

## ONE

### SUBJECTIVITY: EXPOSURE, CARE, AND RESPONSE

For many, "Kierkegaard" is synonymous with a pair of catch phrases – words we think we understand but don't. There is the notorious "truth is subjectivity" and the oft-cited "passionate leap of faith." Setting aside the tangles around 'leaps of faith,' what is Kierkegaard promoting under the heading of subjectivity? My aim here is to bring alive its proper grip and bite against the pressure of counterfeits, and to fill in some of the cultural contexts that have made subjectivity of any sort suspect. I try a retrieval of Kierkegaard's worthy concept, a sort of subjectivity we should welcome in from the cold.

Kierkegaard's subjectivity is a variant of an ordinary subjectivity that may go unnamed but should be familiar in the back and forth exchanges between subjects, between persons, that weave the everyday world. It does not exclude objectivity but enables it. It is *because* we expose ourselves to ongoing passionate exchange with others in a mutuality of subjectivity that we come to embrace objective truths and realities. As subjectivities in pursuit of what's real, we become initiated one by one into the protocols of objective reporting, of objective lab testing or measurement, and so on. It is only certain *sorts* of objectivity that Kierkegaard shuns, and only certain *sorts* of subjectivity that he pleads with us to embrace.<sup>1</sup>

For Kierkegaard subjectivity is prominent in faith or in ethical judgment but it is fully evident in less contested domains as well. It is present in ordinary life as an everyday background, silently entangled in a person's sense of *agency and*

*passivity in a nexus of relations* to herself and others. It is caught up in the daily weave of walking and hearing, cooking and dressing, paying bills and running for the bus -- in opening ourselves, exposing ourselves, to the endless realities and dreams of the everyday.

This sense of subjectivity should be distinguished from the idea of a judgment that is 'merely subjective' -- that is *defective*. In this narrow use, 'subjectivity' attaches to instances of error, miscue, and mere fantasy. It then marks a person's unfortunate *distance* from the real. But everyday subjectivity has a longer reach, and enables a fortunate and flowing *contact* with the real.

## I. An Overview

### *Contact and Immersion*

Let's set textbook definitions and discussions aside and start afresh with an evocation of my immersions in life. Say I read a passage from Heidegger, a philosopher, as we know, who is harsh with the notion of Cartesian subjectivity. After a difficult stint with *Being and Time*, I'll want to know where to shelve Heidegger's tome, whether to loan it, whether its call to resoluteness means staying in or out of politics -- and of what stripe. Answering the phone, I won't mimic the text to chirp "*Dasein here!*" I'll think of myself as someone in this town, at this address, happy or unhappy within this family and this job, disgusted or delighted by the evening news. There's nothing tendentious in my thinking of myself as a self, a "me," a *subjectivity of some sort*.

Perhaps at other moments I'll succumb to reverie. I'll picture myself walking with Dante, a soul mid-way in the journey of my life, lost in a dark wood. Or in less reverie, I'd think of myself as subject to the allure of philosophy and French cuisine and the crushing glory of Leontyne Price. Even after the collapse of

Cartesian subjectivity – an influential configuration to which I’ll return – I’ll think that Heidegger addresses me as a subjectivity in his writing, even as he avoids any picture of subjectivity as an isolate consciousness. I might find that he calls me to monitor technological imperialism. If I return the favor, addressing *him* as a subjectivity, I might tag him as avoiding his implication in political realities between the Wars. Yet I’d also think of him as deeply concerned, “subjectively concerned,” with the roots of Greek culture and with Holderlin’s poems.

Subjectivity is an animated field already inhabited precisely by we who are *openness to* that field. Yet this reciprocal openness-to-otherness – our inestimably *worthy* subjectivity -- gets occluded in disquisitions on the death of the author, the death of the human, the death of ethics, or the death of philosophy -- not to mention the long-heralded yet still lingering death of God (and the soul).<sup>2</sup> To approach Kierkegaard, I’ll bracket these pronouncements of deaths so fashionable in the '80s and beyond – anti-humanism, anti-theism, the demise of ontotheology and of the metaphysics of presence and of a philosophy of consciousness (and so on).<sup>3</sup> Why reduce persons, viable meanings and successful communications, to ghostly after-images that only sophisticates pretend to set aside? As I see it, these suspicions are over-kill, hyperbolic and theatrical. Of course, there are real-enough fissures and enigmas at the edge of our understandings of selves, meanings and communications, and their links with the world. In the pages that follow I return time and again to these enigmas and fissures. But the bare fact of anomalies in our understandings of authorship, writing, or death is no reason to jettison these realities, or censor our talk of them: quite the contrary. The surfacing of anomalies ought, in many cases, to trigger the question how we can fruitfully live with them – something quite other than discarding or scorning them. Living *uncritically* with fashionable denials is uncritical.

There's *no way* to banish pedestrian subjectivity – the idea that we're individuals who are responsive to each other, subject to each other's help and hindrance, responsive to aesthetic, political, ethical, and personal invitations and demands. The challenge is to disable a specific Cartesian picture of knowledge and consciousness that distorts subjectivity – all the while enabling, strengthening, or recuperating a contrasting subjectivity I locate in Kierkegaard's practice. To have a grip on his sort of subjectivity is to acknowledge selves, or souls as caring, responsive participants in a field of reciprocal psychic and social exchange -- misfires included -- a field of conversions in belief, delight in marriages, enjoyment in morning tea, in sunlight streaming over the desk.

### *Kierkegaardian Subjectivity*

Kierkegaard's improvisations on 'subjectivity' will reappear from several angles in chapters ahead, but let me prepare the ground with these introductory strokes. To say that truth is subjectivity is to emphasize the worth and inescapability of personal immersion in life. The dictum is less an epistemological insight than a practical appeal, a plea that I turn away from those public distractions that take me to a no man's land of impersonal non-existence – a place of barely conscious despair. It is a plea to return to myself, to others, and to a world, a return that with luck will expose what matters to me -- as I expose myself to *it*.

