

Introduction: A Socratic and Christian Care for the Self

Edward F. Mooney

My task is a Socratic task, to revise the definition of what it is to be a Christian.

The essays gathered here display Kierkegaard's thoughts on ethics, faith, and love refracted through the prisms of over a dozen contemporary scholars. They are vivid testimony to the ongoing power of Kierkegaard's texts to pull new circles of unexpected readers from successive generations; only writers of great depth have that power to repeatedly regenerate their readerships. Of course, the topics are irresistible: neighbor love and despair, a self free of affectation, refiguring ethics, charting the place of God and sovereign goods, preserving the spirit of one's thought through irony, a theater of pseudonyms, and various styles of indirection. These topics fall under the broad purview of philosophy of religion where love and faith and ethics will intersect. That is the fertile site where Kierkegaard engages his time and where these essays in turn engage Kierkegaard.

In its own small way, this collection continues a tradition of Kierkegaard interpretation vigorous and growing through the century and a half since his death in 1854. The world of philosophy and religion today is unthinkable without Heidegger and Wittgenstein, Barth and Tillich, and more recently, Derrida or Habermas or Cavell.¹ The worlds of these writers rest in turn, and to a greater and lesser extent, on Kierkegaard, as they each avow. He is one of the select and indispensable few who leave us endlessly instructive works. In Robert Brandom's phrase, Kierkegaard gives us "tales from the mighty dead," tales that won't be buried, that we can't help retelling and recasting. The Kierkegaard

who emerges from these essays is committed equally to Socratic inquiry and to the inflections of a Christian faith. He tries both a Socratic and a Christian source for self.

By his consummate literary skill—which is equally his underrated capacity for both intimate and collective connection—Kierkegaard draws his reader into restaging, retelling, and reliving his explorations of the moral and religious center of a life. The moral center here is that set of aspirations toward the good, true, and beautiful that inform a worthy life, and it clearly overlaps a religious center. Kierkegaard engages us dialogically as Socrates did, laying out a claim or provocation and sometimes an extended view, in ways to draw us in—and draw us out. He draws his reader toward his labyrinth, toward and into some portion of his written world, then steps aside to let her write or speak—or worry for her voice. The address is often intimate, singling out a reader not accidentally addressed as “my reader.” We’re not allowed to back into anonymity, to become “just anyone in general,” say, “any rational mind,” or to retreat to a vacant look. He aims to change, or turn, attentive listeners toward the good. So we’re all excused from giving just an impersonal *report* on his work. He challenges us to engage at the level of passion as well as intellect.

Both Socrates and Kierkegaard give us a mix of dialogical interrogation and lyric vision—the vision, for both, being simultaneously philosophical and religious. They provide the sting of provocation but also words that move and dart and soothe, that shape a world we could inhabit while also reaching back to intimate a soul or self that’s *ready* to inhabit such a world. The self we could become, and the world that we could concomitantly welcome, are saturated by moral, religious, and aesthetic energies that make demands on our subjectivity. To believe that truth is subjectivity, in Kierkegaard’s famous words, is to believe that there are such demands that we are subject to, to which we are answerable. Words call on us religiously and morally to square accounts, and there’s an aesthetic to the way we hear and answer those appeals. Those like Alcibiades who fell in love with Socrates felt they had to change their lives, and Kierkegaard can have a similar effect. We trace the sort of appeal his writing makes and simultaneously feel that attraction as a deep demand on our lives.² Socrates and Kierkegaard make *existential* demands. It might seem that we’re straightforwardly challenged to take on the writer’s words as our own, to appropriate them, as one says, but that’s only half the story. The writer’s words take *us* on, *claim* us, *challenge* us to be our next and better self, to become, as one might say, who we are. We read the text, but the text is also designed by Kierkegaard to read *us*, and in light of what it sees, call us to be anew, to be as someone new.

Kierkegaard addresses a unique individual, “his reader,” but this most intimate engagement also has a wider, social relevance. Passages resonate outward from their immediate voicing with the promise of a resonance of indefinitely wide appeal—of potentially universal bearing. Although I may be a unique

recipient of his intimate address, a wider community is also, equally addressed. A simple private-public contrast breaks down here, by design. There's a kind of little-noticed incipient sociality built into the structure of such intimate address.

He does not drop community to one side, as tradition often has it. He writes explicitly in *Works of Love* and *A Literary Review* of social issues in a way that brings out our reliance on others. His polemics against Christendom take on a social, institutional, and cultural target as wide as any Marxist or Nietzschean target might be. Early Frankfurt School critics, Adorno and Marcuse, and in the next generation, Habermas, assimilated much of the broad social dimension of Kierkegaard's critique. In addition, and less obviously, even the most personal writing, addressed to the reader quiet in her solitude, intimates an indefinitely expanding circle of those who can hear this personal address, and take heed. So Kierkegaard does not oppose his withering institutional critiques to his more intimate dialogical address. He harbors, so I'd argue, a utopian hope that one by one the transfiguring resonance of his address might radiate unstoppably, enacting continued couplings or communions. Perhaps this outward spread might even found a city (as Plato envisioned), or a biblical kingdom of persons of goodwill. To put it in a phrase, for Kierkegaard, community, communication, and communion arise linked in interpretations of potentially universal resonance.

Of course, the possibilities of such success rest on our capacities to hear and take to heart and are notoriously prone to failure. Our grip on a world and on the worlds of others in some ways is just another aspect of our uncertain, always provisional, grip on ourselves. Yet there's hope inherent in both Kierkegaard's and Plato's unfinished polemics and more personal intimations. Plato adumbrates an unfinished struggle with his mentor Socrates and with Athens. Kierkegaard plays out a similar struggle—with Socrates and Christ, with Copenhagen, and with himself. Kierkegaard's polemics with Church, Academy, cultural decay, and the Press are attacks on what he calls Christendom, and his dialogues and soliloquies bear against his own acknowledged tendencies to backslide.

