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The Other Heifer

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THE OTHER HEIFER

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TO KARL HUMM

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ABSTRACT

This thesis will work to illuminate the significant similarities between Johann Georg Hamann and Søren Kierkegaard; a relationship that is often referred but rarely attended to. The lines of correspondence are both hidden and pronounced in their early work—Hamann in *Socratic Memorabilia* and Kierkegaard in the *Concept of Irony*. Peculiarly, both Hamann and Kierkegaard employ the ambiguous figure of Socrates in order to impede the rush of philosophy towards absolute knowledge. This is to say that the two writers discern a move towards a world ordering morality that tramples over the perspective of the subject. Hamann and Kierkegaard will counter this move towards the grounding of philosophy into a universal system by re-casting Socrates in an ambiguous light; a mediating figure strung between ideality and actuality. Hamann and Kierkegaard both use Socrates in order to open religious dimensions in the currents of modern philosophy. Hamann and Kierkegaard share common foundations (Lutheranism), common objectives (elevating experience over knowledge), and common vehicles in their argumentation (Socrates and Socratic ignorance).

INTRODUCTION

There is a madness which is a divine gift; the greatness of blessings have come to us in madness. For prophecy is a madness, and the prophetess at Delphi and the priestess at Dodona when out of their senses have conferred great benefits on Hellas, both in public and in private life, but when in their senses few or none. And must I also tell you how the Sibyl and other inspired persons have given to many an intimation of the future which has saved them from falling?...And as the act of the prophet is more perfect and venerable than the act of the augur, by so much the more, as the ancients testify, is madness superior to reflection, for reflection is only human, but madness springs from the gods.¹

The above text is a noted example whereby the classical philosophical tradition acknowledges the role of prophecy and madness in human reflection. Why? Because as Abraham Heschel writes, “Madness is man’s desperate attempt to reach transcendence, to rise beyond himself...That the great fathers of intellectualism—Democritus, Socrates, Plato, whom we revere as models of sanity—should have expressed profound appreciation of insanity is a powerful expression of their awareness of the deficiency of pure intellectualism.”²

For Socrates, to know oneself is the highest knowledge, a knowledge that indicates the radical finitude of the human life in light of the infinite. The fact that Socrates regarded ignorance highly is not unknown, but that Socrates never sought to deliver one from the state of ignorance appears to have been overlooked by those engaging in efforts to make metaphysics certain and universal. Such claims to make human reason the absolute have thwarted the essential aspect of Socrates, namely his

¹ Phaedrus, 244.

² Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: HarperCollins): 499, 501.

madness or genius. For madness always demonstrates the futility in absolute reason. The madness of Socrates is precisely what two seminal thinkers of modernity highlight in order to humble philosophy's hubris towards absolute knowledge: Johann Georg Hamann and Søren Kierkegaard.

CHAPTER ONE: JOHANN GEORG HAMANN'S *SOCRATIC MEMORABILIA*

Johann Georg Hamann provides the first substantial attack on the Enlightenment's belief in the autonomy of reason.³ Hamann questions the claim concerning the impartiality of reason and its capacity to understand all human phenomena. Hamann will argue that reason has its limitations and that existence, as understood by Socrates, implies an inaccessibility concerning ultimate grounds. The stylistic verve that Hamann provides in his esoteric essay *Socratic Memorabilia* provides insight into his novel philosophical approach to ultimate questions concerning the human experience of knowing and one's relation to reality. This is to say that it is difficult to find another thinker who approaches philosophy with the humoristic perspective that is evident in Hamann. For some, this has contributed to Hamann's appearing as the paradigmatic irrationalist of the modern era. For others, Hamann's critique implicitly carries great moral sentiment concerning the role of human possibility and the subject's finitude in the shadows of absolute reason becoming incarnate. Regardless, for any serious student of modern philosophy Hamann should not be passed over. He provided the groundwork for subsequent continental thinkers and their critique of the impulse towards absolute knowledge over and against existence.

In his study of Hamann, W.M. Alexander sees Hamann as attempting a "reconception of the nature of knowledge."⁴ This reconception is unique in that it accepts, from a religiously invested point of view, the challenge of modern philosophy—i.e. the abstraction of knowledge away from a religious perspective—by taking to task modern philosophy on its own grounds. It does so by using Socrates. In this chapter I will examine how Hamann responds to what he perceives as a trend of reductionism in rationalism's aim towards absolute knowledge by contending for the awareness of the limitations of knowledge in light of the inaccessibility of human existence.

³ Beiser views Hamann as the most influential critic of the enlightenment: "Hamann was the father of the *Sturm und Drang*, the intellectual movement that grew up in Germany during the 1770's in reaction against the *Aufklärung*. His influence on the *Sturm und Drang* is beyond dispute, and readily traceable." See Beiser, 16.

⁴ W. M. Alexander, *J.G. Hamann: Philosophy and Faith* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966): 199.

I. Pietism and Rationalism

We will begin with an overview of the milieu surrounding Hamann and the two forces that contribute to the debate over reason: pietism and rationalism. Both movements are addressing similar philosophical/religious questions such as the ontological problem of evil, the grounds for a theological epistemology, and the problem of authority.

Pietism came to prominence in the middle of the seventeenth century and was a part of German culture throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁵ The rise of pietism can be attributed to various Lutherans, most notably are Phillip Jakob Spener, Jacob Boehme, Jacob Hermansz and Kaspar Schwenkfeld, all of whom challenged the rigidity of Lutheran orthodoxy. The pietists regarded Christian faith as a living relationship between man and God. For the Pietists the radicalism of the Christian faith was its ability to transform the inner life of the individual so that a person could thereby construct a moral and virtuous life. In short, the pietists argued for a moral life over an intellectual life. However, as noted by Allen Wood, “the social and political tendencies of were progressive, even radical.”⁶ Pietism upheld the belief that all people were capable of becoming priests and their focus was not so much with the visible church but the invisible.

Pietism concentrated heavily on reading the scriptures directly rather than relying upon orthodox theology.⁷ In order to procure a meaningful life, then, one must look within, rather than from without, to find God’s law. Terry Pinkard explains the pietists move to an inward life in the following passage:

Seeking God’s perfection in the world meant reflecting on God’s love for the world, which, in turn, gradually began to undermine the gloomy picture of human nature presented by some Christian thinkers (particularly, the Calvinists) in favor of a view that held that the world’s imperfections were capable of a sort of redemption in the here and now, not in some afterlife. It was, on that line of emerging thought, therefore the duty of the Christians to reform that world in light

⁵ See Allen Wood’s article, “Rational Theology, Moral Faith, and Religion” in *The Cambridge Companion to Kant*, ed. Paul Guyer (Cambridge, U.K: Cambridge University Press, 1992):394.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 394.

⁷ It is important to note however, that the Pietists belief in the supremacy of scripture did not preclude their active and serious engagement with the philosophical currents during their time.

of God's love, and in order to do that, Christians had to turn away from orthodoxy, even from the intellectualistic theological treatments of Christianity, and focus on the truth within their hearts in order to realize God's kingdom on earth.⁸

This passage demonstrates that pietists were not sectarian. The question will become: what exactly is their alternative to reason? The Pietists acknowledged the imperfections of the world and therefore understood that one could not have an absolute relation to the world through reason, but insisted that another way of relating to the world was needed.

The way in which the individual relates to reality is precisely Hamann's concern and this concern—the imperfections of the world—will drive Hamann to argue for another way of knowing, namely a Socratic way of knowing. What will lie at the center of Hamann's program is a religious and philosophical argument that desires to address the ontological status of man's relation to the world. The fascinating aspect of this argument is its religious and philosophical dimensions, which at times appear to overlap.⁹

The other side of the debate within the Enlightenment was rationalism. Rationalism was interested in constructing a theology that comported with reason in order to dispel immature thinking that relies upon supernatural beliefs. Paul Tillich defines rational theology as “a theology which through arguments for the existence of God, and the like, attempts to build a universally acceptable theology by pure reason.”¹⁰ Furthermore, the value of philosophy, for the rationalists, lies in its utility. Philosophical inquiry is useful in its ability to perfect the individual. This is to say that philosophy took on a religious role through its certainty that man was capable of comprehending God. This absolute knowledge served, it was said, the common good of society by providing

⁸ Terry Pinkard, *German Philosophy 1760-1860: The Legacy of Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002): 9.

⁹ Beiser acknowledges the Lutheranism of Hamann's philosophical arguments: “It was Hamann's mission to defend the spirit of Luther when the Aufklärung threatened to destroy it. Hamann never made any disguise of his great debt to Luther, and he explicitly affirmed his wish to see a restoration of his master's doctrines. There are indeed many Lutheran themes that reappear in Hamann's writings: the authority of the Bible, the importance of a personal relationship to God, the denial of freedom of will, the super-rationality of faith, and the necessity of grace... Rather than simply reasserting his doctrines, like so many pietists of his age, Hamann defended Luther by exploiting the latest ideas of modern philosophy, especially the skepticism of David Hume.” See Beiser, pg.17

¹⁰ Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought*, pg.314

moral stability. Frederick Copleston describes rationalism's connection with religion as continuing the project to secularize the outlook of the Protestant Reformation: "The true service of God is to be found in the ordinary forms of social life...progress and individual success in this world are the marks of divine favour."¹¹ Thus the spheres of faith and knowledge become homogenized in the project of rationalism in order to maintain the autonomy of reason as a universal governing principle.

The focus of the rationalists was to build a philosophical system from both traditional scholasticism and the new sciences, whereas the pietists built upon a revealed theology. The primary representative of rationalism was Christian Wolff.¹² The intention for Wolff was to establish the authority of reason in all walks of life: political, social, moral and religious. Wolff, like many rationalists, desired to ground reason outside of experience in *a priori* truths that could extend into every domain of human activity. This extension would threaten the role of faith in pietistic quarters that saw the deification of reason as leading toward atheism because of the fundamental reduction of a transcendent God to the immanent domain of human faculties. In order to prevent this from occurring the pietists would argue that reason has its limits, namely that it cannot extend beyond objects of the senses. It was the setting of this hostile relationship between reason and faith that surrounds the development of Hamann's thinking evidenced in *Socratic Memorabilia*.

II. Hamann: Introduction

W.M. Alexander provides a good account of Hamann's formal training at the bequest of both pietists and rationalists.¹³ Hamann studied law at the University of Königsberg. While there he was influenced by two professors: Martin Knutzen and Karl Rappolt. Martin Knutzen (1713-51) was known for his attempts to combine the rationalism of Wolff with Christian pietism. What influenced Hamann the most was Knutzen's teaching that the physical influences may influence the mind. Karl Rappolt (1702-53) was the other professor with whom Hamann developed a friendship. Even

¹¹ Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy: Book Two*. New York: Doubleday, 1985, 103.

¹² Immanuel Kant's pre-critical days were mostly taken up with Wolff's metaphysical system. See Copleston, pg. 106

¹³ See Alexander, pp. 2-3

though Rappolt was an outspoken opponent of pietism it was his poetry at the time that attracted Hamann. Hamann grew up in a pietists family but, during his academic years Hamann strayed from Pietism and became a rationalist. Hamann would not reconsider pietism until his dramatic conversion. It was this conversion that served as the catalyst for his authorship.

The story of Hamann's conversion goes as follows: Hamann was working in London as a diplomat for the House of Berens (the family of one of his closest friends, Christoph Berens). His mission as a diplomat was a failure. Following multiple catastrophes Hamann sequestered himself into a room with little resources other than a meager diet and the Bible. During his reading of the Bible Hamann had a mystical experience where he felt God communicated directly to him concerning his sinful nature:

On the evening of March 31, 1758, he read from the fifth book of Moses: "The earth opened the mouth of Cain to receive the blood of Abel." Reflecting upon this passage, Hamann felt his heart pound, his hands tremble. In a convulsive flood of tears he realized that he was the murderer of his brother, "the murderer of God's only begotten son," Christ himself. He began to feel the spirit of God working through him, revealing "the mystery of love" and "the blessing of faith in Christ... After hearing the voice of God, and after reading the Bible in a personal and allegorical way, Hamann came to believe that God was always communicating to him."¹⁴

Frederick Beiser views Hamann's conversion as the source for the *Sturm und Drang* movement that set into motion Romanticism. Beiser believes that Hamann's experience had serious philosophical consequences that cannot be discarded from the annals of philosophical history. It was his conversion and the aftermath of his return to pietism that eventually led Hamann to begin an authorship. The intent of his authorship would confront the problem of reason in the Enlightenment, and thus create a clear watershed in the challenge of the autonomy of reason.

