

THE PROBLEM OF KIERKEGAARD'S SOCRATES

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This essay re-examines Kierkegaard's view of Socrates. I consider the problem that arises from Kierkegaard's appeal to Socrates as an exemplar for irony. The problem is that he also appears to think that, as an exemplar for irony, Socrates cannot be represented. And part of the problem is the paradox of self-reference that immediately arises from trying to represent x as unrepresentable. On the solution I propose, Kierkegaard does not hold that, as an exemplar for irony, Socrates is in no way representable. Rather, he holds that, as an exemplar for irony, Socrates cannot be represented in a purely disinterested way. I show how, in *The Concept of Irony*, Kierkegaard makes use of 'limiting cases' of representation in order to bring Socrates into view as one who defies purely disinterested representation. I also show how this approach to Socrates connects up with Kierkegaard's more general interest in the problem of ethical exemplarity, where the problem is how ethical exemplars can be given as such, that is, in such a way that purely disinterested contemplation is not the appropriate response to them.

Socrates ... this puzzling, uncategorizable,
inexplicable phenomenon (Nietzsche)

A plausible general hypothesis about Kierkegaard is that he modelled his work as an author on Socrates. This supposition helps to explain many features of his work: his self-withdrawing and maieutic gestures, his focus on ethical self-knowledge, his eye for paradoxes, his animus against those he regarded as modern-day sophists, his professions of ignorance.¹ Further,

¹ This hypothesis has long guided Kierkegaard studies, going back at least to David Swenson's way of introducing Kierkegaard to Anglophone readers, in the 1940s, as a "Danish Socrates" (1983 [1941]). Hjørdis Becker-Lindenthal writes, "Kierkegaard's perception of Socrates was decisive for his thoughts and methodology alike" (2014, 259). Critical studies that develop this hypothesis also include Daise 1999;

the hypothesis finds ample support in Kierkegaard's own self-assessments, not least a late text that invokes Socrates as the "only analogy" for his own life's work (KW XXIII, 341).² And his writings generally abound with references to Socrates, often via a metonym such as, "the simple wise man" (e.g. KW XVII, 241).

A second well-attested hypothesis about Kierkegaard is that he understood Socrates, first and foremost, as an *ironist*.³ This understanding of Socrates is worked out in detail already in Kierkegaard's *magister* dissertation, *On the Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*. Part One of this work purports to show that his being an ironist is not only a possible interpretation of Socrates but that he actually was so and even, in a world-historical perspective, had to be. Later, in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, the figure of Socrates as ironist will play a leading role as counterpoint to the Hegelian speculative philosophers who, allegedly lacking any sense of irony, confuse themselves with God. And another metonym by which Kierkegaard invokes Socrates is, "the greatest master of irony" (JP 2: 1554).⁴

Plausible though they are, these two hypotheses lead quickly to an interpretative difficulty. For, the evidence which supports them gives us *prima facie* reasons to affirm both of the following:

- (A) Kierkegaard holds that Socrates can serve as an exemplar for irony; and
- (B) Kierkegaard holds that, as an exemplar for irony, Socrates cannot be represented.

Thesis A is already supported by the evidence that Kierkegaard modelled his work as an author on Socrates, whom he understood as an ironist. For, how could this be so if he did not hold that Socrates can serve as an exemplar for irony? As we shall see, there is strong further evidence already in *The Concept of Irony* that he holds that Socrates can and should serve as an exemplar for irony, not just for Kierkegaard as an author but also for his readers, assuming only on their part an interest in living a "properly human life" (KW II, 326). As we shall also see, this text provides

Cooper 1985; Howland 2008; Kirmmse 2001; McCombs 2013; Mjaaland 2007; Mooney 2007; Muench 2009a; 2009b; Sinnott 2000.

² The reference is to *Kierkegaard's Writings*, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong et al., 26 volumes. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978-2000. Citations to this series are to "KW" followed by Volume and page numbers.

³ While critics disagree about the details, there is broad consensus that, in Kierkegaard's view of Socrates, irony is the bottom line. See e. g. Kofman (1998); Harrison (1994, Ch. 2); Lippitt (2000); Martinez (2001); Muench (1999a); Pattison (2002; 2007); Rubenstein (2001); Söderquist (2013); Strawser (1997).

⁴ The reference is to Kierkegaard's *Journals and Papers*, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, 7 volumes. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967-78. Citations to this series are to "JP" followed by Volume and page numbers.

prima facie evidence for Thesis B, given the way it develops the idea of Socrates as an ironist, that is, as one to whom it belongs never to appear *in propria persona*. In Kierkegaard's image, trying to represent an exemplar for irony, so conceived, is like trying to draw something that becomes invisible as soon as it appears (KW II, 3).

The difficulty is that these two theses, A and B, appear to be in some tension. For it may be natural to suppose that if X can serve as an exemplar for F , then X can be represented as an exemplar for X . Even if we hold to the view, sometimes attributed to Wittgenstein, that, while in use, the standard meter in Paris was the one thing that could not be measured as the length of a meter, we should still agree that nothing could serve as the standard meter were it not capable of being represented as such, in writing and in speech.⁵ And even if we deny that all exemplars are exemplars for F , where F is some particular property or feature, we should agree that some things serve as exemplars for F and that these things can be represented as such.⁶ If a given colour swatch is to serve as an exemplar for magenta, for example, then it will need to be represented as such. Such representation need not be anything mental: it need not be for example a mental image of magenta. But for a given swatch to serve as an exemplar for magenta it will need to be represented as such in some way: by its position relative to other shades in a sample, perhaps, or by having the word "magenta" written beneath it. Or, to switch to an example of a sort that will be closer to our main concerns in this paper: I could not take another person as an exemplar of courage, say, or temperance were I to lack any way of representing him or her as such.

So it may be difficult to see how Kierkegaard could hold both that Socrates can serve as an exemplar for irony and that he cannot be represented as such. My aim in this paper is to resolve this difficulty, the problem of Kierkegaard's Socrates.⁷ The central issue is whether and in

⁵ See Wittgenstein 1953, §50. Gert 2002 argues compellingly that, contrary to a traditional reading, the view that the standard meter in Paris cannot intelligibly be described as being the length of a meter is not one that Wittgenstein actually endorses in his later work.

⁶ In *The Brown Book*, Wittgenstein gives an example which might illustrate the idea of an exemplar that is not an exemplar for F , where F is some particular property or feature. In this example, someone remarks of a piece of soap that it has a particular smell. To the question, "which smell?" they can only respond, "this smell" or "the smell it has". Wittgenstein observes that these latter, reflexive locutions may tempt us to assimilate this case with ones in which the term "particular" is used transitively, in place of a description (as in, "this soap has a particular smell, the smell of ground-ivy leaves"). But Wittgenstein insists that "particular", in such contexts, might instead be used intransitively: not to stand in for any description but to emphasize or express one's attention directly to the soap. See Wittgenstein 1958, 158. Thanks to Matteo Falomi for drawing my attention to this passage in this connection.

⁷ Kierkegaard's work gives rise to other instances of this form of problem. For example, there is a parallel problem of Kierkegaard's Abraham, in which the difficulty is the impression that Kierkegaard thinks Abraham can and should serve as an exemplar for faith but also that, since nothing could count as empirical evidence of it, Abraham's faith cannot be represented by any description of his actual

what way Kierkegaard thinks that, as an exemplar for irony, Socrates defies representation. I shall argue that the apparent evidence for Thesis B is in fact evidence for the following, significantly qualified, version of this thesis:

(B*) Kierkegaard holds that, as an exemplar for irony, Socrates cannot be represented *in a purely disinterested way*.