However undeniable his literary and religious genius, some have doubted that Kierkegaard measures up specifically as a philosopher. If he's valued as a philosopher, it's often in terms of his local battle with fashionable Hegelianism. A critic of Hegelian philosophy, it's assumed, must be philosophically adept. But this tentative concession to a narrow philosophical relevance overlooks a more central and powerful philosophical center to his writing. His self-conception as a Socratic figure, evident from his early dissertation (*The Concept of Irony, with Constant Reference to Socrates*), on to his deathbed witness that his vocation had "always been Socratic," grounds his philosophical vocation at its proper depth. His legacy as a critic of Hegelian fashions pales beside his powerful legacy as the gadfly of Copenhagen and of our time.

Kierkegaard took to heart a Socrates who was much more than a rational, interrogating critic of Athenian piety. Socrates' interrogations were partly reason-based, but also, as we might say, faith-based, or based on nonintellectualized commitments. His vocation is instigated and confirmed by a temple oracle, his conduct is guided by a god or *daimon*, his last wish is to make a religious offering, his devotion to love is articulated in terms relayed by a mysterious priestess. Significantly, he does not interrogate his primary informer on the nature of love, but submits to being interrogated and corrected by Diotima—out of earshot of anyone who might dispute her account. All this sounds strangely like religious revelation, or at best, a knowledge of love acquired *through* religious-philosophical instruction and then relayed as revelation.

Kierkegaard's religious vocation is interwoven with his philosophical calling—just as Socrates' philosophical vocation is seamlessly interwoven with his religious calling. Kierkegaard could hardly fail to notice that as his life came more and more to assume a trajectory culminating in Christian martyrdom, it also came to assume the trajectory of a Socratic martyrdom.

Kierkegaard mocked a philosophy that let reason overpower the worlds of faith and moral life. He *didn't* mock philosophy in its Socratic incarnation. He assimilated the practice of Socratic interrogation and saw the religious-philosophical concerns of Socrates as a prime exemplification of the ancient view of philosophy as healing, as ministering to what Kierkegaard would call "a sickness unto death." Philosophy is not a merely academic pursuit but a therapeutic practice that employs critique both for diagnosis and as a corrective exercise. Critique removes obstacles a city or a self might maintain in an ignorant or perverse furtherance of spiritual disease. One symptom of disease, as Kierkegaard saw it, was an exorbitant indulgence in useless learning, learning that paraded theatrically and left life aside. In the voice of Anti-Climacus, he cries, "Socrates, Socrates, Socrates! What the world needs, absorbed as it is in so much learning, is a new Socrates!" Socrates could provide skeptical corrosives, but also the vision of Diotima, a witness to love as a mediator linking selves to each other and to the divine.

Early on, Kierkegaard pleads in his journal for an "idea for which he could live and die," an "idea" or inspiring model he succeeded in finding in the lives of Christ and Socrates. He would be a writer who could be true to their living and their saying, in part by depicting the many ways a person and one's city could *fail* to be thus true. Christ and Socrates, he saw, are put on trial because they put others on trial by their words. But they also tried others by their example, by how they lived their words. They let themselves be subject to their words so thoroughly that they were the truth they spoke. Person and speaking became as one. The truth they lived was subjectivity. They lived subject to words, to ideals, to the ideas they spoke; they were truthful to them.

Kierkegaard chides the systematic philosophy of his day for neglecting this

dimension of the human—the necessary yielding to ideals of worth, of taking up with them (and being taken by them) as a condition of finding life. He would have scorned the idea that philosophy is the endeavor to find solutions to a number of technical set-piece puzzles, say, “the problem of evil” or “the existence of God,” which ought to name existential struggles. Our undergoing evil and our capacity to rejoice in creation might be linked in a particular philosophical-religious vision, but rejoicing is not the solution to an intellectual problem, any more than evil is an intellectual conundrum awaiting a theoretical solution. The question of what one can do and endure and celebrate is not a question addressed merely to our puzzle-solving or purely discursive skills. Philosophers are more than conceptual technicians.

In a marvelously subtle dialectic, Kierkegaard undermines an easy opposition between Athens and Jerusalem, between the skeptical interrogations of Socrates and a faithful wrestling with the God of Abraham, Jacob, and Isaac, or with the “offense” of Christ. An initial way to understand this dual loyalty is to imagine Socrates as disposing of false knowledge, taking away overstuffed academic and cultural pretension (including theatrical sermonizing), in order to make way for the openness of Christian faith.³ What makes this dual loyalty possible is the fact that Christ interrogates local customs and that Socrates is a *religious* thinker concerned for the soul and informed by love who can set his own radiant example of love, courage, and devotion. This considerably narrows the opposition between Athens and Jerusalem. Socrates and Kierkegaard are *skeptical and religious*. They pair a praise of love with privileging the care of convictions integral to *a way of life*. They are suspicious of misplaced care for puzzle-solving or detached theory or stale, distracting doctrine. The living questions of love and life and death are worthy of both philosophical and religious pursuit, yet will become moribund when approached from the distant impersonality of grand theory.

Questions that are personally urgent or “existential” arise in moments of trouble. Responses to them, properly released, are modulated to the specific texture of a person’s perplexity or pain. In the nature of the case, the abstract generalities of theory do not address persons as they are immersed in the concrete conditions of a specific need. Abstract theory targets a universal “everyone-hence-no-one-in-particular.” Kierkegaard addresses “my dear reader.” Socrates addresses individuals in their specific need, blindness, evasion, and confusion. Jesus addresses persons intimately one by one, focusing on their specific need.

