Søren Kierkegaard

SUBJECTIVITY, IRONY, & THE CRISIS OF MODERNITY

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Kierkegaard's View of Socrates

In the last chapter we looked at Hegel's analysis of the importance of Socrates for Greek culture and for world history. Kierkegaard studied Hegel's account carefully and, in *The Concept of Irony*, responds to it almost point for point. Our goal in this chapter is to come to terms with Kierkegaard's understanding of Socrates, and to see where he agrees with Hegel and where he disagrees. We will look at Kierkegaard's analysis of Socrates' daimon, his trial and conviction, and his relation to the Sophists and the later schools of philosophy. We will also see that Kierkegaard was quite exercised by the Danish theologian and philosopher Hans Lassen Martensen and his lectures at the University of Copenhagen. We will explore Kierkegaard's response to Martensen's article on Faust, and Kierkegaard's two satirical works that were aimed at Martensen and his students, namely, *The Conflict between the Old and the New Soap Cellars* and *Johannes Climacus, or De omnibus dubitandum est*. Finally, we also want to introduce a lesser-known Danish figure, Andreas Frederik Beck, who wrote an insightful book review of *The Concept of Irony*, which gives us a brief snapshot of the contemporary assessment of the work.

3.1. Kierkegaard's View of Socrates' Daimon

Kierkegaard begins his account of the daimon by poking fun at the attempts of the secondary literature to understand this phenomenon.[1]

[1] For Kierkegaard's account of the daimon, see *The Concept of Irony*, trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1989, pp. 157–67.

He then quickly moves on to an analysis of the ancient sources, where he finds an important discrepancy. According to Plato, the daimon was purely negative: it warned Socrates not to do certain things, but it never proposed or demanded positive actions. According to Xenophon's account, however, the daimon was also positive, prompting and enjoining Socrates to do specific things. Kierkegaard was thus obliged to make some kind of judgment about which of the ancient sources to follow on this point, and he wholeheartedly affirms the view of Plato: "What I . . . would like to point out to the reader is significant for the whole conception of Socrates: namely, that this daimon is represented only as warning, not as commanding—that is, as negative and not as positive."[2] He thus believes that Socrates is fundamentally a negative figure and that it is a mistake when one wants to ascribe something positive to him.

This is important to Kierkegaard since he wants to see Socrates' irony as the Greek philosopher's defining characteristic. In its essence irony is negative or destructive: it negates and can thus be used to criticize various elements of the established order. Kierkegaard believes that Xenophon did not properly grasp this important negative mission of Socrates, and for this reason he mistakenly attributed something positive to Socrates' daimon. By contrast, Plato was the more perceptive student who recognized the importance of the negative element in Socrates.

Kierkegaard agrees with Hegel's understanding of the daimon as a part of Socrates' subjectivity that is opposed to the traditional values and customary ethics of Athens. He raises the question: "Was Socrates, as his accusers claimed, in conflict with the state religion by the assumption of this daimon?"[3] He responds, in agreement with Hegel, "Obviously he was. For one thing, it was an entirely polemical relation to the Greek state religion to substitute something completely abstract for the concrete individuality of the gods."[4] He also agrees with Hegel in seeing the daimon as a private alternative to the public oracle that the Greeks revered.[5] While he is

[2] Ibid., p. 159. Here and later, I have replaced "daimonion" in the translation of Kierkegaard's text with the more customary version "daimon."

[3] Ibid., p. 160. [4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid., pp. 160f.: "For another, it was a polemical relation to the state religion to substitute a silence in which a warning voice was audible only on occasion, a voice that . . . never had a thing to do with the substantial interests of political life, never said a word about them, but dealt only with Socrates' and at most his friends' completely

generally quite critical of the contemporary secondary literature on the topic,[6] Kierkegaard quotes extensively from Hegel's account as a support for his own view.[7]

The conclusion of Kierkegaard's analysis makes it clear that his main goal is to demonstrate that the daimon is consistent with Socrates' irony. This is the reason why he is so keen to focus on the negative aspect of the daimon that Hegel does not seem particularly interested in. The daimon represented an aspect of Socrates' subjectivity, and as such it allowed him to distance himself from traditional Greek culture. The daimon was thus part of the Socratic revolution of subjectivity.

3.2. Martensen's Faust

When Kierkegaard was growing up, the work of the famous German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe was very popular in Denmark.[8] In particular, Goethe's tragic drama *Faust* was often quoted and much discussed. This is the story of a scholar who sells his soul to the devil in exchange for unlimited knowledge. When Kierkegaard was a student at the University of Copenhagen he became very interested in this legend and in the figure of Faust. In 1836 in his *Journal BB*, he made a bibliography of different interpretations of Goethe's work and of the Faust legend generally.[9] He was

private and particular affairs—to substitute this for the Greek life permeated, even in the most insignificant manifestations, by a god-consciousness, to substitute a silence of this divine eloquence echoed in everything." See also Kierkegaard's account of Hegel's interpretation, ibid., pp. 163f.: "Instead of the oracle, Socrates now has his daimon. The daimon in this case now lies in the transition from the oracle's external relation to the individual to the complete inwardness of freedom and, as still being in this transition, is a subject for representation."

