13. The Dangers of Indirection: Plato, Kierkegaard, and Leo Strauss

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I

Much has traditionally been made of the fact that Kierkegaard’s writing style is not one that is usual to philosophers. Philosophers, though this is more true of Anglo-American philosophers than of any other group of thinkers, tend to write in a straightforward, exegetical, or axiological manner, whereas Kierkegaard’s style is often closer to that of a novelist, dramatist, or poet. Some have even argued that what would appear to be the eccentricity of his literary style actually disqualifies him from being considered a philosopher. Kierkegaard’s purportedly “literary” style does sometimes make it difficult to determine what he is trying to say. If Kierkegaard’s style is too “literary,” however, to satisfy the conceptual rigor required of philosophy, then there are a host of other thinkers whose names should also be stricken from the philosophical rolls.

First among this ragtag group of unclassifiable thinkers would have to be Plato. If Kierkegaard’s works are notoriously difficult to interpret, then Plato’s works are famously so. If some of Kierkegaard’s works read like novels, all of Plato’s work are in effect dramas. The reader, and more particularly the scholar, would do well to remember this. One cannot automatically assume that the characters in these dramas, not even Socrates, express Plato’s views. Is virtue, for example, a type of knowledge, as some Plato scholars have argued? If so, why does Socrates contrast it, at the end of the Meno, with knowledge? Knowledge (at least in some form), he argues in that work, is a universal human possession, whereas virtue, he suggests at the end of the work, is something the gods bestow on a select few.

Thinkers who do not express their views directly appear to invite misinterpretation. The most conspicuous recent example of what some have charged
is misinterpretation is the political philosopher Leo Strauss. Strauss did not
employ the literary style characteristic of Plato and Kierkegaard, but his theory
that the real message of a philosophical text is often presented indirectly has
inclined some of his interpreters to the view that Strauss may have used this
method of indirect communication himself.7 This would, in any event, explain
the otherwise puzzling diversity of interpretations of his thought.

There is also substantial disagreement among scholars of both Plato and
Kierkegaard concerning the real substance of their thought.8 All three thinkers,
Plato, Kierkegaard, and Strauss, have been variously interpreted as defenders
democracy and as proponents of elitist totalitarianism.5 The question, of
course, is which of these interpretations are closest to the truth. Neither Plato,
nor Strauss (if he engaged in esoteric communication as some have argued)
left many clues that would help guide the reader to the proper understand-
ing of their works. Kierkegaard, by contrast, who has been almost pilloried
for the purported incomprehensibility of his oeuvre,9 left us volumes, liter-
ally volumes, in the form of his journals and papers, to guide us to the proper
interpretation.

I will argue that while the form of the works of thinkers such as Plato
and Kierkegaard and Strauss may make them more difficult to interpret than
the works of thinkers who employ a more direct style, this difficulty is not
insurmountable. I will begin by looking at what I will argue is a particularly
unfortunate interpretation of Plato’s Republic, an interpretation that many have
attributed to Strauss, but that others have argued may not be Strauss’s. This
interpretation, I will argue, is an example of how not to approach a text whose
message, if it has one, is not stated directly. I will then proceed to contrast this
unfortunate attempt to decipher the hidden message in a work with a more
fortunate interpretation of Kierkegaard’s Concluding Unscientific Postscript.

II

The political philosopher Leo Strauss is believed by many to be a proponent of
the Platonic idea of the “noble lie” as a legitimate means of “leading the stupid
masses.”10 The idea does appear in the Republic. It is not at all clear, however,
that it is an idea Plato endorsed. Strauss appears himself to have been a pro-
ponent of indirect, or, as he calls it, “esoteric” communication. So it is not actually
all that easy to tell what his views were. It’s not actually all that easy to tell what
Plato’s views were either. Plato did not present his views in straightforward
scholarly treatises in the manner of contemporary philosophers. His works are
“dialogues,” effectively dramas, with a recurring protagonist, Socrates, who
purports to have no views of his own. Plato, on the other hand, like all great
dramatists, clearly was trying to communicate important truths in his works.
The difficulty is simply, as it is with all great dramatic works, figuring out what those truths are.

Most people, at least most educated people, in our society have heard of Plato’s Republic and know that it deals with the construction of an ideal city. That is as far as it goes, though, for most people. Among intellectuals, however, it is widely acknowledged that this purportedly ideal city becomes increasingly bizarre and unappealing to those of democratic predilections. It becomes a city ruled by propaganda and systematic deception.