Christ and Socrates begin their care of others by challenging idols of temporal or spiritual power, and providing superior objects of attraction. Socrates lets his moral-religious passion manifest as love of beauty, love as ascent toward saving truth, loyalty to friends, fearlessness in death, a conviction that the good exempts a soul from harm. This philosophical-religious vision overlaps a Christian one. Kierkegaard makes an effort in the *Postscript* to mark the dialectical

differences between this Socratic and a more specifically Christian vision, but overall, he's less concerned with the gap between the Socratic and the Christian than with the gap between this pair, taken as a potentially seamless unity so far as "love on the street" is concerned, and the unconcern of Copenhagen's Christendom for anything like a philosophical-religious passion, Christian *or* Socratic.⁴

Socrates' presence as a religious thinker exerts an influence that's seamlessly attuned to a Christian calling—so intimately attuned, we might say, that in their work against Christendom, they work hand in glove. In a well-tuned couples' dance, it may make little sense to rank one partner's contribution over (or under) the other, and may make little sense to try to determine who leads and who follows. Kierkegaard was far from disinterested in impenetrable disguise. A shopkeeper can be a knight of faith, a Christian in Copenhagen might become a Socrates (Kierkegaard avows that *his* task is Socratic), and Socrates can become a Christian (Kierkegaard asserts in *Point of View* that this has happened). Seeking out differences between Socrates and Christ—creeds or doctrines or the social forms of ritual or priesthoods, say—distracts from the virtues of questioning, of reflecting, of turning over one's commitments and attunements in the solitude of inwardness, then to move out to inhabit one's life in a new way. That's a Christian task, and a Socratic one.

By all appearances, Kierkegaard never ceased Socratic questioning amidst his Christian convictions. In *The Concept of Irony*, we find Socratic intervention in Romantic ways of life; in *A Literary Review*, there's Socratic critique of "the crowd" and the press; the last pages of *Fear and Trembling* give Socrates as a model of composure before death; a conversation between the signed *Discourse* literature and the pseudonymous works has the look of a Socratic exchange.⁵ Kierkegaard refuses to put Socrates outside his Christian tent. He is a filter against thoughtlessness and a paragon of those passions necessary for a fully moral and religious life.

In the last years of his writing Kierkegaard was fiercely against Christendom and against the Church, going so far as to reject, on his deathbed, its final ministrations. It's likely that in his student years his faith was in danger. And we have his striking protestation from late in his life, "I do not call myself a Christian!" even as he confessed that his task had always been Socratic. The extent to which he joined his Socratic and Christian cares is marked by his striking attestation that, despite all appearances, "[Socrates] has become a Christian!"⁶ That transformation allowed Kierkegaard to be a Socratic who was also Christian.

Having one's reflections and life animated by both Socratic and Christian energies kept Kierkegaard honest at a proper level of existential intensity. That was his design for life: to avoid the pitfalls of merely academic exercises and to keep one's eye on the state of one's soul and on the state of our souls in congress with others. This is a Socratic-Christian allegiance to *Ethics, Love, and Faith*.



This book of philosophical engagements opens new avenues of reflection not just for Kierkegaard scholars but for any concerned with ethics, love, and faith. We discover here a Kierkegaard who adopts a critical Socratic stance toward religious matters and who then shifts, like Socrates himself, to the register of poetic-religious vision. Thus Kierkegaard sidesteps a debilitating cultural “either/or” between uncritical vision and visionless critique, exhibiting what Tyler Roberts calls a “critical piety.”⁷ This is a critical stance that identifies decadence and even violence, and yet brings into view, as great criticism does, those things and aspects of things that call for affirmation. A critical piety toward matters of ethics, love, and faith separates the dross from the gold. No one has done more than Alastair Hannay to keep the best of Kierkegaard, and the best of Kierkegaard scholarship, alive over the past three decades through his sympathetic yet supremely intelligent and critical philosophical readings. Many of the essays included here respond to this work, and Hannay’s interspersed reflections on them advance their collective impact.

The essays fall into four sets, each followed by Hannay’s remarks. The first set traces Kierkegaard’s themes of selfhood, personality, or character. Dreyfus and Mooney explore subjectivity, passion, personality, and the Kierkegaardian schema for selfhood. Taking a more historical approach, Kirmmse lays out the emergence of a modern view of self, the person subject to anxiety and uncertainty and to the threats of affectation and self-deception.

In the second set of essays, the theme is love, especially as Kierkegaard develops it in *Works of Love*. What do we make of a *command* to love? Are passions under our command? And what is the contrast between neighbor love (which is difficult) and loving those we’re attracted to (which in comparison seems easy)? Furtak defends Kierkegaard’s view that the attunements of love give a proper direction to our thinking about others and our place with them. Ferreira explores whether neighbor love must be in necessary conflict with preferential attachments of friendship and romantic love. Roberts shows that Kierkegaard’s map of the ethical landscape we inhabit has little to do with fashioning a moral *theory*. Kierkegaard’s discussion of Christian love is his example of philosophical reflection aimed elsewhere than theory construction.

The third set of essays contains a pair focused on Kierkegaard’s themes of despair, melancholy, and depression. Marino takes *Sickness unto Death* to show the contrast between depression, a nonreligious concept, and despair, a theme that Kierkegaard develops Christianly. Cappelørn explores the subtle ways that melancholy and despair are construed in *Either/Or*. The fourth set explores tensions between the claims of faith and of philosophy, a topic we’ve broached above. Pattison shows that Kierkegaard’s *Discourses* are a site where

the critical stance of philosophy and the dogmatic stance of theology can be negotiated. Piety links the tension between faith and philosophy to Kierkegaard's method of indirection, and Conway finds that tension both buried and revealed in Kierkegaard's invention of varied narrative styles. Finally, Davenport explores the notoriously baffling account of ethics, love, and faith in Kierkegaard's masterpiece, *Fear and Trembling*. He argues that this work construes faith as eschatological trust.

Kierkegaard dares us to recognize the despair and slumber that can be our unhappy lot, so easily papered over by fashion, pride, and pretense. He hopes to maneuver us toward a view of life—and the living of it—that is at home with passion, aspiration, and full skeptical interrogation, whether these arise in ethics, faith, or love. It's not Kierkegaard's reflections alone but existence *itself* that provokes the questioning and counter-questioning and affirmations that these essays, and the accompanying reflections from Hannay, so compellingly undertake.