[6] In this context he refers to "pharisaical scholars, who strain at a gnat and swallow a camel." Ibid., p. 161.

[7] Ibid., p. 161, p. 162, p. 163, p. 164, p. 165.

[8] For Kierkegaard's use of Goethe and the Goethe fever in Golden Age Denmark, see Katalin Nun and Jon Stewart, "Goethe: A German Classic through the Filter of the Danish Golden Age," in *Kierkegaard and his German Contemporaries*, Tome III, *Literature and Aesthetics*, ed. by Jon Stewart, Aldershot: Ashgate 2007 (*Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception, and Resources*, vol. 6), pp. 51–96.

[9] *Kierkegaard's Journals and Notebooks*, ed. by Niels Jørgen Cappelørn et al., vols 1–11, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2007ff., vol. 2, pp. 85–99, BB:12–15.

clearly planning to write something about Faust, and maybe he was even considering it as a possible topic for his master's thesis.

In any case, he became very upset when in June of 1837 Hans Lassen Martensen published an article in the first issue of the academic journal *Perseus* entitled "Observations on the Idea of Faust with Reference to Lenau's *Faust*."[10] When he heard of this, Kierkegaard wrote in his journals: "Oh, how unhappy I am—Martensen has written an essay of Lenau's *Faust*!"[11] Why was Kierkegaard so disturbed by this? Why was he so interested in the figure of Faust in the first place?

The answer to these questions becomes clear when we take a brief look at Martensen's article. Instead of treating Goethe's well-known version of Faust, Martensen chose instead to examine a version written by the Austro-Hungarian poet Niembsch von Strehlenau, who wrote under the pseudonym Nicolaus Lenau. On his journey Martensen had met Lenau personally in Vienna and became interested in his work. Martensen saw in the figure of Faust, as portrayed by Lenau, a representative of the modern world.

As noted in the previous chapter, in his dissertation *On the Autonomy of Human Self-Consciousness in Modern Dogmatic Theology*, Martensen examined the concept of autonomy. He concluded that the idea of humans acting on their own and determining the truth by themselves was a widespread and dangerous modern notion that led away from Christian belief. He sees Faust as exemplifying this principle of autonomy and as a symbol for modern secular knowledge. Faust embodies "the deep feeling of the corruption of the human will, its desire to transgress the divine law, its arrogant striving to seek its center in itself instead of in God."[12] According to the Christian view, humans are by nature sinful and ignorant; they can know nothing without the help of God. It is thus only human pride and arrogance that believe humans can discover the truth on their own. Faust thinks he has no use for Christianity since he can discover the truth by means of secular scientific knowing. Martensen writes, Faust "represents

[10] Hans Lassen Martensen, "Betragtninger over Ideen af Faust med Hensyn paa Lenaus *Faust*," *Perseus, Journal for den speculative Idee*, no. 1, 1837, pp. 91–164.

[11] *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, vols 1–6, ed. and trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press 1967–78, vol. 5, p. 100, no. 5225.

[12] Martensen, "Betragtninger over Ideen af Faust med Hensyn paa Lenaus *Faust*," p. 94.

the human race's striving to ground a realm of *intelligence* without God."[13]

Faust also represents the modern principle of doubt. What cannot be demonstrated by science must be subject to skepticism, and this includes the doctrines of religion. This view rejects traditional beliefs and exposes everything to its merciless doubt. It also leads Faust to despair, and he becomes separated and alienated from society and accepted ethics. Martensen thus portrays Faust as the model for the ills of the modern world.

Kierkegaard's irritated reaction to Martensen's article can be explained by the fact that he too was interested in presenting Faust as a paradigmatic example of modern existence, and Martensen had done so first, thus anticipating Kierkegaard's critical assessment of the modern age. Kierkegaard was interested in Faust for the same reason that he was interested in Socrates: they were both negative figures who called into question traditional beliefs and values. Both Socrates and Faust believed that the critical reasoning of each individual must decide the truth of the matter. Socrates reduces people to *aporia* and ends with a negative conclusion, just as Faust's skepticism leads him to despair.

Kierkegaard is attentive to the fact that both Socrates and Faust represent something at the heart of the modern spirit. He makes this connection explicitly in his *Journal AA* from the year 1837, when Martensen published his article. He writes, "Faust may be seen as parallel to Socrates, for just as the latter expresses the severing of the individual from the state, so Faust, after the abrogation of the Church, depicts the individual severed from its guidance and left to itself."[14] Both Faust and Socrates represent an emphasis on the individual at the cost of a larger institution or aspect of the objective world.

3.3. Kierkegaard's Analysis of Socrates' Trial

Kierkegaard also addresses the condemnation of Socrates.[15] Like Hegel, he is critical of what he calls "the scholarly professional

[13] Ibid., p. 97. [14] *Kierkegaard's Journals and Notebooks*, vol. 1, p. 44, AA:41.
[15] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, pp. 167–97.

mourners and the crowd of shallow but lachrymose humanitarians,"[16] who regard Socrates as an honest and righteous man who was unfairly persecuted by the rabble. Also like Hegel, he sees the daimon as something that clearly puts Socrates at odds with traditional religion.

