Praise for *Socrates Meets*

"How Peter Kreeft finds the time to write so many helpful books is beyond me. How he manages to fill them with such sensible wisdom is known to God alone. The *Socrates Meets* series is just further proof that we are witnessing something special."

—**Fr. Gregory Pine**, OP, the Dominican House of Studies

"Peter Kreeft's writing exhibits wit and erudition, but these qualities alone would not be enough to pull off the ambition of these texts: to explore major historical thinkers by putting each in dialogue with Socrates. A flexible and generous interpreter, Kreeft's imagined conversations allow each thinker to speak for himself, while inviting the reader to participate in the dialectical questioning that draws out the ideas, appreciating their motivations and historical context, and, as often as not, putting them under gentle but critical scrutiny. Kreeft is above all a sensitive reader of texts, and he has composed works that invite new readers to learn how to think alongside, and in critical engagement with, many of modernity's most influential minds."

—**Joshua Hochschild**, Professor of Philosophy, Mount St. Mary's University

"In this brilliant series, Peter Kreeft, like a modern-day Virgil, guides us into corners of purgatory where the father of philosophy, Socrates, instigates conversations with eight of the most provocative minds in Western history. We are in Kreeft's debt for reminding us that philosophy is not essentially a college or university subject, a strange if not grotesque discipline we undergo in pursuit of a degree, but live mind encountering live mind in live conversation in pursuit of truth—and that the most fruitful conversations are often with the live minds of the dead. The humor and plainspokenness of this series make it ideal for beginning students of philosophy, whether in formal courses or in independent study, but the intellectual vigor of these dialogues will remind even the most seasoned thinkers that a bracing engagement with

Socratic questioning is the best way to shake up the complacency that too often obstructs the quest for wisdom."

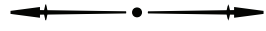
—**Daniel McInerny**, Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Philosophy, Christendom College, and author of *Beauty & Imitation: A Philosophical Reflection on the Arts*

"Among the most formative influences on my development as a philosopher has been Peter Kreeft. When I first encountered his work when I was in college I could not believe that someone could make philosophy so accessible and so alive. Although I never took a formal class from Professor Kreeft, I have been a student of his for many decades. Through *The Unaborted Socrates* I was persuaded to embrace a sanctity of life ethic; through *The Best Things In Life* I was taught how to think about virtue, vice, intrinsic goodness, and practical Thomism (though the genius of Kreeft is that he never explicitly tells you he's doing that). Later, when I was journeying back to the Church, it was Kreeft's explication of the *Catechism* and his commentary on Aquinas' *Summa theologiae* that helped me to see how Catholicism made sense and that much of what I believed as a lapsed-Catholic Evangelical was an inheritance from Rome and not something I had discovered by exercising my rational powers on Scripture alone. I thought I had hit a triple, but Kreeft showed me that I had been born at third base. What you will encounter in this series of cross-examinations of the world's most important modern philosophers is Kreeft at his best. Through the character of Socrates and his famous interlocutors, you are introduced to some of the most influential and difficult thought in the history of philosophy, but in a way that requires no prior philosophical background. In the hands of this master teacher, you will come to appreciate both the strengths and the weaknesses of these towering figures and how the intellectual tradition of the Church ought to engage them."

—**Francis J. Beckwith**, Professor of Philosophy and Associate Director of Graduate Studies in Philosophy, Baylor University

SOCRATES MEETS KIERKEGAARD

SOCRATES MEETS KIERKEGAARD



THE FATHER OF PHILOSOPHY CROSS-EXAMINES THE FATHER OF CHRISTIAN EXISTENTIALISM

PETER KREEFT

WORD on FIRE

Published by Word on Fire, Elk Grove Village, IL 60007

Printed in the United States of America

Cover design, typesetting, and interior art direction by Rozann Lee and Cassie Bielak, Clark Kenyon, and Nicolas Fredrickson

Illustrations by Peter Voth

Quotations taken from Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments, or, A Fragment of Philosophy*, trans. Howard V. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1962).

First edition published 2014 by St. Augustine's Press
Second edition 2025

ISBN: 978-1-68578-162-0

Library of Congress Control Number: 2024945257

Contents

Preface

This book is one in a series of Socratic explorations of some of the Great Books. Books in this series are intended to be short, clear, and nontechnical, thus fully understandable by beginners. They also introduce (or review) the basic questions in the fundamental divisions of philosophy: metaphysics, epistemology, anthropology, ethics, logic, and method. They are designed both for classroom use and for educational do-it-yourselfers. The *Socrates Meets* books can be read and understood completely on their own, but each is best appreciated after reading the little classic it engages in dialogue.