As we shall see, the notion of disinterestedness emerges in Kierkegaard's work as a mode of attention and representation that is appropriate to a wide, but limited, range of possible objects. The proper objects of disinterestedness are, namely, those that do not essentially bear on existential questions, that is, on questions regarding how to live and who to become. I shall argue that Kierkegaard relies on the possibility that Socrates can be represented as an exemplar for irony, albeit not in a purely disinterested way. Focusing on *The Concept of Irony*, I shall show how this text makes use of special sorts of representations that, by disturbing the attitude of disinterestedness, are designed to help make possible ways of emulating Socrates that are not based on any purely disinterested representation of his life.

My plan is as follows. I shall first review the evidence in *The Concept of Irony* for Thesis B, i. e. the evidence that Kierkegaard thinks that Socrates cannot be represented as an exemplar for irony. I shall argue that there is no coherent reading of this text that supports this unqualified thesis. Secondly, I shall introduce in a general way how the idea of disinterestedness enters into Kierkegaard's thought and why he doubts the suitability of purely disinterested representations to represent ethical exemplars. Finally, I shall argue that *The Concept of Irony* deploys certain "limiting cases" of disinterested representation that are designed to help make possible ways of emulating Socrates that are not based on any purely disinterested contemplation of his life.

I

Kierkegaard introduces Part One of his dissertation by citing two widely recognized difficulties for any attempt to represent the historical Socrates and then adding to these a third, hypothetical, difficulty. The two familiar difficulties are that (i) Socrates himself left no written

behaviour. For a radical approach to this problem, which grasps the nettle that Kierkegaard's real view must be that Abraham *cannot* serve as an exemplar for faith, see Kosch 2008. For a critical perspective on this interpretation of *Fear and Trembling*, see Watts 2011.

record and that (ii) his contemporaries found him puzzling, if not baffling, and left us with portraits of his life that are (to put it cautiously) difficult to reconcile. Let me briefly rehearse the second of these familiar difficulties (I take it that the first needs no comment).

That Socrates's contemporaries found him puzzling is amply attested in Plato's dialogues. We need only recall Alcibiades' reference to Socrates's "bizarreness" (*tēn sēn atopian*) (*Symposium* 215a3); or the remark given to Phaedrus about Socrates being *atopotatos*, "the oddest of men" (*Phaedrus* 230c); or again what Socrates is himself given to say when he says, "I am utterly disturbing (*atopos*) and I create only perplexity (*aporia*)" (*Theaetetus* 149a). But the issue is not only internal to Plato. From the historical point of view, the difficulty is that, vivid though they each are, the three major first-hand portraits of Socrates we have – from Xenophon and Aristophanes as well as Plato – diverge to the point of making it hard to see how they can be representations of one and the same person. Xenophon's seemingly conventional moralist, for example, is difficult to reconcile both with Plato's aporetic stingray (see *Meno* 79e7-80b7) and with Aristophanes' scurrilous purveyor of head-in-the-clouds "wisdom" (see *The Clouds*).

The hypothetical difficulty that Kierkegaard adds to these familiar ones is that Socrates lived in such a way as to maintain a discrepancy between his outward appearance and his inner life. On this hypothesis, Socrates is a man of masks, where "it is of the nature of irony never to unmask itself" (KW II, 48). At first blush, we might hope that this hypothesis is suitable to ease our difficulties by helping to explain the divergence between the first-hand accounts we have of Socrates's life. For, if indeed it belongs to Socrates to conceal himself behind different masks, different public *personae*, then we might well expect his witnesses to recall different impressions of his life. And indeed Kierkegaard will proceed to defend his hypothesis (*inter alia*) on just these grounds. At the outset, however, he clearly flags up a way in which the hypothesis that Socrates was an out-and-out ironist, where this means one who never appears *in propria persona*, only brings with it a new difficulty and one of a quite different order.

This new difficulty – call it *the paradox of the radical ironist* – can be introduced as follows. If, by definition, the radical ironist "is always only making himself seem to be other than he actually is" (256) then he cannot be represented as he actually is; but in that case, he cannot be represented as one who never appears as he actually is. Paradoxically, it appears to follow from the supposition that Socrates is a radical ironist he cannot be represented as such. Kierkegaard is clearly aware of this paradox. To bring it out, he offers the analogy of trying to draw the

mythical nisse in the cap that makes him invisible (3).⁸ This is an apt image for Kierkegaard's paradoxical project in the first part of his dissertation: to defend his hypothesis by revealing Socrates as one whose nature is always to remain concealed.

We may observe that the root of the problem here is the paradox of self-reference that arises immediately from any attempt to represent Socrates's true nature as beyond the limits of manifestation and so, *a fortiori*, beyond the limits of representation. The general form of this problem arises whenever we find a claim advanced of the form, *X is unrepresentable* (or inexpressible, indescribable, etc.). The problem is that any such claim appears to be either self-refuting or unintelligible. It will be self-refuting in the case that the place-holder, "X", can be filled in by something representable (or expressible etc.). It will be unintelligible, or an empty schema, in the case that it can be filled in by nothing representable (or expressible etc.). In the gloss that Graham Priest puts on predicaments of this sort, we have "a totality (of all things expressible, describable etc.) and an appropriate operation that generates an object that is both within and without the totality" (2001, 3).⁹

As Priest also illustrates, in the face of this sort of predicament, some thinkers (including Priest himself) are led to logically unorthodox conclusions. Noticing that even to say that God is inexpressible is to express something about God, Nicholas of Cusa, for example, was apparently prepared to conclude that God's nature both is and is not expressible, in a univocal sense of "expression" (2001, 22-23). In principle, we could envisage Kierkegaard as saying, or trying to say, something similar about Socrates: that his ironical nature both can and cannot be represented (in a univocal sense of "representation"). But he does not say this and I do not think it would be a plausible reading of his dissertation. How, then, does he set out to resolve the paradox of the radical ironist?

Kierkegaard adopts a strategy that is more often associated with theologians who confront paradoxes of divine transcendence. This is the *via negationis*, the way of negation (see KW II, 198). Here is Aquinas' canonical formulation of the stratagem:

But we cannot know what God is, only what he is not. We must therefore consider the ways in which God does not exist, rather than the ways in which he does. (I.3 proem, 19¹⁰)

⁸ Compare the references in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* to the paradoxical task of trying to paint mars in the armor that makes him invisible (KW XII, 79; 174).

⁹ I have elsewhere considered Kierkegaard's response to this form of paradox with respect to the presentation of Christianity worked out in *Philosophical Fragments* and *Postscript*. See Watts 2016.

¹⁰ Translated by Brian Davies (Aquinas 2006, 28).

In parallel fashion, Kierkegaard's ostensible procedure is to specify ways the historical Socrates is *not* adequately represented in Plato, nor in Xenophon, nor in Aristophanes. And he purports to infer from these merely negative results that the hypothesis that Socrates was a radical ironist must be true. I say that Kierkegaard *purports* to argue in this way because I think the strategy signally fails to work, as a solution to the paradox of the radical ironist, and that he knows this full well.