The mistaken view that subjectivity and passion only mark misalignments and distortions in our attempts to capture what comes to pass is only reinforced by the imperatives of an administrative culture that closes down the subjective, intimate, and personal. Front and center are institutional career advancement, bureaucratic progress reports, preparation of tax returns, and endless 'objective,' quantitative performance evaluations. Anything we'd call personal, intimate, or

subjective gets buried under protocols of administration. What matters is not the pleasure I take in my kids but whether they qualify for scholarships, not devotion to classical music but whether better 'time management' will save the day. Intimate space then shrinks in importance. For Kierkegaard this loss is disastrous.

If the 'private' remains *radically* 'private,' ceding its articulations to the institutionalized 'public,' then it lies fallow or dies. We collaborate in the silencing of our own subjectivity and affect, operating on the safer ground of the 'objective.' The "objectivity" that Kierkegaard finds so ridiculous and dangerous is, in part, the field of the public wrapped up in impersonal gossip and chatter, in "what one must do" in objective roles, or under administrative edicts. To privilege the impersonal and public as we absorb the objectivities of disciplinary and professional pursuits is to distance our more personal, private selves, and our spans of worthy subjectivity.

In a strange misplacement of focus, and as if to satisfy a craving for our *own* fugitive subjectivity, we gorge on the details of someone else's all-too-glib subjectivity – guests of Oprah or Dr. Phil who so often vent predictable feelings, or disheveled celebrities in scandal magazines at supermarket check out aisles. Distracted from, and fearful of, our own intimate life, we lose ourselves in the shallow revelations of figures that remain anonymous to us even as they seem vulnerable and accessible.

Closer to home, a fragmented university, especially in its pre-professional programs, serves as an impersonal training school for assimilation into wider political and economic structures. Especially in graduate programs in the humanities, the professoriate is self-replicating, producing new scholars to replace departing ones. The university takes pride in the production and distribution of objective knowledge of utility to outside institutions. All this has its purpose, but none of it sounds like the cultivation of subjectivities or sensibilities, like engaging

in self-reflection and exploration. It's unsocratic and unpoetic. It's not evocative of simple things of great depth or radiance. It's not quietly bringing the intricacies of my specific immersions in life to bear on my reading and viewing, nor letting that reading and viewing realign my desires. It's not letting a poem or a philosophical meditation look into my soul. A volume by Kierkegaard takes my subjectivity in earnest.

Kierkegaard refused to embark on a university career in part because he wanted knowledge that would let him come alive, that would quicken his sense of the *inescapably human*, and of *self-recognition*. He wanted knowledge that would key him to dimensions *he* should attend to in *his* complicated, singular existence. A tepid interest in tracing the objective footprints of world-historical figures, their texts, and the trails of their promoters and detractors was not enough. With regard to his readers – say in particular, to *my* reading -- Kierkegaard prods me to set aside the objective world-historical and take up with my *own* subjectivity, even as I do this in tandem with a mentor – say, Socrates, Cervantes, or Gillian Rose. Kierkegaard loved Socrates. His thinking was always as much Socratic as Christian.<sup>4</sup> He learns from Socrates how to keep subjectivity alive, and what's at stake in doing so. We can do no better at this stage than revisit Socrates in Athens.

## II. Wounds of Subjectivity

### *Trauma, Socrates, and Athens*

Jonathan Lear, a philosopher, psychologist, and psychoanalyst, has recently written extensively on Kierkegaardian irony and the soul.<sup>5</sup> He takes irony to be *the* fundamental structure of evaluative consciousness for modern subjects. He uses Kierkegaard's account to illuminate Socratic irony, which in turn gives us the structure of Kierkegaardian subjectivity. Briefly, irony permits both a critical

backward step for critique of the parade of existing evaluations that weave the fabric of my life, and a forward step of immersion into a life lived ironically – that is, in the tacit awareness that critical distance is necessarily suspended as life goes on -- but is not abolished. At any time, ironical, critical distance – on our convictions, as well as on others', is ready to reappear. This means that Lear's account of irony gives us subjectivity's inner tensions, or wounds, or beautiful fault-lines.

Irony, its wounds and foretastes of change, is played out as Socrates confronts Athens, and Athens retaliates. Here we can turn to Lear's earlier *Happiness, Death, and the Remainder of Life*.<sup>6</sup> His account throws light on Socrates, and also on Kierkegaard, Socrates' counterpart in Copenhagen. The confrontation depicted in Plato's early dialogues, especially the *Apology*, shows how Socrates' stinging interrogations cause cultural trauma, with its associated anxiety and disquiet. This is familiar Kierkegaardian terrain.

Socratic questioning is a blow to the city. Lear shows a parallel. The impact of Socrates is like the blow to my self-understanding that arrives with an awareness of my death. Schopenhauer and Freud, not to mention Plato and Kierkegaard, are acutely aware of the destabilizing effect of exposure to the inevitability of my death. Freud speaks as if death is an instinct bent on raising uncanny havoc on my evaluative center of gravity, on my conception of life.<sup>7</sup> Death shatters my ordinary subjectivity the way Socrates shatters Athenian subjectivity.

Death snatches life, and is traumatic also because it defies simple comprehension. In considering my own death, it can't be just another event that I watch transpire. But if not, how *do* I think of my own death? It's not exactly unthinkable, but it's surely uncanny. I'm here, and then I'm not, not even as an onlooker: I disappear *totally*, without a trace. But if I try to *think* of my death, I

have to picture myself both dead and undead – I must be undead to do the picturing of my death. This enigma is uncanny because we half-see, half don't see, what's going on. We wrestle with death the way we wrestle with great sea storms or whirlwinds. One of Kierkegaard's wrestlings with death is set at a scene of graveside mourning.<sup>8</sup> A hidden onlooker is suddenly, uncannily, caught up with his *own* death. To consider my death, Kierkegaard seems to say, is to undergo a kind of uncanny trauma that brings my entire life to the fore.