Prior to Hamann's publication of *Socratic Memorabilia* he met with two of his contemporaries, Christoph Berens and Immanuel Kant. The purpose of the meeting was

¹⁴ Beiser, pg. 20

for Berens and Kant to re-convert Hamann back to Rationalism. The attempt failed. Not long after the meeting Hamann sent a letter to Kant that, according to O'Flaherty, served as a prelude to *Socratic Memorabilia*:

Most honored *Magister*: I do not blame you for being my rival and that you have enjoyed your new friend for whole weeks, while I only see him for a few scattered hours, like a phantom or a clever informant...I shall, however, bear a grudge because your friend insulted me in introducing you into my solitude...If you are a Socrates, and your friend want to be Alcibiades, then you must need for your own education a genius...Allow me therefore to be called your genius as long as it takes me to write this letter.¹⁵

The July 27th letter sets the stage for *Socratic Memorabilia* as it defends the role of faith outside of reason and cast Hamann in the role of a prophet who contends against the priestly class and their systematic approach to absolute knowledge. Beiser interprets the letter by stating the following, "if Kant is Socrates and Berens is Alcibiades, then Hamann is the genius who speaks through Socrates."¹⁶ In response to this attempt to re-convert Hamann to the Enlightenment, Hamann, then, had to show his audience that reason has its limits. This meeting between Berens, Kant and Hamann is a beginning point for the counter Enlightenment movement and it is interesting to note that at its initial stage the figure of Socrates plays the role of challenger to the sovereignty of reason.

While on one hand *Socratic Memorabilia* can be read as a typical religious diatribe against a faithless intellectualism, on the other hand, it contains a complex philosophical message. Hamann seeks to counter the Enlightenment's presuppositions concerning the hegemony of reason by casting Socrates in the role of its main challenger. In other words, Hamann moves to counter the philosopher's program to situate faith under the domain of reason by revisiting the philosopher's hero, Socrates. Thus, this essay engages a philosophical audience using key philosophical themes concerning the limits of reason.

¹⁵ Hamann's letter to Kant on July 27th 1759, See Manfred Kuehn's *Kant: A Biography*, pg. 119

¹⁶ Beiser, pg. 23

III. Overview of Hamann's Socratic Memorabilia

In the introduction of *Socratic Memorabilia* Hamann challenges the Enlightenment's approach to the history of philosophy; according to Hamann, the rationalist approaches the history of philosophy by way of abstraction, giving primary interest to conceptual history, and thereby passes over the unique situation of the philosopher, Socrates. For Hamann, this shortcoming of modern philosophy is linked to its reading of history through abstraction and the impulse that it exhibits toward absolute knowledge to the exclusion of cultural, historical, and other existential settings. In short, Hamann questions the rationalist's extracting the essence of Socrates from his epoch without considering his particular existential situation. For Hamann, one ought to engage the past with a "little enthusiasm and superstition."¹⁷ This, Hamann believes, is best found in Aristophanes' depiction of Socrates: "The artisan (Aristophanes) was the first to have the idea of writing down the conversations of Socrates. The latter perhaps recognized himself better in them than in those of Plato, upon the reading of which he is supposed to have asked in surprise, "What does this young man intend to make of me?"¹⁸ Hamann suggests that the view of the comedic, the less philosophically involved, might be more apt at attaining the genuine Socrates than the professional philosopher, Plato. In the end, Hamann will argue that the Enlightenment is working from its own particularities and that it has no justification in assuming reason's impartiality.

The primary critique that Hamann gives in the second section, and in the entirety of the essay, is that the superior status allotted to reason is not justified from a Socratic point of view. For Hamann, the elevation of reason is an ironic conclusion for the rationalist in that they began their philosophical inquiry with an affinity for Socrates and Socratic ignorance, and yet they make known their desire to ground knowledge in reason. The contradiction for Hamann in the rationalist's Socratic existence is that Socrates remained ignorant and this is precisely the genius of Socrates: that he knew that he knew nothing.¹⁹

¹⁷ S.M., pg. 63

¹⁸ *ibid*, pg. 65

¹⁹ *ibid*, pg. 70

III. Hamann's Socratic Critique

Hamann begins his critique with an attack concerning the Enlightenment methodology in reading the history of philosophy. According to Hamann, the historical method represented by the Enlightenment produces an image of philosophy contrary to the example demonstrated in the life and philosophy of Socrates:

From the judgments I have passed on all these honorable and fine essays concerning a critical system of the history of philosophy, it is to be concluded as more than probable that I have read none of them, but seek merely to imitate the verve and tone of the scholarly crowd, and to flatter by imitation those on whose behalf I am writing. Meanwhile I believe more firmly that, if one had studied or knew how to study the fate of this name or word, philosophy, according to the coloring of the times, minds, races, and peoples, not as a scholar or philosopher even, but as an idle spectator of their Olympic games, “standing off like a painter,” our philosophy would necessarily have another form.²⁰

Strikingly, this passage suggests that Hamann is calling for a more objective approach to philosophy. Hamann is implying that if one were to engage history from a perspective absent of an utilitarian aim, i.e. objectively as an idle spectator, a different form of philosophy would be evident, namely a philosophy that would take into account all facets of the human experience and experience in general. This is to say that Hamann is interested in the situations of Socrates: the particularities of Socrates' life will open up multiple views from which one can observe the Socratic life, hence the “standing off”. What Hamann seems to be implying here is the need to be absent of scholarly objectives in the re-telling of history. Moreover, for Hamann, there is a reason for this criticism: the polemics of Hamann concerning the fate of the history of philosophy functions more specifically to draw attention to Socrates for explicit philosophical and religious purposes. Socrates is that unique individual that mediates between reflection and madness.

²⁰ S.M., pg. 63

In the introduction Hamann uses various words and pointers to divine messengers and prophetic figures to re-introduce Socrates as a revelatory figure: “That godly men did exist among the heathen, and that we should not despise the cloud of these witnesses, that heaven has anointed them as its messengers and interpreters, and consecrated them to precisely that vocation among their people which the prophets had among the Jews.”²¹ Hamann is interested in asking the question about how one should study history so that the object is more lifelike and therefore morally instructive.²² The project of rationalism, according to Hamann, has neglected the existential aspect of knowledge. This aspect of knowledge is that which opens up the finite subject to his or her intrinsic finitude. This chapter will work through Socrates’ prophetic message as the disclosure where one comes to terms with the vanity of knowledge and the finitude of humanity: Socratic ignorance.

Hamann shows the depth of his criticism by suggesting that there are distinct aspects of history (and philosophy) that are impregnable to the reach of reason: “But perhaps all history is more mythology than this philosopher thinks... a riddle which cannot be solved unless we plow with another heifer than our reason.”²³ Hamann is calling upon modern philosophy to open up other ways of discerning events and ideas. Hamann believes that the certainty inherent in rationalism precludes the objective thinker from relating to his object because of the rationalists preoccupation with a conceptual history. This exclusive approach to intellectualism lacks the depth needed in order to plumb the existential message concerning self-knowledge that is exemplified in Socrates’ project. Hamann emphasizes various aspects of Socrates’ life: Socrates as a sculptor²⁴; his sensuality²⁵, etc. These examples show Hamann’s repeated focus in taking up the human dimensions of Socrates in order to recover the essentials of Socratic thinking. In his dedication and introduction Hamann is concerned that an overuse of utilitarian

²¹ *Socratic Memorabilia*, pg. 64

²² It is clear that in Hamann’s argument against the objectification of history is a moral argument. Much has been written on the moral undertones present in Hamann’s critique of rationalism and ‘professionalism’ with regards to the study of philosophy and the ‘curious’ nature of Enlightenment thinkers. What lies underneath this curious nature, for Hamann, is a false ignorance where the curious individual only confesses their ignorance but does not adequately address their true ignorance because of their presuppositions and confidence in a dogmatic rationalism. See Alexander pg. 67-71

²³ *Ibid*, pg. 65

²⁴ *Ibid*, pg. 66

²⁵ *Ibid*, pg. 67

principles in the history of philosophy will inevitably distance the observer from his object and therefore continue the unaffected project that serves material aims rather than moral or spiritual aims.

Therefore, Hamann begins his critique concerning the project of grounding absolute reason in the affairs of the world, as evident in rationalism, by attacking the manner in which historians of philosophy recover Socrates. Hamann seeks to recover a different Socrates. Hamann remembers Socrates as one whose artisanship is similar to his thinking. This serves Hamann's program of presenting Socrates in a new light that will lay an emphasis on the fact that Socrates always remained open to situations to further instruct him concerning the nature of existence. Hamann opposes this to the rationalist reduction of history to mere curiosities. Alexander comments on this curiosity in the following: "To Hamann curiosity was the sickness of the age. This was so because its interests were not desperate; secretly it possessed its Deity. In matters of ultimacy it was well fixed. Thus it could become curious. In the *Socratic Memorabilia* he takes philosophy to task because it has only academic concern for its material."²⁶ The curiosity that Hamann is contending against is a curiosity that is at ease because of the grounding of absolute knowledge under the domain of human reason. Thus knowledge becomes reduced to human uses and Socrates becomes reduced for modern purposes.

For Hamann, there is an uncertainty in knowledge that can't be eliminated. In order for one to make claims concerning existence one must believe: "Our own existence and the existence of all things outside of us must be believed and cannot be determined in any other way."²⁷ The end of philosophy is skepticism, or ignorance, and this is the hallmark of Socratic thinking, the benchmark for all philosophy, according to Hamann. This form of radical skepticism is similar to Hume's empiricism.²⁸ Hamann notes there are radical differences between Socratic ignorance and a philosophy that proceeds by way of theoretical propositions. Theoretical propositions that rely upon proofs are subject to the testing of reality, and reality can cause a shattering experience where one disavows

²⁶ Alexander, pg. 68

²⁷ Ibid, pg. 73

²⁸ Alexander comments on the relation between Hume and Hamann in the following statement: "In the case of Hume, Hamann both appreciates his critical philosophy and rejects it. He appreciates the destruction of rationalism and the demonstration of 'faith'." Alexander then quotes an excerpt from a letter Hamann wrote to Herder, "Hume (over against Kant) is always my man because he at least honored the principium of faith and took it up in his system." See Alexander pg. 46

reason and confesses that he does not believe in the best of worlds: “Let fate thrust the greatest philosopher and poet into circumstances where they have a shattering experience; in such a case one disavows his reason and discloses to us that he does not believe in the best of worlds.”²⁹ This is to say that the faith demonstrated in the works of reason is ill suited to engage the existential difficulties of life. Hamann argues that the belief in absolute knowledge—the soul’s capacity to represent itself to the world through self-consciousness illuminating the external world—is beyond the scope of the human experience. If Socrates’ followers understood the degree of Socratic ignorance they would avoid placing truths in abstract pronouncements concerning the world and the individual, according to Hamann.

Hamann conceives the basis of knowing as mysterious and opaque as indicated in the following passage: “If our frame is hidden from us, because we were made in secret, because we are wrought in the depths of the earth, how much more are our concepts evolved in secret, and subject to being regarded as members of our understanding.”³⁰ In this passage Hamann argues that any faith in theoretical concepts ultimately lies in mystery as we are uncertain where these concepts originate. This will contribute later to Hamann’s concept of genius that is willing to accept death as mysterious and thereby to live in relation to it by relativizing all the particularities of human existence. The wisdom of Socrates is that he positions himself in such a place to aid the birthing of these concepts (notably, Hamann does not deny the existence of these concepts, for Hamann the question is how one should mediate these concepts authentically, i.e., recognizing their dependence, ultimately, on human finitude).³¹ What is important for Hamann is that one must become ignorant, like Socrates, in order to perceive these concepts. The claim for Socratic ignorance is a direct challenge to the reliance upon abstract categories as representative of reality.