The setting—Socrates and the author of the Great Book meeting in the afterlife—need not deter readers who do not believe there is an afterlife. For although the two characters and their philosophies are historically real, their conversation, of course, is not and requires a "willing suspension of disbelief." There is no reason the skeptic cannot extend this literary belief also to the setting.

Introduction

Emerson defined philosophy in one word: "Plato is philosophy, and philosophy, Plato." Whitehead summarized the whole history of philosophy as "footnotes to Plato." Plato was the first philosopher with a complete system and the first philosopher from whom we have complete books. He was also the first to write dialogues and the first to combine the talents of a logical thinker with those of a poet, dramatist, and psychologist. That is not surprising; what is surprising is that he was also the last. For over two thousand years, no one has rivaled him in combining intelligence with imagination, truth with beauty, philosophy with poetry, the objective with the subjective.

Except perhaps one: Søren Kierkegaard (SK).

No philosopher since Augustine had more strings to his bow than SK. He wrote from many points of view, in many literary styles, about many topics (not all of them traditional philosophical topics). He should have written novels or plays, for he turned himself into a different character every time he wrote a new book. I know of no philosopher who has ever exceeded the quantity, quality, *and* variety of his output in such a short time.

And out of it all shone forth the three most important qualities we want in any writing, in fact in any human work of art: truth, goodness, and beauty; intelligence, holiness, and charm. Who since Augustine has better combined all three? (C.S. Lewis, perhaps; who else?) And these three are the three greatest things in the world, the only three things that never get boring, and that everyone desires, with the very deepest desires of the heart, in unlimited quantity.

Yet this amazing variety in SK had a tight and total unity. To the despair of his secular admirers, he explicitly identified his

vocation as a kind of undercover missionary. He said that the ultimate task of every sentence he ever wrote was the exploration of "what it means to become a Christian." His many means to this single end were very varied, and constituted a kind of end run around both deductive and inductive logic into a *seductive* logic, which he called "indirect communication." It is the strategy of the novelist or playwright: to show rather than to tell.

Out of the embarrassment of riches that SK left for us, I have deliberately selected two short chapters from one short book, *Philosophical Fragments*, for two reasons. The first is because I think if SK had been asked to select just one thing he would want all philosophers to read, this would be it. At issue is the fundamental step from philosophy to religion, and that step beyond itself is the most important step philosophical reason could take, he thought.

The second reason is that these two chapters constitute the most profound philosophical comparison I have ever read between the two most important men who ever lived, Socrates and Jesus.

I wrote another book, a few millennia ago, called *Socrates Meets Jesus*, but the title was misleading. Physically, Socrates met only some students and professors at Have It Divinity School, who were on the way either to or from Christianity. Nobody can write fiction about Jesus himself that is not embarrassingly silly. The figure of the Gospels simply dwarfs the greatest human imagination. And that, in the last analysis, is precisely SK's argument for believing him. (It is the argument at the end of both of these two chapters.) In the book you are now reading, Socrates meets not Jesus but Jesus' philosophical missionary, SK, who was also the one philosopher who explicitly modeled himself on Socrates himself in order to inveigle disciples of Socrates into becoming disciples of Christ. The following little drama tests how successful he would have been with Socrates himself.

Just who is questioning whom in this dialogue is the question behind all the questions, just as it is in the Gospels, when Jesus, every time anyone questions him, always turns the situation

around somehow so that the questioner is the one questioned. It is exactly what his Father always did whenever he appeared in the Old Testament (e.g., the burning bush dialogue in Exodus 3). Like Father, like Son.

In these two chapters, SK performs the imaginative thought experiment of casting Christianity into the two most important pagan thought-forms familiar to Socrates: philosophy and mythology. SK knows very well that Christianity is neither a philosophy nor a myth. But these are the two disarming "covers" for his mission. Instead of preaching, he philosophizes and mythologizes; he reasons and story-tells. Both are exercises in creative imagination, fantasies, thought experiments, "what-ifs."

This book does not try to summarize all of SK's main themes. The reader needs to know only two of them to appreciate the two chapters that are discussed.

The first is that all of it is about "subjectivity," or subject-hood, or self-hood, or I-ness, or personhood, that new category brought into prominence by all the "existentialists," however great their differences.

