

KIERKEGAARD'S FORM OF WRITING AND USE OF SOCRATES IN "AT A GRAVESIDE"*

Jon Stewart¹ 

¹ Institute of Philosophy, Slovak Academy of Sciences, Bratislava, Slovakia

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Abstract

This article examines Kierkegaard's discourse "At a Graveside" from *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*. It is argued that this text illustrates Kierkegaard's special way of presenting his ideas. The discourse is interdisciplinary with elements of literature, philosophy, and theology. But this is not to say that it is a literary, philosophical, or theological work. Rather, it is a combination of all these that defies categorization in the conventional genres. Moreover, it is argued that an important part of Kierkegaard's way of writing in "At a Graveside" is connected to his well-known emulation of Socrates.

Keywords: death; nihilism; indefinability; inexplicability; *aporeia*.

Resumen

Este artículo examina el discurso de Kierkegaard "Junto a una tumba" de *Tres discursos sobre ocasiones imaginarias*. Se argumenta que este texto ilustra la manera especial de Kierkegaard de presentar sus ideas. El discurso es interdisciplinario, con elementos de literatura, filosofía y teología. Pero esto no quiere decir que sea una obra literaria, filosófica o teológica. Más bien, es una combinación de todas ellas que desafía la categorización en los géneros convencionales. Además, se argumenta que una parte importante de la forma de escribir de Kierkegaard en "Junto a la tumba" está relacionada con su conocida emulación de Sócrates.

Palabras clave: muerte; nihilismo; indefinibilidad; inexplicabilidad; *aporeia*.

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Kierkegaard published the discourse "At a Graveside" on April 29, 1845 in his collection *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*.¹ These discourses follow the series of edifying discourses that appeared from 1843 to 1844, which Kierkegaard published in his own name instead of under a pseudonym. The three discourses featured in the work from 1845 are each dedicated to a specific context or occasion: the first, a confession, the second, a wedding, and the third, a funeral. "At a Graveside" is the last work in the collection. These are not real events that Kierkegaard witnessed and then reported on, but rather they are fictional or "imagined" ones that serve as the occasion for him to reflect on key issues concerning human existence. "At a Graveside" focuses on the issue of death and what kind of a disposition one should have toward it.² This is not a technical scholarly or philosophical work but rather is intended for general religious believers.

Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions and specifically "At a Graveside" might appear to belong straightforwardly to the established genre of edifying or upbuilding religious literature, which is the way that Kierkegaard's earlier discourses are usually classified. However, the matter is not so straightforward. The issue of Kierkegaard's genre of writing has long been puzzling for scholars,³ and it has in turn engendered somewhat ideologically driven questions about whether Kierkegaard was a literary writer, a philosopher, a theologian, or something else. Although there is clearly a literary side in his works,⁴ it would seem inaccurate to characterize his entire *corpus* as literary in the strict sense. He has often been dismissed as not being a philosopher due to his refusal to give straightforward analytic arguments to make his case and to establish specific theses.⁵ His credentials as a theologian in the strict sense have also been called into question for much the same reason, namely, his refusal to present consistent and clear-cut arguments to support the various Christian dogmas.⁶ Instead of following conventional genres for these fields, he makes use of different

¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Tre Taler ved tænkte Leiligheder*, Copenhagen, C.A. Reitzel, 1845. In what follows reference is made to the reprint of this text in *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, hereafter *SKS*. (English translation: *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*, trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993, hereafter *TD*.)

² See *Kierkegaard and Death*, ed. by Patrick Stokes and Adam J. Buben, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2011.

³ See Jon Stewart, "Kierkegaard's Use of Genre in the Struggle with German Philosophy" in *The Unity of Content and Form in Philosophical Writing: The Perils of Conformity*, London, New Delhi, New York and Sydney, Bloomsbury, 2013 (*Bloomsbury Studies in Philosophy*), pp. 81-95.