In summary, the theme of the first section is how Socrates performs his philosophical task: Socrates acts a sculptor. In the introduction Hamann intimates how he reads Socrates. The following quote from the first section is an indication of how

²⁹ “Let fate thrust the greatest philosopher and poet into circumstances where they have a shattering experience; in such a case one disavows his reason and discloses to us that he does not believe in the best of worlds.” This passage undoubtedly refers to Leibniz’s *Theodicy*. See S.M. pg.74

³⁰ S.M. pg. 66

³¹ Ibid, pg. 66

Hamann will read Socrates as a primarily *negative* philosopher concerning the possibility of absolute knowledge: "... in this connection Socrates therefore imitated his father, a sculptor, who, by removing and cutting away what should not be in the wood, precisely in so doing, furthers the form of the image."³² Hamann insists that one's relationality to the world is negative, and that only through a rigorous critical approach can any positive be affirmed; thus the idea that through a "cutting away" can the form emerge (it is important to remember that for Hamann, as a pietist, the world lacks intelligibility due to the existence of evil). In other words, Hamann's challenging the hegemony of reason will produce an alternative to the program of reason. Hamann is not against reason, *per se*, but rather he seeks to give reason an appraisal of reason's limitations; a limitation that implies another way.

What is evident in this critique is that Hamann thought it vital to reintroduce Socrates in order to challenge the contemporary faith in reason. In order to accomplish this, however, Hamann considered it necessary to present a different Socrates; the Socrates of Aristophanes rather than Plato's Socrates. Hamann asserts that Aristophanes better understood his subject than Plato: "The artisan was the first to have the idea of writing down the conversations of Socrates. The latter perhaps recognized himself better in them than in those of Plato..."³³ This comment suggests the need for reconsidering the sole reliance upon philosophy as a means of comprehending Socrates, and history for that matter. Aristophanes' Socrates would critique the totalizing effect of reason and in its stead offer other means to relate to reality and truth.

IV. Hamann's Alternative to the Program of Reason

What did Hamann mean by the "other heifer"? The alternative to abstract theoretical propositions is Socratic ignorance. For Hamann Socratic ignorance is the awareness of human finitude. This awareness recognizes that there are limits to human wisdom and knowledge. The apex of this essay is the direct comparison Hamann makes between Socratic ignorance and its fruit of genius on the one hand, and Pauline concepts of repentance and the Holy Spirit on the other:

³² S.M., pg. 66

³³ *ibid.*, pg. 65

For the testimony which Socrates gave of his ignorance, therefore, I know no more honorable seal and at the same time no better key than the oracle of the great teacher of the Gentiles: If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if one loves God, one is known by him... But how the grain of all our natural wisdom must decay, must perish in ignorance³⁴, and how the life and being of a higher knowledge must spring forth newly created from this death, from this nothing.³⁵

The difficulty in this text is to determine how Socrates remains ignorant in light of gaining a “higher knowledge.” Is Hamann indicating that Socratic ignorance leads to a different way of knowing that is similar but distinct from theoretical reasoning, or, does Hamann intend his Socrates to remain ignorant even after receiving a new form of knowledge? The introduction to Socrates’ daimon directly follows Hamann’s comparison between Socratic ignorance and the Pauline message. Hamann states “the empty understanding of Socrates can become fruitful as well as the womb of a pure virgin.”³⁶ The implication here is that Socratic ignorance has its fruit in genius. The relation between ignorance and genius is an important distinction concerning the Hamann and Kierkegaard connection, and may be a departure point in their use of Socrates.

What is Hamann’s concept of daimon? Hamann offers little speculation whether it is a passion, spirit or a concept of mathematical ignorance.³⁷ To be sure, the genius works to keep Socrates asking; in other words to keep Socrates ignorant. In short, genius is the positive side of Socratic ignorance because of its receptivity to the givenness of reality. Genius, broadly defined, is able to perceive the fundamental opaqueness of reality; it can express the esoteric dimensions of reality. Strictly speaking, this aspect of reality is precisely the point that rationalism can not grasp because of its insistence that reality become accessible for “the common good.” Socratic ignorance is a descriptive statement concerning the mysteriousness of reality and maintains the authenticity of the mysterious. W.M. Alexander comments on Hamann’s conception of genius: “He is explained not in

³⁵ Ibid, pg. 74

³⁶ Ibid, pg. 75

³⁷ Hamann offers various theories concerning the nature of Socrates’ daimon, see *S.M.* pg. 75

terms of his knowledge, but of his ignorance, which to Hamann is his sensitivity (his nakedness and openness) to reality in which the divine Spirit can reveal truth through him.”³⁸ The genius is one’s relatedness to the creative power of God according to Hamann. It is in direct relation with the unfolding of reality unclouded by theoretical propositions.³⁹

The reality Hamann evokes is a reality that is always relative to the position the individual occupies. This concept of reality is spoken of in the following quote, “Like numbers, words derive their value from the position which they occupy, and their concepts are, like coins, mutable in their definitions and relations, according to time and place.”⁴⁰ Hamann views this relational truth as the way in which an interpreter must go about reading his text. The meaning of a text is dependent upon the position it holds with respect to the reader. The point of this example is to demonstrate that propositions are relative to the particularities of time and place. For example, Hamann writes that when Eve was told that she would be like God, this statement is different then when “Jehovah prophesies: Behold Adam has become like one of us.”⁴¹ Hamann is saying that words and propositions are subordinate to a variety of factors and can change accordingly. This, however, according to Hamann, is not discernable to the rationalist who has faith in his timeless propositions. What Hamann is calling for is a genuine recognition concerning the ambiguity of reality which therefore, requires humility with regards to reason’s capabilities.

The limits given to reason and the unbounded role of ignorance in Socratic thinking, for Hamann, open the door to genius. He is advocating an alternative to reason in the acquirement of truth, or reality, wanting to convey the necessity of ignorance in the vocation of Socrates, and therefore the vocation of philosophy in general. This indicates there is a role for the negative appropriation of knowledge in philosophy (ignorance) and moreover this negative aspect of thought is imperative in opening up ground for positive a positive relation (genius).

³⁸ Alexander, pg. 150

³⁹ Isaiah Berlin, in “The Magnus of the North”, acknowledges Hamann as a primary source for Romanticism and its concept of genius. According to Berlin, Hamann’s genius is not a “heaven storming irrationalist” but rather his genius is a master of participating with life. See Berlin, pg. 98

⁴⁰ Ibid, pg. 71

⁴¹ Ibid. pg. 72

The positive category, for Hamann, is sensation (*Empfindung*). Sensation is in direct contact with experience, whereas reason is indirect. The sensation Hamann is addressing is the concept of faith. Hamann makes this clear when he argues against the belief that reason can adjudicate over faith: “Faith is not the work of reason, and therefore cannot succumb to its attack, because faith arises just as little from reason as tasting and seeing do.”⁴² Beiser comments on faith in the following passage:

Hamann thinks the sensation of death arises when we sense the incomprehensibility of death. Voltaire and Klopstock both had this sensation, he says, in the face of sudden and tragic death. Voltaire felt it after the Lisbon earthquake, which forced him “to renounce his reason”; and Klopstock felt it after his wife’s death, which “robbed him of his muse.” These examples suggest, then, that the sensation of faith arises in confronting the incomprehensibility or absurdity of life and death. What we sense or feel in faith therefore seems to be the givenness, mystery, and absurdity of existence itself... The sensation of faith gives us a kind of intuitive knowledge which is not reducible to the discursive.⁴³

Beiser goes on to comment that the general thesis of Hamann’s essay is that faith transcends reason and is therefore not open to its critique. In fact, Hamann is convinced that it is irrational to demand reasons for faith, since faith addresses issues of transcendence. Hamann is arguing that some experiences preclude any reasons for their occurrence and are outside the jurisdiction of historical analysis and theoretical propositions. Moreover, these experiences inform the individual of truth and value more directly than discursive reasoning allows. In *Socratic Memorabilia*, Hamann expects that our sensitivity towards reality will allow us to see the religious or super-rational dimensions contained in experiences, thus finding once again a place for the quality of genius in philosophy, and or faith. And here is where one can recognize Socrates as a prophet for the generation of the Enlightenment; a prophet who situates existence over thought.

⁴² *Socratic Memorabilia*, pg.74

⁴³ Beiser, pg.27-28

V. Conclusion

The analogy made between faith and genius, then, brings us to ask the following questions: How does Hamann view the relation between philosophical knowledge and religious knowledge. Is Socrates just a precursor to Christ, and is philosophy merely on the way *to* religious belief? Does Hamann at the end of the day allow room for philosophy to exist in light of the religious moment? And if so, how does it function in relation to Christianity? These questions are relevant to ask at the early stages of Hamann's authorship. In *Socratic Memorabilia* Hamann is drawing parallels between Christianity and philosophy. These parallels are explicated in concepts such as ignorance and genius. These concepts appear to function similarly to faith and the Holy Spirit in Christianity.

For Hamann, the apotheosis of reason challenged the function of faith, and more importantly, departed from the vocation of philosophy in general. This is to say that Hamann challenges the rationalist's project of making absolute reason immanent in the world for the sake of both philosophy and religion. Hamann is engaged in two battles in his writing *Socratic Memorabilia*: On the one hand, Hamann is defending the validity of his religious conversion by arguing for the value of experience regardless of its non-rationality, since the rationality of existence is its inherent mysteriousness. On the other hand, Hamann is challenging his counterparts' perception of their own vocation—philosophy—by reinterpreting their hero, Socrates, in order to undermine the infallible impulse of reason and dogmatism. This tactic is why Hamann goes back to the source of western philosophy in order to challenge its current presuppositions. This act is not a refutation of philosophy; it is a healthy reminder of its proper role.

Hamann's program is exemplified in a letter that he wrote to a friend during the time he composed *Socratic Memorabilia*:

The final fruit of all philosophy is the noting of human ignorance and weakness. This same function, which is related to our powers of understanding and knowledge, shows us how ignorant we are just as the moral shows us how evil and shallow is our virtue. This cornerstone at the same time is a millstone which shatters to pieces all the sophistries. Our reason therefore is just that which Paul calls the Law – and the Law of the Reason is holy, just and good... If everywhere

Paul speaks of the Law one puts reason (this “law” of our century and the watchword of our clever heads and scribes), Paul will speak to our contemporaries...⁴⁴

This letter demonstrates that Hamann was interested in engaging philosophical issues for the “fruit” it produces. The difficulty in distinguishing between philosophy and religious belief is Hamann’s view concerning the ubiquitous nature of God as manifest in the unfolding of reality. This is to say that it is difficult to delineate philosophical points from religious points (i.e., when Hamann is speaking of genius, is he covertly meaning the Holy Spirit?). Nevertheless, what can be known is that Hamann does not intend to replace philosophy with religious belief, far from it, for just as the Law is good and holy, so too is philosophy. Rather, Hamann is challenging a trend of modern philosophy that he believes is encroaching upon religious territory by way of absolute reason.

In essence, Hamann understands the role of philosophy as a critical tool in relating to reality. The nature of philosophy is to break down the self’s relation to the world so that the self may construct a more dynamic relation with it in light of the fact that it is unknowable through reason alone. It is not that Hamann becomes an irrationalist and discards the function of philosophy. Rather he believes that philosophy has a positive role in keeping the investigator in check with regard to the perception of reality. The critical function of philosophy has positive consequences in necessitating reflection and providing new relations. More specifically, philosophy functions by opening up self-knowledge whereby the philosopher is always aware of his or her limitations. For Hamann, this is the prophetic message of Socrates, and to move Socrates beyond a negative relation with reality is to read Socrates erroneously.

Hamann’s critique of rationalist philosophy is strikingly similar to Pinkard’s passage on pietism mentioned before and is worth recapitulating:

...a view that held that the world’s imperfections were capable of a sort of redemption in the here and now, not in some afterlife. It was, on that line of emerging thought, therefore the duty of the Christians to reform that world in light of God’s love, and in order to do that, Christians had to turn away from

⁴⁴ Alexander, pg. 153

orthodoxy, even from the intellectualistic theological treatments of Christianity, and focus on the truth within their hearts in order to realize God's kingdom on earth.