The second is that the fundamental structural outline of all of SK's work is the classification of human existence under three possible "stages on life's way" or "points of view" (perspectives)—namely, (1) the "aesthetic," whose fundamental categories are pleasure and pain, the interesting and the boring; (2) the "ethical," whose fundamental categories are rational good and evil, right and wrong; and (3) the "religious," whose fundamental categories are faith and sin, the two possible relationships to God, positive and negative.

SK's "point of view" or "stage on life's way" in this book is halfway between the philosophical-ethical-rational-secular and the religious. To signify this, he signs this book not "Søren Kierkegaard" but "Johannes Climacus" (John the Climber, a medieval mystical figure) because he pictures himself (or the imagined author of this book) as climbing from the second of his "three stages" to the

third, from the "ethical" (and rational and philosophical) to the religious. But he also adds, "Responsible for Publication: Søren Kierkegaard," to signify that he himself stands in the religious stage addressing and judging the ethical-rational-philosophical as an object rather than vice versa, even though in the text of the book he seems to do the exact opposite: he seems to take the point of view of the outside inquirer into Christianity, the point of view of the rational philosopher or the imaginative myth-maker. It is an irony similar to the one Jesus typically entered into in the Gospels: the one who is apparently questioned is really the questioner, and vice versa. That is also the irony in the dialogues of Socrates, who teaches by assuming the role of the questioning student.

But SK tells us in his preface *not* to ask the question he foresaw all subsequent scholars would ask about this book—namely, to what extent does it reflect SK's own point of view—but to ask the only important question: What is *true*? "But what is my personal opinion," SK asks, "of the matters herein discussed? I could wish that no one would ask me this question; for next to knowing whether I have any opinion or not, nothing could very well be of less importance to another than the knowledge of what that opinion might be." He has to trick us out of our self-trickery by which we avoid the question God is actually posing to us at the present moment—"Do *you* believe this is true?"—and by which we divert our passion to the impersonal scholarly question "Did *SK* believe it?" Very tricky, he is. Like Jesus.

Philosophy and religion have been mankind's two most ambitious undertakings, and the most interesting—if by "philosophy" is meant what the Greeks meant by it, namely, the love of wisdom, rather than what many moderns mean by it, namely, the cultivation of cleverness. SK's *Philosophical Fragments* is about the relation between these two things, between philosophy and religion, between reason and faith, between Socrates and Jesus, and about the unbridgeable gap between the two; and about the infinite existential priority of the second.

The essential claim of Christianity SK calls "the absolute paradox," which is Christ himself, God-become-man, eternity-become-temporal, that-which-has-no-beginning becoming that-which-had-a-beginning. A paradox is an apparent contradiction, an apparent impossibility. SK was not so muddleheaded as to believe that it was a real contradiction, for that is a literally meaningless concept. But he did believe that this paradox forever remained opaque and mysterious to man, and could never be proved or made transparent to human reason, as most other paradoxes can.

The Church Fathers believed the same thing: they called it a "mystery," whose inner light always shines both out of and into a darkness. However much we explore this mystery, however much we expand the light (which is what SK himself does in this book), the darkness always expands with it. If human reason, and philosophy, is to be the *ancilla theologiae*, the handmaid and servant of divinely revealed theology, and not usurp it, its primary object must always remain beyond its capacity. Its last word about itself must be the word Aquinas used to describe his *Summa theologiae*: "straw." God always speaks "out of the whirlwind," as he spoke to Job, or out of the two pillars by which he appeared to Israel in the desert: the dark pillar of cloud and the blinding pillar of fire.

Yet philosophy remains the second greatest thing in the world; and Socrates remains, in SK's opinion, the very greatest of all philosophers; and "between man and man the Socratic relationship is the highest." Aquinas had the same opinion of Socrates (*ST* 3.42.4).

Religion is higher than philosophy because God does more than any man can do. Man can *lead* us to truth, but God *brings* us truth, *gives* us truth, because he gives us himself and God *is* truth, and you can't give what you don't have. That is SK's essential point in this book.

SK explicitly says in his preface that "the present offering . . . does not make the slightest pretension to share in the

philosophical movement of the day." Yet the central question in the philosophy of religion that this book addresses was being addressed, and answered wrongly, by all the influential philosophers of SK's day; so this book does impact "the philosophical movement of the day." And since the issue, and the sides, are the same today as they were in SK's day, this book very much impacts today, as it impacted the generations between SK and today—for example, by inspiring Karl Barth's "neo-orthodoxy" in reaction to the modernism or liberal theology represented by SK's opponents, especially Kant, Schleiermacher, and Hegel.