⁴ See Aage Henriksen's characterization in his *Kierkegaards Romaner*, Copenhagen, Gyldendal, 1954.

⁵ See William Barrett, *Irrational Man*, Garden City, New York, Doubleday Anchor Books, 1962, p. 151: Kierkegaard "never aimed at being a philosopher, and all his philosophy was indeed incidental to his main purpose, to show what it means to be a Christian." Marvin Farber, *Phenomenology and Existence: Toward a Philosophy within Nature*, New York, Evanston and London, Harper & Row, 1967, p. 27: Kierkegaard's "writings are for the most part undistinguished so far as their philosophical content is concerned. Extensive reading is necessary to find a single philosophical thought that can be referred to as such." See the following more nuanced discussions, Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 632-652. Alastair Hannay, "Why Should Anyone Call Kierkegaard a Philosopher?" in N.J. Cappelørn and J. Stewart (eds.), *Kierkegaard Revisited*, (*Kierkegaard Studies Monograph Series*, vol. 1), Berlin and New York, Walter de Gruyter 1997, pp. 238-253. Alastair Hannay, "Kierkegaard and What We Mean by 'Philosophy,'" *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, vol. 8, no. 1 (2000), pp. 1-22.

⁶ See the insightful reflections by Lee C. Barrett in his edited work, *Kierkegaard as Theologian*, London, Bloomsbury, 2018. This issue also appears in Heiko Schulz's outstanding study, *Aneignung und Reflexion*, vol. 2, *Studien zur Philosophie und Theologie Søren Kierkegaards*, Berlin and Boston, De Gruyter, 2014 (*Kierkegaard Studies Monograph Series*, vol. 28).

kinds of literary forms and strategies of communication. In the first instance I wish to show how “At a Graveside” illustrates Kierkegaard’s special way of presenting his ideas. This work is interdisciplinary with elements of literature, philosophy, and theology. But this is not to say that it is a literary, philosophical, or theological work *per se*. Rather, it is a combination of all these that defies categorization in the conventional genres.

Moreover, I would like to claim that an important part of Kierkegaard’s way of writing is connected with his emulation of Socrates. Throughout his life, Kierkegaard was fascinated with the figure of the Greek philosopher.⁷ It is well-known that he made use of Socrates as a model for his own work.⁸ He explains, “The only analogy I have before me is Socrates; my task is a Socratic task.”⁹ In this paper I wish to show that there is an important Socratic element in “At a Graveside.” This might seem especially odd given that the discourse is clearly written in a Christian context, which might seem to rule out the use of a pagan thinker. But this is not so. Kierkegaard, somewhat oddly, sees Socrates’ thought as being in harmony with many aspects of Christianity. He writes in *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, “True, [Socrates] was no Christian, that I know,” but “I also definitely remain convinced that he has become one.”¹⁰ I wish to argue that the use of Socrates as a model in “At a Graveside” holds the key to Kierkegaard’s disputed understanding of the nature of death.

In this connection I wish to support and develop the position set forth by Marius Mjaaland in his criticism of Michael Theunissen’s reading of “At a Graveside.”¹¹ In my opinion, Mjaaland rightly sees Kierkegaard’s views about the indefinability and inexplicability of death as a kind of Socratic *aporia*. Kierkegaard wants to mark a fundamental limit of thought itself. By contrast, Theunissen prefers to interpret Kierkegaard’s discourse as an exercise in philosophical dialectics, which remains within a basic framework of thought in line with the

⁷ Jacob Howland, *Kierkegaard and Socrates: A Study in Philosophy and Faith*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2006. Wolfdietrich von Kloeden, *Kierkegaard und Sokrates. Søren Kierkegaards Sokratesrezeption*, Rheinland-Westfalen-Lippe: Evangelische Fachhochschule, 1991 (*Schriftenreihe der Evangelischen Fachhochschule Rheinland-Westfalen-Lippe*, vol. 16). Jens Himmelstrup, *Søren Kierkegaards Opfattelse af Sokrates. En Studie i dansk Filosofis Historie*, Copenhagen, Arnold Busck, 1924. Sophia Scopetea, *Kierkegaard og græciteten. En kamp med ironi*, Copenhagen, C.A. Reitzel, 1995. See also the articles in J. Stewart and K. Nun (eds.), *Kierkegaard and the Greek World*, Tome I, *Socrates and Plato*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2010 (*Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources*, vol. 2).