Hamann viewed the imperfection of the world posed by the problem of evil as fundamental to the proper understanding of philosophy. To put it bluntly, philosophical understanding must continually reckon with the inherent opacity contained within reality and human existence.

I believe Hamann intended to transfer the problem of evil from a religious dilemma over to philosophical investigation so that philosophy would continue in the Socratic spirit of ignorance, not for the sake of removing the necessity of philosophical inquiry, but rather to give modern philosophy a healthy critique concerning its own limits.

In the end, Hamann does not convert Socrates into a transfigured religious hero. Socrates remains within the philosophical sphere, but, his vocation contributes to the opening of the religious dimension: The fruit of ignorance is genius. Unlike other Christian apologists, Hamann is content with relating to philosophical learning so long as it remains in the Socratic state of ignorance, always careful not to venture into absolute claims, and thereby not threatening to usurp the vital role of religious faith and its ongoing relation with the inherent finitude of human existence in light of the infinite.

CHAPTER TWO: SØREN KIERKEGAARD'S *CONCEPT OF IRONY*

Like Hamann, Søren Kierkegaard uses Socrates in order to critique the philosophical reduction of Socrates within philosophy alone. Again, it is the argument of this thesis that both Hamann and Kierkegaard recognize not only the philosophical role of Socrates but also his religious role. That Kierkegaard was influenced by Hamann is not a secret⁴⁵, but what is important for this paper is to recognize that Kierkegaard detected a distinct relation between Hamann and Socrates concerning one's relation to the world as evinced in the following statement by Kierkegaard:

Now I perceive why genuine humor cannot be caught, as irony can, in a novel and why it thereby ceases to be a life-concept, simply because not-to-write is part of the nature of the concept, since this would betray an all too conciliatory position toward the world (which is why Hamann remarks somewhere that fundamentally there is nothing more ludicrous than to write for the people). Just as Socrates left no books, Hamann left only as much as the modern period's rage for writing made relatively necessary, and further more only occasional pieces.⁴⁶

Kierkegaard also writes, "Hamann's relationship to his contemporaries—Socrates to the Sophists."⁴⁷

In part one of *The Concept of Irony* Kierkegaard attempts to come as close to the actual Socrates as possible. This attempt is to render the concept of irony, as well as the historical Socrates, more known. Kierkegaard works throughout the first section to unfetter Socrates from the intentions of previous thinkers that use Socrates to accomplish a speculative goal. Most notable for Kierkegaard is the way in which Plato uses Socrates for his philosophical development of the *idea*. It is clear from the beginning that Kierkegaard believes that for one to know the concept of irony, one must know the personality that gave birth to the concept itself. Strictly speaking, Kierkegaard's intention

⁴⁵ James O'Flaherty writes that "it is not so well known that he (Kierkegaard) was acquainted with Hamann's work of Socrates when he wrote his masters thesis in 1841, see O'Flaherty pg. 107

⁴⁶ C.I. pg. 434

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, pg. 444

is to accentuate the difficulties in demarcating the relationship between Socrates and the concept of irony. Kierkegaard's project in part one of *The Concept of Irony* is to free Socrates from any developmental scheme that reduces Socrates to one stage among many (i.e., the relegation of Socrates to the reflective stage in order to set up the speculative stage). Kierkegaard seeks to keep Socrates from the regulatory move by articulating Socrates' divine mission: the preservation of possibility and the subject's temporal finitude. In this way Socrates becomes irreducible to any measuring scheme because of his inherent ironical thinking and existence. The irony will be how the finite subject can relate to the absolute. Therefore, to guard Socrates from pure ideality and certainty is the task of Kierkegaard, as well as establishing his actuality. This task provokes the following question: does Socrates carry any quality of positivity? If so, what is that positive quality?

I. Kierkegaard and Hegel

Before we begin to look at the text it will be worth going over the argument implicit in the first part of the *Concept of Irony*; an argument mainly directed at the absorption of Socrates into a larger historical development of the notion as represented in Hegel's *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*. In the *Concept of Irony* Kierkegaard responds to Hegel's depiction of Socrates. Hegel portrays Socrates as the "midwife" for a self-reflective morality in which the individual is able to comprehend the universal good through subjectivity, Hegel writes: "His philosophy, which asserts that real existence, is in consciousness as a universal, is still not a properly speculative philosophy, but remained individual; yet the aim of his philosophy was that it should have a universal significance."⁴⁸ Socrates, according to Hegel, is responsible for moving civilization from particularity into universality. Thus Socrates is able, through his method of inquiry, to produce a new epoch: "The spirit of the world here begins to change, a change which was later on carried to completion."⁴⁹ While for Hegel Socrates' philosophy is not speculative, it does aim at such, and for Kierkegaard, this is the speculative mistake.

⁴⁸ Hegel, pg. 392

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, pg. 407

To further outline Hegel's view of Socrates the following quote is helpful: "This, in short, is Socrates' method. The affirmative, what Socrates develops in the consciousness, is nothing but the good in as far as it is brought forth from consciousness through knowledge—it is the eternal, in and for itself universal, what is called the Idea, the true, which just so far as it is end, is the Good."⁵⁰ Thus Hegel's Socrates brings us to the universal, the good. The absolute is manifest in consciousness through Socrates' reflections and shows itself as the good. Hegel goes on, "The reflection of consciousness into itself begins here, the knowledge of the consciousness of self as such, that it is real existence—or that God is a Spirit, or again, in a cruder and more sensuous form, a human form."⁵¹ Hegel reads Socrates as beginning the process of making consciousness, or "abstract being", immediate via an incarnation. Even though Socrates does not arrive at the idea, he does, nonetheless, begin the developmental process through reflection. Hegel discerns the speculative germ within the Socratic turn, which platonically arrives eventually at the universal, the good. This will be contra Kierkegaard who asserts that the speculative idea within Socrates is the ironic, that the absolute discloses itself as nothing. For Hegel the irony of Socrates is that he brings the universal into the particular as universal; for Kierkegaard it will be that Socrates particularizes (or temporalizes) the universal. Hegel criticizes the construal of Socrates as a nihilist who makes the nullity of life the ultimate: "Making the consciousness of the nullity of everything ultimate, might indicate depth of life, but it is the depth of emptiness, as maybe seen from the ancient comedies of Aristophanes."⁵² For Kierkegaard, however, Aristophanes is the closest to capturing the authentic Socrates, and it is Hegel's and Plato's infatuation with making the absolute immanent that confounds their understanding of Socrates.

Kierkegaard's aim is to slow down the developmental scheme that seeks to make manifest the platonic idea. What is most important for Kierkegaard concerning Socrates is not so much his anticipatory role in the evolution of knowledge, but rather the task that Socrates took upon himself to work efficiently at maintaining possibility through his negative relation to the world. Concerning Kierkegaard, this chapter will demonstrate that the ironic does not serve a larger goal in the grounding of knowledge into the world. To

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, pg. 406

⁵¹ *ibid.*, pp. 407-8

⁵² *ibid.*, pg. 401

the contrary, the ironic perpetually battles the impulse to posit positive knowledge for the sake of the moral task.

Kierkegaard interprets Socrates as beginning with the presupposition of nothing and concluding with nothing. In other words, Socrates exhibits an “infinite absolute negativity” in relation to reality, philosophically speaking, that must necessarily remain as such for possibility to remain, i.e., religious faith in that which transcends the world. The element of possibility is important for Kierkegaard’s morality in that, I believe, it leaves room open for faith. And this leads me to express what may be Kierkegaard’s key argument in part one of the *Concept of Irony*: that Kierkegaard accuses Hegel of not “adhering to the direction of the trend in Socrates’ life... Socrates is to arrive at the good, but not at some time.”⁵³ It is important to note that, if Kierkegaard granted Socrates an arrival, or for a completion to occur, then he would have erased possibility, and thereby erased faith. For Kierkegaard, the good is not at some point in time or within the reach of the finite subject, rather, it is the task, and the task is manifest in the infinitely negative, unrestrained freedom. Jon Stewart comments on Kierkegaard’s final criticism of Hegel in the following: “At the end of his analysis, Kierkegaard criticizes the static or finished view of Socrates as presented by Hegel’s speculative philosophy. For Kierkegaard, one must essentially understand Socrates and his life not as a static entity but as a process.”⁵⁴

Furthermore, Kierkegaard argues that Hegel exhibits a rush towards a development concerning the concept. This rush inevitably misses distinguishing points in Socrates’ life and thinking that preclude such a development, at least from the particular viewpoint of Socrates himself. Stewart addresses this point in the following: “Hegel allegedly fails to see this since he is purportedly only interested either in the historical concept (*Begriff*) that is represented by the Greek world...the details of history are, it is claimed, of no interest to him.”⁵⁵ According to Kierkegaard, Socrates’ life can not be grasped only by the scholarly method.⁵⁶ This criticism will be evident later where Kierkegaard chastises philosophy with abstracting from actuality, a criticism that will

⁵³ C.I., pg. 235

⁵⁴ Stewart, pg. 164

⁵⁵ Stewart, pg. 153

⁵⁶ Strikingly, Kierkegaard fluctuates often between the philosophical approach and the historical approach, signifying a reluctance to commit purely to one or the other.

reveal Kierkegaard's concerns with a philosophical absolutism that exercises the moral subject's infinite freedom as an open-ended task and his own inherent finitude.

II. Kierkegaard's Coverage of Socrates in Antiquity

In the introduction to the *Concept of Irony*, Kierkegaard attends to the relationship between philosophy and history. He recognizes that in order to understand the concept of irony (the essence) one must first examine the person (the phenomenon) from whom this concept originated: "Concepts, just like individuals, have their history and are no more able than they to resist the dominion of time, but in and through it all they nevertheless harbor a kind of homesickness for the place of their birth."⁵⁷ For Kierkegaard the concept of irony has its birth in the life of Socrates and this suggests that before one approaches the concept itself it is necessary to review the life that brought this concept to bear. This review is conducted through the three primary sources of Socrates' life: Xenophon, Plato and Aristophanes.

In his dissertation, Kierkegaard tries to make an account of the actual Socrates possible through the major primary sources. Kierkegaard is concerned with the personal interpretations of Socrates and the ironic evident in the three sources. The three sources yield valuable information for Kierkegaard because of the varying Socratic images that appear and help explain the similarities between the writers' view of Socrates, both ancient and modern: Xenophon exemplifies the typical utilitarian witness of Socrates that discards the Socratic situation; Plato shows the more deep view of Socrates as the proto-speculative agent; and Aristophanes captures the comedic element of Socrates making jest of any use of Socrates whatsoever.

The first criticism that Kierkegaard lays before Xenophon is his neglect of the phenomena that arise from Socrates' life. According to Kierkegaard, Socrates' situation was precisely the point from which one could "work oneself up into the sphere of thought." Here Kierkegaard is addressing the lack of phenomenon present in Xenophon's Socrates (similar to Kierkegaard's criticism of Hegel). It is his contention that Xenophon misses the essence of Socrates because he shoots past the existence of Socrates. In this first criticism Kierkegaard establishes the necessity of the relation between the

⁵⁷ C.I., pg. 9

phenomenon and the idea, and that one without the other is the absence of both. Had Xenophon attended to the situation of Socrates he might have noticed what for Kierkegaard is essential in Socrates, that he lacks any one fixed point: “This emphasis on situation was especially significant in order to indicate that the true center for Socrates was not a fixed point but an *ubique et nusquam* (everywhere and nowhere), in order to accentuate the Socratic sensibility, which upon the most subtle and fragile contact immediately detected the presence of an idea...”⁵⁸

Ultimately, the critique leveled against Xenophon is that he misses Socrates’ sensibility. Kierkegaard views Xenophon’s depiction of Socrates as utilitarian and pedestrian. That is to say that Xenophon appears to be interested in his subject for professional reasons only (Xenophon would be similar to Hamann’s opponents who are interested in Socrates for scholarly means). For Kierkegaard Xenophon only captures the exteriority of the Socratic dialectic. The outer realm of the Socratic Method is its usefulness, its education. The interiority, however, in Xenophon, is negated for the sake of the exteriority:

The useful is the external dialectic of the good, its negation, which detached becomes itself merely a kingdom of shadows where nothing endures but everything formless and shapeless liquefies and volatizes, all according to the observers capricious and superficial glance, in which each individual existence is only an infinitely divisible fractional existence in a perpetual calculation.⁵⁹

The atrocity here, according to Kierkegaard, is that the Socratic *way* is passed over. The Socratic way is the infinite space made inaccessible to utilitarian practices and is rather the “tunnels under existence.”⁶⁰ The critique here is that Xenophon practices the rationalistic approach to history where the subject under study is reduced to an instrumental value for the modern era. Xenophon concentrates only on what is commensurable, Kierkegaard writes that for Xenophon’s Socrates: “One should learn geometry to help to see to it that one’s fields are correctly measured; the further study of

⁵⁸ C.I., pp. 16-17

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, pg. 22

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, pg. 19

astronomy is deprecated and he advises against the speculations of Anaxagoras—in short, every science is reduced for the use of everyone.”⁶¹ For Kierkegaard a meaningful element of Socratic thinking is the empty space that lies between the words of Socrates as that which implies the irreducible dimension of human existence, its incommensurability. This is to say that it is the feeling that Socrates’ produces, the ambiguous qualities are what agitates the Socratic audience and makes one self-active, hence Kierkegaard’s affinity for the poet’s rendering of Socrates. The empty spaces between words, otherwise known as silence, exemplify the key moment in Socratic thinking for Kierkegaard because silence captures the ambiguous role of Socrates as wholly negative, and yet, mysteriously, Socrates is capable of producing action through silence. In this way Socrates’ message cannot be reduced to just one program or another.