With regard to the question of whether Socrates was an atheist who rejected the gods of the state, Kierkegaard claims that this was based on a misunderstanding. This was a typical charge leveled against ancient Greek philosophers like Anaxagoras, who were interested in exploring the phenomena of nature. The Greek gods were conceived as closely related to the natural forces, for example, Zeus with lightning, and Poseidon with the sea and earthquakes. When the early Greek philosophers took it upon themselves to study nature, they distinguished themselves from the religious tradition that saw the gods as causal agents in nature. Since these philosophers did not make any appeal to the gods in their explanations of the natural world, they were often accused of not believing in the gods at all. Kierkegaard concludes that the charge of atheism against Socrates arose from a mistaken belief that he was also working in this tradition of natural philosophy when in fact he was solely concerned with human knowledge and ethics.

The misunderstanding of his agenda was exacerbated by his well-known claim to ignorance. When Socrates claimed to know nothing, this was mistakenly taken to mean that he knew nothing about the gods worshipped by the state. But this was of course not the point of Socrates' self-proclaimed ignorance. He clearly knew a great deal about the particulars in the world around him, but he claimed not to know the universals and was constantly trying to get people to formulate clear definitions of them: What is piety? What is justice? What is beauty?[17]

Kierkegaard claims that an important element in the condemnation of Socrates was what was regarded as his attempt to alienate individuals from the state. He associates this with the famous maxim, "know yourself." According to Kierkegaard, Socrates' understanding of this command was that each individual should seek the truth in him- or herself. But this meant turning away from the world of objective truth, which included traditional ethics and religion. Kierkegaard explains, "The phrase 'know yourself' means: separate

[16] Ibid., p. 167. [17] Ibid., p. 169.

yourself from the other."[18] The individual is thus alienated from mainstream society, since after the Socratic interrogation it is impossible to continue to maintain traditional values and customs as before. By calling everything into question, Socrates destroys the individual's belief in the things that hold society together. This is, according to Kierkegaard, rightly regarded as a dangerous matter: "it is obvious that Socrates was in conflict with the view of the state—indeed, that from the viewpoint of the state his offensive had to be considered most dangerous, as an attempt to suck its blood and reduce it to a shadow."[19]

Kierkegaard thus agrees with Hegel that the Athenian state was justified in condemning Socrates, since his revolutionary actions were undermining its foundations.[20] But it should be noted, he was not revolutionary in the sense that he was forming a specific political party with a positive platform. Rather, his mission was purely negative: he separated individuals from the state and isolated them from one another by undermining their accepted beliefs in tradition.

Kierkegaard also gives an assessment of the last part of Socrates' trial, where the Greek philosopher proposes his alternative punishment. Kierkegaard draws attention to the fact that in the *Apology* Socrates dwells on the specific number of people who voted for his acquittal and his condemnation. By doing this, Socrates represents the jury as a group of individuals and not as a collective whole or as an impersonal instrument of the Athenian state.[21] Each of them individually made a decision and cast his vote. Socrates thus recognizes the importance of the subjectivity or individuality of each person, but he refuses to recognize the authority of the abstract state or any other collective unit.

Here Kierkegaard is in agreement with Hegel's account, which sees Socrates' condemnation as being the result of his refusal to accept the legitimacy of the court.[22] Kierkegaard explains, "The objective power of the state, its claims upon the activity of the individual, the laws, the courts—everything loses its absolute validity for him."[23] Kierkegaard sees Socrates as occupying a position of complete negativity toward the state.[24] Socrates accepts the truth and validity of each single individual but refuses to accept it in any collective group: the state, the jury, a political party, etc. Athenian society was built upon principles of

[18] Ibid., p. 177. [19] Ibid., p. 178. [20] Ibid., pp. 181f.
[21] Ibid., p. 194. [22] Ibid., p. 193. [23] Ibid., p. 196. [24] Ibid.

community and democracy, and thus to call this into question was very alarming for most people. So according to this interpretation, the great menace to Greek society came not from some outside source, but rather from Socrates and his merciless use of irony.

3.4. Doubt and *The Conflict between the Old and the New Soap Cellars*

We have seen that Kierkegaard was irritated by Martensen's success with the students at the University of Copenhagen and that Martensen, like Kierkegaard, was interested in the figure of Faust. One important aspect of Martensen's thought was his characterization of modern philosophy as beginning with the principle of doubt. While medieval philosophy was uncritical and based its views on faith, modern philosophy that began with Descartes realized that it was necessary to begin from the ground up by doubting everything. Descartes saw that many things generally accepted as true in fact prove to be mistaken upon closer scrutiny. This means that much of what we take for granted is thus based upon shaky foundations. In his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes begins by making an attempt to doubt absolutely everything that he has ever known or been taught so that he can attempt to determine from the start what can firmly be established as true.