In 1793, Kant, in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, reduced the Gospel to a historically relative temporal expression of what he thought of as the essence of religion—namely, the timeless principles of rational morality. The historical truths of the Incarnation, Atonement, and Resurrection are not essential, then, and are lowered to what Kant calls "dogmatic" and cultic religion. SK takes exactly the opposite position: that the ultimate truth is precisely the historical Christ, eternal-truth-in-*time*, and all of our philosophical, rational, and ethical principles must bow before Christ, not vice versa.

Schleiermacher reduced religion not to reason, as Kant did, but to feeling. But for him also, the historical events in the Gospels are not essential, because religious feeling, or God-consciousness, is to be found in all men by nature, so that, as with Kant, no supernatural irruption or interruption is needed. Christ only had more of this religious feeling, and more perfectly, than we do, exactly as in Buddhism all men are already-enlightened Buddhas but Gotama the Buddha ("the man who woke up") was the one who realized this awakened-consciousness more perfectly than anyone else.

This brings us to Hegel, who in SK's day was to philosophy what Babe Ruth was to baseball in 1927. For Hegel, Christianity was merely an imperfect form of true philosophy (Hegel's philosophy, of course): imperfect because less abstract and

conceptual. So no *historical* revelation could ever bring anything absolutely new.

All three of these philosophers really go back to Plato and his theory of "recollection": that all men by nature possess the highest truth, but have "forgotten" it. For Plato, the way to "re-collect" or remember it is the Socratic method. For Kant, it is moral conscience. For Schleiermacher, it is religious feeling. For Hegel it is the conceptual dialectic of his system. For all of them it is—and this is the simplest way to state the essential issue—naturalism versus SK's supernaturalism. The very last thing any of these "Enlightenment" thinkers would allow is a miracle. "No miracles allowed here!" was the inscription on the contraceptive they put on God, or on mankind (really "womankind"), to prevent us from getting pregnant with any supernatural life. In this book, SK simply asks the question: what if there are cracks in this contraceptive?

(Socrates, however, not only allowed for miracles but actually lived an ongoing miracle in his unquestioned faith in the "divine voice" which directed him down surprising, unpredictable, and ultimately fatal roads—as it did to Christ.)

1

The Meeting

KIERKEGAARD: I knew it! I knew it would happen that way: the moment I withdrew the last check from the bank—the very last cent of my inheritance from my father—I died.

Just like the grandfather clock that "stopped short, never to go again, when the old man died." I am like that clock, and the money was like the old man. It was my "old man's" money, after all! Well, I am not at all surprised to find that God has a perfect sense of irony.

However, I *am* surprised at my surroundings. Surely this is not quite bright enough for heaven, nor gloomy enough for hell.

SOCRATES: "Not bright enough for heaven nor gloomy enough for hell"—that's not a bad description of your own writings, you know, O melancholy Dane.

KIERKEGAARD: You know me, Sir? Then—is this heaven indeed?

SOCRATES: The beginning of it. You would call it purgatory if you were a Catholic. But you didn't have enough time to finish that journey on earth, though you were beginning to move in that direction through your love of their saints and monks and mystics.

KIERKEGAARD: If you are from heaven, Sir, why do you look more like a deformed frog than an angel? Everyone in heaven should be beautiful, but you are the ugliest man I have ever seen.

SOCRATES: "It takes one to know one," as they say. You hardly cut a dashing figure in Copenhagen yourself. You looked like Ichabod Crane with a hunchback, something from a Charles Addams cartoon. Old women warned their children and grandchildren about you.

KIERKEGAARD: Granted, I lacked beauty. But heaven does not. So how can *you* be a messenger from heaven?

SOCRATES: Because beauty—or rather the ability to see it—is in the eye of the beholder.

KIERKEGAARD: How should I see you, then?

SOCRATES: As I see myself.

KIERKEGAARD: And how is that?

SOCRATES: I see my ugliness as a kind of beauty: the beauty of a perfect joke.