True to his pursuit of recovering the historical Socrates Kierkegaard has to address the following problem: with regards to Platonic philosophy one needs to know what belongs to Plato and what belongs to Socrates. Kierkegaard approaches this problem by first acknowledging the role of the dialectic in Platonic philosophy. The dialectic is representative of the value that both Plato and Socrates placed on the art of conversation, otherwise known as the “Socratic art of asking questions.”⁶² According to Kierkegaard to ask questions raises the relation of an individual to his subject, he writes: “Inasmuch as I ask a question, I know nothing and am related altogether receptively to my subject.”⁶³ This is important because the form of dialectics issues forth a sense of lack in the process of asking and answering, even in answering there is the possibility of a new question. For Kierkegaard this lack is evident in the interrogative process manifest two potential intentions, two intentions that will surface differently in the Socratic dialectic and in the Platonic dialectic.

The distinction that Kierkegaard observes between the two dialectics is that one is a *speculative* dialectic and the other *ironic*. This distinction between the two dialectics is what radically separates the Socratic project from the Platonic project:

One can ask with the intention of receiving an answer containing the desired fullness, and hence the more one asks, the deeper and more significant becomes

⁶¹ *ibid.*, pg. 23

⁶² *ibid.*, pg. 33

⁶³ *ibid.*, pg. 35

the answer; or one can ask without any interest in the answer except to suck out the apparent content by means of the question and thereby to leave an emptiness behind. The first method presupposes of course, that there is a plentitude; the second that there is an emptiness. The first is the speculative; the second is the ironic. Socrates in particular practiced the latter method.⁶⁴

Socrates' intention in asking questions shows the negative relation that he has with his subject, a relation that is also correlated with his philosophical presuppositions: that one begins knowing nothing and ends with knowing nothing. Kierkegaard will then work from this distinction between the speculative intention and the ironic intention by indicating the touchstones in various Platonic texts where this distinction becomes pronounced. The purpose for such an exegetical task is to make possible a new view of Socrates so that Socrates can be distinguished from his interpreter, Plato.

The first text that Kierkegaard examines in order to make clear the distinction between Socrates and Plato is the *Symposium*. In this section Kierkegaard seeks to uncover the negative aspect of Socrates' love and to explicate the way that love is agitated from a point of negativity. For Socrates, love is not in possession of something, but rather is in want of something. He writes,

Love you see is desire, a want, etc. But desire, want , etc. are nothing. Now we see the method. Love is continually disengaged more and more from the accidental concretion in which it appeared in the previous speeches and is taken back to its most abstract definitions, wherein it appears not as love of this or that or for this or that, but love for something it does not have, that is, as desire, longing.⁶⁵

Kierkegaard understands this type of love as abstract. It is abstract, however, not ontologically, but rather in its lacking content. Kierkegaard states that this form of love is "infinite subjectivizing."⁶⁶ To put it simply, love ends in emptiness. The temptation—the Platonic and Hegelian temptation to use desire as a point of departure for the sake of

⁶⁴ *ibid.*, pg. 36

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, pg. 45

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, pg. 46

speculative knowledge—according to Kierkegaard, is to begin where this abstraction fades. However, he notes that it is at this zero point that Socrates stops. It is this juncture that Kierkegaard sees Plato beginning the speculative project, yet Socrates always ends with the ironic: “Just as the abstract in the sense of the ontological has its validity in the speculative, so the abstract as the negative has its truth in the ironic.”⁶⁷ The question for Kierkegaard is: what is the effect of this irony? Is there any value to such a phenomenon?

The intrinsic value in Socrates’ love is the passionate agitation that it produces. Kierkegaard views Socrates’ love as a demonic love that leaves its object empty. However, the excitement produced by this love is not entirely neutral. The negativity in its emptiness does make a presentation. Kierkegaard states “moments of transfiguration do indeed demonstrate at most only the presence of a divine fullness *κατα κρυψιν* (hidden) in such a manner that one cannot say that it was the fullness of the positive that was inspiring.”⁶⁸ The presentation of Socrates’ love is valued in its negativity and it is precisely this negativity that stimulates the audience into participation, albeit a negative relation. This suggests the inherent preclusion of any form of positivity in Socrates because of the negative groundlessness that is manifest in love as a desire. Once the desire is fulfilled it ceases to be desire, but for Socrates, according to Kierkegaard, this is what necessitates its existence, its longing. Again, the question needs to be asked if this negativity is capable of producing positivity.

Kierkegaard continues with the concept of desire and its relation to knowledge when he comments on *Protagoras*. The issue at hand is the negative qualification in the thesis that virtue can not be taught. For what may seem to be a positive aspect of knowledge, that virtue is not teachable because it is already within the individual, actually becomes a negative qualification because of its infinite distance from the student. However, for Kierkegaard this distance should not denote incompleteness, but rather convey finality in the experience of knowledge and knowing. The interesting aspect to note is the relation that Kierkegaard gives between experience and knowledge and how the phenomenon of experience in general articulates the ultimate negativity in knowledge: “The negative lies in the perpetually necessary, inherently disastrous

⁶⁷ *ibid*, pg. 46

⁶⁸ *ibid*, pg. 50

discontent in a limitless empiricism...since the limitless sum of experience is like a heap of utterly mute letters – the more it grows, the less it is pronounced.”⁶⁹ This is to say that experience, in its multiplicity of effects, shows the inherent negativity in knowledge, if knowledge is posited as containing inherent positivity. Knowledge is negative only in relation to the proposition of positive knowledge. The Socratic form of knowledge, according to Kierkegaard, has a distinct awareness of finitude. Furthermore, this finitude presupposes itself; desire is always aware of itself as longing and thus never is accomplished precisely because of its nature. The illuminating lesson in this is that there exists finality in knowledge precisely because of its infinite nature. Kierkegaard explains this in the following: “The knowledge he reclaims in this manner (the pleasurable) becomes an art of measurement, a subtle sensibleness in the sphere of pleasure. But knowledge of that sort basically cancels itself because it continually presupposes itself.”⁷⁰ Socrates ends all consideration for further speculation by confessing the intrinsic negative aspect to knowledge by equating it with desire.

Kierkegaard also makes the point that Socrates ends with an absolute negative conclusion concerning the quality of knowledge in the text of *Phaedo*. In his analysis Kierkegaard considers the nature of the soul. For Socrates the preexistence of the soul strongly elucidates how the philosophical project ends with negative knowledge. The relation between ideas and things is indiscernible and always vanishes. This vanishing point between the universal and the particular is made in the following:

The salient point in the argumentation really amounts to this – that just as the idea exists before palpable things, so the soul exists before the body. In and by itself, this no doubt sounds rather acceptable, but as long as there is no explanation as to how the ideas exist before things and in what sense they do, we see that the “just as” around which everything revolves becomes the abstract equal sign between two unknown qualities.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Ibid, pg. 61

⁷⁰ Ibid, pg. 61

⁷¹ ibid, pg. 71

Kierkegaard goes on to argue that the mediation point of the soul between the individual and the idea, the universal and the particular, is continually vanishing and only transitory. The very process of knowing is limiting. Moreover, this point of vanishing in no way opens up for speculation or for skepticism—skepticism is in of itself a way of positing—but rather is the “nothing arrived at by way of strenuous reflection.”⁷² Again, the process of knowledge ends in an infinite abstraction that gives no ground for further speculation; hence the expression of a “vanishing” that precludes certainty. The relation between the particular and the universal breaks down and is radically dislocated. The distance between the body and the soul requires a fantastical leap.

In the end, the analysis of various texts shows that whereas Plato’s use of irony served as a beginning point for a second stage, Socrates’ use of irony served as both a beginning and end point in the pursuit of knowledge. In his explication of the texts Kierkegaard uncovered two ironies existing in Plato’s works. The first irony is a stimulus for thought and the second irony is itself the activator and the terminus striven for. The first is a beginning point to soon be followed by a superceding thought and the second is the beginning point and end point. Kierkegaard raises a distinct dilemma concerning the presence of two forms of irony within the Platonic dialogues:

An injustice is thereby done to the first position: it is not allowed to consolidate inwardly but is razed as much as possible in order to make easier the transition to the second. If this is done the phenomenon is altered; if not, the difficulty of containing both of them is primarily in Plato becomes all the greater. Moreover, this completely shoves aside the importance of Socrates, and such an interpretive venture would conflict with all history.⁷³

According to Kierkegaard, the first irony supports a developmental system that moves smoothly from one stage to another, however, the anticipation for another stage necessarily alters the first stage. The first stage, irony, exists only for the sake of the second stage: speculation. This impulse towards speculation is found both in Plato and

⁷² *ibid*, pg. 71

⁷³ *ibid*, pg. 122

Hegel. Systems, it can be said, inevitably shift away from attention to the particular toward some sort of developmental scheme. This dilemma precludes the authentic ironic existence as it is quickly absorbed into a higher thought. This poses a problem for Plato because either he cancels the existence of one for the sake of the other, or, one of these belong to Socrates and the other to Plato. This is the point that Kierkegaard has argued for in this analysis, namely that two forms of irony exists in Plato: one that is negative (Socrates) and the other positive (Plato).

Essentially, the argument is that a distinct quality of Socrates is lost in his translation from existing ironically to serving as a catalyst to foment poetical and speculative thinking. While the function of Socrates is to consume, the function of Plato is to develop. This, Kierkegaard argues, demonstrates that Plato can not adequately grasp the total negativity that exists within Socrates because of his rush towards development. Kierkegaard writes that “Xenophon, like a huckster, has deflated his Socrates and that Plato, like an artist, has created his Socrates in supranatural dimensions.”⁷⁴ Both are unable to do justice to the ironic existence of Socrates, and so Kierkegaard proposes an alternative reading of Socrates in Aristophanes in order to open up a new view of Socrates.

According to Kierkegaard both Aristophanes and Plato attempt to depict Socrates with ideality, however, their depiction lies at two opposite ends: “Plato has the tragic ideality, Aristophanes the comic.”⁷⁵ The advantage for the comic view is that it is free from any particular concerns and is able to move about unrestrained. Aristophanes vacillates between the empirically mundane view that Xenophon offers and the idealized view of Plato. To put it simply, the comic view conveys the essential misrelation to the idea that Socrates repeatedly manifests, and this is precisely the goal for the comedic.