If I can undergo trauma, so can a culture. Lear argues that Socrates gives Athens a foretaste of its own demise. He numbs their subjectivity. Citizens *just don't understand* the Socratic irruption in their midst. For self-protection, they trump up charges against him in order to restore their balance. Just as I would banish death, if I could, so Athens would banish Socrates. It does. And yet in a deeper sense, Athens fails. Thanks to the charm of Plato's words, the city launches Socrates into a spectacular, ever-expanding post-mortem career.

The unsettling idea that puts Socrates to death, and that survives his death, is the disquieting insistence, echoed by Kierkegaard, that I have *a life-as-a-whole, I am responsible for it, and it needs scrutiny*. The charge is that Athenians fail to acknowledge that they are *answerable for the span of their lives*, that "life-as-a-whole" can be interrogated, that each citizen has a life-as-a-whole to put under radical questioning and to doggedly own up to. Truth is subjectivity – that is, alert responsibility for who I am. But Athenians were accustomed to being tried for only ignoble *deeds*, not for the span of their entire lives. Furthermore, trials were to be conducted through oratory, exhortation, and emotional manipulation, not through the trickery of logical examination.

Socrates needs to be silenced because he has exposed a raw, uncanny thing (life-as-a-whole) in a raw, uncanny way (cross-examination). Kierkegaard likewise

is pilloried. His charge against Copenhagen is raw, uncanny. They call themselves Christians -- in fact, they are not; they picture themselves individuals -- but they aren't. Interrogation, mimicry, dialectic, and humor are his stings. In turn, he is Socratic, boisterous, polemical, literary, and lyrical.<sup>9</sup>

Athens is frightened and humiliated as Socrates asks for definitions of piety or friendship, of moderation or justice, drawing his interlocutors into doubt and confusion. The sting is to leave those accusations hanging, to leave his interlocutors stumbling publicly, in shameful disarray. He breaches their threshold for tolerable moral anxiety. Perhaps Socrates himself could not know what sort of answers he was groping for -- always opening issues he couldn't close, starting fights he left unfinished -- leaving Athenians to finish things off. Copenhagen didn't finish him off, but they found Kierkegaard a bewildering irritant. Just as death (as Lear has it) is an uncanny disruptor we just can't come to terms with, so *philosophy* and *philosophers* can be uncanny disruptors we just can't come to terms with. If as readers of Plato or Kierkegaard we attend to this arena of *subjectivity and its disruption*, we may likewise be dispirited and disrupted. But perhaps such confusion is a prelude to resolution, to new immersion in life. If so, transformation will be a response to trauma, a recasting of subjectivity itself.

### III. Descartes

#### *A Loss of Sociality and Cares*

A sensibility antithetical to Socrates and Kierkegaard, a *modern* sensibility, emerges with Descartes. The advent of Descartes' revolution inaugurates a new face of subjectivity, one that strips the subject bare, and in its own way is as traumatic to European culture as Socrates was to Athens. For example, in concert with other texts and technologies, it effects what Max Weber identifies as the

“disenchantment” of the world. Let me give a rough outline -- a cartoon -- of the Cartesian subjectivity that Kierkegaard (and others) will inherit and resist.

Descartes enthrones subjectivity first as a center of skepticism; yet in the same breath he exhibits an exorbitant self-confidence, a kind of tacit declaration of the power of his isolated mind, quite independently, by itself, to deliver from its own pockets two things: the proof of its own existence (the *cogito*) and the existence of God. Do I sense a trace of chutzpah? He sets aside schooling, history, and language, disregards the necessary role of others in one’s thinking (and in one’s existence), and pays no heed to the matrix of material sustenance and civil security so necessary to learning and thought.

The self established solo by Descartes is disembodied, asocial and conceived as an autonomous site of individual consciousness and mental performance. This is not a Socratic subjectivity, embedded in public dialogue with differing figures, focused on comportment (the place of love, justice, or friendship, for instance). Descartes has solitude, but none of Rousseau’s or Thoreau’s deep immersion in a rich natural world, a creation that encourages or consoles as one walks in meditation.

To be sure, Descartes’ accomplishment is astounding, both world-shattering and world-making, and elicits astounding rejoinders in Marx, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Parisian poststructuralists. Hobbes and Spinoza are anti-Cartesian, and German Idealism and Romanticism are too. For Marx, consciousness is neither individual nor autonomous but molded by social and economic forces. Nietzsche, Weber, Durkheim, and Freud take further turns in dismantling an individualistic, asocial, consciousness. On a related front, psychology discovers science-based ways to study persons that seem to bypass

consciousness. Philosophy has its own recurrent fixations on a world of pure matter, where both God and subjectivity leave the stage.

By dint of an unfortunate simplification, a passion for the scientific study of things human and otherwise comes to mean breaking free from all religious and even moral conceptions of the psyche, self, or soul. A secular chauvinism posits only one world, and lets the natural sciences tell us what it is.<sup>10</sup> Subjectivity comes to mean the *failure* to meet the objective standards of scientific inquiry. In a similar vein, we say of a journalist or judge who becomes “subjective” that she has succumbed to cognitive or moral vice. Cartesian tenets also become tethered to acquisitive individualism, where rational self-assertion mixes with egoism oblivious to dependencies on community, class, gender, or education. The inescapable field of a rich subjectivity, of humane exposure and responsiveness, is forgotten as its counterfeits take center stage.