Martensen seizes on this image of Descartes applying a systematic method of doubt as a model for modern philosophical thought. He takes a Latin phrase from Descartes' text to capture this: "*De omnibus dubitandum est*" or "One must doubt everything." Martensen used this phrase repeatedly, and it became a kind of shorthand slogan among his students. It seemed initially to be used just as a characterization of the period of modern philosophy in contrast to earlier periods, which were less critical. But through force of repetition it came to take on a prescriptive meaning, which in effect amounted to a call to arms for modern thinkers to apply Descartes' skeptical method. Clearly, Martensen's injunction to doubt everything is closely related to the Socratic method of questioning everything. Descartes does not wish to stop until everything has been called into question, just as Socrates does not wish to stop until he has gained a satisfactory answer to his questions.

Kierkegaard wrote two satirical works about Martensen and his students that he never published. Both take Descartes' universal doubt as a central motif. The first of these works is a comedy entitled *The Conflict between the Old and the New Soap Cellars*, which Kierkegaard wrote in his *Journal DD* probably in the first months of 1838 when he was still a student (see Fig. 3.1). The inspiration for

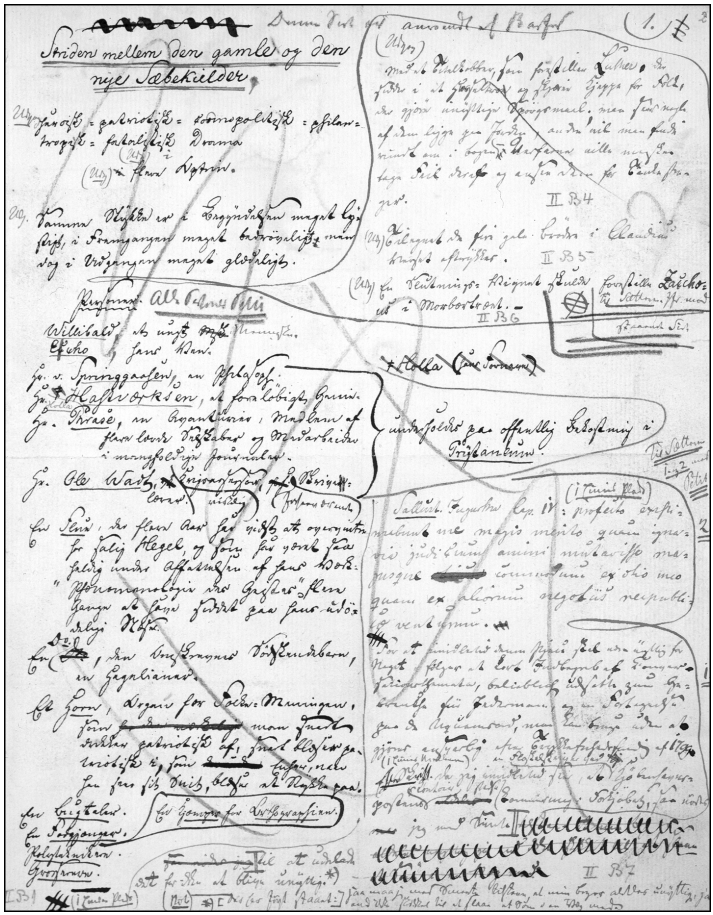

Fig. 3.1. The first page of *The Conflict between the Old and the New Soap Cellars* in the *Journal DD* (*c.* 1837–8)

this piece came from a square in Copenhagen called Gråbrødre Torv, where during Kierkegaard's time there were rival shops that sold soap. There a new soap vendor moved into the basement of a building next to where an established soap vendor was still operating. To avoid losing business due to the confusion caused by there being two shops, the old soap cellar put up a sign to indicate that his shop was the old, traditional soap cellar.[25] This was the beginning of an amusing rivalry that caught Kierkegaard's attention.

It will be recalled that at his trial Socrates proposed as his penalty that he be maintained at public expense and be provided with free meals at the Prytaneum. This was a public building in Athens, a kind of town hall, where people who had done great deeds for the state, for example, victorious Olympian athletes, would receive free meals at public expense. In his satire Kierkegaard makes use of this idea, but instead of placing Socrates in the Prytaneum, he places Martensen and his students there. Kierkegaard creates a handful of amusing characters, who engage in absurd philosophical conversations. They are constantly using slogans such as "*De omnibus dubitandum est*" that everyone knew from Martensen's lectures and written works. By placing these comic philosophers in the Prytaneum, Kierkegaard seems sarcastically to imply that they, like Socrates, are providing some important public service with their philosophizing and with their attempt to doubt everything. But instead of doing anything meaningful, they simply engage in confused and absurd philosophical conversation, all the while taking themselves very seriously. Kierkegaard thus lampoons Martensen and his students for their sense of self-importance.

It is worth noting that during the period when the piece was written, Martensen lived on the same square in a house just opposite the soap cellars. In September of 1837, that is, when Kierkegaard was a student and when he conceived of the idea of writing the comedy about the soap cellars, he moved into an apartment that stood at the corner of Løvstræde and Niels Hemmingsens Gade (at Løvstræde 7). The apartment was right next to the square with an unimpeded view of Martensen's house.

[25] *Kierkegaard's Journals and Notebooks*, vol. 1, pp. 550f., Explanatory Notes.