5. Love and the Discipline of Philosophy

Rick Anthony Furtak

In this chapter I'm going to take my lead from two essays by Alastair Hannay that have been reprinted as the first two chapters of his recent collection *Kierkegaard and Philosophy*. The earlier of the two was originally called "Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Mind," and the latter first appeared as "Kierkegaard and What We Mean by 'Philosophy.'"¹ Accordingly, I will first say a few things about the importance of taking a humanistic approach to the study of mental phenomena, and then I will proceed to discuss the philosophical significance of Kierkegaard's writing style. The logical relation between these two topics ought to become clear as I go, if it is not already obvious to a reader familiar with Kierkegaard's work. Whether or not he would have wanted us to remember him as a philosopher, Kierkegaard can be seen as making what Hannay calls "contributions to a 'thickened' philosophy that takes fuller account of the ways in which we find ourselves in a world and of our ways of responding to these."² Not only do his writings address some of the central problems of philosophy, but they also challenge us to reevaluate our standard ways of approaching these problems. If contemporary philosophers hesitate to view Kierkegaard's work as pertinent to their concerns, this is just another sign that the discipline of philosophy, as it currently exists, is in need of a Kierkegaardian thickening if it is to survive in a form that is worthy of its own name.

Part 1—Kierkegaard and the Philosophy of Mind

There is a lot of talk in philosophy of mind about the "hard problem" of consciousness, or "the problem of *experience*."³ Within this context, Thomas Nagel has famously argued that the "subjective character of experience" is not

adequately captured by scientific explanations that assume that we obtain “a more accurate view of the real nature of things” only as we “move in the direction of greater objectivity.”⁴ Regarding certain objects of inquiry, it makes sense to eliminate personal bias and to rely upon highly restricted techniques of measurement. But when we are trying to understand love and other varieties of meaningful human experience, this is a dubious move: by abstracting away from the viewpoint of a specific person, we may lose touch with the phenomena we are ostensibly talking about. Nagel is concerned about this tendency to adopt what he calls *the view from nowhere*, since “there are things about the world . . . that cannot be adequately understood from a maximally objective standpoint”—for instance, “the pursuit of objectivity with respect to value runs the risk of leaving value behind altogether.”⁵

Of course, the unacknowledged source of this distinction between the outer and the inner is Kierkegaard, whose insistence upon the validity of the first-person perspective “goes against the grain of most recent philosophy of mind.”⁶ But even those Anglophone philosophers who have taken an interest in “the view from within” have generally failed to recognize that they could benefit from a serious engagement with Kierkegaard’s writings. Nevertheless, as the field of consciousness studies continues to expand its horizons, it is likely to find itself moving in this direction sooner or later. Kierkegaard shows us why *objectivity*, so often conflated with *accuracy* or *rationality*, might sometimes be a misguided ideal; and he helps us to understand how it is that love can provide us with a kind of insight that isn’t available from the vantage point of dispassionate cognition. Even if it were possible to ascend to a God’s-eye point of view on human experience, we would find it impossible to breathe in that atmosphere: the sort of thing that it matters for us to know is visible only from the vantage point of a person who is engaged in the business of living on earth.⁷

It ought to go without saying that this business is an unscientific one. If it were the case that research in the natural sciences could make any discoveries that would clarify mental or spiritual life, Kierkegaard writes, then “I’d be the first to get my hands on a microscope.”⁸ His aim is not to disparage biology or physics, but to point out that the sort of thing he cares about as a moral psychologist does not yield to scientific investigation. The target of his criticism in this journal entry from 1846 is the tendency to speak as if such things as promises do not *really* exist, since they cannot be seen through a microscope, nor can they be weighed or measured like a stone or a potato. Quine is neither the first nor the last philosopher to argue that “[w]hatever can be known can be known by means of science alone,”⁹ and this positivistic assumption is tacitly shared by the intellectual culture of our time, influencing even the most well-intentioned members of the popular media. A striking illustration of the prevailing scientism is provided by John Dupré, a philosopher of science who describes an educational television program that he happened to stumble upon:

The official topic of the episode was Love. In between images of chemical clouds bubbling out of glands and diffusing through the body, the program traced the effects of hormones on sexual differentiation *in utero* and in puberty. Distinguished scientists reported the exciting and sometimes surprising results of our recent ability to measure the levels of hormones in bodies, and correlations between these levels and the emotional states of the subjects were noted. As different behavioral tendencies were shown to develop in males and females, evolutionists informed us about the functions these might have served for our Stone Age ancestors. Reaching the official topic of love, we were taught to distinguish its various phases—infatuation, obsession, companionship—and their hormonal correlates. Magnetic Resonance Imaging of obsessed lovers revealed similarities between their brain activities and those of the mentally disturbed, providing, apparently, scientific evidence that love is indeed a form of madness. Later, we learned that whether male [rodents] remained faithful to their partners or indulged in untrammelled promiscuity depended on the presence of specific hormones, and we were invited to speculate as to whether similar mechanisms might operate in humans. And so on. Although much of this work was admitted to be at a somewhat speculative stage, the scientists involved expressed no reservations about the possibility that love might turn out to be caused by, or just to be—such ontological subtleties were not addressed—a sequence of hormonal surges. . . . This programme illustrates the hold on our culture of what I call scientism, an exaggerated and often distorted conception of what science can be expected to do or explain for us. One aspect of scientism is the idea that any question that can be answered at all can best be answered by science. This, in turn, is very often combined with a quite narrow conception of what it is for an answer, or a method of investigation, to be scientific. . . . Everywhere this implies a restriction of the powers of the human mind; but nowhere is this restriction more disastrous than in the mind's attempts to answer questions about itself.¹⁰

Even in the philosophy of mind and in ethical philosophy, we hear plenty of doubt as to whether beliefs and pains are real, or whether aesthetic and moral values such as beauty and honesty are *actually* just as nonexistent as unicorns and phlogiston.¹¹ If you want to understand love, according to those who believe that philosophy ought to be “hard” and not “soft,” then you must ask the leading behavioral scientists of the day. You are likely to hear them speculate about the arrival of a “completed neuroscience” that will somehow explain away the phenomenon and tell us what is *really* going on. Then we will have no more talk of promises, holidays, reputations, misunderstandings, and threatening gestures; since none of these things can be quantitatively weighed or measured, the positivist argues, they must be unreal.¹² As one philosopher of this stripe remarks, in the midst of a discussion of conscious awareness, “there may be no such thing as awareness.”¹³ This is equivalent to a philosopher going to the ballet and then concluding, in the name of a naturalized aesthetics, that there is actually no such thing as gracefulness (or lack thereof, for that matter). If

beauty does not show up in our scientific account of the world, according to this way of thinking, then it must lie in the eye of the beholder; and the idea that we experience meaning in life can only be dismissed as a myth about the existence of some obscure substance that no physical instrument is able to detect.