Kierkegaard reveals the Aristophanic idea in the employment of the clouds as imagery of emptiness:

The Aristophanic irony no doubt resides in the mutual impotence – the impotence of the subject, who in wanting the objective obtains only his likeness, and in the impotence of the clouds, which merely catch the likeness of the subject but

⁷⁴ *ibid*, pg. 127

⁷⁵ *ibid*, pg. 128

reproduce it only as long as they see it. That this is a superb description of the purely negative dialectic that continually remains in itself, never goes out into the qualifications of life or of the idea...⁷⁶

This type of dialectic—negative or empty relation of the clouds with its object—sufficiently establishes the Socratic relation that Kierkegaard has put forward, namely that his relation desires nothing and is essentially no-thing. The clouds only appear as form and never materialize; this correlates with the Socratic idea that never truly exists.⁷⁷ Aristophanes' comedy is able to capture the Socratic form because of the freedom that exists within the ironist, as Kierkegaard points out, who is radically free because for him the absolute is nothing.⁷⁸ This is precisely the Socratic form Kierkegaard has sought to retrieve, both in Plato and in Aristophanes; only it is more explicit in Aristophanes because of the medium of comedy whose goal it is to make the ironic victorious.

Concluding his section on the view made possible, Kierkegaard expresses that Aristophanes succeeds in providing a medium between Plato and Xenophon, although, he too remains just an interpretation of Socrates.⁷⁹ Again, Kierkegaard's intention with this interpretive work is to make the concept of irony more concrete by recovering the most accurate view of Socrates. Kierkegaard has weighed the texts by the different authors in order to pronounce a manageable image of Socrates' personality for the sake of understanding the ironic, since, as he states in the introduction, "concepts, just like individuals, have their history and are no more able to resist the dominion of time, but in and through it all they nevertheless harbor a kind of homesickness for the place of their birth."⁸⁰ While the texts are not able to offer up historical data Kierkegaard is convinced that reading the various phenomenon in the text one can imagine how Socrates may have appeared; especially by comparing the Aristophanic Socrates with the Platonic Socrates and discerning the manifestation of Socrates' negative relation with the idea that appears in both text. The texts that he has explicated serve to provide an opening in which the actual Socrates can be discovered: a Socrates recovered through historical data.

⁷⁶ *ibid*, pg. 135

⁷⁷ *ibid*, pg. 137

⁷⁸ *ibid*, pg. 146

⁷⁹ *ibid*, pg. 155

⁸⁰ *ibid*, pg. 9

III. Kierkegaard's Analysis of Socrates' Daimon

The beginning point concerning the personality of Socrates is his daimon. This concept is important for Kierkegaard's project because it shows the ironic relation that Socrates maintained with his surroundings as a consistent truth, albeit a negative truth. Moreover, this concept manifests the actuality that Socrates never exemplified any positivity.

Socrates' daimon functioned by providing Socrates with negative warnings concerning any objective reality. Kierkegaard writes, "This daimon is represented only as warning, not commanding—that is, as negative and not as positive."⁸¹ This is important because it accentuates the fact that Socrates never espoused any positive doctrines. The daimon has the function similar to that of an oracle and thus an authoritative dimension. The following is a description of an oracle: "oracles are necessary wherever man does not yet know himself inwardly as being sufficiently free and independent to make a decision solely on his own."⁸² The oracle was a moral adjudicator for individuals in particular crisis. The daimon, for Socrates, functioned similarly as the oracle did, however, the daimon existed both externally and internally, objectively and subjectively. That is to say the daimon awoke, partially, the subjectivity of Socrates, and yet also was hidden through its externality. Kierkegaard explains, "The subjectivity did not disclose itself in full opulence, such that the idea became the boundary from which Socrates turned back into himself in ironic satisfaction."⁸³ Here, with the manifestation of Socrates' daimon, is the important distinction for Socrates concerning the concept of irony: namely, that it is revealed through the person of Socrates and makes itself known through his particularities. In other words, the essential element of the daimon is that it constitutes a vanishing point between the objective and subjective dimensions in human existence. This point is an agitating force that forces Socrates into a negative relation with reality. Kierkegaard writes:

Whatever the case may be, grant that science and scholarship are right in ignoring such things (i.e. the personal life); nevertheless, one who wants to understand the

⁸¹ *ibid*, pg. 159

⁸² *ibid*, pg. 163

⁸³ *ibid*, pg. 165

individual life cannot do so. And since Hegel himself says somewhere that with Socrates it is not so much a matter of speculation as of individual life, I dare to take to take this as sanction for my procedural method in my whole venture, however imperfect it may turn out because of my own deficiencies.⁸⁴

Therefore, Kierkegaard's method will be to construct the concept of irony through the particularities of the individual life. Essentially, Kierkegaard's charge is that philosophy is being abstracted from actuality to the detriment of philosophy. In order to avoid the absorption of the micro level into the macro level he will take into account concrete situations in Socrates' life that lay out the concept of irony; this will primarily be done through Socrates' self- knowledge.

The daimon plays out in the life of Socrates by rejecting the established orders of the day. More specifically, the daimon indicates the negative relation that Socrates has with any forms of positive theologies. Socrates, however, is not an atheist, for that would posit a positive knowledge. To the contrary, "Socrates knew that it was (the divine), but he did not know what it was."⁸⁵ What Kierkegaard is pointing out is that the nature of Socrates' ignorance is by no means an empirical ignorance. Socratic ignorance is a true philosophical position. The question becomes whether a positive knowledge can establish itself behind this ignorance? The task begins with a challenge from the warnings of the daimon. However, whether or not such a venture will yield positive knowledge is unknown.

Kierkegaard comments on Schleiermacher's notion that behind Socrates' ignorance was positive knowledge. The explanation goes something like the following: in order for Socrates to assert that he knows nothing, he must know what knowledge is. But, Kierkegaard argues, that this apparent positivity only makes the negative more pronounced: "there is a rich and profound positivity the moment it has a chance to come to itself, but Socrates continually kept it merely in this possibility that never became actuality."⁸⁶ This form of ignorance, in actuality, never allows for positivity; rather, it uses the negative relation to stimulate a self-knowledge that is significant because is

⁸⁴ *ibid*, pg. 167

⁸⁵ *ibid*, pg. 169

⁸⁶ *ibid*, pg. 170

employs a radical human subjectivity. Philosophical ignorance is an initiation for self-knowledge. Again, it is necessary to say that Kierkegaard guards Socrates from becoming a positive figure when he reminds the reader that Socrates “had come not to save the world but to judge it.”⁸⁷ Once more, Socrates functions as a prophet and not as a redeemer.

In an interesting note Kierkegaard explains that while Socrates robbed individuals and left those empty handed, that just like the gods vanishing and disappearing from the earth, this disappearance was the “condition for a deeper relationship.”⁸⁸ This suggests that Socrates’ negative relation with all finite knowledge opens the door for an infinite task. It is at this point that Socrates becomes actualized and his personality is venerated as identical with irony:

For him, the negativity implicit in his ignorance was not a conclusion, not a point of departure for a more profound speculation, but the speculative element in the idea, whereby he had infinitely circumnavigated existence, was the divine authority by virtue of which he practiced in the realm of the particular. This ignorance was the eternal victory over the phenomenon, which no particular phenomenon or the sum of all phenomena could wrest from him, but by virtue of it he triumphed over the phenomenon at every moment. In this way he admittedly freed the single individual from every presupposition, freed him as he himself was free; but the freedom he personally enjoyed in ironic satisfaction the others could not enjoy, and thus it developed in them a longing and yearning. Therefore, while his own position rounds itself off in itself, this position when absorbed into the consciousness of others becomes only the condition for a new position. The reason Socrates could be satisfied in this ignorance was that he had no deeper speculative craving. Instead of speculatively setting this negativity to rest, he set it far more to rest in the eternal unrest in which he repeated the same process with each single individual. In all this, however, that which makes him into a personality is precisely irony.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ *ibid*, pg. 173

⁸⁸ *ibid*, pg. 174

⁸⁹ *ibid*, pg. 176

This text suggests why ignorance is a true philosophical position: namely, because Socratic knowing is always dependent upon a form of un-knowing that ironically generates knowledge, albeit negative knowledge. Kierkegaard cites a place in Xenophon's *Memorabilia* where Socrates discusses how the gods kept for themselves the most important knowledge, the outcome of life, in order to make all of human striving in vain and accomplish nothing.⁹⁰ The pressure of knowing the futility of the finite (the eternal unrest) presses one to move deeper into an infinite task. The point of tension, however, is that Socrates' self-knowledge is infinitely separating: to know yourself is to know yourself separated from others. Socrates, in the end, is left in the demonic mystery.

IV. Kierkegaard's Final View of Socrates

In the final chapter of Part One, "The View Made Necessary", Kierkegaard concludes by stating the importance and to some degree the positivity of Socrates. Like Hegel, Kierkegaard views Socrates as a necessary figure in the development of thought. Socrates functions as a midwife for subjectivity: "Early Greek culture had outlived itself, a new principle had to emerge, but before it could appear in its truth, all the prolific weeds of misunderstanding's pernicious anticipations had to be plowed under, destroyed down to the deepest roots."⁹¹ Kierkegaard further states that Socrates fills the place of this service (plowing the weeds) and becomes a martyr for the new principle (reflection). Thus Socrates becomes a passionate agitator who gives birth to reflection because he was able to unceasingly deny reality and demand ideality, even though he never arrives at ideality. Furthermore, Kierkegaard comments that "the destruction is possible only because the new principle is already present as possibility."⁹² This makes for an interesting discussion point concerning whether or not in the end Socrates exhibits pure negativity. To deem Socrates as an intermediary figure suggests that possibility is in the horizon. Socrates gives himself away in the end in order to create space for positivity. Kierkegaard writes that "just as his intellectual mobility and enthusiasm in daily association were inspiring to his pupils, so the enthusiasm of his position is the actuating

⁹⁰ *ibid*, pg. 176

⁹¹ *ibid*, pg. 211

⁹² *ibid*, pg. 214

energy in the subsequent positivity.”⁹³ Kierkegaard suggests that while Socrates himself remained in negative relation with reality, for the sake of a new principle, almost as a type of martyr⁹⁴, his actions were a stimulus for further generations’ subjectivity and thereby constitutes speculation concerning his positive qualities. In his conclusion, however, Kierkegaard suggests that Socrates’ position has now become infinitely ambiguous. This final analysis of the Socratic position as “ambiguous” poignantly conveys the entirety of Kierkegaard’s program in part one, namely to accurately depict Socratic ignorance. This is to say that ambiguity is a good descriptive term because it does away with any predicates, both negative and positive. David Kangas makes this point in the following statement:

Socrates’ standpoint becomes finally “infinitely ambiguous” (CI, 218), something “nameless, indefinable and altogether predicate less.” Like the aporetic Platonic dialogues Kierkegaard analyzes, part one ends not simply without a result, but with a *negative result*. We know even less about Socrates’ standpoint than when we began—in fact, infinitely less, since we know him only him only in the total absence of any determinate predicates. Knowledge here coincides with ignorance—an ignorance *after* thinking, not before it.⁹⁵

To some degree it can be imagined that Kierkegaard wrote the first part of his dissertation in the spirit of the Socrates’ daimon by making his subject vanish at the point of illumination. The final section almost produces a view of Socrates as a pre-cursor to positive knowledge; however his text ends abruptly with a climactic confession concerning the ambiguity of Socrates and the concept of irony. Kierkegaard finishes his topic by arguing that Hegel is guilty of allowing subsequent generations after Socrates to make sense out of Socrates, and thereby altering the essential project of Socrates: the infinite negativity. Kierkegaard warns us that such a movement away from Socrates will fail in truly hearing the Socratic message; a message that questions the affirmation of the absolute as some thing:

⁹³ *ibid*, pg. 217

⁹⁴ The images of Christ in this concluding section abound greatly and would merit further studies.

⁹⁵ See David Kangas, “Conception and Concept: The Two Logics of *the Concept of Irony* and the Place of Socrates” in *Kierkegaard and the Word(s)*, ed. by Gordon Marino (Reitzel, 2003), pp. 180-191

By way of the absolute reality became nothing, but in turn the absolute was nothing. But in order to be able to hold him fast at this point, in order never to forget that the content of his life was to make this movement at every moment, we must recollect his significance as a divine missionary. Although Socrates himself places much weight on his divine mission, Hegel has ignored this. As for the continual temptation to attribute something more to him, this is due to the failure to see the world-historical individualities are great precisely because their entire lives long to the world and they, as it were, have nothing for themselves. But this is also why the world has all the more for which to thank them.⁹⁶

In the end, we must thank Socrates, according to Kierkegaard, because of his tireless effort to forge the moral task of infinitely striving towards the ideal without ever arriving. And it is precisely the concept of irony, or Socratic ignorance, which functions as the stimulus in the infinite task; because it recognizes the absolute as nothing. Similar to Hamann, Kierkegaard sees Socrates as functioning in a similar task to that of John the Baptist, a task that continually recognizes that it must decrease so that the other may increase.

