philosophy were integral parts of an examined life. This is what the pseudonymous author of the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*—like its 'editor', Kierkegaard himself—admires above all in the 'beautiful Greek way of philosophizing', according to which 'to philosophize' is 'an action', and the philosopher never ceases to be 'someone who exists' (SKS7: 97, 302/Hannay 2009: 84, 277).

[17] Plato, *Apology* 20e–23b. Cf. Howland 2006: 61–4. On misrepresenting ancient Greek thought by failing to see that there may be 'different types of rationality', see Kingsley 1995: 372–3.

[18] On those in the modern age who are guilty of an 'irrational exaltation' of speculative reason, see the remarks by 'Johannes Climacus' early in *Philosophical Fragments* (SKS4: 215–17/PF: 5–8). Nietzsche, who describes every great philosophy as a personal or individual vision, an 'involuntary and unconscious auto-biography', castigates Socrates for being a monstrous, logic-chopping rationalist from *The Birth of Tragedy* through *Twilight of the Idols*. I quote from *Beyond Good and Evil* § 6 (Nietzsche 1997: 4).

[19] See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1177a–1179a. I cite Sparshott's commentary on this passage (1994: 340–1). See also Irwin 1988: 344–6, 608.

[20] Plato, *Phaedo* 79a–80e, 114c; Plotinus, *Enneads* I.6, III.8, V.9.

It is also in keeping with the spirit of the ancient philosophers to experiment with various styles of writing. Although the realm in which philosophical ideas are taken to heart and put to use is not within a text of *any* kind, nevertheless some literary methods are arguably better than others at addressing readers directly and making them feel that their own existence is at issue.[21] Kierkegaard seeks to address the reader in this way, to speak about matters that concern him or her quite intimately, and that pertain to his or her concrete situation. That is why he does not adopt a mode of discourse that seems remote from human life, or that appears not to be about anyone in particular. The way that his pseudonym 'Johannes de Silentio' introduces the idea of infinite resignation, for instance, is through a narrative about a specific character, a 'young lad' who falls in love with a princess (SKS4: 136–7/FT: 41–3). Like the author of the *Symposium*, he shows that philosophical ideas are meant to apply to our lives, and that philosophy as the love of wisdom must come to terms with our individual circumstances. The wide array of literary styles used by classical philosophers—including dialogues, discourses, letters, poems, aphorisms, and meditations—gives Kierkegaard a model to emulate as he alters his own mode of expression depending on his audience and his topic. In our pursuit of philosophical truth, we must not forget that it is *as* finite and striving beings, engaged in the ethical 'task' of being human, that we are practicing philosophy. As the *Postscript* explains, Socrates never ceases striving to discover ideas that he can live by, since he always remains unfinished and in the midst of becoming, even at age seventy—and that is how he is able to bring the ethical to light, to make it clear that philosophy is by and for a particular existing person. 'Existential thought' is best expressed in a novel form of literary-philosophical writing—not in a bland, uniform style. This is why the Platonic dialogues are an especially rich source of inspiration for Kierkegaard, offering an example of how ideas can unfold in relation to characters and situations, in addition to a variety of striking images, anecdotes, and jokes, which Kierkegaard weaves into his own works.[22] The narratives in Diogenes Laertius, and the pointed exhortations of the Stoic sages, provide him with examples of significant gestures and memorable sayings, which also provide raw material for his own creations.[23] Kierkegaard, who portrays himself as 'a

[21] See also Furtak 2008: 68–70. Hadot notes that, in reading the works of the ancient philosophers 'one is always faced with a writing…of circumstance', one that is 'particularized' rather than universal and impersonal (Hadot 2009: 53–4). The existential thinker rejects the 'exposition of abstract thoughts' in isolation, and explores 'literary techniques of presenting individual character', believing that meaning can be found only in 'existence' (Ong 2009: 173).

[22] For instance: the image of Eros as the child of poverty and plenty (Plato, *Symposium* 203b–c), those lines about Socrates not knowing if he is a gentle creature or a complex being puffed up by more pride than Typhon (*Phaedrus* 229e–230a), or the Socratic joke about 'giving birth' only to 'a wind-egg' when one's arguments have faltered and the 'midwife' has failed to deliver (*Theaetetus* 210b).

[23] Such as: Diogenes the Cynic walking across the room to refute the Eleatics (Diogenes Laertius VI.39), Socrates replying to a young man, who asked whether it was a good idea to get married, by assuring him that he would regret it either way (Diogenes Laertius II.33), and Epictetus upbraiding someone who wished to study philosophy only in order to solve logical paradoxes, by telling him to go hang himself (*Discourses* II.17.34). Aristotle points out the difference between learning something 'by rote' without appreciating what it means and 'assimilating' it so that one more thoroughly 'knows' its meaning: see *Nicomachean Ethics* 1147a–b, with reference to Empedocles.

singular kind of poet and thinker' (SKS12: 28/WA: 165), revives the classical ideal of the literary philosopher, bringing individual life more emphatically back into the orbit of philosophical writing.