As Kierkegaard presents it, his procedure involves a sort of “triangulation” between Plato's idealized view, Xenophon's prosaic view, and Aristophanes' satirical view (KW II, 19). The suggestion here is not that these three portraits are equally valid. On the contrary, Kierkegaard makes no secret of his view for example that, compared with Xenophon's, Plato's portrayal is by far the more authoritative. His argument, rather, is that it is only on the hypothesis that he was a radical ironist that we can explain how Socrates could be a point of departure for Plato's philosophy in just the way he was and be misunderstood by Xenophon in the way he was and be satirized by Aristophanes in the way he was. Kierkegaard does, however, express an overall preference: remarkably, it is for Aristophanes' literary caricature of Socrates in *The Clouds* (152). (I shall offer a suggestion about the significance of this preference in §III below.)

On the face of it, then, Kierkegaard supposes that, although it cannot be represented in a positive and direct way, Socrates's ironical nature can nonetheless be represented in an indirect and negative way. Early on in *The Concept of Irony*, Kierkegaard alights on a suggestive image in this connection. “There is a work”, he writes, “that represents Napoleon's grave. Two tall trees shade the grave ... as the eye follows the outline, suddenly Napoleon himself emerges from this nothing” (19). Likewise, Kierkegaard purports to proceed purely negatively and indirectly, by arranging the portraits of Plato, Xenophon and Aristophanes in such a way that the real Socrates can emerge to fill the empty space, as it were, between them.

But there is a glaring problem with the way Kierkegaard purports to bring Socrates to light purely *via negationis*. This becomes plain on a moment's reflection on the analogy with the picture of Napoleon's grave. For, it is not, of course, by magic that Napoleon emerges from “the nothing” between the two trees depicted. Plainly, the trick works only because the artist has drawn the outline of these trees with a positive image of Napoleon already in mind. Likewise, we may suspect that Kierkegaard's critical discussion of Plato's, Xenophon's and Aristophanes' portraits of Socrates is guided from the outset by a positive view of what belongs to Socrates: namely, the hypothesis that his was the life of a radical ironist. Drawing to a close his *via negationis*, Kierkegaard admits as much:

During this whole investigation, I have continually had something in mind, namely, the final view [sc. the view of Socrates as an ironist], without thereby laying myself open to the charge of ... having hidden, sought, and then found what I myself had found long ago. (155)

Kierkegaard here anticipates the objection that his method of triangulation has been far from innocent, having been guided from the outset by a positive view of Socrates. His response is to concede that his approach to the source material has been guided by his hypothesis, but to deny that there is anything pernicious about this. His reply, in effect, is that the hermeneutic circle is inescapable: “this can scarcely be otherwise, since the whole is prior to the parts” (156). There can be no such thing, Kierkegaard insists, as a purely innocent, presuppositionless, ground-up interpretation. Now, on its own terms, this reply looks reasonable enough. But the problem is this. If Kierkegaard’s method is supposed to bring Socrates into view purely *via negationis*, the concession that his procedure has been guided from the outset by a positive view of Socrates is nothing short of disastrous. For it amounts to the concession that he has failed to show that, if Socrates cannot be positively represented, he can nonetheless be brought into view in a purely negative way.

One interpretative possibility here is that Kierkegaard has failed to notice this implication of his concession that his approach has been guided from the outset by a positive view of Socrates. A more sympathetic interpretation, and I think a far more plausible one, is that his purported attempt to bring Socrates into view purely *via negationis* is an example of Kierkegaard’s own irony.¹¹ But, if so, where does this leave us regarding his view of Socrates? Are we to suppose that his portrait of Socrates *qua* radical ironist simply self-destructs, leaving us with no serious claims to consider? Sarah Kofman, who rightly draws attention to the possibility of Kierkegaard’s own irony in this connection, appears to think that this is indeed where *The Concept of Irony* leaves us: with no positive claims about Socrates whatsoever. Kofman writes:

[I]f Kierkegaard ends up, where Socrates is concerned, having contributed nothing but the gift of the viewpoint of irony, a gift that is in no way positive, a gift that is a negative

¹¹ Something of a smoking gun in this regard is a journal entry in which, reflecting on his dissertation, Kierkegaard comments, “if something should be found, particularly in the first part of the dissertation, that one is generally not accustomed to come across in scholarly writings, the reader must forgive my jocundity” (KW II, 441). To this remark, Kierkegaard adds for good measure the information that “I, in order to lighten the burden, sometimes sing at my work” (*idem*).

conception, at least he will have shown that it is possible to get around the Hegelian dialectics without appearing to touch it. (1998, 216)

It is hard to know where these remarks leave us. They seem to keep in play the idea that Kierkegaard somehow manages, after all, to pull off a purely negative representation of Socrates and Socratic irony. Or perhaps Kofman's view is that, once we see through Kierkegaard's own irony, we will be left with nothing but the thought that Socrates is unrepresentable. But this thought only takes us back to the core paradox: on pain of self-contradiction, Socrates cannot be represented as unrepresentable.¹²

From these considerations, I think we may draw the negative conclusion that *The Concept of Irony* does not support ascribing to Kierkegaard the view that Socrates's nature as an ironist cannot be represented at all or that it cannot be represented in any positive way. In the remainder of this paper, I shall work towards an alternative reading of the use he makes of his negative representation of Socrates as a radical ironist. I hope to show how his use of this representation is intelligible as part of Kierkegaard's aim to reintroduce Socrates as an ethical exemplar.

II

At one point in his dissertation, Kierkegaard remarks:

[I]t 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. Moreover, it is also clear that he would unavoidably draw official attention to himself, because it was not a scholarly still life to which he was devoting himself. (KW II, 178)

In his own milieu, Kierkegaard might well have expected this imagery of blood-sucking, and the observation that Socrates's life was no "scholarly still life", to strike a dissonant note. In his lectures on the history of philosophy, Hegel had portrayed the life of Socrates as a necessary and beautifully formed moment in world-history, a life marked by just the kind of harmonious

¹² It is especially difficult to see how, on Kofman's reading, Kierkegaard's portrayal of Socrates can have any anti-Hegelian purchase. For, Hegel clearly recognizes the sort of problem of self-referential incoherence at issue here; indeed, this sort of problem is at the heart of Hegel's criticism of Kant's appeal to unknowable noumena. See for example Hegel 1991[1830], §60.

plasticity that characterizes the classical artwork itself (1995 [1805-6]). I shall not take up here the issue of his complicated relations to Hegel circa 1840.¹³ But we shall see that, in Kierkegaard's portrayal, Socrates comes out by contrast as aesthetically disturbing, even grotesque.

Now, the image of a “scholarly still life” is an early marker of a theme that returns in Kierkegaard's mature work. On a line of thought made most explicit by his fictional philosopher, Johannes Climacus, certain objects of human attention – centrally including the productions of poetry and the fine arts – can be distinguished by their aptness to sustain disinterested contemplation. Alluding to Kant's third *Critique*, for example, Climacus remarks:

Poetry and art have been called an anticipation of the eternal. If one wants to call them that, one must nevertheless be aware that poetry and art are not essentially related to an existing person, since the contemplation of poetry and art, “joy over the beautiful,” is disinterested, and the observer is contemplatively outside himself qua existing person (KW XII, 313n).