⁸ See Jon Stewart, *Søren Kierkegaard: Subjectivity, Irony and the Crisis of Modernity*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015. Paul Muench, “The Socratic Method of Kierkegaard’s Pseudonym Johannes Climacus: Indirect Communication and the Art of ‘Taking Away,’” in P. Houe and G.D. Marino, (eds.), *Kierkegaard and the Word(s): Essays on Hermeneutics and Communication*, Copenhagen, C.A. Reitzel, 2003, pp. 139-50. Paul Muench, “Kierkegaard’s Socratic Pseudonym: A Profile of Johannes Climacus,” in R.A. Furtak (ed.), *Kierkegaard’s Concluding Unscientific Postscript: A Critical Guide*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 25-44.

⁹ *SKS*, vol. 13, p. 405; *The Moment and Late Writings*, trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1998, p. 341.

¹⁰ *SKS*, vol. 16, p. 36; *The Point of View*, trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1998, p. 54.

¹¹ Marius G. Mjaaland, “Death and Aporia: Some Reflections on the Problem of Thinking Death in *At a Graveside* (1845),” *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook* (2003), pp. 395-418. Michael Theunissen, “Das Erbauliche im Gedanken an den Tod. Traditionale Elemente, innovative Ideen und unausgeschöpfte Potentiale in Kierkegaards Rede. An einem Grabe,” *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook* (2000), pp. 40-73. (In English as “The Upbuilding in the Thought of Death: Traditional Elements, Innovative Ideas, and Unexhausted Possibilities in Kierkegaard’s Discourse ‘At a Graveside,’” in Robert L. Perkins (ed.), “Prefaces” and “Writing Sampler” / “Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions”, Macon, Georgia, Mercer University Press, 2006 (*International Kierkegaard Commentary*, vols. 9-10). pp. 321-358.)

Western philosophical tradition. My contribution to this discussion and the interpretation of "At a Graveside" in general can be found in the connection between Kierkegaard's use of the model of Socrates and his way of writing. His Socratic approach leads him to avail himself of different kinds of genres to achieve his goal.

I. THE LITERARY BEGINNING OF "AT A GRAVESIDE"

In "At a Graveside" Kierkegaard makes use of a variety of literary tools, such as storytelling. The work begins with a description of a funeral and the next of kin grieving over the dead man. By way of introduction, he gives a sketch of the man and his life. This is admittedly not an elaborate story, but it is a very useful way of drawing the reader into the issue of the discourse without any complex philosophical or theological preamble. With this story Kierkegaard presumably anticipates that he will recall some concrete situations in the minds of his readers who have themselves had the experience of attending a funeral. This can be regarded as a literary aspect of the work.

Kierkegaard uses the phrase "Then all is over" as the first words of the discourse and as a kind of mantra throughout.¹² He seems clearly to want to suggest that with death we lose our conscious being. This is consistent with the description that "in the grave there is quiet," and "there is no recollection."¹³ In his account, Kierkegaard emphasizes the simple piety of the deceased. Since the dead person knew that it would be impossible to think of God when he was dead, "*he recollected God, while he was living.*"¹⁴ In other words, he tried to live a Christian life and thus to think of and pray to God regularly. In the sketch of the man, there is nothing remarkable. He was a quiet unassuming person who did his job and lived happily with his wife and son. He was not someone famous or important, and his death was hardly noticed by people. The death of such an obscure and humble person seems to emphasize the meaninglessness of human existence. What was the point of the life of such an insignificant person?