A dark soul in a body full of light would be no joke. For an ugly soul in a beautiful body would make even its body ugly, to eyes that truly see. But what about a beautiful soul in an ugly body? The perfect irony for a philosopher. If God had given me a handsome body, like Plato's or Aristotle's, I would have been just another philosopher. As it is, I am his walking joke. A great privilege, it is, to be his walking joke. But to appreciate any joke you have to have the right sense of humor, of course. I had rather hoped that you would qualify on that score.

KIERKEGAARD: Why?

SOCRATES: For three reasons. First, you wrote more truly witty lines than any philosopher in history. Second, I thought you

would understand me, since you rather idealized me when you wrote of me on earth. Third, I thought I had infected you with a little bit of my irony. You did write some profound things about irony.

KIERKEGAARD: Socrates! It is you indeed, then? In the flesh?

SOCRATES: "Flesh," you say? Hmm . . . that term clearly needs to be defined. But that is not my task today. I am here not to do my own thing, as they say, but to fulfill a task assigned to both of us by higher and wiser Authorities. We are here to discuss one of your books—in fact, the one that is most directly about me, your *Philosophical Fragments*. You are to endure one of my cross-examinations.

KIERKEGAARD: Then this cannot be purgatory, for that would be pure pleasure to me.

SOCRATES: We shall see, we shall see. Perhaps both of those propositions are half-truths.

KIERKEGAARD: What do you mean?

SOCRATES: Perhaps this is purgatory as well as heaven, and perhaps purgatory is the pure pleasure of finally discovering the truth as well as the pain of abject humiliation in its light.

KIERKEGAARD: My greatest pleasure will be to pursue the truth wherever it may be found, no matter how much pain and humiliation it may cause me, just as this was *your* greatest pleasure on earth, I think. I am ready to be refuted. I wrote once, you know, that every sentence I have ever written may well turn out to be wrong, except one: that God is love.

SOCRATES: That was the wisest sentence you ever wrote. But for that sentence . . . But I am reminded of a similar sentence you once wrote about Hegel: that had he only added one single sentence to his voluminous philosophical works, he may have been justly regarded as the greatest thinker of all time, but because of the lack of that sentence he could only be regarded as a comic figure and a fool. The sentence was . . .

KIERKEGAARD: I remember: "Everything I have ever written is only a joke."

SOCRATES: That was a beautiful combination of the serious and the humorous. I could hardly have done better myself. I am tempted to plagiarize it, but the author of this book, a philosophy professor on earth, already plagiarized it in making me utter it about another thinker whom I have recently cross-examined, an absurd man named Freud.

KIERKEGAARD: Are we both merely characters in someone else's book?

SOCRATES: Yes, but the author is not merely that philosophy professor. The author of both our present selves, and of who we were on earth, and of that philosophy professor, is God. He assigns to each of us our proper task and our proper degree of reality.

KIERKEGAARD: Shouldn't we get on with our assignment then?

SOCRATES: Indeed we should.

KIERKEGAARD: And is your assignment to converse with me, or to cross-examine me?

SOCRATES: Both. But the method is not as important as the

purpose it serves. I am here for the same purpose as you are. I am not so much your interrogator, or even your teacher, as your fellow learner. We both serve the same master, Truth.

KIERKEGAARD: I wonder about our roles in this dialogue. Who is teaching whom? You see, I wonder about that famous humility of yours, your claim to be always a learner and never a teacher. Is that serious or ironic?

SOCRATES: You are to interpret *that* seriously—as seriously as anything I ever said.

KIERKEGAARD: But it was your supreme irony!

SOCRATES: Yes. And *that* is what you must interpret seriously.

KIERKEGAARD: How ironic!

SOCRATES: We understand each other, then.

KIERKEGAARD: Do we also teach each other?

SOCRATES: Nothing is more likely. For in a real dialogue, *both* parties always learn, if only they both love truth more than victory. If a dialogue leaves either party untouched, unchanged, then it is not really a dialogue at all.

KIERKEGAARD: So this could be for both of us a good purgatory and a preparation for heaven?

SOCRATES: Yes.

KIERKEGAARD: I thought you came *from* heaven. How can you also be *preparing* for it?

SOCRATES: There are many degrees of heaven. Both of us may be destined to move up a notch or two. In fact, isn't that the whole purpose of everything in life?

KIERKEGAARD: It is indeed.

SOCRATES: So are you ready to begin?

KIERKEGAARD: With all my heart.

SOCRATES: I am glad to hear you say that, since we must use both the eyes of the head and the eyes of the heart to read what you have written. And that is because you used both sets of eyes to write it.