Yes, the city described in Plato’s magnum opus is unappealing indeed. Yet the Republic is not all that easy to interpret. The city described therein is referred to by Socrates early in the work as “spoiled,” or “swollen and inflamed,” depending on which of the contemporary English translations one consults, with luxuries. Socrates contrasts this city, where the citizens “abandon themselves to the unlimited acquisition of wealth” (373d7–9), with the city he first presents to his interlocutors as the “true,” “truthful,” or “healthy” city. The early part is ignored by people who like to dismiss the work as just another, albeit perhaps the earliest, fascist political treatise. It is this part of the work, however, that may hold an important key to interpreting the rest.

The Republic does not actually start out as a political treatise. The subject at the beginning of the work is the nature of a just person. Socrates is having dinner at the home of a friend, Polemarchus. There are quite a few other guests as well, including Plato’s two brothers, Glaucion and Adelimanus. They are all there in the port district of Athens, a place known as a hotbed of democratic sentiments, to observe a new religious festival in honor of the Thracian goddess Bendis. Cephalus, Polemarchus’s father and a man well advanced in age, is there, and he and Socrates quickly become absorbed in a discussion on the sort of wisdom that comes with age.

Cephalus observes that many of his friends complain of the hardships associated with old age. He asserts, however, that a person’s character determines how pleasant or unpleasant are both his youth and the last days of his life. Toward the end of their lives, he goes on to argue, people begin to remember the tales told about how the unjust are made to suffer for their injustices in Hades, and they begin to fear that this will be their own fate, fear it to the extent, he continues, that “the man who finds many unjust deeds in his life often even wakes from his sleep in a fright as children do, and lives in anticipation of evil” (330e7–9).

The discussion turns to definitions of justice as it characterizes the behavior of individuals. This discussion takes up the whole of the first book of the Republic and part of Book Two. As so often happens in the Platonic dialogues, however, Socrates and his interlocutors are unable to arrive at a satisfactory definition of the concept they are attempting to define. Thrasymachus, a professional rhetorician and teacher of rhetoric, goes so far as to suggest that there
really is no such thing as justice in the traditional sense; that contrary to popular belief, it is not a good in itself but is practiced only when it is unavoidable or only for its rewards, which are more easily gained by the appearance of justice than by the real thing.

Socrates is entreated to defend justice against such attacks and though he protests he is unequal to the task he says that he feels "it is wrong to stand idly by when I hear justice coming under attack, and not come to its defense" (368c2–3).

"The enquiry we are undertaking," asserts Socrates,

is not a simple matter. If you ask me it requires sharp eyesight. And since we are not clever people, I think we should conduct our search in the same sort of way as we would if our eyesight were not very good, and we were told to read some small writing from a bit of a distance away, and then one of us realized that a larger copy of the same writing apparently was to be found somewhere else, on some larger surface. We would regard it as a stroke of luck, I think, to be able to read the larger letters first, and then turn our attention to the smaller ones, to see they really did say the same thing. (368c10–d9)

Thus they turn from defining a just person to defining a just city. Socrates starts by looking at what he asserts is the theoretical origin of a city. The origin of the city lies, he asserts, "in the fact that we are not, any of us, self-sufficient, we have all sorts of needs" (369b5–6). He constructs a hypothetical city that will meet people’s needs. He does this step by step, starting with basic needs such as those for food, clothing and shelter, and progressing to more esoteric needs such as those for olives, wine, and exotic cheeses. The city Socrates describes comprises farmers, carpenters, weavers, cobblers, blacksmiths and "a whole lot of skilled workers of that kind" (370b6–7), cattlemen, shepherds, and other herdsman. The city will also require merchants to secure from outside the city the things the citizens require but that they cannot themselves produce, and sailors to transport these merchants to foreign lands and hired laborers to help with the heavier sorts of physical tasks.

People can live very well in such a city, asserts Socrates. They will drink wine after their meals "wearing garlands on their heads, and singing the praises of the gods, they will live quite happily with one another. They will have no more children than they can afford, and they will avoid poverty and war" (372b6–c2).

Glaucion asserts, however, that the city is not yet finished, that the citizens would not be able to enjoy the full variety of dishes contemporary Athenians enjoy and that "[i]f they are going to eat in comfort, they should lie on couches [and] eat off tables" (372d5–e).