Although there were no great ceremonies or days of mourning for the dead man, nonetheless Kierkegaard emphasizes that there was something important about him:

Yet he still had one more work; in simplicity of heart it was performed with the same faithfulness: he recollected God. He was a man, old, he became aged, and then he died, but the recollection of God remained the same, a guide in all his activity, a quiet joy in his devout contemplation. Indeed, if there were no one at all who missed him in death, yes, if he were not with God now, God would miss him in life and know his dwelling and seek him there, because the deceased walked before him and was better known by him than by anyone else.¹⁵

The idea is clearly that there is something important about the dead man's relation to God, even if he were the most insignificant person in the world. The implication is that it is here that the man found meaning. Kierkegaard emphasizes the point that the deceased, so to speak, lived with God in every aspect of his life. As in all his edifying discourses, Kierkegaard here simply presupposes the existence of God without argument. This is because these works are intended for Christian readers. But here he does not assume immortality in the same way.

¹² SKS, vol. 5, p. 442 / TD, p. 71.

¹³ SKS, vol. 5, p. 442 / TD, p. 71.

¹⁴ SKS, vol. 5, p. 442 / TD, p. 71.

¹⁵ SKS, vol. 5, p. 443 / TD, p. 72.

Instead, he seems to regard it as an open question with the remark, “if he were not with God now.” This implies that it might be the case that he is immortal and with God, or that it might not be the case. Moreover, at the beginning of the discourse, Kierkegaard seems clearly to imply that in death we have no consciousness or feeling, which seems to point in the direction of a skepticism about life after death.

Kierkegaard introduces the concept of the earnestness (*Alvor*) of death, which is central to the discourse.¹⁶ He describes the idea behind this concept as follows:

Death can expressly teach that earnestness lies in the inner being, in thought, can teach that it is only an illusion when the external is regarded light-mindedly or heavy-mindedly or when the observer, profoundly considering the thought of death, forgets to think about and take into account his own death.¹⁷

It is possible to think about death in many ways. It is a sensitive topic that makes people uncomfortable. Kierkegaard’s point is that as long as we think of death only when we think of the death of others, then we are not being earnest about it. We only appreciate the full importance and gravity of it when we think of *our own death* honestly and in our “inner being.” Only when we personalize the idea as our own death are we able to have the correct perspective. Everything else is a form of distraction, self-deception, repression, or denial.

The meaning of the death of another and my own death are quite different. For however sad we might be about the death of a loved one, the situation is fundamentally changed when we consider our own death personally. Death is not the same as sorrow since sorrow is what happens to the survivors of the death of a loved one. But the dead feel no sorrow. For them “it is over.”¹⁸

For Kierkegaard, true earnestness involves thinking and appropriating the idea of one’s own death. He uses the term “appropriation” (*Tilegnelse*) to emphasize the individual nature of this relation.¹⁹ Along the same lines he uses the familiar term “the single individual” (*den Enkelte*) to underscore the fact that this concerns every human being on their own.²⁰ Kierkegaard frequently uses this kind of formulation also in other works.²¹ The point of these concepts in this context seems to be that each of us individually must come to terms with the

¹⁶ SKS, vol. 5, p. 444 / TD, p. 73. See Michael Theunissen, *Der Begriff Ernst bei Søren Kierkegaard*, Freiburg i. Br. and Munich, Alber, 1958. W. Glenn Kirkconnell, “Earnestness or Estheticism: Post 9/11 Reflections on Kierkegaard’s Two Views of Death,” *Florida Philosophical Review*, vol. 3 (2003), pp. 62-72. Robert J. Widenmann, “Christian Earnestness (Seriousness),” in M.M. Thulstrup (ed.), *The Sources and Depths of Faith in Kierkegaard*, Copenhagen, C.A. Reitzel 1978 (*Bibliotheca Kierkegaardiana*, vol. 2), pp. 83-99. John Davenport, “Earnestness,” in J. Stewart, S.M. Emmanuel and W. McDonald (eds.), *Kierkegaard’s Concepts, Tome II, Classicism to Enthusiasm*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2014 (*Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources*, vol. 15), pp. 219-227.