Any number of 20<sup>th</sup> century critiques (Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Freud, for a quick sample) target Cartesian subjectivity, but as I see it, they don’t touch the everyday subjectivity we all affirm. This everyday weave is the place of reading and responding, of being me and not you, of speaking at conferences, or disputing my hotel bill.<sup>11</sup> Even as Cartesian varieties die out, there is plenty of garden space left for healthy alternatives, not least, for a Kierkegaardian subjectivity.

#### IV. The Demise of Care

##### *Subjectivity and What Matters*

Kierkegaardian subjectivity is tied to my sense that I care for things that matter. I am summoned and struck by things that make demands on my responsiveness. To be subject is to be summoned, struck, and responsive. Subjectivity is not an epistemological concept focused on how I know this or that, nor does it name a

kind of propositional truth. It is a broadly moral, existential, and experiential concept. One has more or less subjectivity as one takes more or less responsibility for one's life, or is more or less affectively and morally responsive to others and one's ideals, or is more or less subject to passions, benevolent or malevolent. It is an openness to be affected by (*subject to*, and *responsive to*), interventions and pleas, calls and demands, whether moral, religious or aesthetic.

Kierkegaard undoes a raw Cartesian isolationism by evoking a porous interiority. In facing a simple request, another's words enter my socially tuned consciousness – I am not alone. Kierkegaard has angst, care, and mood circuit into the world and return back to the self. In a long passage from *The Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Johannes Climacus, overhears a man at a grave-site grieving a son.<sup>12</sup> Mood travels from the stranger "over there" to enter and upset Climacus, who rediscovers it permeating the heavens and whispering trees. Mood is both outside and inside in seamless animations. When Heidegger places us primordially always already "in the world," he is taking a page from Kierkegaard.<sup>13</sup> Emerson will say a person "is place."<sup>14</sup> Person and place are mutually articulate.<sup>15</sup> In class I am, in a sense, my classroom.

Of course, Kierkegaard and his pseudonym Johannes Climacus speak approvingly of "inwardness," which sounds alarmingly Cartesian. But "inwardness" is an *outward flowing* wholeheartedness or cordiality.<sup>16</sup> It is not a Cartesian screen of consciousness on which disembodied images float, images that are only conjecturally connected to an outer world. We're implicated in a world that already implicates us. A loving parent faces a loved child; a desperate soul faces desperate straits. Furthermore, when Kierkegaard talks of "inwardness" the point is less *about* something (a metaphysical region) than it is an earnest plea -- that I *enact* the truth of wholehearted (inner) responsiveness. I am asked, as it were, to bring

wholeheartedness into the world. There is no retreat into self-enclosure or ascetic withdrawal under the auspices of inwardness.

### *Losing Contact*

Kierkegaard laments a *loss* of subjectivity. He sees that one can *lose* care for self and others, *lose* care for one's God, one's neighbor, and one's world, *lose* a sense that one's time and place *matter*, and that one *matters to oneself*. Cartesian subjectivity is tied to the *epistemological certainty that I think*. Kierkegaardian subjectivity is tied to broadly *moral-religious convictions I can muster* – or not -- in the face of objective uncertainty. It is tied to whatever cares *summon* me or make *demands* of me or *call* me to become who I am. It's a sense that can wax and wane, a passion that will run full tilt or die a trickling death.

A suffering child pleads for my response, calls on my responsiveness, my subjectivity, asks for help or compassion. To record this dispassionately, to "make a mental note" -- "a child's voice was heard asking" -- and feel or do nothing in response, would be to stand in good stead as an objective observer. Writing down my observation, the result could be passable as "true to the facts" – though it would still be, I suspect, true to only a stripped down and cruel, even alien view of "the facts." To be only an objective observer in this circumstance, however, would be to stand utterly *false* to what I could and should be, false to my recognition that I hear a call to respond from my heart. It simply follows, then, that if the highest value anyone can aspire to is being morally, religiously, humanely *responsive*, then truth (our highest value) is subjectivity.

To lose subjectivity is to lose the sense that things matter or summon the heart. Short of nihilism, numbness or indifference, one might feel an intimate pain of absence, like the pain of unrequited love. To restore lost subjectivity is to

restore, if not an unqualified "Yes!" to life, then at least the hope that a heart wounded is not dead. One might hope that love can be requited, that despite desolation a Whirlwind's voice can return a world (as in the *Book of Job*). One might find that dialogue, even as it addresses lost love, or the bleaker prospect of nihilism, can bespeak a fragile intimacy alive *in that address itself*.<sup>17</sup>

#### V. Subjectivity as Interpersonal Exchange

Let me add – again, in broad strokes -- another dimension of Kierkegaardian subjectivity. His manner of writing works to bring subjectivities alive. I approach this more fully in chapter four, but here let me sketch words in flight and at rest.

##### *Living Words and Voice*

A passage born in writing is reciprocally born in being read or heard -- born in the moment it breaks a deadening drone to jolt and ignite a soul. Each launch invites interpretations along contrasting registers of hearing. Each intimates an unfinished world as an adumbration (or refiguring) of *my* world, and intimates an unfinished source as an adumbration (or refiguring) of *my* source. Words get intercepted as I read or listen. They fall under my purview, yet are not hedged thereby from becoming any others' words just as well. My gain in self through words is no one's loss. In the best of circumstances, we rise together. Speaking of the poet Wallace Stevens, Simon Critchley avers, "Words of the world are the life of the world, and poetry is the highest use of those words."<sup>18</sup>

As traveling arcs of subjectivity, words can shape an intimate communion that forms part of a communication -- that then radiates outward and aspires to realize universal community. If they ring true, the conditions of the soul that a Kierkegaard and Plato bare for us in the charm of their writing begins to resemble a

general condition. I gain access to a soul that is not mine, that begins to become mine, that can belong as much to others as to Kierkegaard, as much to the present age as to another, as much to me as to him or to my neighbor. It's as if spirit lay in common trust, even as I avail myself of it as the particular and irreplaceable individual that I am. Of course, community and communion can fail in the familiar ways.