II. Doubt and Socratic Faith

Because Kierkegaard views potentially 'edifying' truth as the kind that matters most, he is intrigued by the ancient Greek understanding of sceptical doubt, and belief, as intimately bound up with the emotional life of each moral agent.[24] This is yet another way in which philosophical ideas are constantly linked with practice in the classical era: Sceptics such as Pyrrho and Sextus Empiricus consider the suspension of judgement to be a grounding principle of ethics. The reason for abiding by the sceptical tenet that we must always suspend judgement is that it will bring about peace of mind by curing us of our inveterate and unsettling desire for knowledge.[25] By ceasing to reach for something that will always remain beyond our grasp, we can secure tranquillity. As Kierkegaard's pseudonym states in *Philosophical Fragments*, the classical Sceptic reasons as follows: if I can avoid forming beliefs, or drawing conclusions, then 'I shall never be deceived' (SKS4: 281–3/PF: 82–4). In defending this attitude, which Kierkegaard regards as an essentially passionate stance, Sextus Empiricus borrows from the arguments of Parmenides, who first argued that nothing true can be predicated of anything but unchanging being.[26] It follows for Parmenides that the realm of temporality and change is profoundly illusory; for the Sceptics, however, this conclusion is accepted only in its negative form. We can know nothing certain about reality based upon our experience of what happens to exist, and which could have been otherwise than it is. No necessary truths are to be found in the realm of becoming. Confining secure knowledge to 'that which always is', Aristotle also discerns that what is 'scientifically knowable' is 'the necessary, the eternal'—that which is 'absolutely everlasting', as Kierkegaard records in his notes on the sixth book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (SKS19/KJN3: Not13:17 [JP 2: 2281]). For ancient scepticism, this is why it is most rational, as well as ethically advisable, for us to avoid forming any strong opinions whatsoever.

The upshot of all this radical doubt regarding our capacity to know anything with certainty—which is introduced by the Eleatics and defended by the classical Sceptics, which takes a different form in Sophism, and appears again in all the Platonic dialogues that end without arriving at any definite answer (see SKS18/KJN2: JJ:482 [JP4: 4266])—is clear, as far as Kierkegaard is concerned. Although he identifies even Socrates as 'a sceptic' because of how frequently his method of questioning has 'negative' results

[24] Only edifying truth is 'for you', as Kierkegaard says in an 1843 notebook entry (SKS18/KJN2: JJ:53). The same claim appears at the very end of *Either/Or* (see SKS3: 322/EO2: 354).

[25] The core doctrines of Scepticism are formulated by Sextus Empiricus: see *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 1.3–4, 1.6–8, and 1.12. On Kierkegaard and ancient scepticism, see also Rudd (1998).

[26] See, e.g., Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Mathematicians* 7.3. Cf. SKS19/KJN3: Not14:1.

(SKS24/KJN8: NB24:84 [JP4: 4285]), he also thinks that Socrates' ability to paralyse people into doubt by undermining their former beliefs and leaving them with 'nothing' is a crucial aspect of the Socratic mission (SKS1: 25/CI: 210).[27] It uncovers the pervasive uncertainty of human existence, and illustrates the risk of error that is inherent in our most ordinary beliefs. Socrates understands that all of our claims to knowledge are insubstantial, and that we cannot presume to have a secure hold on the truth from a merely human perspective. And yet his testimony in the *Apology* makes it clear that he upholds a meaningful interpretation of his purpose in life, trusting in his daimonic promptings and seeking insight even though he is sceptical as to whether it can be found (*Apology* 31c–d, 40b; *Meno* 86c). Socrates also demonstrates a kind of faith by taking the 'noble risk' of believing that the soul may be immortal, although he realizes that he cannot prove this conclusively (*Phaedo* 91a–b, 107b, 114d). Kierkegaard expresses admiration for this outlook in many places, and regards it as a classic example of faith. Like Abraham, Socrates abides by his beliefs in the context of finite existence, orienting his life in accordance with a conviction that is formed and maintained in the face of uncertainty.[28] The best sceptical arguments thus help us to appreciate the importance of holding beliefs about important yet unknowable matters: wanting to secure oneself absolutely against the risk of error, then, is like 'wanting to know with certainty that one can swim before going into the water' (SKS4: 282/PF: 83). This is the significance of classical scepticism for Kierkegaard. He suggests that a person who only has the ability to 'doubt everything', but not to develop any convictions, will find that his life is 'utterly meaningless' as a result (SKS2: 32, 45/EO1: 23, 36).