⁹⁶ Ibid, pg. 236-37

CHAPTER THREE: A COMPARISON OF HAMANN AND KIERKEGAARD

I. Introduction

This thesis has exposed various points from within the works of Hamann and Kierkegaard that make clear the philosophical issues that both consider important to their task of re-interpreting Socrates: the placement of human experience within philosophy and the focus on human finitude as a way to limit reason's scope. Since we know that Kierkegaard deemed Hamann an invaluable resource concerning the Socratic project, it is only reasonable that a more thorough comparison of their respective uses of Socrates be made. This final chapter will examine two distinct similarities: first, we will look at the similarities concerning their respective goals in light of modern philosophy and the impulse towards speculative knowledge (again speculative knowledge construed as placing the eternal within the grasp of the finite subject). More specifically, we will look at the way they insist on Socrates' revelation manifesting the subject's finitude, rather than an intermediary figure for the sake of apprehending a timeless truth. In addition, we will consider their understandings of Socratic ignorance and what Socrates' ignorance means for philosophy and religious thought, along with the possible relation between the two categories.

The primary question that is involved within a comparison between Hamann and Kierkegaard is whether or not Hamann's Socrates, in the end, can be equated with Kierkegaard's infinitely ironic Socrates who exerts ambiguous knowledge. That is to say, does Hamann's Socrates appear as a positive or negative figure? It is this question that Hans Von Balthasar concludes as the distinctive difference separating Hamann from Kierkegaard. In his essay on Hamann, "On the Eve of Idealism", Von Balthasar addresses this question explicitly:

For both Hamann and Kierkegaard, Socrates is a mythical character and paradigmatic figure, but what seems to be a meeting point between the two men turns out to demonstrate the gap better, perhaps, than anything. For Kierkegaard, Socrates, the Socratic art of midwifery and Socratic ignorance are all the marks of the human, in sharp contrast to the divinely human, that which is of Christ. For

Hamann, however, Christ himself appears directly through Socrates...Socratic art is transfigured, becoming the 'oracular utterance of the great teacher of the heathen. If any man think that he knows anything, he knows nothing as he ought to know...that the grain of all our natural wisdom must decay, pass into ignorance, and...out of this death, this nothing, there must spring forth, in new creation, the life and being of higher knowledge.' That is a sentiment that German mysticism and Kierkegaard's sworn enemy, Hegel, would have echoed...Kierkegaard had no liking for Hamann's idea that the Christian and theological may appear directly through the secular and the philosophical.⁹⁷

The point of difference, according to Von Balthasar, between Kierkegaard and Hamann, is the way Hamann allows for the ignorance of Socrates to produce a 'higher knowledge', namely through genius and the Holy Spirit, thereby turning Socrates into a religious figure similar to Christ. It is clear that Hamann discerns a relationship between knowledge and faith, ignorance and a higher knowledge. In light of Von Balthasar's distinction between Hamann's and Kierkegaard's usage of Socrates, I will concede that Hamann's Socrates, as depicted in *Socratic Memorabilia*, is different than Kierkegaard's Socrates in *The Concept of Irony*. However, the difference between the two is far more modest than Von Balthasar recognizes.

From my reading of the two texts, both Socrates' are construed as divine messengers and function to indicate the ambiguity of existence. Where they differ is the way in which Hamann conflates Socratic ignorance with Pauline faith, a step that Kierkegaard will not make. Hamann views the historical Socrates as denying knowledge. However, because of Hamann's usage of Socratic categories after the point of nullity—genius—one can argue that Hamann then appropriates Socrates in a positive fashion. Of course, this does not suggest that Hamann constructs a speculative theological system from Socrates' ignorance. This thesis has demonstrated the way in which Hamann's faith operates non-discursively without any attempt to construct positive philosophical knowledge concerning the nature of reality. The higher knowledge that emerges from

⁹⁷ Hans Von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: a theological aesthetics*. trans. by Erasmo Leiva Merikakis ; ed. by Joseph Fessio and John Riches San Francisco : Ignatius Press, 1982. pp. 241-2

ignorance is a knowledge that recognizes one's relation with and to the external world and the historical processes of the world. Hamann's relativizing scheme would preclude any absolute statements about knowledge.

This chapter will argue that both Hamann and Kierkegaard share a similar understanding of philosophical ignorance for similar reasons. Both relate philosophical ignorance to an existential situation where reality is disclosed as fundamentally unknown. This situation then creates the possibility of religious faith within the philosophical domain. What will follow, then, will be a comparison between Hamann and Kierkegaard in order to demonstrate how they reach their similar goals within their respective milieus.

II. The Abstraction of Socrates

Hamann and Kierkegaard are primarily concerned with the scholastic and philosophical programs that attempt to extract Socrates from his particular situations. The reason for this concern is that both believe Socrates' situations are primary to his overall philosophical enterprise: namely, an existential philosophy that precludes any systematic appropriation into a larger program. More specifically, they emphasize the way that Socrates uses particular situations to disclose the nature of reality as incommensurable. This disclosure is manifested in Socrates' conversations, which revolve around the various quandaries that open up in everyday situations. This is especially important for Hamann who, by way of an unexpected experience, was granted insight into the meaning of philosophical ignorance; an insight that was obviously identifiable with the Socratic moment. Both Hamann and Kierkegaard challenge philosophical programs revolving around speculative claims concerning the accessibility of reality and the possibility of absolute knowledge.

Hamann locates the distinct problem for philosophical reasoning in its neglect of the human dimensions of Socrates. This move to accentuate the phenomenological elements of Socrates has a specific philosophical aim. Hamann engages his Socrates by identifying his existential situations thereby concentrating on his trades and lifestyle:

It was significant that Socrates had a sculptor and a midwife as parents. His teaching has always been compared with the art of midwifery. One is still content to repeat this idea without allowing it to develop like the seed of a

fruitful truth. This expression is not merely figurative, but is at the same time a clew of excellent concepts that every teacher needs as a guiding thread in the education of the understanding.⁹⁸

Hamann points to the skill of Socrates as a sculptor and his art similar to that of midwifery in order to highlight key aspects to Socratic thinking: Socrates was a mediating point between the idea and actuality. This aspect of Socrates as a mediating point is analogous to the concept of the daimon brought up with respect to Kierkegaard. It is similar in that Socrates, as a midwife, functions at the border point between the idea and actuality, and is not isolated to either sphere. Furthermore, Hamann speaks of this fringe element to Socratic thinking that lies between ideality and actuality as a clew (or clue) of excellent concepts. Hamann suggests that Socrates' life exemplifies the ambiguous juncture between knowledge and faith; between what is immanent and the transcendent. Socrates' life, in essence, is a receptive device in understanding truth. For Hamann, Socrates is pedagogical through his ignorance, "From this Socratic ignorance readily flow the peculiarities of his manner of teaching and thinking."⁹⁹

Similarly, Kierkegaard is troubled by philosophy's attempt to ignore the human dimensions of Socrates for systematic purposes because of what the phenomenon of human existence, if considered, demonstrates. Kierkegaard writes:

It is necessary to make sure that I have a reliable and authentic view of Socrates' historical-actual, phenomenological existence with respect to the question of its possible relation to the transformed view that was his fate through enthusiastic or envious contemporaries. This becomes inescapably necessary, because the concept of irony makes its entry into the world through Socrates. Concepts, just like individuals, have their history and are no more able than they to resist the dominion of time...¹⁰⁰

For Kierkegaard, concepts have their own history and can not be divorced from their particularities. What concerns Kierkegaard is that, in light of the philosophical, the

⁹⁸ S.M., pg. 66

⁹⁹ S.M., pg. 75

¹⁰⁰ C.I., pg. 9

phenomenological becomes reduced to serve the purposes of “higher” goals. Kierkegaard comments that “the phenomenon has its rights and is not to be intimidated and discouraged by philosophy’s superiority.”¹⁰¹ Kierkegaard, then, goes to great lengths to recover the phenomenological elements of Socrates in order to make clear the concept of irony. For Kierkegaard the phenomenon of Socrates will indicate the truly ironic elements within Socrates and show that “the true center for Socrates was not a fixed point but an everywhere and nowhere.”¹⁰² This is to say that Socrates offers no specific location in the development of thinking and resists any attempts to be placed within any systematic approach of appropriating the history of philosophy. Socrates, if observed phenomenologically, becomes a stumbling block to those seeking a developmental account of the *idea*. If Hegel had attended to the details of history then the rush towards the platonic ideal would have been tempered by Socrates’ silence.

Another key text for this section is Hamann’s striking comment of the needed objectivity concerning one’s approach to history. Hamann writes that “if one had studied or knew how to study the fate of this name or word, philosophy, according to the coloring of the times, minds, races, and peoples, not as a scholar or philosopher even, but as an idle spectator of their Olympic games, ‘standing off like a painter’, our philosophy would necessarily have another form.”¹⁰³ Again, Hamann is advocating that one’s approach to philosophy ought to be removed from any professional ideals that attempt to come into truth. Hamann recognizes that the scholar or philosopher who appropriates Socrates is entangled with specific rationalist schemes that will prevent the observer from apprehending the aspects of reality that befuddle rationality. This is announced by Hamann more distinctly in a letter to Kant just prior to the writing of S.M.: “Truth would not let herself be approached too closely by highwaymen; she draws her clothing so closely about her that reaching her body is doubtful. How terrified they would be if they had their way and actually saw that fearful ghost—the truth.”¹⁰⁴ This statement by Hamann signifies his conviction that existence is irreducible to knowledge. To the

¹⁰¹ C.I., pg.10

¹⁰² *ibid.*, pp.16-17

¹⁰³ S.M., pg. 63

¹⁰⁴ See Alexander, pg. 75

contrary, knowledge is dependent upon experience. We see this as well in Kierkegaard's introduction to the *Concept of Irony*:

If there is anything that must be praised in modern philosophical endeavor in its magnificent manifestation, it certainly is the power of genius with which it seizes and holds on to the phenomenon. Now if it is fitting for the phenomenon, which as such is always *foeminini generis* [of the feminine gender], to surrender to the stronger on account of its feminine nature, then in all fairness one can also demand of the philosophical knight a deferential propriety and a profound enthusiasm ... Therefore, even if the observer does bring the concept along with him, it is still of great importance that the phenomenon remain inviolate and that the concept be seen as coming into existence through the phenomenon.¹⁰⁵

Likewise, for Kierkegaard, if the concept of irony is ineluctably contained within the personal life of Socrates, then, the scholar and science, which rightfully ignores such things, will not have a tight grasp of the concept:

Whatever the case may be, grant that science and scholarship are right in ignoring such things (i.e. the personal life); nevertheless, one who wants to understand the individual life cannot do so. And since Hegel himself says somewhere that with Socrates it is not so much a matter of speculation as of individual life, I dare to take to take this as sanction for my procedural method in my whole venture, however imperfect it may turn out because of my own deficiencies.¹⁰⁶

Kierkegaard tempers the idealist project to illuminate the concept of irony by demonstrating the necessities in attending to the personal life of Socrates for the sake of understanding the ironic. However, Kierkegaard shows how even the phenomenological is unable to disclose the essence of irony. Thus, Kierkegaard argues against any attempt to reduce Socrates to a moment within the larger project of philosophy. The enigma that is Socrates impedes any positive development from his ironic relation with the world.