Complacency, selfishness, power, desire for fame or riches, dull imagination, lack of contact with the better world of words – each or all can deny me salutary transformations. The bulk of words that cross our paths hardly carry transformative powers, and the transformations offered can be illusory or violently destructive. We know, too, that words are not the only force in town. There's brute power, blindness, and famine to contend with.

Living voice and words work seas of subjectivity. Launched by a friend or a Socrates, words take on power from deep cultural roots. It's as if they flow with an indigenous strength from an opaque, even mythic or archetypal timeless past. If my friend admonishes "*To thine own self be true*," its force is powered in part from Shakespeare, and in part from even deeper roots, for Shakespeare borrows "true self" from cultural strata earlier than his own.

Such words seem to carry transforming power *on their own*, as if my friend, or Shakespeare, were exploiting a collective source quite apart from a particular awareness of a deep provenance. Though we may stumble at giving an account, that such words can have immense effect is hardly in doubt. If someone says on a dark street, in effect, "Your money or your life!," the impact is as certain as a physical blow. When my friend says, "*To thine own self . . .*," words likewise carry power, yet without a physical threat. We can acknowledge *that* words realign selves -- and manage with humbling ignorance when it comes time to say *how* that

is done.

My friend's words are not his alone, but "the words of others" through which he calls on me. This confirms our lives as cultural creatures, at the disposal of language. We avail ourselves of words other to ourselves in becoming selves. Heidegger's *Dasein* gets translated recently, "*the-openness-we-are*."<sup>19</sup> Among other things, we are openness to time. We are the very *undergoing* of this passage from a present, soon to be former self, and a self that speaks now to us as other, as future, stranger, or neighbor -- in words that are other, first and last.

Kierkegaard puts all this aphoristically: "*the 'I' is oneself and one's neighbor at once*."<sup>20</sup> His words arrive through evocative depictions, first as neighboring us, then as words and worlds to make our own, then abandoned to others who may or may not await them (or return them). They impinge from an unknown past as old as Faust or Socrates or Abraham, and arc toward a passing present contact with us -- from which they may (or may not) find new lease on life to form a future now unknown.

These are inter-animating moments in fields of widening (and contracting) subjectivity. We should find them in our classrooms, those minor animated worlds. But is living voice, a transfiguring moment, a transporting word or melody, at all *welcome* in a modern secular university? Far from starting a digression, this question asks us what role Kierkegaardian subjectivity might play – or not – in a locality most of us know too well.

#### VI. *Pedagogy in the Humanities*

The domain of the performing and expressive arts is one academic site for exploring feeling, action, gesture and perception, where ordinary subjectivity might be a focus of attention. We wonder objectively, but also intimately, how to perform

Hamlet or read aloud a single line, how to hear Beethoven, how to see Chagall. We acknowledge the need to get ourselves subjectively into their lives or worlds or creations, and wonder how to come alive within the varied domains of popular culture. Literature is another place we encounter modulations of ordinary subjectivity. We wonder at the acuity of Toni Morrison or Jane Austen in depicting the inescapably human in its great and compelling variety.<sup>21</sup>

We might think that matters of personal aspiration, passion, or meaning – matters of subjectivity -- don't belong in the academy. They get nurture elsewhere in sports and entertainment, in the melee of public politics or the pieties of religion. Immersion in things that give importance to life (a big part of what I mean by ordinary subjectivity) can take place outside the academy, and certainly does. But why take from psychology, philosophy, literature or the arts their capacity to join happily in joint ventures of understanding, celebrating, and mourning the human?

### *Intimate Classroom Exchange*

Kierkegaard found the barren intellectuality of his university comical and distressing. Professors might take a detached, impersonal approach to the matters they teach, especially in the natural sciences or technical disciplines – say academic medicine or engineering – where a cool impersonality can be an apt and prominent ideal. Yet even here we'd want teachers to model passion, a love of truth, love of discovery, or a love of the many small details of the discipline itself.

Mathematics can be a calling that animates a life, not just a machine-like mastery of specialized techniques. But in the humanities and in those sectors of psychology, religious studies, or philosophy that belong there, we engage in more than the transmission of hard fact, elegant theory, and necessary technique. We engage and are engaged by *subjectivities*, and our *own* subjectivity is altered in the

process. In our texts we encounter grief or anger or halting tenderness, and in successful teaching, such grief or sweetness will come alive, echo in the room. To win this success in teaching requires intimate touch with a mood or passion, and depends on modeling that intimacy in diction, pace of speech, apt analogy. And it requires recognizing its transference to a student. It means monitoring the receptivity of a class to what's at stake. All this is not just cool objectivity. It's warm engagement.

To evoke possibilities and hopes for renewal and repair, and to evoke, with some regret, the multiplicities that conspire to *shut down* hopes or possibilities, requires intimacy with the terrain of affect and aspiration – not to mention the capacity to convey it. Part of understanding in the humanities is laying out facts and context, and putting methods of analysis to work. Yet understanding here is also to enter repositories of yearning and desire, of imagination, aspiration and tact, of tainted love and rash conceit. To understand, we enter a treasury of cultural resources, and listen from a place of immersion and exposure. Psychology and history, poetry and philosophy, art, dance, and music ask us to imagine very particular instances of requited and unrequited love, betrayal and steadfast courage, fluid grace and tempestuous disorder, arrogance and single-minded vengeance, innocent delight and deep despair.