"I see," replied Socrates, in what could be argued is one of the most important sections of the work:
So we are not just looking at the origin of a city, apparently. We are looking at the origin of a luxurious city. Maybe that is not such a bad idea. If we look at that sort of city too, we may perhaps see the point where justice and injustice come into existence in cities. I think the true city—the healthy version, as it were—is the one we have just described but let’s look also at the swollen and inflamed city if that is what you prefer. (372e3–9, emphasis added)

The rest of the Republic is taken up with the organization and management of this “swollen and inflamed city” where poetry and music are censored and the citizens are systematically deceived about both the origin of the city and how it is run.

This portion of the Republic is better known than the first part, so I won’t take up space summarizing it here. It is interesting to note that although the plan had been to return to the discussion of what constitutes a just individual after having identified justice in a city, the discussion never really does return to this topic. It does turn to a consideration of what separates the philosopher, the proposed ruler of this inflamed city, from the masses, or the true philosopher from one who merely professes to be a philosopher. But these characteristics, for example, ethical virtue and a love of learning and wisdom and truth, would make the philosopher entirely unsuited to rule the city that occupies so much of the discussion in the Republic.

So what is the point? Is it that too much luxury threatens justice; that consumer societies such as ours are doomed to be characterized by systematic deception and manipulation of the citizens by those in power? That such deception and manipulation are “just” to the extent that they appear necessary to insure order in such a society?

Much is made of Socratic irony. It can hardly be denied that irony is one of Socrates’ favorite literary devices. The difficulty is identifying precisely where Socrates, or Plato, is being ironical. One relatively uncontroversial instance would appear to come very early in the dialogue when Socrates asserts that he and his interlocutors are unable to arrive at a satisfactory definition of a just individual because they “are not very clever people.” Not very clever? Of course they were clever people, among the cleverest people in Athens during what is considered to be the “cleverest” period of the “cleverest” culture the world has probably ever known. This reference would be so patently absurd to Plato’s contemporaries that rather than subtly ironical it was undoubtedly intended by Plato to be directly humorous.12

But if Socrates interlocutors in the Republic are among the cleverest people of a clever time, why couldn’t they figure out what justice was in an individual? And if they couldn’t figure out what constituted a just person, what hope is there that they could figure out what constituted a just city? That is, if they couldn’t read the fine print, how would they know where that same text was written larger? And indeed it appears that they do misjudge where it is written larger.
Socrates enlarges the script with his example of a “healthy” city, but this example was rejected in favor of the “spoiled” city. It could be argued further that the failure of the discussion to return to the original issue—that is, what constituted a just person—suggests that Plato did not think the true nature of social or political justice had been clearly identified by the end of the Republic.

So what is the point of the work? Is Socrates playing an elaborate joke on his interlocutors as he is wont to do in other dialogues? And if this city that has so captured the imagination of fascists throughout history was an elaborate joke, is there anything to be learned from the Republic as a whole?

One thing that might perhaps be learned from the Republic is that there is a point at which the cost of luxuries becomes too high, that a state (one should remember that the “cities” of ancient Greece were actually states) that exists primarily for the purpose of guaranteeing its citizens, or even some portion of its citizenry, a lifestyle characterized by a surfeit of material goods is doomed to become “diseased and inflamed.” Of course I have stacked the deck a bit by using the term “surfeit” of goods rather than some more neutral term like “abundance.” Even Glaucon acknowledges, however, that the goods he suggests introducing into the city are to satisfy people’s wants rather than their needs.

Perhaps part of the message we ought to take from the Republic is that not everything people desire is actually good for them, and that it makes no more sense to slavishly seek to satisfy all the immediate desires of adults than it makes to slavishly endeavor to satisfy all the immediate desires of children. Perhaps part of the message we ought to take from the Republic is that materialistic societies inevitably become unjust or at least unappealing to those of democratic sentiments.

III

However one chooses to interpret the Republic, the suggestion that Plato was seriously proposing that what he explicitly identifies as a “swollen” or “inflamed” city was an ideal to strive for seems untenable. Such a suggestion could only spring from a singular lack of sympathy with the author. That observation brings us to the crux of what is often considered the problem of indirect communication—it relies, for its effectiveness, on a certain sympathy on the part of the reader.

There is a word game that illustrates this situation very nicely, called “Taboo.” The game is played in teams, usually of two people, one who gives clues to the identity of a hidden word and the other who attempts to guess this identity based on these clues. What makes the game challenging is that each card on which the words are written also lists a series of “taboo” words—words that cannot be used in the clues. If, for example, the word were “marriage,” the
taboo words might include “wedding,” “matrimony,” “nuptials,” “bride,” and “groom.” The clue giver must then find some way of communicating the identity of the hidden word without resorting to any of these taboo words. A clue for “marriage” might thus be something like: “the state where two people are joined together in perpetual union.”