KIERKEGAARD: Which "it" are you referring to?

SOCRATES: That little book that has just appeared in our hands, your *Philosophical Fragments*.

KIERKEGAARD: Why there it is, as soon as you spoke its title! How differently things happen here—and how right and natural it seems. Also the choice of titles. A good choice for beginners, and exactly what I would have chosen if I were in charge here.

SOCRATES: That is precisely why it has been chosen. In a sense you *are* in charge here.

KIERKEGAARD: How can that be?

SOCRATES: It is with the strength of your freedom that you forge the links of the chain of your fate. The links in that chain are not made of iron; they are made of choices.

KIERKEGAARD: Am I not here for *judgment*?

SOCRATES: You are. But when you appear before the throne, you will see not only him but also yourself sitting on it. That is why you will be unable to escape, or even to argue.

KIERKEGAARD: And it is to prepare for that that we converse here now?

SOCRATES: It is to prepare for that that you do everything you do.

KIERKEGAARD: How wise in the ways of heaven you seem to be, Socrates! Yet you say you, too, are being prepared for it.

SOCRATES: There is no contradiction between those two things.

KIERKEGAARD: So perhaps we are each other's purgatory. Perhaps as your writings challenged and enriched mine, mine can challenge and enrich yours. What a privilege to be a Socrates to Socrates!

When my book appeared in my hand, the idea also appeared in my mind that I should read to you from it, and await your reaction and your questions.

SOCRATES: That is indeed our assignment.

KIERKEGAARD: So where shall we begin?

SOCRATES: I should like to make a radical proposal in answer to that question: that we begin at the beginning.

2

The Question

KIERKEGAARD: Here is my beginning: "How far does the Truth admit of being learned? With this question let us begin."

SOCRATES: What did you mean by that question? Could you "unpack" it a bit for me? I am especially curious about why you capitalized the word "Truth."

KIERKEGAARD: The philosophers distinguish two kinds of truth, as I'm sure you know: the truths of fact, or history, or events—truths that change with the passing of time, like "Caesar is dead" or "Caesar crossed the Rubicon"—and truths that are timeless, like the Platonic Forms, truths like "Justice is a virtue" or "2 + 2 = 4." Kant called them *a posteriori* and *a priori* truths: truths known only posterior to experience and truths known prior to all experience. Some call them empirical truths and rational truths, or temporal truths and eternal truths. And it was the second kind that you were always in search of, isn't that true?

SOCRATES: Yes indeed. And since you capitalize the word, I assume that you mean the higher kind of truth, the kind I was always searching for, eternal truths rather than temporal truths, what the history of philosophy would come to call Platonic Ideas or Platonic Forms.

Each of my dialogues was a search for one of these: What is Justice? or What is Piety? or What is Friendship? or What is Love? I assume that this is what you are exploring in your book.

KIERKEGAARD: Why do you assume that?

SOCRATES: Because that would make your quest a religious one, since religion is always about the eternal, and you were always exploring questions of religion in some way, however indirect. That is what you said in one of your last books, *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, where you said this was true even of your so-called "aesthetic" works like *Diary of a Seducer*, since these apparently nonreligious works set up the two essential contrasts in your philosophy: the contrast between the aesthetic and the ethical "stages on life's way" that you focused on in your first major book, *Either/Or*, and the contrast between the ethical and the religious that you focused on in works like *Fear and Trembling*.

Am I correct in this assumption?

KIERKEGAARD: You are correct—and yet you are not correct.

SOCRATES: I see you love to play riddling games.

KIERKEGAARD: As you did, Socrates. In fact, you were my model. I hoped to be the Christian Socrates.

SOCRATES: But you are now no longer in the world of games, the world of shadows and hints and guesses. You are now in the world of light. Once, we both lived in the world of questions; now we are in the world of answers.

KIERKEGAARD: I see. But I also see that we are still humans, and therefore our path to those answers must remain the path of questioning, even if the path is no longer a crooked, dark, and dangerous one. Is this not so?

SOCRATES: It is indeed. That is why I was the first one sent to you

by the will of Heaven, to prepare you, gradually, for the Sudden Vision that still remains far off.

KIERKEGAARD: So I assume we may still speak in riddles, if that is the best way to approach the Light.

SOCRATES: Your assumption is correct. But I must ask again, is *my* assumption correct as I said before?

KIERKEGAARD: Which assumption?

SOCRATES: That when you speak of "Truth" in this book you are asking a religious question.