The ancient Sceptic is ultimately portrayed in Kierkegaard's writings as a coward, someone whose only way of coping with his own unrealistic demand for assurance is to avoid the risk of believing anything. Socrates, by contrast, serves as an essential point of reference throughout Kierkegaard's writings, especially after *The Concept of Irony*. He is exemplary not so much for *what* he believes, but because he shows *why* 'existential faith' is important (Pap. X 6 B 80/CUP2: 163–4 [JP1: 11]), and *how* it could be maintained. And Aristotle provides the philosophical justification for non-scientific knowledge, or practical wisdom, which has to do with matters of actual, contingent existence. Referring to the *Rhetoric*, Kierkegaard claims that, 'as far as every existential proposition is concerned, for every proof there is some disproof, there are a *pro* and a *contra*'. And he adds: 'the man of conviction is not ignorant of this' (SKS20/KJN4: NB:102 [JP2: 2296]). If we learn through philosophical inquiry that we cannot be perfectly certain of anything

[27] Cf. Plato, *Meno* 80a–d and 86b–c. Regarding the Socratic disavowal of knowledge, see also Plato, *Apology* 21d–23b. For an account of how Socrates surpasses the Sophists in his destructive and 'nihilistic' irony, see Söderquist 2007: 59–60, 187–8. As Kierkegaard writes, the ignorance professed by Socrates is 'the nothing with which he destroys any knowledge' (SKS1: 307–8/CI: 270–1). By Kierkegaard's own standards, Socrates was 'the first existential thinker' because he 'discovered the ultimate bankruptcy of reason' (Wild 1940: 538–9).

[28] See, e.g., SKS23/KJN7: NB20:58 and SKS7: 184–5/Hannay 2009: 169–70. McPherran (1996: 200–8) remarks on the resemblance between Abraham and Socrates as exemplars of faith in the context of finite existence. See also Howland 2006: 43–4, 68.

except what is necessarily true, then we have good reason *not* to seek this degree of precision in forming beliefs about human life. The term used by Aristotle to describe moral certainty or conviction is *pistis*, as Kierkegaard notes (SKS18/KJN2: JJ:305c [JP1: 628]),[29] which is also the Greek word for 'faith' that is used in the New Testament. Here, the continuity between philosophical and religious forms of belief is obvious—and it will inform Kierkegaard's exploration of our passionate capacity to sustain convictions in the face of uncertainty, in texts such as *Works of Love* and the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. As he realizes, partly through his engagement with ancient philosophy, the epistemic demand for certainty or proof may deprive us of any firm standpoint regarding issues that are so practically urgent that we can hardly avoid thinking about them, at least while we exist.

III. Wisdom and the Passions

When the ancient Sceptics doubted, they did so 'within existence', for the sake of attaining peace of mind; in a sense, they 'needed passion' in order to cultivate *ataraxia* (SKS7: 289, 323/Hannay 2009: 266, 297). According to Kierkegaard's pseudonym in the *Postscript*, each human being has a passionate interest in understanding his or her own existence, and Socrates was right to emphasize this kind of knowledge. A theme which is repeated in other Kierkegaardian texts is that we need to recapture a classical Greek conception of wisdom according to which understanding is essentially linked to ethical life (see SKS11: 203–5/SUD: 90–2). As living human beings, we cannot help but care about questions that pertain to the way we exist, and that are related to how we experience and interpret the world. This is one reason why 'passion' is among the main attributes of the 'authentic existing thinker', in Kierkegaard's view.[30] In this respect, Greek philosophy sets an example that modern philosophy ought to follow. Moreover, the prominent focus on passion and emotion that persists throughout Kierkegaard's writings has been cited as one of the most distinctively 'classical' of his philosophical concerns (Roberts 1998: 179–84).[31] It allows him to find inspiration even in ancient schools of thought that regard passions or emotions with considerable distrust. Not only is Kierkegaard well acquainted with Aristotle's emphasis on the ethical task of cultivating one's dispositions toward

[29] Kierkegaard is alluding to Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1354a–1357a. See also *Nicomachean Ethics* 1094b, 1098a, and 1139b–1142a. Aristotle makes it clear that *phronēsis*, practical wisdom, is not the same as *epistēmē*, or 'scientific' knowledge. Cf. Schulz 2010: 88–92.

[30] My translation of Scopetea 1995: 395. As she correctly notes, this ideal can to some degree be 'traced back to Greece'. On the centrality of ethics in ancient Greek philosophy, and the recognition of 'the role of the emotions in informing us about matters of ethical significance', see also Nussbaum 2001: p. xvi.

[31] See also Roberts 1998: 189–92; Gouwens 1996: 76–9, 106–7. Roberts and Gouwens both make note of the cognitive significance of emotions and the role they play in informing us about matters of ethical value. On Aristotle's sense of the 'intimate link between knowledge and affectivity', see Hadot 2002: 85; see also *Metaphysics* 1072a–b, *De Anima* 433a.

emotion (see, e.g. SKS19/KJN3: Not13:12), a notion that he has good reason to admire, but he also draws upon ancient Stoicism in the process of articulating a standard of passionate wisdom that diverges quite radically from the Stoic ideal of the tranquil sage.