¹⁷ SKS, vol. 5, p. 444 / TD, p. 73.

¹⁸ SKS, vol. 5, p. 445 / TD, p. 74.

¹⁹ SKS, vol. 5, p. 445 / TD, p. 74. See Jon Stewart, “Kierkegaard’s Criticism of Abstraction and His Proposed Solution: Appropriation,” in *Idealism and Existentialism: Hegel and Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century European Philosophy*, New York and London, Continuum, 2010, pp. 94-119.

²⁰ SKS, vol. 5, p. 446 / TD, p. 76. See Alastair Hannay, “Kierkegaard’s Single Individual and the Point of Indirect Communication,” in Steven Crowell (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Existentialism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp. 73-95. Marie Mikulová Thulstrup, “The Single Individual,” in M.M. Thulstrup (ed.), *Some of Kierkegaard’s Main Categories*, Copenhagen, C.A. Reitzel 1988 (*Bibliotheca Kierkegaardiana*, vol. 16), pp. 9-25.

²¹ See the overview in Lydia B. Amir, “Individual,” in J. Stewart, S.M. Emmanuel and W. McDonald (eds.), *Kierkegaard’s Concepts, Tome IV, Individual to Novel*, Farnham and Burlington, Ashgate, 2014 (*Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources*, vol. 15), pp. 1-7.

inevitability of our own death. Only you can think of your own death. No one can do it for you. There is no fixed formula for how best to do this.

Kierkegaard's literary use of the story of the funeral is particularly effective here since this inevitably conjures up in the minds of the readers the memory of the last time that they were at a funeral. This is an occasion for them to recall their own thoughts and emotions at that time. Presumably they too thought of death along the lines that Kierkegaard sketches, that is, their thoughts were confined to death of the specific person whose funeral they were attending. But they failed to extend the thought of death to themselves. Kierkegaard's strategy here is thus didactical since just by telling a simple story he is able to get the readers thinking on their own, just as Socrates tries to get people to reflect by asking them critical questions. There is also a critical element in Kierkegaard's thought here since the hope is that when the readers start to reflect on how their thoughts of death were only about the dead person, then they will realize that they were not in earnest about the thought of death. This provides the framework for them to understand Kierkegaard's concept of earnestness in such a way that they can directly relate it to their own first-hand experience.

II. THE THEOLOGICAL DIMENSION OF THE DISCOURSE

The theological dimension of "At a Graveside" is perhaps the most overt. Reference is made to God and heaven in the context of the reflections on the nature of death. But these are not developed as dogmas but instead are used as simple assumed points of orientation. In this sense the discourse can be regarded as a text for religious inspiration rather than a work of Christian theology.

Kierkegaard distinguishes between earnestness and mood (*Stemning*).²² He lists many cases where one feels a sense of sorrow at the death of people whom one knows or does not know. But all of these, he claims, are moods that come and go. They are prompted by concrete events such as seeing a hearse or a grave. Such sights remind us of the inevitability of death, but they do not compel us to think earnestly about it. By contrast, the earnestness of death is not a feeling or a mood, but rather a thought, an idea that never leaves us. The death of another might prompt us to think of our own deaths, but it might not. Earnestness is a secondary level of reflection that goes beyond a mood or feeling of sorrow.

