

TITLE: Søren Kierkegaard and the Very Idea of Advance Beyond Socrates

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation presents a new assessment of the place of Socrates in the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855). It is commonly thought that Kierkegaard sought to explain Christianity as an intellectual or existential “advance” beyond Socrates’ pagan outlook. This impression, however, is false. As I demonstrate, it derives from a misreading of passages that are in fact satirical.

The butt of Kierkegaard’s satire was his rival Hans Lassen Martensen (1808–1884), who taught that Christianity permits its faithful to progress beyond Socratic ignorance to a state of “co-knowledge” with God. Kierkegaard vigorously opposed this claim, decrying it as a travesty of both Christianity and Socrates’

legacy. On Kierkegaard's own view, Christianity in fact demands a *resolute embrace* of the Socratic practice of continually acknowledging ignorance.

To promote his own view, Kierkegaard mounted an energetic campaign to *rehabilitate Socrates* as an enduring philosophical, ethical, and even (to an extent) religious paradigm for Denmark's Christians. And as part of that campaign, Kierkegaard produced two elaborate parodies of Martensen's idea of "advance beyond Socrates." These parodies are the texts that today give rise to the false impression of Kierkegaard described above. Unaware of the underlying polemic, readers of these texts blithely conflate Kierkegaard's position with that of Martensen, the object of his satire.

By correcting this error, my dissertation sheds new light on Kierkegaard's views and texts—and discloses their revolutionary thrust. As I demonstrate, Kierkegaard depicts Christian life as fully compatible with Socrates' zetetic philosophy. Kierkegaard brings Socrates to life, and sets him to work, as a powerful critic of religious triumphalism. In so doing, Kierkegaard proudly defies the view—all too common in our age of surging fundamentalisms—that the philosophical search for truth has no place in, or has no place for, a profoundly religious life.