On the topic of 'authentic *pathos*', Kierkegaard praises the same 'vulnerability toward emotion' that a Stoic would guard against (SKS18/KJN2: FF:152 [JP3: 3070]). Classical Stoics such as Chrysippus and Epictetus embraced a systematic philosophy in which logic (or epistemology), physics (or metaphysics), and ethics were integrated into a coherent doctrine that could provide guidance for human beings in every walk of life. The ethical aspect of Stoic philosophy includes a cognitive theory of emotions, as well as principles for becoming dispassionate—which, for the Stoics, is the result of bringing one's mind into harmony with a cosmic principle of reason.[32] Emotion, or passion, has to do with the apparent value of something that is beyond one's own control. Believing in the value of these contingent 'external goods' disposes a person towards a wide variety of emotional responses. 'To cherish something', that is, 'to ascribe to it a high value', is to become vulnerable to such passions as 'fear when it is threatened', or 'grief when it is lost', as the Stoics argue (Nussbaum 1994: 370). In other words, any concern, interest, care, or enthusiasm 'can give rise to' a 'whole range of emotions' (Roberts 1998: 186). The Stoic attempts to avoid this vulnerability, removing the liability to emotions by remaining indifferent about whatever lies beyond his or her moral control. Because passions arise from 'beliefs about what is good and what is bad' in the realm of what is out of our control, the 'most important' distinction in Stoicism is between that which is within in our power, or 'up to us', and that which is not (Epictetus, *Discourses* I.1.14–17, *Encheiridion* 1): as Kierkegaard notes in a journal entry, this is the 'main thesis' in Stoic thought (SKS24/KJN8: NB24:156 [JP4: 3863]). The Stoics deny that anything outside of us, or anything besides one's own moral purpose, is truly important or valuable. To believe that a contingent event can affect us for better or worse is to make a basic error about the nature of reality. This is why a recurrent theme in Stoic philosophy is that we should resist being moved—for instance, by the observation that a child is precious or that a violent storm is threatening.[33]

As the Sceptics also recognized, appearances or impressions of value do not force us to give assent to them in one way or another.[34] But once we have done so, the Stoics claim, our emotions take on a momentum of their own—and the feeling of an emotion carries an intrinsic sense that what we are perceiving is truly the way it appears, that the storm *is* a threat or that the child *is* precious. This is why it is necessary for the Stoic to be vigilant about eradicating all dispositions towards emotion: for instance, by thinking of his or her nearest family members in such a way that he or she will not be troubled when they pass away. The way to console a person in mourning, according to Epictetus and

[32] See Epictetus, *Discourses* II.8.12–13 and Diogenes Laertius VII.88. Cf. Long 2002: 118–19. On the Stoic account of emotion, see also Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* IV.27.

[33] Epictetus, *Discourses* II.18.30 (on the storm) and I.23.5–6 (on the child). Cf. Diogenes Laertius VII.110, on the error that is allegedly involved in becoming disturbed by such things.

[34] See, e.g., Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 1.10 and 1.13. See also Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 6.52 and Epictetus, *Encheiridion* 5.

Chrysippus, is to convince him that his grief involves a mistaken sense of value (see Gould 1970: 132–3).[35] If we educate ourselves about what is truly of value, the Stoics argue, we will not be susceptible to passions any longer.[36] Emotional attachment is 'a certain recipe for disappointment, anxiety, and unhappiness' (Long 2002: 28–9). By placing no value on 'external goods', a person can remain in a blissful state of apathy. Yet Kierkegaard reproaches the Stoics for this goal of cultivating passionless detachment (SKS24/KJN8: NB22:30 [JP4: 4515]). He disputes their thesis that everything beyond our power is insignificant to us. In an 1848 notebook entry, he refers to the claim made by Epictetus that, if one eradicates the idea that an emotionally disturbing event is truly significant, then one will cease to be pained by the emotion (SKS21/KJN5: NB8:5 [JP4: 4625]).[37] He alludes to this Stoic notion that 'all pain resides in the idea', or in one's way of thinking, in a sketch for *Either/Or* (Pap. III B 180: 13/EO1: 489). While this may be true, as Kierkegaard acknowledges in the same notebook entry, he quickly adds that we should not therefore eliminate all impressions of affective significance.