Not least under the influence of Kant, the association between the aesthetic as such and disinterestedness had become widely accepted in Kierkegaard's milieu.¹⁴ Climacus's take on this association, in terms of one's being ‘contemplatively outside of oneself qua existing person’, is nicely captured also in the following from Joyce's *Portrait of An Artist as a Young Man*:

The feelings excited by improper art are kinetic, desire or loathing. Desire urges us to possess, to go to something; loathing urges us to abandon, to go from something. These are kinetic emotions. The arts which excite them, pornographical or didactic, are therefore improper arts. The esthetic emotion (I use the general term) is therefore static. The mind is arrested and raised above desire and loathing. (Joyce 2012 [1916]: 197)

In the view I think Joyce's artist shares with Climacus, art proper allows the observer to be “raised above desire and loathing”. But we should enter two caveats here. Firstly, the relevant idea of disinterestedness is not to be conflated with the idea of the non-sensuous. Given the root of “aesthetic” in *aesthesis*, it would approach an oxymoron to describe “the aesthetic emotion” as non-sensuous. This emotion is said to be “static”, I take it, not because it does not

¹³ I have addressed the question of the early Kierkegaard's response to Hegel's Socrates in Watts 2010.

¹⁴ For an historical overview, see Kreitman 2006.

excite the senses but because it does not excite our practical interests.¹⁵ (This is surely why in this connection Joyce's artist can place the pornographic in the same class as the didactic.¹⁶) Secondly, the idea of disinterestedness is also not to be conflated with the idea of one's being *un*interested or emotionally detached. To describe "the aesthetic emotion" as disinterested is not to deny that it is an emotion. Following Kant, in Climacus's view, the contrast is instead with any form of attention that directly engages one's interests as a temporally situated practical agent.

Some maintain that disinterestedness is the preserve of the aesthetic, narrowly construed in terms of the appreciation of art. While he agrees that it is "the highest pathos" in aesthetics (KW XII, 328), Climacus conceives of disinterestedness in a broader way: not as restricted to the gallery or concert hall but as the mode of attention that befits any subject-matter that does not essentially bear on existential questions, that is, questions concerning how to live and who to become. Thus, Climacus refers in the same breath to "the aesthetic" and "the intellectual", as general modes of human attention, defining both as disinterested: "the aesthetic and the intellectual are disinterested" (266-267). In this view, disinterestedness is closely associated with the ideal of objectivity and is the mode of attention required by studies in logic, for example, or metaphysics, no less than art criticism.¹⁷

As it emerges in Kierkegaard's writings, then, the idea of disinterestedness describes a mode of human attention that is appropriate for a wide domain of possible objects. But it is also characteristic of these writings to introduce in this connection an immediate note of caution and warning. At one point in *Either / Or*, for example, Kierkegaard's fictional "ethicist" admonishes himself not to get "carried away into the aesthetic-intellectual intoxication" in which he thinks his young friend, the aesthete, lives (KW IV, 16). Likewise, in *Postscript*, Climacus argues at length that, while there are important domains in which disinterestedness is perfectly fitting, a dangerous fantasy is involved in any posture in which this attitude is adopted wholesale, as a general outlook.¹⁸ As a temporally situated individual with a constitutive concern for one's own

¹⁵ A nice counterpoint to the example of pornography as improper art is provided by the remarkable discussion of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* in *Either / Or*, as a perfect aesthetic expression of "the sensuous", a paragon of "the musical-erotic" (see KW III Vol. 1, 45ff).

¹⁶ In the terms used by Kierkegaard's aesthete in *Either / Or*, we could make the same point by saying that the aesthetic pathos is *ecstatic*; that is, it transports us outside the temporal structure of our practical agency (see "Either / Or: An Ecstatic Lecture" in KW III Vol. 1, 38ff).

¹⁷ This is not to say that Kierkegaard's writings fail to recognize a distinction between aesthetics and, for example, metaphysics (on the contrary, this distinction is made explicitly: see e. g. KW III Vol. 1, 150). Rather, we should think of metaphysics, like aesthetics in the narrower sense, as sub-divisions within the sphere of disinterestedness, the sphere of the 'aesthetic-intellectual'.

¹⁸ Climacus's worry has antecedents in *The Concept of Irony*. In the background of this text, and the critical focus of its second part, is the ideal of a global aesthetic outlook, as celebrated in the writings of the Jena romantics and associated with certain kinds of irony. Thus, in the course of his critique of Schlegel's

existence, Climacus insists that it is impossible for a human being to fully inhabit the sphere of the aesthetic-intellectual. To try to do so, he thinks, could only lead to a kind of performative contradiction in which agents try to exercise their practical agency by evading the very conditions of such agency.¹⁹

These general worries about the dangers of losing oneself in disinterested contemplation find a particular focus in Kierkegaard's treatment of the problem of ethical exemplification. The problem is how it can be possible for a person to serve as an exemplar for an ethical ideal.²⁰ A central context for Kierkegaard's interest in this issue is no doubt the tradition of *imitatio Christi*, where the problem is how Christ, "the God-Man", could possibly serve as a prototype for us.²¹ But Kierkegaard also problematizes the issue of ethical exemplarity in a more general way, not least regarding what is involved in properly representing an ethical exemplar as such. A major part of this general problem is the risk of turning a putative exemplar into an object of mere *admiration*. Thus, Climacus:

One would think that, by telling the reader that this person and that person *actually* have done this and that (something great and remarkable), one would place the reader closer to wanting to do the same, to wanting to exist in the same, than by merely presenting it as possible. [However,] the fact that this person and that person actually have done this and that can just as well have a delaying as a motivating effect. The reader merely transforms the person who is being discussed (aided by his being an *actual* person) into the rare exception; he admires him and says: But I am too insignificant to do anything like that. Now, admiration can be very legitimate with respect to differences, but it is a total misunderstanding with regard to the universal. (KW XII, 358)

Lucinde, Kierkegaard writes: "Who would be so inhuman as not to be able to enjoy the free play of fantasy, but that does not imply that all of life should be abandoned to imaginative intuition. When fantasy alone gains the upper hand in this way, it exhausts and anaesthetizes the soul, robs it of all moral tension, makes life a dream" (KW II, 292 fn). While part of the worry here is evidently an ethical one, there is also arguably an internal dimension to Kierkegaard's critique of the Romantics in this regard: viz. the worry that if everything is aesthetic then nothing really is. Indeed, the very word "anaesthetizes" in the passage just cited contains the idea of that which is antithetical to the aesthetic (thanks to Oisín Keohane for drawing my attention to this word in this regard).

¹⁹ For the argument that disinterestedness leads "at its maximum" to a performative contradiction, see KW XII, 193-194. See also my "Kierkegaard on Truth: One or Many?", forthcoming in *Mind*.

²⁰ The "ethical" in "ethical exemplar" here should be understood in the broad sense of that which pertains to human flourishing and the human good. My use of this term therefore does not discriminate between ethical and religious exemplars. (Compare Kierkegaard's use of such locutions as, "ethical or ethical-religious" (e.g. KW XII, 198)).

²¹ See especially KW XX, Section VI.