The clues are often quite creative and this makes the game entertaining to observe as well as to play. What becomes apparent relatively quickly is that the better one knows one’s partner, the more successful will the team be. Siblings, close friends, and spouses make the best teams, people who know each other well, people who know how the other thinks. I have seen such pairs race through a stack of cards with only a word or two for each. These displays often appear astonishingly close to mind reading. Strangers, on the other hand, or people only recently acquainted, usually make wretchedly miserable teams.

What is clear is that the more sympathy one has with someone who is trying to communicate something indirectly, the more likely one will be to get it. Kierkegaard knew this. This is undoubtedly why he so often speaks of his “reader” in the singular. He appeals, just at it would appear Plato appeals, to someone reflective enough to have similar concerns.

Nowhere is the assumption of a similarity of concerns more important than in the writings of Kierkegaard’s pseudonym, Johannes Climacus. Climacus’s concern, in Kierkegaard’s Fragments and Postscript, is not whether Christianity is true—a concern which according to thinkers such as Pascal, everyone ought to have, and to thinkers such as William James, everyone in the West ought to have. Climacus’s concern is with how one becomes a Christian and this is an issue that will interest only those who have in some sense already committed themselves to the view that Christianity is true.

Fragments proposes that we can become Christian only by relating ourselves to the god in time—which is to say God in the instant (Œiblik)—and that this can be achieved only through faith rather than through any particular temporal position relative to the historical phenomenon of the incarnation. Postscript elaborates upon the point by examining the ways people have confused this task with a problem of historical scholarship or speculative philosophy. Most of Postscript is devoted, however, to examining how one becomes truly “subjective.” That is, most of Postscript presents what Hannay calls “the path to personality” (300), the path away from objective thought and toward subjective reflection in the sense of the subject’s reflection on his own situation in an attempt to determine his position relative to what he has committed himself, in some sense, to accepting as the truth. Postscript presents a reader with a desire to know himself and where he stands relative to this truth with a path of self-exploration, self-discovery, and self-understanding.

Postscript puts so much emphasis on subjectivity that it has actually been interpreted as championing a kind of subjectivism. Climacus, observes Hannay,
says that for a “subjective reflection” truth is a matter of appropriation, a matter of how one believes something, not whether some proposition adhered to is true or not. In contrast to objective reflection, in which... subjectivity vanishes along with its task, in the case of subjective reflection it is subjectivity that is left over and objectivity “the vanishing factor.” So it doesn’t really matter whether the what of the belief corresponds to facts “out there.” Indeed, as Climacus notoriously adds, “if only the how of [the] relationship is in the truth, the individual is in the truth even if he should happen to be related thus to untruth.” The highest truth available to an existing individual is “an objective uncertainty held fast in a most passionately inward appropriation.”

“That statement,” continues Hannay, “has been read as carte blanche legitimation of any zealously held point of view. But we should not forget that Postscript is a postscript to Fragments” (301). That is, the concern of Fragments is with how one becomes a Christian, not with how one becomes truly subjective. The point of Postscript, or one point of Postscript, is to show that the path to authentic subjectivity and the path to Christianity are the same, that authentic selfhood brings one before God or that as Kierkegaard explains, there is a how—genuine, in the sense of passionate subjectivity—that brings the what—God—along with it.

Unfortunately, Postscript was published pseudonymously by an author who does not claim to be Christian. This has posed such a problem for philosophers that the work has sometimes been dismissed as “nonsense.” Postscript is shot through with humor, which, when philosophers are able to recognize it as such, leads them to conclude that it cannot be making a serious point. To add to the confusion, Climacus, the pseudonymous author, Hannay observes, “recants the entire book. Indeed, in the postscript (Tillæg) to Postscript (‘for an understanding with the reader’) he not only ‘revokes’ the work but announces its ‘superfluosity’” (313). It’s bad enough that Fragments and Postscript were published pseudonymously, but then to have the pseudonymous author disavow any relation to their content had led some scholars to conclude that the works are nothing but an elaborate joke. A parody of speculative philosophy.