KIERKEGAARD: Yes. That is correct.

SOCRATES: And that religion always deals in some way with the eternal.

KIERKEGAARD: In some way, yes.

SOCRATES: And therefore that you were dealing with eternal Truth here.

KIERKEGAARD: I was. But I think you are making another assumption that is *not* true, and I must disabuse you of it. In fact, *two* false assumptions.

One is the assumption that my book, and my question, is about religion in general rather than Christianity in particular, or the assumption that Christianity in particular follows the same essential paths, or seeks the same kind of truth, as other religions. That is *not* my assumption, and I do not believe it is a true one.

The other is the assumption that these two kinds of truth,

the eternal and the temporal, must always be separate. I do not believe that is true either.

You could even say that the questioning of these two assumptions is precisely the main point of my whole book.

SOCRATES: I am surprised to hear that. I am also confused.

KIERKEGAARD: I will try to unconfuse you.

SOCRATES: How?

KIERKEGAARD: By pointing to the *connection* between these two assumptions. Do you see it?

SOCRATES: Let me think . . . I think so. Your first point is that Christianity is *not* like other religions that seek only eternal truth, and your second point is that even though it is a religion and all religion seeks the eternal, Christianity identifies the eternal with the temporal rather than separating them. Is that correct so far?

KIERKEGAARD: Yes.

SOCRATES: And the reason for both is this central claim of Christianity, about Christ—what you call the "Incarnation"—that this man is God in the flesh, the eternal Truth become a temporal man.

KIERKEGAARD: Exactly. The riddle is solved. The cat is out of the bag. So soon! Usually you take many pages to come to your main point, Socrates. Well, I suppose we are finished already, since the secret of my book is no longer a secret, and the main point has been clearly revealed. May I go now? And if so, could you kindly point me to the shortest road to what you called the Sudden Vision?

SOCRATES: You are still playing games with me, Søren. You know very well that we have not finished, but only barely begun. I think nothing would surprise you more than my saying "yes" to your last question.

KIERKEGAARD: You know me very well, Socrates.

SOCRATES: And vice versa.

KIERKEGAARD: I see that we can still play games with each other in this world.

SOCRATES: Yes, but we cannot lie to each other. The games here all come from and lead to the light, never the darkness. You played many such games of light in your writing career on earth, adopting many different points of view, like a novelist. So let us get on with our investigation of the game you played in this book. In comparing me with Christ, and my teaching with his, you adopted my point of view rather than his in this book, in facing the question of how we are to come to the Truth—isn't that right?

KIERKEGAARD: Yes. And since I must be totally honest here, I must tell you something else, something that you have not asked. We distinguished two kinds of truth, but there is a third kind of truth that you do not know, and *that* is the real subject of this book.

SOCRATES: Oh. That puts quite a different slant on everything. And what is this third kind of truth?

KIERKEGAARD: I cannot tell it as well as I can show it. The best way to discover it is simply to follow the plot of my argument, as if it were the plot of a novel, and see where it leads.

SOCRATES: Let us do that then, by all means.

KIERKEGAARD: You did something very similar, I think, Socrates, in your dialogues: you followed an argument as if you were a detective and it was a suspect in a murder case, or long-lost lover. You philosophized *dramatically*. And so did I, largely because of your inspiration. You followed the argument wherever it went, like a rafter on a river.

SOCRATES: True, but this had two purposes: to follow the argument to the eternal truth at its end and also to follow the soul of the other person, to lead him to that end. It was not just abstract truth I was after, for my own sake, to satisfy my purely theoretical curiosity. The ultimate purpose of all my lived dialogues was the salvation of souls from ignorance and folly and vice. I tried to lead them to healing wisdom as one would lead an animal that was dying of thirst to water.

KIERKEGAARD: And that was precisely my own higher purpose, too, in philosophizing. It was not merely scholarship or science; it was therapy, and liberation, and transformation. I had to hide that intention, to avoid offending my patient before I could heal him. That is why I adopted his points of view rather than my own most of the time.

SOCRATES: Exactly my strategy!

KIERKEGAARD: And that is perhaps the deepest kinship between us. And yet, if we follow the argument in this book of mine, I think we will find that even there, where we seem to meet at the very heart of our vocations, to lead men to salvation, we most strikingly differ. And that difference is precisely the point of this book.

SOCRATES: I cannot wait to discover it. Let us step onto our boat and follow the river of your book together, then.