This passage reflects Climacus's view that, in order for an ethical exemplar to function as such, the exemplar must serve to represent an ethical possibility *for me*, a way I could become. And he evidently thinks that this tells against any attempt to represent ethical exemplars, in writing or in speech, in the modality of actuality, by describing how the exemplary other has actually lived, what noble deeds he or she has actually performed and so forth. For, the worry is then that, far from serving to represent an ethical possibility *for me*, a way I could become just in virtue of being human, the putative exemplar will become for me (at best) merely an object of my admiration, an exceptional individual.

Climacus here gives us a reason to reject a certain picture of what is involved in representing an ethical exemplar. On this picture – we might call it the Blueprint Model – the first step is to represent the ideal as actually instantiated in the exemplar's behaviour. Using this representation as a standard, others can then try to live up to the ideal by copying the relevant features of the exemplary behaviour. Put in these terms, Climacus's worry is that, if we try to implement this model, we will never get beyond the first step since, even if we manage to latch onto the right ones from among the myriad features instantiated by any given slice of behaviour, we will become transfixed in contemplation of these features.²² The problem is then how it can be possible to represent, as such, a determinate ethical possibility in which agents have a live interest, one they could take up for themselves, open to them just in virtue of being human.

This problem is not just the worry that admiration is not the right way to relate to an ethical exemplar as such. There has been some debate among the critics about just how strongly Kierkegaard censures admiration in this regard.²³ On one view, he thinks that relating to ethical exemplars in a spirit of admiration could only be a form of moral evasion. Others argue that, while he is alive to this danger, we need not attribute to him a blanket prohibition on admiration in this context. Notably, both sides of this debate take it for granted that ethical exemplars can be given as such: the question at issue is how we should relate to them. In my view, however, the deeper problem is how in the first place ethical exemplars can be given as such: that is, how they can be given so that disinterested contemplation is *not* the appropriate response to them. For, it is difficult to see why contemplation and admiration should not be fitting responses to moral

²² Compare the picture of what is involved in the exemplification of rules that has been the target of critical discussion in the literature after Wittgenstein and Kripke on rule-following: the rule-follower first grasps one of the myriad rules instantiated in a finite set of examples which he or she then tries to follow. For a discussion, see my 2012.

²³ With special reference to *Fear and Trembling*, and the idea of Abraham as an exemplar of faith, contributions to this debate include Conway 2002; Cross 1994; Lippitt 2000; Lippitt 2003. *A propos* Kierkegaard's worries about admiration in the context of his critique of "Christian art", see also Gregor 2009; Kaftański 2016.

heroes represented as those whose deeds instantiate praiseworthy ideals. Since any such “still life” portrait of the moral hero will invite and sustain disinterestedness, the deeper worry is that it will be unfit to represent an ethical exemplar as such.

Now, from the perspective of traditional virtue ethics, there may appear to be a ready way to diffuse these concerns. This is simply the idea that the successful functioning of ethical exemplars is relative to an audience. If a given person has been brought up well – in Aristotle’s terms, if the person is at least familiar with “the *that*” of just and noble action if not also “the *because*” – then he or she will be appropriately attuned to further ethical teaching, including the teaching that involves the representation of exemplars (see *Nicomachean Ethics* 1095b2-13). In this perspective, an audience in which there has been formed over time “a kinship with virtue” (1179b30) will already be disposed to respond to represented exemplars not in a stance of disinterestedness but in a spirit of appropriate ethical sensitivity and interest.²⁴

With this Aristotelian tradition in mind, it is notable that Kierkegaard’s interest in the problem of ethical exemplarity has an historical dimension and involves a certain critique of modernity. On this critique, modern cultures display a systemic tendency away from any ethos of shared ideals and towards an orientation that is hyper-reflective, distanced, disengaged. In short, modern cultures tend pervasively towards the aesthetic-intellectual. On the memorable image developed in *Two Ages*, the default orientation of a modern culture, towards its heroes and ideals, is like the admiring audience of a highly controlled display of skillful ice skating. This audience is made up of those who, “with the air of connoisseurs”, pride themselves on their ability to discern the folly of anything involving any real daring (KW XIV, 72). For them, what in an earlier age might have been an “inspired venture” now gets transformed into an “acrobatic stunt” (*idem*). Such is the background against which Kierkegaard aims to reintroduce ethical exemplars as such. A journal entry indicates the centrality of this aim for his work in general:

With the aid of mediocrity's cheap dishonesty, Christendom has managed to lose the prototypes completely. We need to reintroduce the prototypes, make them recognizable, something that can be done only by: Either/Or. Either you have quality in common, or you are on another qualitative level – but not this ‘also – well, not quite, but nevertheless – also.’ (JP 2, 299)

²⁴ For a seminal discussion of this dimension of Aristotle’s ethics, see Burnyeat 1980.

In pursuing this aim, the aim to “reintroduce the prototypes”, Kierkegaard evidently takes it that he may not presuppose in his audience the ability to recognize ethical exemplars as such.

It is beyond my scope in this paper to provide a full account of Kierkegaard’s approach to the problem of ethical exemplification. But I believe that his early portrayal of Socrates needs to be understood as responsive to the problem of how to represent “the greatest master of irony” as an ethical exemplar, not least with a view to avoiding the pitfall of rendering Socrates merely an object of disinterested contemplation. Let me return, then, to *The Concept of Irony* and to the way this text takes up the problem of ethical exemplification.

III

The fifteenth, and final, formal thesis of Kierkegaard’s dissertation runs: “Just as philosophy begins with doubt, so also a life that may be called human begins with irony” (KW II, 6). In his Conclusion, Kierkegaard proceeds to defend the claim that “no properly human life is possible without irony” (326). He defends this claim on the grounds that, without irony, we are liable to vacillate between two ways of falling short of living a properly human life. Without irony, that is, we are liable to vacillate between a sort of restless absorption “in finitude” – in hum-drum worldly affairs – and, on the other hand, a self-forgetful preoccupation with abstract, impersonal questions of “science and scholarship” (idem). Inasmuch as these twin dangers are especially characteristic of modern life, Kierkegaard suggests that the need to recover a sense for irony is for us especially pressing.²⁵

How then are we to benefit from the humanizing effects of irony? Against the background also of his critique of modern, Romantic irony, advanced in Part Two of his dissertation, the overall shape of Kierkegaard’s answer seems clear. We need to go back to *Socrates* and recover, for ourselves and for our own time, a sense for the kind of irony he first exemplified in an archetypal way.²⁶

Plausibly, then, Kierkegaard’s dissertation is fundamentally shaped by the aim to reintroduce Socrates as an ethical exemplar. And this aim is in turn shaped by Kierkegaard’s dissatisfaction with what he regarded as a tendency in his own day to aestheticize Socrates and

²⁵ For a forceful defence of the ethical value of irony, with continual reference to Kierkegaard, see Lear 2003.