3.5. Kierkegaard's *Johannes Climacus, or De omnibus dubitandum est*

The other satirical work that Kierkegaard wrote but never published makes use of Martensen's slogan in its very title, *Johannes Climacus, or De omnibus dubitandum est* (see Fig. 3.2). Johannes Climacus is a name that Kierkegaard later used as a pseudonym when he published *Philosophical Fragments* and the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. But the satirical text *De omnibus* was apparently written at some point in 1843 before these two well-known pseudonymous books.

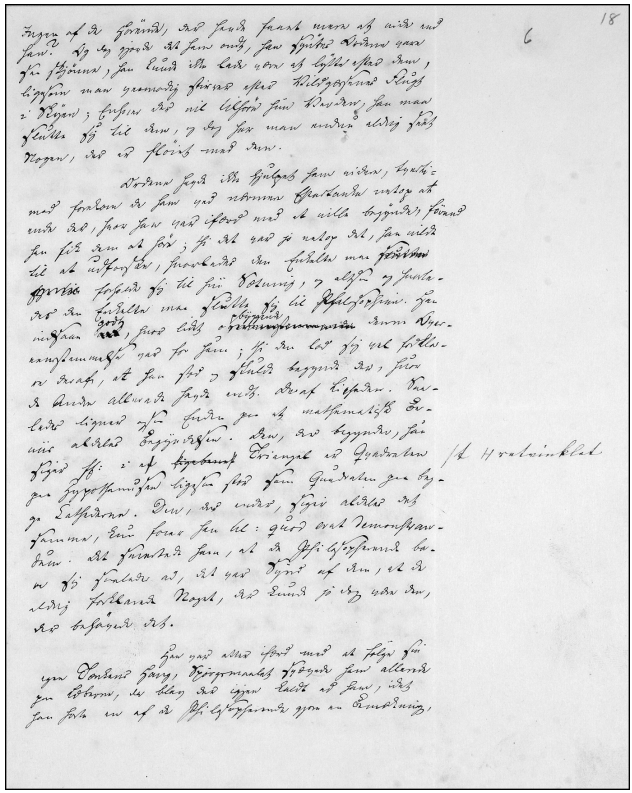

Fig. 3.2. Manuscript from *Johannes Climacus, or De omnibus dubitandum est* (*c.* 1842–3)

De omnibus tells the story of a young student named Johannes Climacus, who attends lectures at the University of Copenhagen and becomes interested in the philosophical discussions about the need to begin by doubting everything. Clearly Kierkegaard intends Climacus to represent one of Martensen's students who is caught up in the flurry of interest surrounding Martensen's lectures. Much of the text is filled with somewhat tedious philosophical deliberations in which Johannes tries to determine exactly what is meant by the demand that one doubt everything in philosophy. There are three different variants of this that he explores in turn: "(1) Philosophy begins with doubt; (2) in order to philosophize, one must have doubted; (3) modern philosophy begins with doubt."[26] Each leads to absurdities.

Although Kierkegaard never finished this work and it breaks off in the middle, the plot was apparently intended to end by showing how Johannes was reduced to despair in his attempt to follow the imperative of doubting everything. In a note Kierkegaard explains the plan for the work that he never realized:

> Johannes does what we are told to do—he actually doubts everything—he suffers through all the pain of doing that. . . . When he has gone as far in that direction as he can go and wants to come back, he cannot do so. . . . Now he despairs, his life is wasted, his youth is spent in these deliberations. Life has not acquired any meaning for him, and all this is the fault of philosophy.[27]

Martensen has irresponsibly enjoined the students to doubt everything, but this would also involve doubting things such as one's religion, one's relations to family, community, etc. To question these things is to isolate oneself. While doubting everything was intended as a kind of academic exercise, the young students take it seriously as a way of life and thereby undermine their own beliefs. But once one has reached this point, it is impossible to go back. Once one has begun the process of critical reflection, one can no longer live in uncritical intimacy with one's former beliefs. This is the view that is suspicious of new knowledge, fearful of what it might bring. As was the case with Socrates, it separates the individual from family and

[26] Kierkegaard, *Johannes Climacus, or De omnibus dubitandum est*, trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1985, p. 132.

[27] Ibid., Supplement, pp. 234–5.

community. The conclusion of Kierkegaard's story is that Johannes ends in despair, destroyed by philosophical doubt.

3.6. The Sophists and the Legacy of Socrates

Kierkegaard agrees with Hegel's characterization of Socrates as "a turning point" in history.[28] He proposes his own evaluation of this by analyzing first the relation of Socrates to the movement of the Sophists which preceded him and then his relation to the different schools of philosophy that came after him. By seeing Socrates between these two poles, we can come to a better understanding of his role as a turning point in the development of Greek thought and culture.

The cause of the downfall of Greek life was what Kierkegaard, following Hegel, characterizes as "the arbitrariness of finite subjectivity."[29] This is associated with the Sophists, who are known for their relativism and their denial of any absolute or enduring truth. He explains, "The *Sophists* represent knowledge separating itself in its motley multiplicity from substantial morality by means of the awakening reflection. On the whole, they represented the separated culture for which a need was felt by everyone for whom the fascination of immediacy had faded away."[30] Like Socrates, the Sophists also questioned and criticized the traditional Greek culture, which Kierkegaard refers to as "substantial morality."