Intimacy is the opposite of abstraction and *also* the opposite of fact or method. It opens to realms of understanding, appreciation, and worth. It's imagining the feel of *possibilities*, regions one's soul might inhabit, that one's friend or enemy might live in and from – say, envy, tenderness, or brashness. In its own way, the university would be for Kierkegaard, and should be for us, Plato's city of words – a place where imaginative conversational exchange both critiques the present and gives the future allure.<sup>22</sup> We might even believe, against the evidence

of money and guns, that "words of the world are the life of the world."<sup>23</sup> Unhappily, classrooms can become just another site where intimacy and soul have fled. The Socratic and Kierkegaardian aim is nudging persons, one by one, toward their better selves, toward inhabitation of unforeseen realms of openness and response.

Not long ago, an Amish schoolhouse was invaded mid-day, the children terrorized and several shot by a local deliveryman. The next day, the grandfather of one of the girls killed said, within his inconsolable grief, "We must not think evil of this man." I passed on these words to my class, letting them sink in, and quietly alluded to the Christian injunction to love one's enemies. I moved on. But from the hush I could tell something essential had been communicated.

Institutions tend to sideline sites of intimate or passionate encounter – with Hamlet's doubts or Mozart's grace, or with the terror of unnecessary death. A figure of ridicule in Kierkegaard's *Postscript* is the teacher utterly blind to a pedagogical aspiration: the desire to let affect or insight, eloquence or affliction, come alive and vibrant in a class. The credentialed Adjunct unknowingly damps down all soul as he distributes trivia tests on Plato.<sup>24</sup> Knowledge that bears on "care for the self" would resemble what Clifford Geertz calls local knowledge, aspiring to a fine-grained sense of things as they lie ready for one's responsible attention. We might call this "tactile" or "visceral" wisdom, the sort of acquired and practiced intimate knowledge a rock climber has of a granite wall, or the unexpected fleshly knowledge Jacob has in wrestling his angel, or the knowledge Thoreau has of his Concord paths and ponds. It might be the intimate pain and joy resonant with the life one knows only in giving birth.

Kierkegaard, like Plato in the *Symposium*, thought that any knowledge worth its salt comes from love and gives birth – to new thoughts, new ways of response, new configurations of soul. This sensuous knowing shows one's

attunements and convictions, one's world and others, as one is exposed to them. It's an undergoing linked to a quick readiness for the next step or grip or moment in one's impending future. It resists propositional formulation (hence Socratic ignorance is its ally). Yet it can give bracing or terrifying intimacy of the sort one has in confidently knowing one's way about, knowing how to go on -- or in fearfully or joyfully knowing what one undergoes, as one meets a metting challenge or a moment of renewal.

*Passion for Truths and Texts*

Here's a startling announcement that sounds a death-knell for subjectivity – for humanistic ideals of refining moral, aesthetic, or literary passions, of refining imaginative inflections or perceptions. Here is the credo of a contemporary university. Just listen: *The University of Malta is geared towards the infrastructural and industrial needs of the country so as to provide expertise in crucial fields.*<sup>25</sup>

With a brush of the hand, we abandon the humanities leaving them unfunded and forgotten; we drop imaginative variation or the inflection of lyrical perception, and abandon sites for curates of past lives and souls, welcomed from this culture and the next, brought from the dead into presence. We shut down fleeting dialogue with *this* companion figure, with *this* striking line, *this* image, *this* chord sequence. Nor does this credo honor sites for futures flowing in as dark or lifting winds apt for souls taking their next tremulous step into an unknown where questions are so much more than answers and even silence has its place. No space is saved to lift and fall with *this* Van Gogh crow, with *this* line from Rilke, with *this* Socratic exchange, Emersonian invocation, or Hepburn moment -- no space for *this*

gasp of King Lear's incomprehension. There is no hearing Kierkegaard's plea for knowledge that will "*come alive in me.*"<sup>26</sup>

Cultivating intimacy or affection in the humanities is cultivating subjectivity as openness to texts, suffering exposure to them, as they display the arts of conversation and praise, of attentiveness, gratitude, and compassion; the arts of grieving and outrage; the arts of seeing and coping with affliction, injustice, and estrangement. Subjectivity means allowing oneself responsiveness to demands that appeal to us as initiates of poetry, wonder, grief, and love. Contacts here become pedagogical moments, dance movements, steps initiates can learn from (though this learning is never simply imitation). The good or radiant, the beautiful, serene, or frankly sublime would beckon not just on the scale of a city, of a hero, or of a sonnet of great power, nor just on the scale of a violent storm or vast thunder soundscape. The scale could be far smaller, a glimpse of easy wonder, grief, or love, or of an early lily, the smile of a child. It could be the dazzling feel of granite at one's fingertips, the air above, below.

Truths thus imparted or evoked (*This is beauty! This is tenderness!*) are not propositions to test at arm's length -- or to pocket greedily as a creed. They're an intimate touch that's quite compatible with a Socratic "propositional ignorance." They're truths resonant in athletic or musical wisdom, in love, or in hearing just *this* line of Dickinson. Such intimate, passing contact is called 'truth' because it has inestimable value and fitness for and to life -- as when we speak of a true love or true path, or of a dedication that's true, or of truly living. Or as we speak of Hamlet enacting and suffering truths of the most capacious consciousness (or subjectivity) we've had the fortune to know (and not to know).

In being at home at sea, in being *true* to our intimate knowledge of death and of giving (and undergoing) birth (to ourselves and others), in being exposed to

and grasped by lives and their truths – in such cases truths appear as apt attunements to varied worlds. And they appear as beckoning possibilities that in our brief time afloat we marvel to uncover or meet in moments of illumination.