²⁶ “Concepts”, Kierkegaard declares in his Introduction, “just like individuals, have their history and are no more able than they to resist the dominion of time, but in and through it all they nevertheless harbor a kind of homesickness for the place of their birth.” (KW II, 9) Accordingly, we are to see how the concept of irony needs to be traced back to its place of birth, in the life of Socrates.

the concept of irony, as symptomized both by Hegel's account of the beautiful life of Socrates and by the aesthetic types of irony celebrated by the Jena Romantics. In its aim to reintroduce Socrates in this context, *The Concept of Irony* answers the call of J. G. Hamann's *Socratic Memorabilia*, a text that was surely formative for the early Kierkegaard. Hamann writes:

[T]here is an idol in the temple of learning which bears beneath its image the inscription, "The History of Philosophy," and which has not lacked for high priests ... [who] have provided us with ... masterpieces which might have been very much admired and sought after by learned connoisseurs of the arts, but on the other hand were secretly ridiculed by sensible people as fantastic growths and chimeras or were even imitated for the sake of whiling away the time, and in theatrical drawings. [What we need is someone who will] show us, instead of the paintings of philosophers or their decoratively mutilated busts, quite different creatures, and would imitate their customs and wise sayings, their didactic and heroic legends, in colours that would be more life-like. (Hamann 1967 [1759], 145-146)

Hamann's talk of the "decoratively mutilated busts" and "theatrical drawings" of standard histories of philosophy, offered as if only for learned connoisseurs of the arts, reverberates in Kierkegaard's claim that it was no "scholarly still life" to which Socrates devoted himself. And Hamann's call for an alternative sort of representation, such as one might actually live by, also finds its echo in Kierkegaard's dissertation. "[I]f our generation has any task at all", he declares in his Conclusion, "it must be to translate the achievement of scientific scholarship into personal life, to appropriate it personally" (KW II, 328).²⁷

How, then, is Kierkegaard's dissertation shaped by the aim to reintroduce Socrates as an ethical exemplar? We can begin to answer this question by underlining a striking, albeit often unremarked, feature of this text. This is its tendency to defeat our expectations of a scholarly dissertation.²⁸ We might naturally expect a scholarly discussion of a great philosopher to focus

²⁷ Compare Climacus: "If in our day thinking had not become something strange, something second-hand, thinkers would indeed make a totally different impression on people, as was the case in Greece, where a thinker was also an ardent existing person impassioned by his thinking" (KW XII, 308)

²⁸ In his journals, Kierkegaard draws attention to the stylistic idiosyncrasy of his dissertation: "The ease of style will be censured. One or another half-educated Hegelian robber will say that the subjective is too prominent. First of all, I will ask him not to plague me with a rehash of this new wisdom that I already regard as old ... [and reply] that one cannot write about a negative concept except in this way; and I ask him, instead of continually giving assurances that doubt is overcome, irony conquered, to permit it to speak for once" (KW II, 440-441). We may add that even the list of theses Kierkegaard chalks up at the

on the thinker's major doctrines, theories, conceptual innovations and the like. But it is one of the negative results of Kierkegaard's examination of the source material that what belongs to Socrates *cannot* be specified merely by reference to doctrines, theories and the like. This is not to deny that Socrates's thought can be partially represented by, for instance, the doctrine that it is better to be harmed than to harm. What Kierkegaard denies, rather, is that any such representation of the discursive contents of his thoughts and beliefs, however extensive, could be adequate to capture what essentially belongs to Socrates.²⁹ (There is a plausible contrast here with what essentially belongs, say, to Quine.)

Now, representations of doctrines, theories and the like are, paradigmatically, apt to sustain disinterested contemplation. But it is a feature of *The Concept of Irony* that its representations of Socrates often work to disturb any such attitude. Witness for example the following, being something of a purple passage:

Just as there is sometimes something deterring about irony, it likewise has something extraordinarily seductive and fascinating. Its masquerading and mysteriousness ... holds one prisoner in inextricable bonds... In this manner, there quietly develops in the individual [who has encountered irony] the disease that ... allows the individual to feel best when he is closest to disintegration. The ironist is the vampire who has sucked the blood of the lover and while doing so has fanned him cool, lulled him to sleep, and tormented him with troubled dreams. (49)

In these few lines, Kierkegaard conjures a host of familiar vampire motifs: viz. that which is mesmerizing, seductive, predatory, disintegrating, impotent, repressed, bloodless, dream-like, ambiguous, ambivalent. *The Concept of Irony* associates with Socrates three vampire-like qualities in particular. First, he elicits ambivalence in those who encounter him. Sensing that his self-presentations serve ultimately to conceal, his interlocutors typically find themselves, like Alcibiades, seduced into trying to detect the essence behind the appearance. But, *ex hypothesi*, the ironist never allows this desire to be satisfied, never fully discloses himself. Second, in his singular ability to detect aporias in his fellow Athenians' grasp of familiar ethical concepts,

beginning of his dissertation, as per the formal requirements of the degree for which it was submitted, are scarcely conventional *qua* scholarly theses (KW II, 4).

²⁹ This negative claim about Socrates is, I believe, at the heart of the early Kierkegaard's critical response to Hegel's portrait of Socrates as a would-be systematic philosopher. Thus, he complains that what is most wrong about Hegel's view is that it "does not accurately adhere to the direction of the trend in Socrates' life" (KW II, 235). On this, see Watts 2010.

Socrates drains the life-blood from the established ethical order. And third, rather as a vampire is neither exactly dead nor alive, Socrates is neither fully present in public life nor entirely absent from it. As an ironist, he never straightforwardly identifies himself with any particular *persona* but neither does he simply withdraw from public life. For, he must appear to others in certain ways in order to maintain ironic distance between his public *personae* and his inner life.

The Socrates-as-vampire motif is no passing fancy in Kierkegaard's dissertation. On the contrary, this text turns out to be awash with imagery that approaches horror. To mention two further examples: Socrates is the ferryman who "took people across from the fullness of life to the shadowy land of the underworld" (236); and Socrates leaves his victims suspended like Mohammed's coffin which, according to a European fable, since it was found unacceptable to both heaven and earth had to be suspended between the two by a magnet (48).

It is, then, a striking feature of the way Kierkegaard depicts Socrates in his dissertation that he makes liberal use of horror imagery. And we may note in general the way such imagery disturbs the attitude of disinterested contemplation. In his seminal work on the philosophy of horror, Noël Carroll argues that the kind of repulsion we feel when confronted with monstrous phenomena – detached but moving body parts, werewolves, zombies, vampires and the like – is a response to that which violates our settled categories of thought. Carroll writes:

That the works of horror are in some sense both attractive and repulsive is essential to an understanding of the genre. ... With great frequency [horror narratives] revolve around proving, disclosing, discovering, and confirming the existence of something that is impossible, something that defies standing conceptual schemes ... If what is of primary importance about horrific creatures is their very impossibility vis-à-vis our conceptual categories is what makes them function so compellingly in dramas of discovery and confirmation, then their disclosure, insofar as they are categorical violations, will be attached to some sense of disturbance, distress, and disgust. (Carroll 1990, 160)

Now, I take it that it does not follow from Carroll's analysis that works of horror are "improper art" in the sense in which Joyce's artist thinks of pornography and didactic stories as improper art. Horror imagery is not wholly inimical to disinterestedness: rather, it disturbs this attitude, so to speak, from within. Horror images both invite but also, in a particular way, repel an aesthetic-

intellectual stance: by confronting us with “categorical violations”, they fascinate us and grip our attention while also making us recoil in “disturbance, distress, and disgust”.³⁰

Using a geometrical analogy, we might think of works of horror in this regard as ‘limiting cases’ of disinterested representation. That is, on analogy with the way that parabolas and circles are limiting cases of the ellipse, for example, works of horror might be situated at the limits of what can qualify as disinterested representation. On this conception, if still life paintings, say, or classical busts are paradigm cases of that which lies within the sphere of the aesthetic-intellectual, works of horror lie at the boundary of this sphere. By volatilizing our standard schemes of disinterested representation, pushing these to their limits, works of horror explore the limits of such representation and bring them into relief.³¹

My suggestion, then, is that Kierkegaard’s use of horror imagery attests to his aim to represent Socrates in ways that also represent limits to the sphere of disinterestedness. The preference he expresses for Aristophanes’ caricature of Socrates points, I think, in the same direction.³² For, the art of caricature may be regarded as another limiting case of disinterested representation. Consider in this connection the way that, unlike a realistic portrait which is self-effacing with respect to what it portrays, a caricature represents by distorting its subject-matter, making play of its status as a picture and producing a comic effect. From this perspective, Kierkegaard’s preference for Aristophanes’ satirical portrait attests to his view that Socrates *can* be represented as an ironist, but only by representations that draw attention to their own status as such and begin to disturb the attitude of contemplation.