The Sophists claimed to teach a practical knowledge that would be beneficial to young men in politics and business. Specifically, they taught the art of speaking and argumentation, by means of which they could make an effective case for whatever they perceived to be to their advantage at the moment. But this argumentation was always in the interest of the one doing the arguing and not in the interest of any higher truth. The Sophists were positive in that they made claims about the world, but negative in that they also questioned or ignored traditional beliefs and higher truths whenever it suited their interests.

[28] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, p. 200.
[29] Ibid., p. 201.
[30] Ibid., pp. 201f.

In the absence of absolute truth, there is only arbitrary or contingent truth, dictated by the self-interest of the individual. The Sophists elevated these arbitrary and contingent truths into ends in themselves. Without any absolute truths, they and their followers were free to revel in the contingent ones for as long as it served their purposes. Kierkegaard explains this as follows, "In its first form, this education [offered by the Sophists] shakes the foundations of everything, but in its second form it enables every pupil . . . to make everything firm and fast again. The Sophist, therefore, demonstrates that everything is true."[31] The Sophists can thus give reasons and arguments for anything at all. It is in this sense that we still use the word "sophist" today in a pejorative sense to refer to someone who uses eloquence or specious reasoning to defend questionable opinions or behavior.

Kierkegaard perceived Martensen to be acting sophistically. One of the things that bothered him was that Martensen pretended to assume a posture of radical, disabused skepticism with his well-known claim "*De omnibus dubitandum est*," but this was only an empty slogan. Martensen's point was, like that of Descartes, to emerge from the skepticism and begin to establish something positive: a doctrine, an argument, or a foundational truth claim. This was exactly the way that Kierkegaard describes the Sophists, as we just saw: they shake "the foundations of everything" but then "make everything firm again." For Kierkegaard, the profundity and genius of Socrates are to be found in the fact that he remained in skepticism and negativity, and refused to be drawn into the construction of a positive truth claim. Kierkegaard thus contrasts Socrates with the Sophists by claiming that Socrates was purely negative, whereas the Sophists made positive claims. For example, Protagoras claimed to know what virtue is and to be able to teach it. Socrates claimed not to know what it is and claimed that it could not be taught.[32]

Kierkegaard then argues that Socrates' "irony has a world-historical validity."[33] It is valid for Socrates to use irony in the given historical situation. His irony was aimed at two targets: first, unreflective proponents of traditional Athenian life, and second, self-assured Sophists who were making unfounded positive claims.[34] He saw the former as mired in traditions that were no longer relevant or

[31] Ibid., p. 205.
[32] Ibid., p. 208.
[33] Ibid., p. 211.
[34] Ibid., p. 214.

useful and the latter as promoting a shallow self-serving relativism. He thus used irony as a tool to correct what he perceived as misguided behavior by his contemporaries. These were two important aspects of Greek life at the time, and Socrates, with his irony, plays a key historical role in this context. He is not employing irony just to be flippant or to irritate or impress someone; rather, his use of irony was dictated by the times.

Kierkegaard then addresses the other side of the idea of Socrates as a turning point, namely, his legacy. Socrates gave rise to a number of competing schools of philosophy in antiquity. Kierkegaard raises the question of how so many very different views could all claim to have their origin in his thought. If Socrates had had a number of different doctrines, then one might be tempted to think that his legacy is due to the fact that these different doctrines were attractive to different philosophical schools. However, Kierkegaard argues, on the contrary, that Socrates' heterogeneous legacy provides further evidence for the claim that he represents pure negativity. If he had had a positive doctrine with a handful of constructive theses, then these would have been attractive to some people but repellent to others. But the positive nature of his views would invariably have had a limiting effect on the number of his followers. Kierkegaard argues that precisely because socrates had no positive doctrine, people were free to see in his thought anything they wished.[35] He could thus be readily co-opted into whatever views a given philosophical school wished to promote. So while Socrates gave rise to a number of philosophical schools with different positive doctrines, he himself represents what Kierkegaard, following Hegel, calls "infinite negativity."[36]

3.7. Socrates and Christ

In Kierkegaard's time it was common practice to compare Socrates and his fate with Christ. Both were ethically righteous individuals, and both were prosecuted in legal proceedings and executed. There was a body of literature on this comparison, which Kierkegaard was familiar with. One of the most important of these works was the book

[35] Ibid., p. 215. [36] Ibid., p. 216, p. 218.

of the German theologian Ferdinand Christian Baur, entitled *On Christianity in Platonism: Socrates and Christ* from 1837,[37] which Kierkegaard refers to several times in *The Concept of Irony*.[38]

The New Testament portrays Christ as struggling with the scribes and teachers of the law known as the Pharisees who insisted on strict observance of religious ceremonies and practices. In comparative studies like Baur's a parallel was often drawn with Christ's conflict with the Pharisees and Socrates' conflict with the Sophists. Kierkegaard makes this connection himself when he says, "the Sophists are reminiscent of the Pharisees."[39]

This gives us useful insight into the importance of Socrates for Kierkegaard generally. Initially, it was not clear why he would be so interested in Socrates, a pagan philosopher, if his primary goal had something to do with understanding Christianity. Here the connection is clear: Socrates is like Christ, and the Sophists are like the Pharisees. So although Socrates is a pagan philosopher, he displays some important points of commonality with the message of Christ that Kierkegaard believes have been forgotten. Thus, by making use of Socrates' ideas or methods, Kierkegaard believes that he can bring some insight into what he takes to be the confused understanding of Christianity in his own day.