Kierkegaard understands the psychological need to believe in some kind of immortality. He explains,

there is a longing for the eternal when death took and took again and now took the last outstanding person you knew; there is a fever heat or cold fire of soul illness when someone becomes so familiar with death and the loss of next of kin that life becomes soul-destroying for him; there is sheer sorrow when the dead person was one of yours; there are the labor pains of immortal hope when it was your beloved; there is the jolting breakthrough of earnestness when it was your one and only guide and loneliness overwhelms you—but even if it was your child, even if it was your beloved, and even if it was your one and only guide, this is still a mood.²³

Kierkegaard is acutely aware of how deeply people suffer when their loved ones die. He knows that this can bring with it a psychological trauma that can last a lifetime. He refers to this above as the "fever heat or cold fire of soul illness" and acknowledges that the death

²² SKS, vol. 5, p. 446 / TD, p. 75.

²³ SKS, vol. 5, p. 446 / TD, p. 75.

of another can be “soul-destroying.” But once again he reiterates his point that despite this, earnestness only truly arises when one thinks one’s own death.

In order to illustrate his discussion about the meaning of death, Kierkegaard once again makes use of a story. He writes:

A poet has told of a youth who on the night when the year changes dreamed of being an old man, and as an old man in his dream he looked back over a wasted life, until he woke in anxiety New Year’s morning not only to a new year but to a new life. Likewise, to be wide awake and to think death, to think what surely is more decisive than old age, which of course also has its time, to think that all was over, that everything was lost along with life, in order then to win everything in life—this is earnestness.²⁴

The “poet” referred to here is the German writer Jean Paul, and the story is his “Die Neujahrnacht eines Unglücklichen” (1789), which constitutes the second part of the “Postscript” to the “Vierter Brief. An Benigna.”²⁵ Being frightened by the vision of his life that took the wrong path and was wasted, the young man changes his ways and tries to live a virtuous and ethical life starting with the new year. The perspective of imminent death and looking back on a life full of regrets is the kind of thing that Kierkegaard means by earnestness, which can effect a radical change in the person. The thought of one’s own death enjoins one to think of one’s own life differently.

In an inordinately long sentence, Kierkegaard describes the simple person who goes out to the grave of a loved one and recollects them, while at the same time thinking earnestly about his own death:

We surely do agree... that his recollecting is precious to the deceased, is received with joy in heaven, and that his earnestness is just as laudable, just as well-pleasing to God, just as serviceable to him as that of someone who with rare talent used day and night in practicing in his life the earnest thought of death, so that he was halted and halted again in order to renounce vain pursuits, was prompted and prompted again to hasten on the road of the good, now was weaned of being talkative and busy in life in order to learn wisdom in silence, now learned not to shudder at phantoms and human inventions but at the responsibility of death, now learned not to fear those who kill the body but to fear for himself and fear having his life in vanity, in the moment, in imagination.²⁶

The religious side of Kierkegaard comes out here somewhat suddenly and contrasts with much of the previous tone of the discourse. Before it seemed clear that the dead had no consciousness and were not capable of thought, but now the dead are portrayed as being “in heaven” and being joyful that they are remembered. Moreover, God is pleased by the fact that the grieving person remembers the dead and thinks earnestly about his own death. If one wants to read Kierkegaard as a philosopher, then one would expect him to give evidence and arguments for these views. But this is not the case. Instead, he writes more as a religious writer, who simply assumes the existence of God and an afterlife since he is writing for Christians. The vagueness of his view and its apparent contradiction with the more secular picture he presented previously in the work raises interpretative problems about where exactly he comes down on the issue of the immortality of the soul.

²⁴ SKS, vol. 5, pp. 446f. / TD, p. 76.

²⁵ See *Jean Paul’s Briefe und bevorstehender Lebenslauf*, in *Jean Paul’s sämtliche Werke*, vols. 1-60, Berlin, G. Reimer 1826-28, vol. 35, 1827, pp. 46-48. See Katalin Nun, Gerhard Schreiber and Jon Stewart (eds.), *The Auction Catalogue of Kierkegaard’s Library*, Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2015 (*Kierkegaard Research, Sources, Reception and Resources*, vol. 20), numbers 1777-1799. See SKS, vol. K5, pp. 453f.