In one of his earliest works, Kierkegaard writes that a life-view ought to open up deeper experiences of meaning than Stoicism does (SKS1: 32/EPW: 76). Although the one admitted Stoic in his pseudonymous works, 'Constantin Constantius' in *Repetition*, says that he has always 'strongly mistrusted all upheavals' (SKS4: 45/R: 171), Kierkegaard himself claims that a Stoic self—with its fear of upheaval and its defensive autonomy—is 'the most isolated self' of all (SKS21/KJN5: NB8:8 [JP4: 3898]).[38] And the list of the varieties of despair in *The Sickness Unto Death* includes the following statement about *defiance*: if a 'generic name' were to be applied to this form of despair, 'it could be called Stoicism' (SKS11: 182–3/SUD: 68–9). In this mode of despair, 'the self is its own master, absolutely its own master, so-called; and precisely this is its despair', although it is in this very fact that the Stoic takes pride. Ostensibly, 'the Stoic takes earthly sufferings [and] adversities' so lightly that they effectively 'do not exist for him' (SKS23/KJN7: NB17:83). Yet the Stoic doctrine of dispassion and self-sufficiency forms a sharp contrast with some of Kierkegaard's core ideals. Impassive detachment is incompatible with the unconditional engagement of a loving person, and for this reason Kierkegaard's vision of ethical life is quite unlike the Stoic paradigm of wisdom. Indeed, he ultimately defends the view that passion can be a valuable mode of perception, even going so far as to declare that 'only great souls are exposed to passions' (SKS18/KJN2: FF:152 [JP3: 3070]).

[35] Epictetus, *Encheiridion* 3, *Discourses* IV.1.65–9. Cf. Sherman (1997: 108): 'false belief' is responsible for passions, and 'the cure' for passions is 'true and reasoned belief about what is of value or worth'. By contrast, Aristotle views emotions as potentially accurate perceptions of value: see, e.g., *Rhetoric* 1378b–1379a. According to Aristotle, 'emotions are perceptions or appearances of particulars as good or bad', such that 'when we perceive particulars as bad or they appear to us as bad, we are pained', as Achtenberg explains (2002: 164–8).

[36] See, e.g. Epictetus, *Discourses* III.1.40. The ensuing discussion overlaps in part with Furtak 2010b, a discussion of Stoic themes in Kierkegaard's work which contains further references to their historical and intellectual context. See also Furtak 2005: 17–33 for an account of ancient Stoicism in its own right.

[37] In the margin, Kierkegaard quotes from Epictetus, *Discourses* I.4.23 (SKS21/KJN5: NB8:5.a).

[38] Here, he cites Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 11.3. Clearly, this is at odds with Kierkegaard's view of the self as a network of 'life-defining relationships' (Mooney 2007: 101).

This is worlds apart from the Stoic position that wisdom consists in apathy: Kierkegaard in fact explicitly sets himself against the Stoics, saying that what he wishes to see in a person is exactly the 'disposition to passion' that a Stoic has to set himself against (SKS18/KJN2: JJ:55 [JP4:4512]). Rather than striving to develop an invulnerable soul, Kierkegaard suggests, we should adopt the contrary aim of becoming loving subjects who are emotionally open *to*, and engaged *in*, the world of others.

Despite his veneration for the existential spirit of ancient Stoic philosophy, Kierkegaard's encounter with Stoicism eventually leads him to develop an antithetical ideal of radically passionate subjectivity, one in which the human being is rooted and grounded in love. According to Kierkegaard, love is a condition of moral agency as well as a source of insight, the 'ground of all things' (SKS9: 227/WL: 225) which forms the heart as it flows from the heart. He suggests that God ought to be understood in terms of 'pure passion and pathos' (SKS26/KJN10: NB31:76 [JP3: 2447]) and as love itself, the 'middle term' in any relationship between lover and beloved (SKS9: 124/WL: 121). Along with an account of love as the source of emotional life, Kierkegaard also develops a normative ideal of passionate wisdom. Yet his understanding of the passions and of their cognitive significance retains unmistakably Greek traces, even as he departs from ancient views according to which dispassionate tranquillity is the essence of wisdom.

IV. On Love and Virtue

It is a virtue 'to be truly in love', as Kierkegaard writes in *The Book on Adler* (Pap. VII 2 B 235: 195/BA: 108), and it is our capacity to love that gives shape and orientation to our lives. His attention to love, even in abstract theoretical works such as *Philosophical Fragments*, indicates that Kierkegaard agrees with the classical focus on love as a worthy topic for philosophical investigation. From Plato's *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*, through Books VIII and IX of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, all the way to Plotinus's *Enneads*, we find major ancient philosophers addressing love as a moral phenomenon and as the 'Socratic pathos' that inspires 'a passion for truth' (Gouwens 1996: 44) and promises a higher kind of insight. This includes *erôs* and *philia*, as well as *agapê*—the last of which is considered in Stoicism and repeatedly in the Platonic dialogues.[39] Although Kierkegaard finds nothing in pagan Greek thought that entirely resembles the Christian ideal of love that he endorses, he is nevertheless preoccupied throughout his literary career with the accounts of love that he finds in ancient philosophy. His enthusiasm for Plato's erotic dialogues, for instance, extends from his earliest work through some of his latest religious writings.