3.8. Andreas Frederik Beck and the First Review of *The Concept of Irony*

Andreas Frederik Beck was a student at the University of Copenhagen at the same time as Kierkegaard. He was influenced by the German theologian David Friedrich Strauss, who had been a student of Hegel in Berlin. Strauss was known for his monumental study entitled *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*.[40] This work raised a controversy in

[37] Ferdinand Christian Baur, *Das Christliche des Platonismus oder Sokrates und Christus. Eine religionsphilosophische Untersuchung*, Tübingen: Ludw. Friedr. Fues 1837.

[38] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, pp. 13–15, p. 31, p. 52, p. 99, p. 220.

[39] Ibid., p. 213.

[40] David Friedrich Strauss, *Das Leben Jesu*, vols 1–2, Tübingen: C. F. Osiander 1835–6. (In English as *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, trans. by George Eliot, ed. by Peter C. Hodgson, Ramsey, New Jersey: Sigler Press 1994.)

the German-speaking world by examining the gospel texts in great detail and concluding that the stories related about Jesus were by and large myths. The book cost Strauss his position at the University of Tübingen. In 1839, after it was thought that the controversy had died down, Strauss was appointed to a post at the University of Zurich in Switzerland, but when the appointment was made public, it evoked such large protests that the university could not go through with it and had to revoke the position.

Beck was interested in bringing Strauss' approach to Denmark. At the time of Kierkegaard's master's thesis in 1841 he was working on a book entitled *The Concept of Myth or the Form of Religious Spirit*, which would be published the following year.[41] He knew Kierkegaard personally and was keenly interested in *The Concept of Irony*. During the public defense of a thesis it was possible for people from the audience to stand up and ask questions about the work, and Beck was one of these questioners for Kierkegaard's dissertation. The following year Beck wrote a review of *The Concept of Irony*, which appeared in the periodical *The Fatherland*.[42]

Today we recognize *The Concept of Irony* as an important work for understanding our modern world, but at the time it was met with skepticism. All five of the members of Kierkegaard's thesis committee complained that it suffered from some serious flaws, especially with regard to style. The tone of their official statements about it makes it sound as if they only reluctantly passed the work as a master's thesis and would very much have liked to have seen some major revisions. When Beck reviewed the work, however, he saw something more in it. What was that and what allowed Beck to see it, while the others were blind to it?

Beck saw that Strauss was trying to understand the life of Jesus by comparing the different gospel accounts. Where these accounts differed from one another questions could be raised about their historical veracity. Beck saw Kierkegaard using the same kind of methodology in his attempt to reconstruct historically the figure of Socrates. Instead of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, his gospels, so to

[41] Frederik Andreas Beck, *Begrebet Mythus eller den religiøse Aands Form*, Copenhagen: P. G. Philipsen 1842.

[42] Frederik Andreas Beck, "[Review of] *Om Begrebet Ironi, med stadigt Hensyn til Socrates* af Søren Kierkegaard," *Fædrelandet*, nos. 890 and 897, May 29, and June 5, 1842, cols. 7133–40, 7189–91.

speak, were Plato, Xenophon, and Aristophanes, who each gave a different picture of Socrates. Like Strauss, Kierkegaard had to sift through his sources in order to get to the *real* Socrates.

As a follower of Strauss, Beck could see the importance of Kierkegaard's treatment of history. He appreciated Kierkegaard's methodology of treating the concept not abstractly but in its concrete historical development. Like Kierkegaard, he knew that concepts develop and change over the course of time. Because of this he realized that our modern understanding of things was the result of a long and still ongoing period of development. While the ancient world uncritically accepted the stories of the gospels as true, the modern mind feels compelled to analyze them in a scholarly manner to determine whether or not they are true. In other words, the modern mind wants to determine the truth for itself. This is ultimately very much in line with Kierkegaard's emphasis on inwardness and subjectivity.

Kierkegaard responded to Beck's review in the postscript to his article "Public Confession."[43] Although Beck's account is generally quite positive, Kierkegaard is highly sensitive to the few slightly critical points, and he reacts with satire and irony to them. He objects to the fact that Beck's book on mythology, which had been published in the interim, associates *The Concept of Irony* with Strauss and the left Hegelians. This was a group of thinkers who understood Hegel to be critical of traditional religious belief and used his philosophical methodology to try to undermine Christianity. In addition to Strauss, influential writers such as Ludwig Feuerbach and Bruno Bauer also belonged to this group. Kierkegaard always tried to avoid group affiliations and presumably disagreed with the left Hegelians' rather secular understanding of Christianity. He wanted *The Concept of Irony* to be recognized as an original work that was independent of and outside any particular school of thought. In addition, Kierkegaard reacted negatively to Beck's complaint that certain allusions in the work were difficult to understand. He sarcastically responds that if Beck failed to understand something, then this is a shortcoming on Beck's part and should not be counted as a criticism of the book. Despite the fact

[43] Kierkegaard, "Public Confession," in *The Corsair Affair and Articles Related to the Writings*, trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1982, pp. 3–12, see pp. 9–12.

that Beck's review was both perceptive and positive, Kierkegaard was unable to appreciate the elements of praise that it had for his work.