This suggestion also illuminates Kierkegaard’s own ironical pursuit of a *via negationis* towards Socrates, as one who, in Carroll’s phrase, ‘defies standing conceptual schemes’.³³ For, again, the portrait that Kierkegaard produces by this means can be regarded as a limiting case of disinterested representation. In this perspective, Kierkegaard’s portrayal of Socrates, which

³⁰ In this regard, horror manifests some of the features of the Kantian sublime. When experiencing phenomena such as overhanging cliffs, thunderclouds, volcanoes and hurricanes, Kant thinks we experience “a movement of the mind” which “may be compared to a vibration, i.e. to a rapidly alternating repulsion from and attraction to one and the same object” (Kant 2000 [1790], 141).

³¹ Compare the discussion, in *Stages on Life’s Way*, of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* as a work that pushes the genre of tragedy to its limits in the way it borders on the religious (KW XI, 452ff).

³² Number VII of Kierkegaard’s formal list of theses has it that “Aristophanes has come very close to the truth in his depiction of Socrates” (KW II, 4). On Kierkegaard’s interest in literary caricatures more generally, see Watts 2016.

³³ The idea of phenomena that disrupt standing conceptual schemes is already indicated in the very first lines of Kierkegaard’s dissertation which figures philosophers as “knights of the Idea” who ride out to seize hold of elusive phenomena. In this chivalric adventure, Kierkegaard observes, “one sometimes hears too much the jingling of spurs and the voice of the master” (KW II, 9).

presses the idea of an ironist to the point of paradox, is designed to draw attention to its own limits *qua* disinterested portrayal.

Now, all of this is liable to leave some readers of Kierkegaard impatient, if not exasperated. For, what could be gained by any approach to the historical Socrates other than one that tries, so far as possible, to provide a perspicuous, objective, disinterested account of his life and thought? This sort of challenge is in my view an important one, having deep roots in certain ways of being committed to the ideals of truthfulness and clarity. But I submit that the challenge can be answered in a convincing way by the following considerations.

Firstly, though they are undeniably creative, Kierkegaard's representations of Socrates by no means float free from constraints of historical fidelity. They are not, in Kofman's titular phrase, mere "fictions of a philosopher". On the contrary, Kierkegaard works hard to ground his approach to Socrates in the historical resources at his disposal. And, for all the playfulness of his *via negationis*, he offers sober reasons – clear, well-grounded, conscientious reasons – for thinking that, since what belongs to Socrates cannot be specified by reference to doctrines, theories and the like, his life and thought requires a different approach.³⁴ Likewise, he gives us genuine reasons, based on his close readings of the source material, to dispute any account of Socratic irony merely as a trope or conversational ruse, meant to trick others into have their views refuted.³⁵ Thus, Kierkegaard's own use of irony by no means entails that his portrayal of Socrates is without serious intent, so much hot air. (Climacus will acerbically remark that that the presence of irony excludes earnestness is assumed only by "assistant professors"! (KW XII, 277))

But secondly—and this is the point I want to emphasize here—Kierkegaard's approach needs also to be understood against the background of his aim to reintroduce Socrates as an ethical exemplar. Consider again the Blueprint Model we introduced above. On this model, to recall, one takes the behaviour of another as a blueprint, where this behaviour is represented as such as to actually instantiate an ethical ideal. For the reasons Kierkegaard gives in his dissertation, this model is especially problematic if we try to apply it to the case of Socrates, as one who left no written record and who inspired portraits that are difficult to reconcile but which together attest, on any account, to his elusiveness. However, we are now in a position to

³⁴ We may note in this connection a striking observation that Kierkegaard made in his papers, reflecting on his dissertation: "I have worked on this dissertation in fear and trembling", he writes, "lest my dialectic swallow up too much" (KW II, 440).

³⁵ As I have argued in Watts 2010, Kierkegaard gives us compelling reasons to reject, for example, Richard Robinson's identification of Socratic irony with the "Socratic slyness" which consists in deceptively subjecting the views of others to elenctic examination (Robinson 1971, 80).

see how *The Concept of Irony* may apply a different model of ethical exemplification. On this alternative model, the aim is to represent the exemplar in a way that, while sufficiently determinate to make salient a concrete ethical possibility, also works to disrupt disinterestedness. Such representations can be designed to help make possible a process of “appropriation”, in which a person takes up for herself the ethical possibility they serve to make salient.

Conceived in this way, Kierkegaard’s approach relies on the possibility of an alternative to the Blueprint Model that can also be distinguished from the view that representations of ethical exemplars are entirely devoid of ethical content. On this latter, more extreme view, all ethical exemplars are, as such, on a par: there can be no way of discriminating an exemplar for irony from an exemplar for courage, say, or temperance or patience.³⁶ By contrast, on the interpretation I am proposing, Kierkegaard holds that the irony for which Socrates can serve as an exemplar is a determinate ethical possibility, distinct from other ethical possibilities. Crucially, however, this is not to concede to the Blueprint Model that the determinacy of the ethical possibilities for which others can serve as exemplars can be represented in the modality of actuality and grasped in a purely disinterested way.

It is also salutary that, on this interpretation of Kierkegaard, relating to an ethical exemplar as such is no mere matter of behaviour, no mere matter of stimulus-response, but involves *thinking*. It follows that, in Kierkegaard’s view, thinking cannot be purely a matter of disinterested contemplation. And, indeed, on the conception of “the existing thinker” we find worked out in *Postscript*, and associated there above all with Socrates, there is a kind of thinking that is not purely disinterested. This is the thinking that Climacus describes in terms of “double-reflection”, in which one’s thinking about the universally human is always disciplined by reflection on the limits of the aesthetic-intellectual and by reflecting back on the question of how one concretely stands in relation to the objects of one’s thoughts. Plausibly, it is part of Kierkegaard’s aim, already in his dissertation, to make room for a kind of thinking about Socrates that is disciplined in these ways.³⁷

Two major questions remain about Kierkegaard’s model of ethical exemplification. Firstly, what exactly is the role therein for what I have called “limiting cases” of disinterested representation? And secondly, how on this model are we to understand the process of taking up

³⁶ Certain lines in Nietzsche appear to lead in this direction of an account of ethical exemplars in which their role is purely formal, such as in no wise to communicate determinate ethical possibilities but merely to bring to awareness one’s own repressed knowledge of one’s “higher self”. For a development of Nietzsche’s thought in this direction, see Conant 2000, especially p. 206ff.