## Appendix

### *Self-knowledge as Care and Pledge*

Postmodernism is born in suspicion of grand narratives, and in challenges to overweening confidence in epistemological and metaphysical pursuits. It too often culminates, I'm afraid, in suspicion of the very possibility of self-knowledge, authenticity, or wisdom. Self-knowledge can't be a matter of holding oneself as an object at arm's length and then observing. That would leave in darkness the self doing the holding and observing. Nevertheless, more than a grain of truth remains in the Socratic maxims *know thyself* and *the unexamined life is not worth living*. Socratic self-knowledge, and the variant Kierkegaard would hold, has to be a matter of sensing which experiences claim one, getting confident in one's intimacy with those claims, pledging them as one's own, and having one's actions be faithful to that pledge.

Self-knowledge is not propositional. It doesn't rest on knowing "*these truths to be self-evident*" (or otherwise justified). Self-knowledge becomes a species of contact, tactile, or visceral knowledge, knowing our way with our experience, having trust in it, standing by it. Socrates claims ignorance of everything but love.

Perhaps he's intimating that he's in visceral touch with a love of friends, of his city, and of wisdom -- even if he could only stammer in ignorance if asked to give grounds for his loves. To *know* his love is to be close enough to it, and responsive enough to it, to pledge fidelity to it -- say, to stand by a love of inquiry and ideals, of justice and the good, and of friends and city, despite lacking even the semblance of an "enlightenment-approved" proof or justification of those ideals one's action and one's life might embody -- the elusive objects of one's trust and pledge.

We know that Socrates knows himself because he's loyal to Athens, pledges his loyalty, and is at ease in steadfastly *living out* that pledge. He's in intimate contact and at one with himself, oblivious to any temptation *not* to honor that pledge. His self *is* that pledge. He neither pines for anything, nor agonizes over options he *might* have followed out. He wins strength from saying, pledging, "Here I stand and can do no other" -- without a trace of false bravado. The "necessities" his pledge entails are so much a part of *who he is* that they don't strike him as restrictive -- any more than the biological necessities that breathing entails strike one as restrictive -- they can be pure delight. Socrates shows only poise, composure, self-possession, and freedom. He lives out the truth of (his moral-religious) subjectivity. That's as good as it gets, and is good enough for assurance that he knows himself.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I develop a taxonomy of sorts of objectivity and subjectivity from a different angle in *Serve in Discord and Resolve*, (Routledge, 1996, p. xxx)

<sup>2</sup> Foucault is often associated only with the idea that subjectivity and the subject disappear once we grasp the role of powers and institutions in their formation. For an argument that disassociates him from any proclamation of "the death of the subject," see Amy Allen, "The Anti-Subjective Hypothesis," *The Philosophical Forum*, XXXI, 2 (2000); for an argument that disassociates Nietzsche from the demise of subjectivity, and defends a picture of multiple subjectivities (or masks) as capturing Nietzsche's standpoint, see Robert Guay, "The 'I's Have it: Nietzsche on Subjectivity," *Inquiry*, 49, 3, (2006) 218-41.

<sup>3</sup> In *An Atheism that is Not Humanist in French Thought* (Stanford, 2011), Stefanos Geroulanos gives an eye-opening account of 'anti-humanism' in France – a perspective that was dead set against "liberal" views that put individual consciousness (or subjectivity) center-stage. This move against Socrates, Descartes, and even a Kierkegaardian subjectivity started in the thirties and resurfaced after WWII, especially in Heidegger's "Letter on Humanism" and Derrida's privileging of *texts* over contexts, persons, or authors.

<sup>4</sup> I discuss Kierkegaard's collaborative Socratic-Christian identity in the first four chapters of *On Soren Kierkegaard*.

<sup>5</sup> See Jonathan Lear, *A Case for Irony* (Tanner Lectures on Human Values), Harvard 2011, and *Therapeutic Action: An earnest plea for Irony*, The Other Press, 2003.

<sup>6</sup> Lear, Jonathan, *Happiness, Death, and the Remainder of Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002) 101-105.

<sup>7</sup> Our understanding of Freud's "death instinct" should be modified in light of the Socratic experiment in Athens. As Lear sees it, the death instinct is not an *instinct* at all. Freud falls victim here to the widespread assumption that all forces in a life or a culture must have a purpose or manifest a drive or instinct. Lear's counter is that death (for instance) can disrupt massively. It can be a major force in shaping individual life and culture. Yet it is not a drive or instinct: it is "without purpose," *without teleology*, "just a fact." Death's "irruption" is linked both to the execution of Socrates and to the trauma Socratic questioning brings to the city. (This 'irruption' then bears comparison to a momentous Heideggerian "event" or "happening" (*Ereignis*) -- a Kierkegaardian *Augenblick*.)

<sup>8</sup> See Ch. 10.

<sup>9</sup> Socrates' protestations of ignorance – his claim that he's not really teaching anything, that he's not a teacher, that he knows only that he knows nothing – take on new

meaning here. Given the inherited conceptual landscape, Socrates' questions don't make sense to his audience, so he defuses the barbs by protesting that he knows nothing. How can it be a crime to *know nothing*? That makes him seem innocent.

<sup>10</sup> To better approach the ideal of the natural sciences, psychology becomes grounded in physiology, biology, and the observation of behavior. Philosophy approaches the mind through the lens of behaviorism, pragmatism, naturalism, or more recently, cognitive science. Only quite recently has consciousness and a loose phenomenology returned as exciting fields of study among academic philosophers and psychologists. Stokes speaks of a "resurgence of interest in consciousness and subjectivity in philosophy of mind in the last twenty years or so" and points to Chalmers writing on 'the hard problem' of consciousness. (Private correspondence.) And there has been "a return to religion" among a number of continental post-structuralist thinkers. On the other hand, these movements toward a 'rehabilitation' of consciousness or subjectivity is countered, from another cultural corner, by a suspicion of 'humanism,' where that term is a stand-in for the sort of subjectivity and life of the spirit of such concern to Kierkegaard, Buber, and so many others thinkers continuing tradition of philosophical anthropology or the first-person standpoint so crucial to existentialist thinking

<sup>11</sup> Patrick Stokes gives us this caution: "Obviously Heidegger and his descendants reject Cartesianism but it's not clear to me that they thereby give up on subjectivity *per se*. (Private correspondence.)