According to this hard-nosed naturalistic way of thinking, it is hard to see how there can be such a thing as (for example) matrimony: if there were, then “people would have to be bound to one another in marriage, and everything we see . . . goes to suggest that the only way that people can be bound to one another is *with ropes*.”¹⁴ But when we speak of meaning or value or significance, we are not referring to something that could be put in a jar, like peanut butter. Rather, we are focusing upon a relational property of objects viewed in a certain light, by a subject who is emotionally involved in the world that he or she is experiencing. Our emotions provide us with a valuable mode of awareness, since they call our attention to the salient features of things, making whatever matters to us stand out in sharp relief. If I am annoyed, then something must be annoying me; and I cannot sincerely claim to be afraid of you unless I see you as frightening for some reason. We cannot even identify these emotions without using intentional language that makes reference to the external world: no study of what is going on inside my skull could distinguish, for instance, my unrequited love for Cordelia from every other possible state of mind.¹⁵ An MRI scan may be able to indicate a general pattern of agitation, but it cannot explain what has made me upset: in order to distinguish what emotional response I am undergoing, one must look at the whole situation and give an account of what is going on between mind and world.

In a certain sense, things would be easier for us if we could inhabit the view from nowhere rather than an emotional point of view: our vulnerability to emotions is a direct consequence of our passionate engagement with a world that we did not create and do not control. The ancient Stoic avoids the risk of emotion by cultivating an impersonal perspective, proclaiming that “the lofty mind always remains calm, at rest in a tranquil haven.”¹⁶ And there is no better way to guarantee tranquility of mind than to view human existence as devoid of meaning or value, rejecting every appearance of significance until life has been reduced to absurdity. We will not be moved by the beauty of a purple robe if we see it as “nothing but” a piece of sheep’s wool dyed with the blood of a shellfish, nor will we be troubled by human affairs if we see them as “nothing but” a worthless and disgusting progression from sperm to ashes.¹⁷ When objects make a claim upon us by appearing meaningful, the Stoics tell us that we must break them up into their constituent parts, strip them bare, and destroy the myth that they are of any significance.¹⁸ The goal of this reevaluation of values, according to Marcus Aurelius, is to end up viewing things “scientifically”; what he means by this is something like looking through a microscope at whatever is most precious in life so that, under closer scrutiny, it does not appear to be so impressive after all.

This project is certainly liberating, but it ought to remind us of Kierkegaard's remark that "the way to make life easy is to make it meaningless."¹⁹ We should not represent as scientific rigor what is nothing other than moral insensitivity, and yet our quest for objectivity can lead us to doubt whether the world really is the way that it appears to be from the perspective of an emotional person. It is a remarkable feature of human beings that "we are creatures to whom things matter," as Frankfurt points out, but it ought to seem no less remarkable that the world matters to us as it does.²⁰ Emotions arise from our caring engagement with reality, and they reveal as much about that "objective" reality as they do about our own subjectivity. When we are fully disengaged from our surroundings, everything seems empty and absurd—but this is a departure from our ordinary emotional mode of being. The stoical withdrawal from contingent experience into abstract detachment is a kind of perversion: in trying to isolate mind from world, we forget that our consciousness has no content except in relation to its environment.²¹ And it is possible, as Nagel says, to reach "a standpoint so removed from the perspective of human life that all we can do is to observe."²² For his part, Kierkegaard remarks that something has gone wrong when the *participants* in a specific activity "have judiciously transformed themselves into a crowd of *spectators*."²³ When we strive for an "objective" vantage point, we find ourselves alienated from a world that no longer provokes any emotional response, since its significance is simply lost on us.

By virtue of what do we find ourselves inhabiting a significant world, seeing things from a perspective quite unlike the view from nowhere? In a word, Kierkegaard's answer is: *love*. "Love," he writes, "is the source of all things and . . . the deepest ground of spiritual life."²⁴ His descriptive account of love as the source of emotional life is integrated with a normative reflection on what it means to be a loving (or "caring")²⁵ person. To see things with loving eyes is to embrace their concrete particularity in the most favorable light, appreciating them for being exactly what they are; to love (or to care for) someone is to take an unselfish interest in his or her interests, without asking for anything in return.²⁶ Because "what one sees depends upon how one sees," Kierkegaard argues that the world is experienced as meaningful only if we view it with a charitable disposition.²⁷ Love is what illuminates the human world, enabling us to perceive the distinctive significance of things, and thereby providing us with focus and orientation in a life that is worth living. We might say that love bonds us to what is beyond us, creating between self and world the "engagements in which we find ourselves."²⁸

Our lifeworld is one in which ordinary things are weighted with significance: a corpse is revolting, a living room soothing. At a glance we see the police officer's anger, even though we may fail to notice the color of his eyes. Objects are not merely inert bulky structures; they "lure and threaten us, support and obstruct us, sustain and debilitate us, direct us and calm us."²⁹ In short, experience is routinely permeated with meaning; however, the axiologically salient

features of reality would be perceived as neutral facts by anyone other than a loving subject—that is, if they were perceived at all. Love, in other words, “is not solely a warm approval of what is already present”: it is what enables things to show up and be noticed in the first place.³⁰ A passage from Dostoevsky’s “Dream of a Ridiculous Man” suggests that a person who drifted through life in a state of complete indifference would be profoundly out of touch with the world:

I realized that it *would not matter* whether the world existed or whether there was nothing at all anywhere. I began to intuit and sense with all my being, that *there was nothing around me*. At first I was inclined to think that in the past there had been a great deal, but later on I divined that formerly too there had been nothing, it had merely seemed otherwise for some reason. I gradually became convinced that there would be nothing in the future either. It was then that I suddenly stopped being angry at other people and almost ceased to notice them. Indeed this became apparent even in the most trivial matters: for example, I would bump into people as I was walking along the street.³¹

Except for a bit of Cartesian certainty about his own existence, this narrator has lost the world in his apathetic detachment: as far as he is concerned, even the people he bumps into on the street might as well not exist. What he conspicuously lacks is the emotional disposition that is required in order to be able to perceive the significance of things. Now, to an unloving or skeptical observer, it will never be obvious that anything *deserves* to be loved.³² But this statement is analogous to Locke’s claim that the red color of porphyry is not *really* in the object, but is only an illusory appearance—because, as he famously argues, we cannot see its color in the dark!³³ What it is for something to be red, of course, is for it to appear red, when suitably illuminated, to anyone with eyes to see.³⁴ Just as colors cannot be seen in the dark, values cannot be seen in the absence of the required emotional receptivity. In this sense, our capacity for viewing things in the best possible light has something in common with color vision. Objects can be experienced as meaningful (or colorful) only if we perceive them under favorable conditions and in the appropriate way.

“If you yourself have never been in love,” Kierkegaard argues, then “you do not know whether anyone has ever been loved in this world, although you do know how many have affirmed that they have loved”: it is only “if you yourself have loved” that you know what it is like to experience the world in this way.³⁵ Likewise, he adds, “[t]he blind person cannot know color differences; he must be content that others have assured him that they do exist and that they are thus and so.”³⁶ In order to understand this comparison, we should take into account the fact that the person who is *not* blind does not spawn the world of light and color out of his own mind, but must be constituted in a certain way in order to perceive what is visible. What is visible, such as the red color of the rose, is

certainly “out there” in the world, but it would be nonsensical to ascribe this property to the object as viewed from nowhere. What it means to say that the rose is visible and colored is that these appearances are there “to be met with in the object’s relation to the subject,” to borrow a phrase from the *Critique of Pure Reason*.³⁷ Extending this point into the domain of emotional perception (where Kant would not follow us), we could say that when an object is “met with on the path of care, it is experienced as meaningful.”³⁸ As Heidegger also realizes, it is not merely an incidental fact about us that we are loving or caring beings—rather, it is a foundational condition of life as we know it. The features of the world that we perceive as loving subjects are no less real for being undiscoverable by any scientific investigation; we have no more reason to doubt the reality of what love reveals to us than to be skeptical about the material existence of the red rose.

This is why, according to Kierkegaard, our conception of rationality needs to be drastically redefined: “to love and to know are essentially synonymous,” he contends, “and just as to love signifies that the other becomes manifest, so it naturally means that one becomes manifest himself.”³⁹ Following up on this idea (although, like Heidegger, failing to acknowledge its source), Jean-Luc Marion writes that love “opens up knowledge of the other as such.”⁴⁰ It is a virtue to be truly in love, but simply to call it a virtue is to risk missing the moral-psychological point: without love, we would not be able to lead a life that is recognizably human. If love is a category through which we perceive the world, then we must reconsider what it would mean to see things as they really are. It is an untenable prejudice to believe that reality is more accurately perceived without emotion, or that existence can be clarified from a stripped-down, value-free, “scientific” viewpoint. Although I am outside of you, I can see you either as living flesh or as dead meat.⁴¹ The former way of seeing is the caring awareness that an executioner must omit; the latter might be defended as more “rational” or “objective” by a scientific observer. But what we perceive when we occupy an emotional point of view is nothing other than the concrete particularity of the world, seen by an appreciative participant. Defining his criteria for a state of knowledge that would put the human mind in touch with the world, Kierkegaard writes: “an objectivity which takes shape in a corresponding subjectivity, that is the goal.”⁴²

Elsewhere, he adds that all understanding basically depends upon “how one is disposed toward something.”⁴³ When we size things up from a skeptical perspective, we find no shortage of reasons for complaining about our circumstances; by virtue of love, however, we may be able to overcome this habit of distrust. The person who loves finds that the world is charged with a significance that could not be appreciated by a differently constituted observer. At the same time, he develops a kind of unscientific cognition “that displays how the world is *seen*, known by *this* self, and moved by *these* emotions.”⁴⁴ This mode of know-

ing has its own validity according to premises quite unlike those that lead many philosophers to prefer the view from nowhere: ultimately, there is no reason to assume that the world is *not* just as meaningful as it appears to a loving subject. This way of seeing can therefore be described as a dispositional prerequisite for the recognition of value in the world. Although it would be unrealistic to expect that *everyone* could be convinced that a life on such terms is worth living, we should at least be able to agree that the flight to scientific objectivity does not always lead us closer to the truth. If we still insist upon developing a “science of the mind,” then we ought to approach the topic in such a way that our *scientia* (in the classical sense) can take the form of a humanistic “understanding.”⁴⁵

Part 2—Literature and the Art of Philosophy

Be that as it may, the language of philosophical argument is not commonly influenced by this humanistic ideal: our picture of how philosophy ought to be written is much more likely to have been shaped by the legacy of scientific positivism. Since this is not the best idiom in which to give an account of the significant mind-world relations that are the fabric of moral life, our standard vocabulary can actually limit our understanding. One way of describing the challenge posed by Kierkegaard’s writings to those of us who practice philosophy is that they force us to reconsider the pictures that hold us captive, and that define our attitude toward the conceptual issues that concern us. Operating with the wrong picture of how philosophy ought to be written could prevent us from saying anything at all about the person—and this, as Hannay points out, is “a deficiency serious enough to make comedy when philosophy claims to speak to our personal needs.”⁴⁶ Following Stanley Cavell, Hannay suggests that we view Kierkegaard’s religious sphere of existence as a Wittgensteinian form of life, with a distinctive grammar that provides us with a way of seeing the world and of interpreting our own experience.⁴⁷ The world of the person who believes in a God of love is not the same as the world of the reductive positivist who seeks to naturalize all mental phenomena, so we should not be surprised to find them talking past one another:

Religious solutions to human misery are often seen as makeshifts awaiting genuine amelioration through some beneficial adjustment in the conditions of life. But it is also possible to look at it the other way around. One may always, of course, give psychological and sociological explanations of why people like Kierkegaard have such needs. But one may also choose to side with Kierkegaard, to see things as he does, and say, “This is how it really is.”⁴⁸

What ought to move us to accept or to reject Kierkegaard’s ideas is not primarily their dogmatic content, but whether or not we find that they offer us “a persuasive or adequate depiction of the human condition.”⁴⁹ One of his goals, then, is to move his readers to reflect upon their own presuppositions,

and to realize that different internally coherent ways of experiencing reality are available, each with its own language. But in order to create a space in which a person might change her basic way of seeing the world, it is necessary to get her to reconsider the most familiar terms of her self-understanding, either directly or indirectly. This goes some way toward explaining why Kierkegaard's works are written in such an unusual variety of styles, and why he rejected the philosophical dialect of his contemporaries with a polemic that, as Hannay notes, would be just as relevant in the present day.⁵⁰

Most of those who are known as "philosophers" in the Western tradition are authors of one kind or another, and the rare exception of a nonliterary figure such as Socrates is remembered as a philosopher largely because he was admired and memorialized by a very good writer. And yet few people involved in the discipline of philosophy seem to think of themselves as authors, even when they have in fact written many books. David Hume claimed that his *Treatise of Human Nature* was composed just after he had resolved to devote himself to "the improvement of my talents in literature";⁵¹ however, this notion of philosophical writing as a literary art has remained largely foreign to the treatise writers of the English-speaking world. For the most part, Anglophone philosophers would prefer to think of themselves as "conceptual engineers," or something of the sort, rather than as writers. In this climate, it is worth turning to the assaults on philosophy that literary authors have been making since Philip Sidney's "Defense of Poesy" to see if they might be identifying problems that the philosophers cannot afford to ignore. For instance, in an essay entitled "Why the Novel Matters," D. H. Lawrence complains that the "damned philosophers" like to "talk about infinity, and the pure spirit which knows all things"⁵²—whereas, "if you pick up a novel," he says, you immediately recognize the inability of such abstract and purified writing to capture the practical knowledge that we rely upon in the context of embodied life. Now, to a positivist, Lawrence can only be seen as an irrationalist gratuitously threatening to bring sensuous material into the realm of calculation.⁵³ But this bias is based upon the notion that philosophical thought is, and ought only to be, abstracted from any human vantage point, like any other "hard" science. Once we realize that the terms "hard" and "soft" are no more useful for describing philosophers than for classifying novelists, we are in a position to rethink the common belief that philosophical writing should be closer in style to the scientific article than to the literary narrative.

Take emotional perception, for example. Each time I am emotionally affected in one way or another, I experience what a phenomenologist would call a modification of my subjectivity. Therefore, my own perspective must be central to any characterization of what is happening: a language in which "all significant questions become general" will not be able to do justice to this particular event.⁵⁴ Already we can see the problem with philosophical argument that takes place in an "abstract realm, without characters, without situations," as if the

path of abstraction will always lead to truth.⁵⁵ If it hopes to illuminate the human condition, philosophy must speak from *within* concrete existence rather than launching into the sort of objective reflection in which the thinker forgets himself, speaking a merely abstract language “which explains nothing and understands nothing,” and dissolving all of existence into “utterly indifferent talk about Persia, China,” and so on.⁵⁶ Vague generalizations about world history may have their place, but they are hideously unable to address the complexities faced by the individual who loves and suffers. In order to be attuned to this predicament, Kierkegaard suggests, the philosopher requires a different kind of sensitivity and a vocabulary that is appropriate for his subject matter: “Nothing is easier for any reasonably literate person than to give, for instance, a kind of survey of the art of Chinese, Indian, Persian, ancient, and romantic drama . . . on the other hand, nothing is more difficult than to examine and elucidate a single dramatic performance by an actor or an actress.”⁵⁷

Something is wrong with philosophical writing that supposedly has to do with moral situations, but which is so dead to the properties of objects in the world, so descriptively inept, that it cannot say what it is that makes anything honest, graceful, ugly, or shocking, or why we ought to apply one of these evaluative terms rather than another in a given situation. Yet as frustrating as it is to hear a positivist declare that axiological terms add nothing to the factual content of a statement,⁵⁸ there is something equally objectionable about philosophical writing that cleverly invents a neologism and then declares that this bit of jargon *du jour* is neither a concept nor a word but the nonoriginal origin of all differences.⁵⁹ Whether analytic or continental in their orientation, philosophers get into trouble when they insist upon speaking an alienating technical vocabulary: when their words are unrelated to ordinary language, their readers may be left with the impression that nothing other than theory is at stake, or that what they are reading does not pertain to human existence. As if he were foreseeing both kinds of bad writing, Kierkegaard states that when philosophy invents its own peculiar terminology (rather than “appropriating the given”), it “usually ends in silence” or in the “personal isolation of jargonish nonsense.”⁶⁰

What mode of expression could avoid the literary deficiencies of both Ayer’s and Derrida’s writings? To begin with, it would have to be one that allows us to come to terms with the predicament of a situated human being, rather than abstracting the human being away from his or her connections with the world.⁶¹ And the philosophical treatise is not the literary genre best suited to explore *what it is like* to respond to the salient features of a particular situation—such as the blush on a person’s cheek or the dreamlike atmosphere of evening.⁶² It is much more likely to be in the novel or the poem that one finds a record of everything that appears significant from the vantage point of an emotional person. Opposing the philosophical notion that “the task is to become more and more objective, to divest oneself of his subjectivity,” the poets (according to