Hannay asserts, however, that it makes little sense to suppose Kierkegaard would spend “eight months of what he feared might be the last years of his life preparing a party trick he might never enjoy, and an untopical jest at that, since Hegel’s star had long been in the decline” (310). The book, observes Hannay, is not completely serious. “But serious enough to be saying something, and not saying it just to take it away again” (310). “The book is superfluous,” he explains, “because it has no life beyond the orbit of a reader who understands where it leads, and because the life it has only begins if the reader has the right kind of interest” (313).

The right kind of interest is not in whether Christianity is true. The right kind of interest is the subject’s interest in whether he is truly a Christian, which
is to say that it is the subject’s interest in whether he is living as he ought to be living. This is a kind of ethical interest that, when pursued consistently, gives a coherence to the subject’s existence, a coherence that is part of what one could call the subject’s “personality.” “Personality,” Hannay observes, “was a concept very much in the air, and Kierkegaard’s contribution was to give it a new twist by making his controversial notion of faith the unifying factor. What Postscript provides is an itinerary on the path to personality” (300).

“To be or to become the single individual, to prepare oneself in the only possible way for purification and redemption, by standing alone in a God relationship—that at least,” observes Hannay, “can stand as a not implausible corrective to the ‘parody’ reading” (312).

It is not surprising that many philosophers fail to appreciate that this is the most plausible interpretation of Postscript. What philosopher in his right mind is interested in perfection and redemption? These are subjective concerns, and philosophers today—if they have not always done so?—strive for objectivity."

IV

It is not necessary, however, to have precisely the same concerns as the author of a work one is trying to interpret in order properly, or at least productively, to identify what the author is trying to say. A certain sympathy with the author’s temperament—for example, an ability to recognize when he is being humorous—and concerns is all that is required. One needs, first and foremost, to employ the principle of charity—that is, to assume that the author is not a blithering idiot who contradicts himself at every turn, but an intelligent, reflective person who has come to some coherent insight about the nature of human existence that he would like to pass on to others. Second, one needs to have a particular interest in the class of concerns this insight would illuminate. If, for example, one’s interests (at least conscious interests) are overwhelmingly aesthetic, it is unlikely one will gain much insight into the message of a text whose message is essentially ethical.

There is no guarantee, of course, that one will succeed in understanding the message of a given text, even if one’s concerns are similar to those of the author. Such similarity only makes success more probable. This situation is complicated by the fact that one can never really be certain that one’s concerns are similar to those of a particular author. Strauss may have thought he and Plato were kindred spirits. The incoherencies, however, of the interpretation of Plato’s Republic as advocating the use of noble lies, the apparent dependence of such an interpretation on the failure to recognize the irony and even humor with which the work is laden, suggest that it is not an interpretation that would appeal to someone whose sensibilities were similar to Plato’s. Was this really Strauss’s view of Plato? It is a widely held view. Even if this was Strauss’s view
of Plato, that does not necessarily mean that Strauss was himself a proponent of the use of “noble lies.” Perhaps Strauss was intentionally vague on this point in order to prevent his students from simply slavishly adopting his own view. Perhaps his intention was to get his students to decide for themselves what they believed on this point.

Plato’s indirection leaves it to every reader to decide for himself or herself whether he actually advocated the use of “noble lies” in the Republic. It leaves open as well the question of whether anyone who interprets the work in this way shares the sensitivity with the Plato that would be requisite to understanding what it was he really meant to say. That does not mean, however, that there is no fact of the matter, that Plato was not saying anything in particular, that all interpretations of his works are equally good.

Plato may not have known, as he was writing the Republic, exactly what point or points he wanted to make in the work, just as Kierkegaard did not always know the precise significance of his own works. It is common for authors to speak of the feeling of being guided by some force greater than themselves, of being mere instruments through which the universe makes its own points. We may never have a definitive interpretation of the Republic, but that does not mean that some interpretations are not better than others. Even if Plato thought the human condition so miserable that swollen and inflamed cities were all we would ever have, the suggestion that he presented the city described in the Republic as an ideal for which to strive seems untenable.

Strauss, it has been argued, actually endeavored to be obtuse. He observed that stating one’s points directly could be dangerous. He agreed that it had in fact been so dangerous throughout various periods of human history that an entire tradition of obscurantist writing had developed. This tradition, he believed, obscured the true, or “esoteric” message of a text beneath a more obvious “exoteric” message. Strauss appears to have been an elitist who believed that the mass of humanity would be too simpleminded and unreflective to appreciate that what a particular text appeared to say may not be what the author actually intended to communicate. This would insulate the author from the recriminations of the mob if it did not like his views. That is, the views would be presented in such a way that the mob wouldn’t get them.