¹⁰⁵ C.I., pg. 9

¹⁰⁶ *ibid*, pg. 167

The early authorship of Hamann and Kierkegaard details how both considered contemporary philosophical programs problematic in their attempts to exhaust the Socratic point in order to move to a more general philosophical point for the sake of positive knowledge. Whether it was Hamann contending against the rationalist who sought to ground all knowledge in reason for the betterment of the common good or Kierkegaard seeking to thwart the platonic impulse toward speculative knowledge that reduces Socrates to but a prior moment in the movement to positive knowledge thereby retaining existence within philosophy, both manifest a disdain for the systematic reduction of Socrates for the sake of coming into “truth.” These two thinkers, in similar fashion, responded to what they considered an unfortunate reduction of the Socratic, and therefore, made attempts to recover the Socratic by emphasizing his existential situation. We see this explicitly in Hamann’s usage of Socrates as an illustrative point to indicate why the religious moment can not be philosophically reduced but rather is to remain a humbling point within thought itself to remind one of the ultimate inaccessibility of existence. And it is precisely the existential factor of Socrates that Hamann and Kierkegaard believe opens up the Socratic message.

III. The Fruitfulness of Ignorance

In the end, this paper argues that Hamann and Kierkegaard find the remarkable quality of human ignorance as the essential aspect of Socratic thinking, an ignorance that is both the beginning and the end of human reasoning. To be sure, both Hamann and Kierkegaard regard Socrates as promulgating “the problematic” in attempting to make knowledge fully illuminated. The ironic for both of them is how their peers facilitate Socrates and the concept of irony for philosophical purposes that seek to ground reality in the knowable. How ironic it is that Socrates, who made the ironic manifest, is used to posit positive knowledge. Strikingly, both Hamann and Kierkegaard discern this attempt to reduce Socrates to a lower sphere of the development of philosophy and deem it as problematic concerning the nature of possibility that is vital to human existence. Their enterprise clearly is comprised of attempts to confound the movement of reflection that relegates ignorance to a lesser point in the philosophical development. I will point to key

texts that puts forward their peak moments concerning the value of ignorance in human existence and the reasons for such pronouncements.

According to Hamann, Socratic ignorance challenges any philosophical system that purports to know the origins of concepts. Socrates is absent from experiencing truth and exemplifies the inherent weakness of reason: “Socrates entices his fellow citizens out of the labyrinths of their learned Sophists to a truth which lies in concealment, to a secret wisdom, and from the idolatrous altars of their pious and political priests to the service of an unknown God.”¹⁰⁷ This statement would naturally preclude Socrates from positing anything philosophically known, since, Socrates is in the service of an unknown God. To conclude, then, that Hamann construes Socrates as a positive figure is misleading. In what sense is Socrates positive? Clearly with relation to speculative knowledge Socrates is not positive because of his message concerning the nullifying reality of human existence that keeps one from standing in positive relation to philosophical propositions that purport the intelligibility of the world. However, Socrates is positive because of the disposition that emerges from his ignorance, a disposition that is open to the workings of history from a higher source. The higher knowledge that Hamann discerns arising from the Socratic death is higher than the constructs of human systems; Hamann’s higher knowledge is a religious knowledge that manifests only in one’s relationality with human events. This is different from Kierkegaard’s Socrates whose moment of ignorance infinitely cancels out any positivity that would attempt to spawn. Socrates must always remain in the dark. However, Socrates works effectively to make known his ignorance, and there lies his heroic quality. Alexander addresses Hamann’s distinction of Socrates from the religious in the following remarks over a letter that Hamann wrote to his friend J.G. Linder, only months after writing *Socratic Memorabilia*: “My Socrates as a heathen remains great and worthy of emulation. Christianity would only darken his brilliance.”¹⁰⁸

Kierkegaard also uses the ignorance of Socrates as a beginning and end point in philosophy. Kierkegaard states that “the negativity implicit in his ignorance was not a conclusion, not a point of departure for a more profound speculation, but the speculative element in the idea, whereby he had infinitely circumnavigated existence, was the divine

¹⁰⁷ S.M., pg. 77

¹⁰⁸ Alexander, pg. 146

authority by virtue of which he practiced in the realm of the particular.”¹⁰⁹ This is to say that Socrates’ disclosure of his “not-knowing” is precisely the culmination of his philosophical position. There is no room for further speculation, since this is the speculative element in the idea. The negative quality in his ignorance is what frees him from all phenomena. Socrates is always irreducible because of his negative relation to the world, his infinite negative relation to the world. Kierkegaard argues that any attempt to make sense of Socrates, ironically, will only avail in making Socrates unintelligible.

What then is the effect of Socrates’ ignorance? Simply put, the ignorance of Socrates opens space for one to recognize the mysteriousness of existence. As Beiser noted earlier, Hamann sees faith arising once one feels the mystery of life and its absurdity. That is to say that faith becomes irreducible to discursive knowledge. There does seem to be a connection between ignorance and faith, however. Ignorance is negative in its relation to knowledge, whereas faith functions in its receptivity to the givenness of reality. The connection can be explained as faith requiring ignorance regarding the impulse to absolute knowledge so as to maintain an openness concerning the inaccessibility of the future: an inaccessibility that allows for the existence of possibility and faith. It is at the culmination of Socrates’ ignorance that an inward movement is born and actions follow testifying to his religious conviction, a conviction that took him past the sate of Athens. Hamann classifies Socrates in the arena of the prophets and the righteous, “Plato interpreted the voluntary poverty of Socrates as a sign of his divine mission. A greater one is his sharing in the final destiny of the prophets and the righteous.”¹¹⁰

To conclude, Hamann’s Socrates serves to remind the public of the vanity of reason and the frivolity in speculation about matters of ultimacy. Socrates exhibits a prophetic calling whereby he eternally opens up the *truth* that one can not determine either the beginning or the end of knowledge. In this way, Socrates becomes an ambiguous character whose duty it is to demonstrate the vanity in seeking after knowledge, a messenger whose message is essentially negative in content, yet, whose message does lead to the possibility of a higher knowledge. It is at this juncture, then, that

¹⁰⁹ C.I., pg. 176

¹¹⁰ S.M., pg. 81

we must acknowledge that Hamann's Socrates as a divine messenger is like that of Kierkegaard's Socrates who is also given the status of "a divine missionary." Both use Socrates to disrupt a philosophical program that attempts to bring the absolute into the world by way of reason. In other words, Socrates functions to prophetically warn against the deification of reason by disclosing the fact that reality is, ultimately, inaccessible to absolute knowledge, thus insisting on the retrieval of human finitude.

Now we must attend to Von Balthasar's inference that Hamann's Socrates is construed divinely, whereas Kierkegaard's Socrates is wholly human. I contend that Von Balthasar should moderate his view of Hamann's Socrates and elevate Kierkegaard's view of Socrates. First, here is the issue: in Hamann's *Socratic Memorabilia* there is a moment of transfiguration where ignorance metamorphoses into faith, indeed a Pauline faith. However, Kierkegaard gives us no presentation of the sorts in the *Concept of Irony*. If there were a presentation of faith, in Kierkegaard's Socrates, then it would be only a negative presentation in that Socrates can only be analogous to Christ via a contrast. This does raise questions about the relation Hamann sees between Socrates and Christ in his later works and Kierkegaard's view of this relationship. But, again, with regards to Von Balthasar's earlier statement one must conclude, from reading both *Socratic Memorabilia* and *The Concept of Irony*, that Hamann and Kierkegaard, in the end, use Socrates as a prophetic figure sent by the divine(s). In conclusion, the two authors construe Socrates as an intermediary figure, a daimon of sorts who continually discloses to the philosophers the futility of existence and the feeling of one's own finitude.

CONCLUSION

The intention of this thesis was to open up the intellectual relationship between Hamann and Kierkegaard. This relationship has been repeatedly inferred to in the past without any serious endeavor to make clear, comparatively speaking, the distinct lines of similarity between the two authors. The line that exists—a recovery of Socrates to thwart the philosophical domination of the religious sphere—and is not unique to just these two authors. What makes them of such import is the peculiar relation that each author had with his respective milieu and the philosophical currents of their time. This is to say that both reacted negatively towards the scholastic trend to utilize Socrates for speculative purposes. Both Hamann and Kierkegaard found themselves mediating between the philosophical climate and the religious climate, careful not to isolate one from the other. Both depict Socrates as a religious messenger, whose task opens up the inward self in relation to the external world, unfolding the dialectic of objectivity and subjectivity. Both recognize the tension between the eternal and the temporal as fundamental to human existence and irrevocable. Furthermore, both capture the prophetic calling of Socrates as one who struggled with the “already and not yet” aspect of knowledge. All of this to say, that both Hamann and Kierkegaard argue for the implicit relation between knowledge and faith. John Milbank captures the essence of the discussion when he writes:

Until recently, we have failed to see that it was the radical pietist assault on philosophy which forced Kantianism to be so quickly abandoned, and both provoked and made in turn to collapse in quick succession the defences of critical reason by Fichte, Hegel, and Schelling, culminating in an astonishing reassertion of the radical pietist vision of Søren Kierkegaard. Moreover, even their idealist opponents, from Kant onwards, were forced by the pietists to find a way of including Christian faith as knowledge within their accounts of reason itself, from Kant’s rational faith, through Hegel’s crucified logos to Schelling’s philosophy of revelation. Hence in all this long history of ideas theology remained central, and not at all merely reactive in relation to philosophy; on the contrary, it is the essentially theological contributions of the radical pietists that one can trace many of the most potent themes in modern philosophy: for example, the priority of

existence over thought; the primacy of language; the ecstatic character of time; the history of reason; the dialogical principle; the suspension of the ethical; and the ontological difference.¹¹¹

This thesis has primarily focused on the issue of the priority of existence over thought between Hamann and Kierkegaard. Hamann and Kierkegaard were concerned that Socratic ignorance was becoming reduced to a lower place in the systematic appropriation of reality through the incarnation of reason. This is to say, both were troubled with the reduction of faith and possibility to a prior movement in a larger philosophical project that sought to strip away the intrinsic sense of finitude in the self for the sake of a timeless apprehension of the truth.

What is interesting to observe, however, is the way in which both Hamann and Kierkegaard utilize philosophical thought to manifest its own deficiencies rather than resorting to religious claims that nullify philosophical projects. Here, it is important to remember that Hamann maintains Socrates as a necessary figure in what he says about the moment of faith. The philosophical vigor of the early works of Hamann and Kierkegaard exemplifies the necessary role they each gave to the philosophical approach. The reverence they laid before Socrates in marking him as the ambiguous gift from the divine(s) signifies the necessary relationship between philosophy and religion. Of course, questions can be raised with regards to the inherent problematic in viewing Hamann and Kierkegaard's annunciation of the relation between religion and philosophy as ultimately becoming nothing more than the Christianization of the philosophical domain. Is the necessary leap from ignorance to faith a Christian leap in disguise? Are both Hamann and Kierkegaard involved in pseudo-Christian apologetics for the modern era? At this point it will be important to separate Hamann's project from Kierkegaard's dissertation because I suspect that Hamann would be the greater suspect concerning these allegations.

Hamann's biographical sketch informs us that his writing began by defending his religious experience to his peers, Berens and Kant. That religious apologetics was to a large degree the driving force in Hamann's writing of *Socratic Memorabilia* is easily

¹¹¹ John Milbank's article "Knowledge: The Theological Critique of Philosophy in Hamann and Jacobi" in *Radical Orthodoxy*, ed. by John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward (London: Routledge, 1999) pp. 21-37

discernable. The Hamannian faith, however, that arises from Socratic ignorance is not easily definable. Hamann's faith is shown to be some type of trust in one's inward movements. Hamann writes, "in short, Socrates lured his fellow citizens out of the labyrinths of their learned Sophists to a truth in the inward being, to a wisdom in the secret heart."¹¹² The faith that Hamann alludes to in *Socratic Memorabilia* lacks any specific theological content, after all it is a faith that is synonymous with the daimon. To be sure, for Hamann this faith did manifest through Christian beliefs, but as for the faith that ignorance produces, it speaks of one's certainty in the inward motions of the heart rather than in theological propositions.

Regardless, the interesting point is for one to recognize the way in which both authors employ Socrates as a prophetic figure. These prophets are responding to theological concepts to be sure, however, the necessary role of the prophet, as one operating in relation to an ideal yet to manifest, spurs the indifferent practitioners to repentance for their idolatrous affairs.

¹¹² S.M. pg. 77

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