Kierkegaard takes seriously the Platonic notion that love can be interpreted as a divine power: for him, God is the 'source of all love' (SKS9: 12/WL: 3). The ontology developed

[39] See Plato, *Symposium* 180b, 181c, 210d; and Plato, *Phaedrus* 233e, 241d, 247d, 253a, and 257e. See also Cobb 1993: 5. On *agapê* as one of the Stoic *eupatheiai*, see Sorabji 2000: 47–8 and Diogenes Laertius VII.116.

in *Works of Love* hearkens back to the Platonic notion that the truth may be available only to someone with the temperament of a lover, since Kierkegaard claims that we will be comprehensively 'deceived' if we do not 'believe in love,' by trusting in the veracity of what it reveals (SKS9: 13–15/WL: 5–7). He praises both the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* for their portrayal of love (SKS19/KJN3: Not6:12 [JP3: 2387]; Pap. III B 26 [JP3: 3323]). His own texts share with these Platonic dialogues an interest in the way that love is involved in moral education, by influencing a person's formation. Kierkegaard's primary criticism of Eros as conceived in the Platonic dialogues is that it is not sufficiently a love of the individual; another of his main concerns is that it is too selfish and acquisitive. He observes that, in the speech of Socrates in the *Symposium*, love becomes 'disengaged more and more from the accidental concretion in which it appeared', ascending higher into the atmosphere 'until breathing almost stops in the pure ether' (SKS1: 102–7/CI: 41–6). This speech, much of which is attributed to a woman named Diotima, is often regarded as the most reliable source for Plato's own doctrine of love.[40] Love is defined not only as the power that moves human beings with erotic longing, but it is also said to inspire artistic creativity, ethical striving, and insight into ultimate reality. Eros is associated with everything from raw physical desire to the most noble aspirations of the human soul, including the yearning for immortality. Love is also construed in the speech of Socrates as an intermediary between mortal and divine realms of being. We cannot long for what we already have, so if love is a wish to possess the beautiful and the good, then love itself cannot be imagined as a perfect being who is already in possession of goodness and beauty. This shows why Platonic Eros might be considered acquisitive: I long for what is good *for me*, and I long to have it for *my own* benefit. On this view, love is a sense of violent longing for what one lacks.

There is also reason to worry about what is left behind on the erotic progress described in Diotima's narrative, according to which 'the object of love' is initially an individual human being; once aroused, however, love is redirected towards more abstract objects such as customs and sciences, until it arrives at 'the beautiful' itself (SKS1: 160/CI: 107). Beauty itself is said to be uncorrupted by human flesh or colouring or any of that other 'mortal nonsense' (see Plato, *Symposium* 211e), and one who has ascended to this level of abstraction will think less of the distinct reality and value of individuals, which are nothing more than steps on a ladder that leads beyond them. Opposing this Platonic view, Kierkegaard suggests that in order to love actual human beings, we must 'give up all imaginary and exaggerated ideas' about a 'dreamworld' in which the perfect love-object can be found (SKS9: 162/WL: 161). In other words, love should not be used as a means of escape from the concrete reality of the human world into a contemplation of higher and more perfect things.

In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates first defines love as an irrational desire, then retracts what he has said so far as a kind of blasphemy and promises to repent for it by giving another speech in honor of Eros.[41] This time, love is described as a sacred madness, a heaven-sent

[40] Plato, *Symposium* 201d and 204e–206a. See also SKS20/KJN4: NB5:16 (JP6: 6144). The entire speech, including the parts that are ascribed to Diotima, spans from 198a–212c of the *Symposium*.

[41] Plato, *Phaedrus* 238b–c, 242d–245c, and 249d–250e. For a more detailed discussion of the 'madness' of 'erotic love' and the 'puzzle' of 'human nature' in the *Phaedrus*, see Possen 2010: 74–7.

blessing, which provides the one who loves with intoxicating illumination. As in the *Symposium*, the vision of earthly beauty is a precipitating factor, inspiring us with lofty aspirations. Unlike the *Symposium*, however, the *Phaedrus* does not present the individual beloved as being of merely instrumental value, a step on the way to true enlightenment. It 'begins and ends with the love-relationship between individuals', depicting the emotional tie to another person as precisely that which can guide the lover 'to an understanding of beauty and truth.'[42] The divine madness of love has the ability to lift us to a more elevated level of happiness and wisdom than we could reach through the aid of merely human prudence or secular reason. Kierkegaard echoes this idea when he suggests that earthly love bears the imprint of divine love (SKS5: 83/EUD: 75). Yet, on his view, the earthly love relationship is not only a step on the way to the eternal, just as it is not interpreted in merely mundane terms: rather, it is seen as the infusion of an eternal power into finite existence. The unique individuality of the person who is loved, therefore, is an end in itself, not the launching pad for a flight towards the 'great sea of beauty' (see Plato, *Symposium* 210d) and away from the beloved person.