Kierkegaard has sometimes been interpreted as a kind of nineteenth-century Leo Strauss, that is, as someone who addresses his works to “my reader” in the singular, because he does not want to be understood by the multitudes. Kierkegaard may well have been an intellectual elitist. Hannay’s biography makes clear, however, that Kierkegaard thinks of his reader in the singular not because he wants to be misunderstood by the masses, but because he is pessimistic about being understood by the masses. The obstacles to understanding the import of Kierkegaard’s works are not ones designed to fell the dimwitted. They are ethical obstacles Kierkegaard clearly believes are built into any attempt to help others along the path to personality or to authentic subjectivity in the
sense of the self that is transparent before God. We could speculate that perhaps this pessimism came on Kierkegaard as the result of personal experience or that he may have started from such a position to the extent that scripture asserts that the path, or pass, to authentic selfhood in this sense is too narrow for most people. The answer is probably a combination of both.

There is, as Hannay observes, a kind of “anti-intellectualism” in some of Kierkegaard’s works. This is not because Kierkegaard, who undoubtedly was something of an intellectual elitist, had contempt for reason as such, but because as Hannay makes clear, he so often saw it masquerading as a substitute for subjectivity—the one thing necessary not merely to make it possible to become a Christian but to make the interest in becoming a Christian make any kind of sense. The reason so many scholars have been confused, alienated, and even infuriated by Kierkegaard’s works is not because they are intellectually impenetrable but because they are subjectively, or ethically, demanding. A proper interpretation of the content—at least in a general sense—of Kierkegaard’s works is not difficult for a reader who is not offended by the question of whether he is living as he should. Indeed, I have met many people who are not philosophers who appear to have a profound grasp and appreciation of Kierkegaard’s thought. One of the chief joys, in my experience, of being a Kierkegaard scholar is seeing, every once in a while, someone’s eyes light up when they hear I work on Kierkegaard. This has happened to me at dinner parties, political protests, and poetry readings. “You study Kierkegaard,” people will exclaim. “Oh, I love him!” The rest of the evening will then be spent in delightful, elevating conversation with this kindred soul.22

These people are Kierkegaard’s “individuals.” They understand the works not because they are particularly intelligent (though many of them are indeed exceptionally intelligent and anyone in our culture who has even heard of Kierkegaard is at least inclined to be better educated than the average person), but because they are not offended by the suggestion that perhaps they are not living as they should be living, but actually are drawn to it as was Kierkegaard.

It is tempting to consider that Plato may have been drawn to this question as well. Why else would he have taken such pains to present otherwise clever people as apparently clueless when it came to what it meant to be just? It is clear, in any case, that he was drawn to the question of whether we were living collectively as we should, and he was certainly smart enough to see that the questions of how the individual ought to live and how people ought to live together in communities are inextricably linked. Perhaps human existence was as mysterious to Plato as it was to Kierkegaard. Certainly it was mysterious to Socrates—a fact that Plato, his student and admirer, dutifully and carefully recorded. In any case, Plato’s works carry the suggestion of what Kierkegaard would call a religious temperament to the extent that they are shot through with humor. Those who interpret Plato as a proponent of “noble lies” can do so only by ignoring the humor in the Republic and only on the assumption that Plato
thought he had the answer to how we should live all figured out. Such people forget that the Republic is a dramatic work, that Plato does not even appear in it as a character. They do not approach it as one should a dramatic work—that is, with the hope of finding edification in it, but as a didactic work with the expectation of finding straightforward rules of how to order a state. Such a sensibility would appear far removed from Plato’s own and thus unlikely to produce a helpful interpretation of the work.

All this is just speculation though. Plato left us little in the way of a key that would help us to unlock the mystery of his often mysterious texts. Our situation with respect to Kierkegaard is more fortunate because we have a wealth of material on which to draw in interpreting Kierkegaard’s works. Hannay has availed himself amply of this material. Many scholars, including myself, have eschewed “biographical readings” of Kierkegaard. Hannay’s book makes clear, however, that the aversion should not be to biographical readings as such but to the often perverse readings of Kierkegaard’s works that have earlier passed for biographical ones. Hannay’s reading, on the other hand, is illuminating because it gives us not merely an interpretation that makes sense of the works, but one that helps us to make sense of the man. It does not answer every question raised by the works, but no single interpretation would, because over and above the author’s perhaps not fully formed intentions is the “more” of providence (or that force that through the pen fuse drives the author).