3.9. Knowledge as a Double-Edged Sword

How is Kierkegaard's understanding of Socrates relevant for life today? We have been talking about knowledge, doubt, and traditional values, and in the end these issues come down to a fundamental question about the nature and status of knowledge and its role in human life. This is one of the oldest questions in all of human history. Indeed, we can see it in one of the most ancient stories that is known to us: the story of the Fall in Genesis in the Old Testament. We are told of the first human beings, Adam and Eve, who live in a wonderful garden, which provides them with everything they require to satisfy their needs. They are in harmony with nature and the world around them. But they do not have one thing: knowledge. They live in a kind of ignorant bliss. God tells them that they can enjoy everything they like in the garden, but they may not eat from the tree of knowledge.[44] As we know, according to the story, Adam and Eve, seduced by the snake, defy this prohibition, eat from the tree, and thus gain knowledge. Suddenly, everything changes, and they see the world with different eyes. For the first time they realize that they are naked and feel shame. They are no longer in harmony with the world. Instead of being at home in the garden, they are alienated from it. After discovering their transgression, God exiles them from the garden and casts them out into the wider world, "east of Eden."[45] What this story tells us is that knowledge is a dangerous thing. God knew this all along, and for this reason he told Adam and Eve not to eat from the tree. God was aware that knowledge ends in shame, fear, and alienation. Once human beings have taken this step, they can never go back. The moral to this story is that human beings are not meant to have knowledge. They are happier without it.

The Genesis story is constantly re-enacted in the process of the growth and maturation of each individual. When we are children we live in immediate harmony with our family, culture, and society. But

[44] Genesis 2:16–17. [45] Genesis 3:24.

then as we grow up, we reach a point where we naturally begin to question certain things that we took for granted when we were young. We come to realize that our parents and leaders are fallible and our culture has its problems. This knowledge alienates us from the world around us. Figures like Socrates, Faust, and Johannes Climacus sought knowledge by turning their backs on the established truths of their respective cultures. But this search estranged them from the world. Knowledge is a dangerous thing, and the defenders of traditional values and institutions fear it.

Another perspective on this issue comes from the Enlightenment. According to this view, human beings, as Aristotle says, by nature desire to know. Knowledge is what separates us from the animals, and our very humanity lies in our ability to think rationally and to examine our beliefs critically. As Socrates said, "life without [rational] examination is not worth living."[46] Knowledge enables human beings to reshape their environment and has made possible the great technological and social advances of history. Throughout all of history humans have improved things by means of their ability to acquire new knowledge. For example, there have been great advances in many different fields of science that have concretely improved the lives of people; these include the elimination of diseases such as smallpox and polio, the advances in dentistry and anesthesiology, and one could go on with examples. The advocate of this view claims that it would be completely absurd to deny these advances and that the entire weight of human history supports the famous adage that knowledge is power. According to this perspective, anyone who wishes to try to suppress knowledge is blinded by a backward superstition.

Today most of us would probably agree with the Enlightenment view. We read books about Søren Kierkegaard in order to acquire new *knowledge* that we did not have before. We value knowledge and believe that it is important to have it. The constantly expanding volume of information freely available on the Internet evidences a strong demand for it and a culture that prioritizes its dissemination. It seems uncontroversial that everyone should have the opportunity to learn and acquire new knowledge.

[46] Plato, *Apology*, in *The Last Days of Socrates*, trans. by Hugh Tredennick, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1954, p. 72.

While this seems to be very straightforward, our modern world renders this picture problematic. Knowledge is a double-edged sword, and the same Western culture that prides itself on things like skyscrapers and vaccines has also produced concentration camps and biological weapons. Today we have major environmental problems such as global warming and the destruction of the ozone layer that are caused by the by-products of human technology. While it is true that knowledge and technology have helped us to improve our environment, they are proving equally effective in destroying it.

Even the question of the open access to knowledge is not unproblematic. I can share with the readers of this book some knowledge of the thought of Søren Kierkegaard, and this seems not to be a problem. But one can go onto the Internet and find people sharing knowledge about, for example, how to build a bomb. This kind of *knowledge* makes us all very uneasy. Should this be freely accessible to everyone?

Once human beings start on the road to reason, science, and technology, there is no way back. It is a one-way street. The genie is out of the bottle and cannot be put back. As Kierkegaard says of his character Johannes Climacus, once he begins to doubt, and once he starts this process and becomes alienated from this world around him, he cannot return to his previous state of innocence. With considerations of this kind we can begin to see the point behind the story of the Fall in Genesis. The world east of Eden is a dangerous and uncomfortable one. Likewise, the stories of Socrates, Faust, and Johannes Climacus are not just tales from a distant past: they are the story of our perilous world in the twenty-first century.