<sup>12</sup> See Ch 10.

<sup>13</sup> Here I borrow from *On Soren Kierkegaard: Dialogue, Polemics, Lost Intimacy, and Time* (Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate, 2007), especially pp. 62-65. In a story that remains to be fully told, Kierkegaard provides Heidegger's Ur-text for *Being and Time*. Angst, *Augenblick*, care, openness to otherness, repetition, silence, fallenness, appropriation, decisiveness, attunement, leveling, chatter, temporality – all these (and others) are lifted directly from Kierkegaardian texts. The argument that *Being and Time* is a version of Kierkegaard's *Unscientific Postscript's* "religiousness A" (pagan religiousness) is defended in Dreyfus, Hubert L. and Rubin, Jane, "You can't get something for nothing: Kierkegaard and Heidegger on how not to overcome Nihilism," *Inquiry* (30) 1987. Kierkegaard's *A Literary Review* (London: Penguin, 2001), formerly translated *The Present Age*, is the place to find "leveling," "the crowd," and "chatter." In a personal note, John D. Caputo writes, "Augenblick's importance is found in Heidegger's GA

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29/30, pp 224-25 [translated under the title *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* (Indiana University Press), pp. 149-50]. Heidegger interprets "the moment" ("the glance" "Augenblick") as the moment in which Dasein is disclosed to itself in the *Blick der Entschlossenheit*. Rather like the moment of truth." I thank Professor Caputo for this reference. I discuss Kierkegaard's version of "Augenblick," *Øieblikket*, or "the glance," This cluster of concepts or themes becomes central to the development of continental philosophy from Heidegger through Tillich, Buber, Sartre and on to Derrida and after. It also becomes central to psychology through Jaspers, Binswanger, and Carl Rogers, among others.

<sup>14</sup> See Robert H. Richardson, Jr., *Emerson, The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley: University of California: 1995), 312.

<sup>15</sup> In this vein, Henry Bugbee will say that our best thinking comes as a "meditation of the place." Henry Bugbee, *The Inward Morning, A Philosophical Exploration in Journal Form* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia, 1999), 139.

<sup>16</sup> In chapter 10, I argue that "inwardness" (better, "wholeheartedness") is interpersonal – not a private Cartesian box wired up to God or Truth. To lose subjectivity is to fall into public "chatter" or run with "the crowd".

<sup>17</sup> For the role of intimate conversation in the constitution of a moral self, see my *Lost Intimacy in American Thought: Recovering Personal Philosophy from Thoreau to Cavell*, Continuum Books, 2009, ch 9.

<sup>18</sup> Critchley, Simon, *Things Merely Are* (London: Routledge, 2005), 10.

<sup>19</sup> "Dasein" is rendered "the-openness-we-are" by Thomas Sheehan, "Reading Heidegger's 'What is Metaphysics?'," *The New Yearbook for Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy*, I, 2001, p. 196

<sup>20</sup> *Kierkegaard's Papers and Journals, A Selection*, ed. and trans. Alastair Hannay (New York: Penguin, 1996), 92, (7 Oct. 37, II A 131).

<sup>21</sup> Not so long ago, philosophy and psychology would be part of a joint venture in contemplating and studying ordinary subjectivity. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Nietzsche identified himself as a classical philologist *and* as a psychologist. Kierkegaard has mentored psychologists and psychoanalysts from Rollo May and Carl Rogers to Erik Erikson and Jonathan Lear. A radical divorce of psychology from philosophy and an abandonment of subjectivity would be unthinkable to William James, not to mention Plato, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, or Socrates. More recently, both Pierre Hadot and Michel Foucault take philosophy in the old Socratic fashion as care for the soul -- a practice at

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once psychological, religious, and philosophical. See essays on Rollo May, Carl Rogers, Eric Fromm, Erik Erikson and Julia Kristeva, *Kierkegaard and the Social Sciences*, ed. Jon Stewart (Ashgate, 2010). I entered graduate school in philosophy to follow the author of *The Self in Transformation: Philosophy, Psychoanalysis, and the Life of the Spirit*. Later, Herbert Fingarette authored *Self Deception*, a minor classic in which Kierkegaard, Freud, and Sartre play trans-disciplinary parts untangling the riddle of a self against itself, of a split-subjectivity. As an undergraduate, I studied in a seminar room whose door bore the copperplate, "Philosophy and Psychology." The bookshelves held a mixed collection of 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century volumes from what have now become distinct disciplines.

<sup>22</sup> In the *Republic*, Socrates promises to his friends "to build a city of words," a city in speech or dialogue. For Socrates as simultaneously religious and philosophical, see chapters one through four of my *On Soren Kierkegaard*. Parts of the second half of this essay is adapted from chapter four.

<sup>23</sup> Critchley, Simon, *Things Merely Are* (London: Routledge, 2005), 10.

<sup>24</sup> Climacus ridicules the 'privat-docent' – not exactly an Adjunct, but an instructor who is paid by attendance.

<sup>25</sup> This is the opening sentence from the mission statement, found at the web site home page for The University of Malta, fall 2006.

<sup>26</sup> *Kierkegaard's Papers and Journals*, 33, (Gilleleje, 1 Aug 35). On the connections between "knowledge that comes alive" and avowals (or pledges) related to authentic identity and self-knowledge, see Charles Larmore, *Practices of the Self*, University of Chicago Press, 2010.