³⁷ On the notion of double-reflection, see especially KW XII, 73; 87; 629-30. For a fuller account of this notion see Watts 2013 and Watts 2016.

the challenge presented by an ethical exemplar, i. e. the process of “appropriation”? While I shall not attempt here a full answer to these questions, I offer the following remarks in closing.

I have suggested that, in his approach to Socrates, Kierkegaard aims to disturb the attitude of contemplation and to do so from within, by deploying limiting cases of disinterested representation. I have not claimed, however, that such representations are by themselves supposed to be sufficient to impel us to take up Socrates as an ethical exemplar. That hardly seems likely. While Kierkegaard’s Socrates-as-vampire motif may help to disturb the attitude of contemplation it is surely not going to somehow catapult us into ethical appropriation.³⁸ Rather, I submit, the function of such imagery is to help to bring into relief the sphere of disinterestedness as a limited domain, by pointing both to what lies within and to what lies outside of this limit (on analogy with the way that e. g. a parabola points both to that which is and that which is not an ellipse).³⁹ So conceived, such representations can plausibly play a valuable, albeit restricted role, by bringing to our attention just *how* we are oriented towards a matter when we are oriented to it in a purely disinterested way. Plausibly, such attention is an important part of what is involved in the doubly-reflected thinking of “the existing thinker”.

Turning to what Climacus will call “the pathos of appropriation” (KW XII, 609), one thing is clear: in Kierkegaard’s conception, appropriation is no mere matter of *copying*.⁴⁰ To appropriate an ethical exemplar is not to try to mimic some actual piece of behaviour. As Kierkegaard presents it in the Conclusion to his dissertation, taking up Socrates as an exemplar for irony will instead mean trying to find one’s own way, for one’s own context, to counteract the twin dangers he outlines: the tendency to lose oneself either in quotidian affairs or in abstractions. In this, Kierkegaard evidently thinks that a confrontation with Socrates can help us,

³⁸ Compare Mooney: “If the aim of Kierkegaard’s and Climacus’s writing is to effect a change in selves, then good writing, direct and indirect, can minister or pave the way, but it cannot deliver the goods” (Mooney 1997, 146). While I am in sympathy with Mooney on this point, my interest here is on the problem of how it can even be possible for writing – especially writing about Socrates – to “pave the way” for lived ethical appropriation.

³⁹ Compare Kant’s discussion, in his *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, of the difference between two general conceptions of a limit: as limitation and as boundary. Using examples of limiting cases, Kant argues that, by contrast with the merely negative notion of a limitation – as in for example the limited capacity of a container – a boundary has a positive character by virtue of sharing features both with entities within the domain it bounds and also with what lies beyond (see Kant 2004 [1783], 104ff).

⁴⁰ Compare Plato’s contrast between a human craftsman who models his own production on a temporal paradigm and the divine Demiurge who looks to the eternal paradigm (see *Timaeus* 28a6-b2). Arguably, part of Plato’s contrast here is that the eternal paradigm could not be the sort of model that the Demiurge works from by *copying* it (see Broadie 2011, 69-70). In Kierkegaard’s view, ethical appropriation perhaps requires us – as beings who exist in temporal-eternal synthesis – to be more like Plato’s divine Demiurge in this regard, less like the producer who makes copies from material things.

by functioning for us as an unsettling challenge, apt to disturb both the worldliness of our mundane involvements and the unworldliness of our purely aesthetic-intellectual pursuits.

I think we may therefore attribute to Kierkegaard the view that, for an ethical exemplar to function as such, it needs to be treated not as a blueprint, to be copied, but as a determinately unsettling challenge, to be confronted.⁴¹ More no doubt needs to be said to make this contrast precise. But the following analogy, drawn from the sphere of aesthetics, may help to bring it out.

Consider the artist who confronts the ideas inscribed in her art-historical tradition and renders these ideas anew in her own work. Picasso, for example, is known to have made over two hundred variations in different media of Manet's *Le Déjeuner Sur l'herbe*, a work which itself radically challenged the tradition by (inter alia) discovering new possibilities latent in an etching of Raphael's drawing, *The Judgement of Paris*, which in turn appropriates a relief sculpture found on two ancient Roman sarcophagi. Upon viewing the Manet for the third time, Picasso is said to have written on the back of an envelope: "When I see Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* I say to myself: trouble for later on!" (cited in Cowling & Goldring 1994, 37). There is no question here of mere copying. Picasso regards his artistic tradition not as a fixed actuality, to be simply continued or broken with, but as an unsettling challenge, one he is fated to keep on retrieving.

Kierkegaard, I submit, thinks that Socrates can function for us as an ethical exemplar in an analogous way: as an unsettling challenge to be confronted, and confronted again, for one's own time and context.

IV

In conclusion, let me return to the difficulty with which I began, the problem of Kierkegaard's Socrates. The difficulty is how to make sense of Kierkegaard's apparent view that Socrates can serve as an exemplar for irony but that he cannot be represented as such. With reference to *The Concept of Irony*, I have argued that the *prima facie* evidence therein that Kierkegaard holds that Socrates cannot be represented as an exemplar for irony is best construed as evidence for the significantly qualified thesis:

B* Kierkegaard holds that, as an exemplar for irony, Socrates cannot be represented *in a purely disinterested way*.

⁴¹ As Climacus puts it, "The thinker must present the human ideal ... as an ethical requirement, as a challenge to the recipient to exist in it" (KW XII, 1.358).

We have seen that Kierkegaard is well aware of the self-referential incoherence of any attempt to represent Socrates as unrepresentable *simpliciter*. But, on the reading we have developed, he nonetheless deploys the paradox of the radical ironist for a particular purpose: in order to represent Socrates in a way that disturbs disinterestedness and draws attention to the limits of disinterested representation. With reference also to his use of horror imagery and his express preference for Aristophanes' satirical portrayal of Socrates, I have tried to bring out Kierkegaard's special interest in 'limiting cases' of disinterested representation, as ways of bringing into relief the limited domain of the aesthetic-intellectual as such.

We have seen that Kierkegaard's approach in this regard is grounded both in considerations that are unique to the case of Socrates and in general considerations about ethical exemplification. Jointly, these considerations allow us to conclude that, far from being at odds with his view that Socrates can serve as an exemplar, his view that Socrates's irony is not apt to be represented in a purely disinterested way is an important part of Kierkegaard's conception of what it means properly to represent Socrates as an ethical exemplar. Kierkegaard holds that Socrates *can* be represented as an exemplar for irony, albeit not without disturbing the attitude of disinterested contemplation. And he holds that certain representations of Socrates can help to make it possible for us to appropriate for ourselves the ethical value of Socratic irony, though this will be quite unlike following a blueprint.

As I hope to have made plausible, his very insistence that Socrates's life was no "scholarly still life" reflects Kierkegaard's aim to bring into view "the master of irony", not as a mere object of contemplation but as an ethical exemplar. But one may harbour a lingering worry. For, have I not in this paper represented Kierkegaard's portrayal of Socrates in a merely disinterested way? But is it not true that, in taking Socrates for his model, Kierkegaard aimed to ensure that his own work defies any such representation? While it has not been part of my aim here to represent anything as an ethical exemplar, I do not deny the force of this worry. The truth it reveals is that scholarly articles, such as the present one, could never substitute for an engagement with primary texts of the sort Kierkegaard has bequeathed us, texts whose own aims are always more than merely scholarly.⁴²

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