²⁶ SKS, vol. 5, pp. 447f. / TD, p. 77.

The question of one's relation to God is, for Kierkegaard, essential for addressing the problem of the apparent meaninglessness of existence. He explains, "The person who is without God in the world soon becomes sad about himself—and expresses this haughtily by being sad about all life, but the person who is in fellowship with God indeed lives with the one whose presence gives infinite significance to even the most insignificant."²⁷ Without God, the problem of nihilism arises, and one is easily depressed about the fact that there is no meaning. However, if one has a relationship to God, this provides all the meaning that one needs. Even the poorest and most insignificant person can have a great sense of meaning and significance in life in this way. This is completely independent of one's status in society. Apparently, this is Kierkegaard's view about the proper disposition towards nihilism.

Kierkegaard reflects on the passage of time as something that we are unable to prevent. During our lives it is impossible to find rest in a deeper sense, due to time. This kind of rest would have to take place outside of time. Time only stops with death: "When death comes, the word is: Up to here, not one step further; then it is concluded, not a letter is added; the meaning is at an end and not one more sound is to be heard—all is over."²⁸ He refers to this as the decisiveness of death. From the perspective of death, it does not matter what one considers to be important or meaningful in one's life. Death simply acts without interest or emotion. It is a force of nature that cannot be avoided.

Kierkegaard observes that equality in death can seem to be something attractive especially to those who suffer in life from the inequalities of society. It can even be a motivation for suicide. But, for Kierkegaard, this is not earnest but rather is a form of defiance of God. Instead, the correct view is, with the thought of earnestness about one's own death, to embrace life and to understand equality in the sense that we are all equal before God.²⁹ This idea allows one to reconcile oneself with the hardships and injustices of life that are caused by social inequalities. In life people are all very different, but in death they are all the same.

Kierkegaard emphasizes again: "the challenge of earnestness to the living is to think it, to think that all is over, that there comes a time when all is over."³⁰ The problem is that when one is young and healthy, one tends not to think about one's own death. It seems irrelevant since it will presumably only happen far in the future. However, this notion gives a false sense of security since, of course, death can happen at any time to anyone. Likewise, if one has a position of power or prestige, one believes that one is invulnerable. But all of this is an illusion. Kierkegaard refers to the deaths of people in different stations of life: a child, a young man, an older man with an unfinished project.³¹ All of them seem to have a good argument that they should be granted more time to live, but death is indifferent to their pleas. The point seems to be that thinking earnestly about one's own death means thinking about what this means for one's life. A part of this involves preparing oneself for death. When death comes, one should be able to accept it and be at peace with it instead of pleading for more time or wishing in vain that one could complete one final task or fulfill one final wish. Only thinking earnestly about death can prepare one for it.

²⁷ SKS, vol. 5, p. 448 / TD, p. 78. Translation slightly modified.

²⁸ SKS, vol. 5, p. 449 / TD, pp. 78f.

²⁹ SKS, vol. 5, p. 458 / TD, p. 89.

³⁰ SKS, vol. 5, p. 449 / TD, p. 79

³¹ SKS, vol. 5, p. 450 / TD, p. 80.

One reaction might be defiance in the face of death and meaninglessness. Kierkegaard, by contrast, is critical of the notion of rebellion or defiance, which he regards as a form of egotism.³² It is a self-delusion to think that one does not fear death. Kierkegaard's rejection of rebellion should be seen against the background of his Christian view. Death is presumably a part of God's plan and to commit suicide or rebel against it means calling into question God's wisdom. Instead, it is best to trust in God's plan, even though one does not fully understand it and is even frightened by some aspects of it.