In the 'Young Man' of his own *Symposium*, the dialogue on love at the beginning of *Stages on Life's Way*, Kierkegaard creates a character who thinks that 'the lovable' is a dubious notion if it cannot be defined in a way that would command universal assent (SK 6: 36–43/SLW: 31–40). Only a misguided lover, Kierkegaard suggests, would need to define 'the lovable' in advance, so that he could be guided by predetermined criteria in deciding what is worthy of love. Elsewhere, referring back to Socrates, Kierkegaard indicates that there must be an error involved in thinking that we can love only what is 'objectively' lovable (SKS9: 365–7/WL: 371–3). He regards it as 'a sad but all too common inversion' to accentuate 'how the object of love must be' in order for it to be 'loveworthy' (SKS9: 159/WL: 159), so Kierkegaard can be classified as an advocate of *agapê* rather than *erôs*. However, he does not share the view of Anders Nygren that the two forms of love are mutually exclusive and violently opposed to one another (1959: 6). He is much closer to Thomas Aquinas, for whom Eros inspires a striving for perfection, and Augustine, who views divergent forms of love as flowing from one source. Like the ancient Greek philosophers, Kierkegaard uses multiple words to refer to love: *Kjerlighed* and *Elskov*. Yet he sometimes uses *Kjerlighed* in reference to Platonic Eros, and *Elskov* in discussing Christian love of neighbour.[43] This suggests that he considers *agapê* and *erôs* to be different manifestations of love, not as discrete powers.

One reason why Kierkegaard is drawn to Platonic Eros is that he wants to learn how love can motivate human beings towards the good. In the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, his pseudonym refers to 'the Greek conception of Eros as found in [Plato's] *Symposium*' (SKS7: 91/CUP1: 92), as a representation of the way in which an existing thinker is perpetually striving to understand. This once again raises Socrates to the level

[42] Grube 1958: 112–13. See also Nussbaum 2001: 220–1.

[43] See *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions* (SKS5: 423/TDIO: 47), where Kierkegaard alludes to Plato, *Symposium* 178b. In *Works of Love* he also cites Socrates, that 'simple wise man of old', to the effect that 'Love is a son of wealth and poverty', translating the Greek term *erôs* with the Danish word that he uses for neighbourly love (SKS9: 175/WL: 175). Kierkegaard is quoting from *Symposium* 203c.

of an exemplary figure, as the embodiment of philosophical Eros whose entire life is an impassioned search for wisdom. Most importantly, though, love for Kierkegaard has to do with the realization of each person's distinctive potential. What it means to love the neighbour is 'to will to exist equally for unconditionally every human being' (SKS9: 89/WL: 83–4). That is, to love a person is to affirm his or her existence.

Nothing else in ancient Greek philosophy approaches so closely to this ideal as Aristotle's notion of friendship that consists more in loving than in being loved, and which entails wishing that good things happen to one's friend *for his or her own sake*.[44] Love thus defined makes life worth living, according to both Aristotle and Kierkegaard (see SKS9: 368/WL: 375).[45] Kierkegaard is also following in the footsteps of Aristotle when he portrays love as that which enables a person not only to 'seek his own' but to take an interest in the interests of the other (SKS9: 267–8/WL: 269). The capacity to love is aligned with the task of realizing each person's unique particularity, since love involves affirming and encouraging a person's development, seeking to aid his or her flourishing, and believing in the reality and value of his or her life as an end in itself. This is what it means to love another person, and this conveys the sense in which love might enable us to know, as Kierkegaard suggests that it should (SKS20/KJN4: NB3:59 [JP2: 2003])—namely, because it serves as a subjective condition for the realization and appreciation of human individuality.

V. The Legacy of Ancient Greek Philosophy

With the notion that love in any form could be a source of insight, rather than an influence that blinds us or distorts our vision, we are brought back to the general theme of classical philosophy and its significance for Kierkegaard. By suggesting, for instance, that some truths are only available through a mode of experience in which we abandon rational sovereignty, ancient Greek thought offers hypotheses and ways of thinking that differ from what Kierkegaard was able to discover in his immediate intellectual context. This is not to say that *nothing* in modern philosophy could have provided inspiration to Kierkegaard on this topic, and others that were dear to his heart; however, his tendency was to approach recent authors and thinkers more critically, while being generous and receptive towards classical thought. In the works of his contemporaries there were ideas he might have admired that he simply did not: towards the Greeks, his attitude was not uniformly reverential, but there was much that he found encouraging, and which made him wish that philosophers in his own age would become 'more Greek' (Pap. V B 53: 29/

[44] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1159a. Cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1155a–b; *Rhetoric* 1380b.