Kierkegaard) claim that it is a rare achievement to give voice to one's own experience as a loving subject.⁶³ From the reader's point of view, an engagement with literary works of art helps to guard against moral insensibility by exercising our imaginative awareness of what it is like to be someone other than ourselves,⁶⁴ and by calling our attention to morally relevant qualities in the world. As noble as it is to think of myself as a citizen in the kingdom of ends, I will be nothing but an insensitive bus passenger in a real city if I fail to notice that someone is standing uncomfortably and that there are no more seats.⁶⁵ The obtuseness that I display by not being attuned to this situation is a moral shortcoming that can be averted through the cultivation of sympathetic imagination: or, in other words, passionate understanding. "Accurate, clear, decisive, impassioned understanding is of great importance," Kierkegaard says, since "it facilitates action."⁶⁶ Moral agency relies upon the mode of perception in which we recognize the significance of contingent particularity. If novels and poems are uniquely able to help us refine our moral and emotional perception, then they ought to be recognized as contributions to our philosophical knowledge.

Iris Murdoch has observed that "[w]e differ not only because we select different objects out of the same world but because we see different worlds," and she also argues that fine-grained changes in our way of seeing are most adequately examined not in philosophical texts but in literary works.⁶⁷ The lyrical delineation of a slight change of heart, or the narration of an ambiguous situation in which the moral of the story is *not* clear, enables us to explore intricate and difficult issues as they might arise in the context of our own experience.⁶⁸ Among the Greeks that Kierkegaard held in such high esteem, philosophical and literary writings were not sharply distinguished, and both were expected to help a person understand the significance of an experience such as falling in love. When Alcibiades (in Plato's *Symposium*) is asked to speak about love, he gives "no definitions or explanations of the nature of anything, but just a story of a particular passion for a particular contingent individual."⁶⁹ Likewise, when Johannes de Silentio sets out to introduce the category of "infinite resignation," he does not offer an abstract account of this state of consciousness and its place in world history, nor does he give us a list of necessary and sufficient conditions expressed in pseudo-scientific language imported from set theory: he simply tells the story of one "young lad" who falls in love with a princess.⁷⁰ This mode of exposition is appropriate to its subject matter because—as Plato must have realized—some truths about love are inescapably particular, and can be illustrated only in concrete and poetic language. Warning philosophers not to shy away from such raw material, Martha Nussbaum notes that "it is of such incongruous juxtapositions, such intimate perceptions and failures of perception, that real-life love, and philosophy if it is to tell the truth about love, are made."⁷¹ Unless contemporary philosophers are not even up to the task of adding "footnotes to Plato" on this particular theme, we must go beyond making

the vague observation that literature “seems to have something important to do with our lives,”⁷² and begin to engage more seriously with literary texts and the all-too-human phenomena they bring to our attention.

As he occasionally tells us and continually shows us, Kierkegaard is not accidentally writing in a literary style from which the content of his work can be safely abstracted. It is frequently clear that his meaning would not survive a paraphrase—especially one in which terms that have a particular significance are replaced with more general language. A resistance to paraphrase is often cited as the distinguishing feature of poetic texts,⁷³ and it is true that some devices in Kierkegaard’s writings resist being captured by any translation that does not manage to re-create the style of the original. Roger Poole believes that English translators have not captured the alliteration in *The Concept of Anxiety*,⁷⁴ but in other cases this poetic effect does seem to have been well conveyed by Kierkegaard’s translators: for instance, “Where does love come from, where does it have its origin and its source, where is the place from which it has its abode from which it flows?”⁷⁵ This passage, from early in *Works of Love*, is followed by a number of ontological claims, all of which are written in a language rich with vivid imagery.

[J]ust as the sun’s rays invite a person to behold the glory of the world by their help but warningly punish the presumptuous one with blindness when he wants to turn around in order, inquisitively and brazenly, to discover the origin of the light . . . in the same way it is love’s desire and wish that its secret source and its hidden life in the innermost being may remain a secret, that no one inquisitively and brazenly will force his way in disturbingly in order to see that which he cannot see anyway without forfeiting, because of his curiosity, the joy and blessing of it. . . . Love’s hidden life is in the innermost being, unfathomable, and then in turn is in an unfathomable connectedness with all existence. Just as the quiet lake originates deep down in the hidden springs no eye has seen, so also does a person’s love originate even more deeply in God’s love.⁷⁶

Here Kierkegaard’s poetic metaphors are not merely ornamental: it would undermine the point of the whole passage if he were to speak in the dead, flat language of logical positivism or the behavioral sciences, or in the fashionable jargon that dominates much of continental philosophy. Likewise, the sequence of poetic snapshots of Abraham and Isaac in the opening “Attunement” (or “Exordium”) to *Fear and Trembling* have all the intensity, and the cryptic suggestiveness, of the best lyric poems: every time we revisit them, we find something we have not seen before. Although theories of linguistic meaning normally don’t say very much about those aspects of an utterance that are not captured by an indirect quotation, these examples ought to give us pause the next time we are tempted to imagine that the soul of a text can be harmlessly separated from its flesh.

Of course, the philosopher is not the only kind of author whose words can either succeed or fail to do justice to the world of human experience, and even a work filled with conceptual argument can demonstrate an evident awareness of what it is to be a living, breathing individual who is interested in the matter at hand.⁷⁷ Perhaps the best philosophical writing succeeds at performing the kind of abstraction that stays within sight of the reality from which it has abstracted. But this is just to say that philosophy succeeds at illuminating existence from within only insofar as it is animated by an acute literary imagination. Kierkegaard would presumably agree that “the philosopher must go to school with the poets in order to learn the use of language, and must use it in their way: as a means of exploring one’s own mind, and bringing to light what is obscure and doubtful in it.”⁷⁸ His bizarre variety of writings give us reason to believe that philosophy will be impoverished as long as it lacks a poetic sensibility. The question of how to go on in light of this realization is one that must be faced by every one of us who cares about both Kierkegaard *and* philosophy.