[45] On *philia* as 'love', see Vlastos 1981: 4–6. See also Price 1989: 144, 149–50 and Nussbaum 2001: 354. Aristotle's lost writings on *erôs* are listed in Diogenes Laertius V. 22–7; see also *Posterior Analytics* 68a–b and Price 1989: 238–41. For more on Platonic Eros in relation to Kierkegaard, see Furtak 2010a.

CA: 191). Whether accurately or not, the portrait of modern philosophy that emerges from Kierkegaard's writings is of a discipline caught up in irrelevancies, and neglecting the genuine perplexities of human existence (SKS18/KJN2: JJ:288 [JP3: 3300]). What is required, then, is a return to the ancient conception of philosophy, according to which a philosopher was 'an ardent existing person impassioned by his thinking' (SKS7: 280/CUP1: 308). And when Kierkegaard's pseudonym makes this declaration, the thinker he has in mind above all is Socrates. In his own voice, Kierkegaard characterizes Socrates as a figure with whom he has always had an uncanny 'rapport', and as the 'only analogy' that he has for understanding his own 'mission' in life (SKS24/KJN8: NB23:102 [JP6: 6839]). Among the many reasons for this analogy, one is that Socrates conceived of philosophy as a personal enterprise: in his own case as well as for everyone he encountered, he practiced philosophical inquiry in a way that engaged the individual human being as such, addressing his or her actual beliefs (see SKS24/KJN8: NB21:35 [JP4: 4281]). One could reject this conception of philosophy, in favour of an impersonal ideal of philosophy as offering abstract models of reality that do not take individual life into consideration; measured in terms of this ideal, Kierkegaard would qualify as having a philosophical agenda only in a loose or anachronistic sense. Yet the impersonal ideal of philosophy will be the one that seems deficient, if one accepts the ancient concept of philosophy according to which one's life ought to be the embodiment of one's thought. In any event, it is evident that Kierkegaard found sanction for his own work as a writer and thinker in the Greek understanding of philosophy as a way of life.

If we distinguish the sort of philosophical approach that 'avoids personal style and idiosyncrasy as much as possible' from philosophy as an 'art of living', Kierkegaard would clearly fit in the latter category, as one of its finest exemplars and as a vehement critic of the former approach. Yet when Alexander Nehamas adds that the philosophers who adopt a more personal mode of writing must be preoccupied with the 'fashioning' and 'construction' of the self (Nehamas 1998: 3–4), he names a goal that fits poorly with Kierkegaard's priorities. Much more in the spirit of Kierkegaard's work is a statement made by Iris Murdoch, that 'to do philosophy is to explore one's own temperament', while 'at the same time to attempt to discover the truth'. This implies that one could hope to find, through one's own idiosyncratic temperament, a truth that is not of one's own creation, 'a philosophy one could live by' (Murdoch 1991: 46–7). Philosophical activity construed in this way calls for *humility*, a character trait that does not show up on Aristotle's list of virtues and that is not so obviously exhibited by Socrates, but which is nonetheless a virtue that does appear in the Greek philosophers more readily than in most of the moderns. Despite his less-than-apologetic tone in Plato's *Apology*, Socrates displays a pronounced lack of *hubris* in stating that his vocation was not of his own making, and in recognizing that his knowledge is limited and uncertain.[46] This contrasts starkly with the Hegelian idea of 'absolute knowing', and with modern assumptions about rational agency. Some scholars like to scoff at the 'primitive' Greeks who viewed

[46] See, e.g., Plato, *Apology* 20e–21b and 33c. On Socratic humility, see also McPherran 1996: 216–18 and Howland 2006: 125, 192. Cf. Söderquist 2007: 196–200.

human beings as influenced by deities, instead of being actuated by their autonomous 'power' of will (Snell 1982: 19–22). During a time when philosophy was '*merely* a life' (SKS25/KJN9: NB28:24 [JP3: 3317]), Socrates viewed his own existence as beholden to higher powers, like the lives of the Homeric characters to which he was so fond of alluding. And when Kierkegaard invokes the world of the ancient Greeks, he recalls an entire framework in which human life is interpreted against the background of a universe animated with sacred meaning. That unfashionable vision of reality seemed attractive to Kierkegaard, for whom the God of love made him feel 'that I could not do otherwise' but accept the imperative to write as the sign of a vocation: 'it was not at all my idea,' he says, yet he came to regard it as 'my duty' (SKS15/PV: 23, 86–7). By claiming that we are nothing until we accept the imperative 'you shall' (SKS9: 9/WL: 90), and by forming beliefs about his own life tasks as if he were not the artist but the work of art, Kierkegaard revives the classical virtue of humility. In so doing, he relies upon a way of thinking that might seem wildly irrational to champions of secular reason, but which would not have appeared so bizarre to the Greeks. As we have seen, this is typical of the way in which Kierkegaard looks to ancient philosophy for alternatives to prevailing modes of thought—and finds respectable, even heroic, antecedents for his own views.

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