Kierkegaard acknowledges that the contemplation of one's own death in earnestness can lead to different conclusions: "Death in earnest gives life force as nothing else does; it makes one alert as nothing else does. Death induces the sensual person to say: Let us eat and drink, because tomorrow we shall die—but this is sensuality's cowardly lust for life."³³ Hedonism is, of course, a mistaken conception of how to live one's life in the consciousness of death. On the contrary, the thought of death

gives the earnest person the right momentum in life and the right goal toward which he directs his momentum....Then earnestness grasps the present this very day, disdains no task as too insignificant, rejects no time as too short, works with all its might even though it is willing to smile at itself if this effort is said to be merit before God, in weakness is willing to understand that a human being is nothing at all and that one who works with all one's might gains only the proper opportunity to wonder at God.³⁴

Here again the idea of God seems to be essential as the source of true value and meaning in life. This means that the theological dimension of the discourse remains in focus since the belief in God constitutes the framework for the reflections on the meaning of one's own death.

Kierkegaard observes how the finitude of life makes it more valuable. When one only has a specific, limited period of time in which to live, then every hour seems to be important. He offers an analogy of a merchant selling his goods for a specific price. When the goods become scarce, the price goes up since they are more difficult to obtain and are thus more in demand. Likewise, death makes our time scarce, and this makes each day infinite in value.³⁵ From the idea of our own death we can derive the value in our lives. In anticipation of later existentialist views, Kierkegaard concludes that everything becomes meaningful since it is finite and transitory.³⁶ So there is a dialectic involved in thinking about one's death and also having the right to enjoy and value one's life. The two are closely and necessarily related: "So, then, let death keep its power, 'that all is over,' but let life also keep the right to work while it is day; and let the earnest person seek the thought of death as an aid in that work."³⁷ The earnest thought of death sheds light on our lives in a positive manner.

³² *SKS*, vol. 5, pp. 451f. / *TD*, pp. 81f.

³³ *SKS*, vol. 5, p. 453 / *TD*, p. 83.

³⁴ *SKS*, vol. 5, p. 453 / *TD*, p. 83.

³⁵ *SKS*, vol. 5, p. 453 / *TD*, pp. 83f.

³⁶ This is the premise of Borges' short story "The Immortal." See Jon Stewart, "Borges on Immortality," *Philosophy and Literature*, vol. 17, no. 2 (1993), pp. 78-82.

³⁷ *SKS*, vol. 5, p. 454 / *TD*, p. 84.

III. THE PHILOSOPHICAL DIMENSION OF THE DISCOURSE

The philosophical dimension of the discourse concerns epistemology. Specifically, the question is raised about the possibility of knowing what death is. Kierkegaard claims, "Concerning death's decision, the next thing that must be said is that it is *indefinable*. By this nothing is said, but this is the way it must be when the question is about an enigma."³⁸ Only God can understand the mystery of death since he created and governs the universe "with wise and omnipresent purpose."³⁹ The point seems to be that nothing can be known about death, which must always remain at bottom a mystery. Kierkegaard explains: "So death is indefinable—the only certainty, and the only thing about which nothing is certain."⁴⁰ This represents a limit to human knowing. We have per definition no possibility of experiencing death as long as we are still alive. With all our modern medical technology, we can seemingly know a lot about the physical process of death, but this tells us nothing about our own experience of death. Moreover, it tells us nothing about the ethical dimension of death, for example, why do innocent children die?

The indefinability of death, however, does not stop people from engaging in discussions about it, where they speculate, for example, about why a certain person died at a certain time, or whether it was a relief or not. But, for Kierkegaard, all these kinds of speculations lead away from an earnest consideration of death as one's own death. In these kinds of discussions, one forgets one's own death. Kierkegaard points out that people have a difficult time thinking about their own death and accepting the fact that death is inexplicable.⁴¹ They therefore repress thoughts of this kind and prefer to live as if death did not exist.

After the discussion of indefinability, Kierkegaard introduces the notion of *inexplicability*: "Finally, it must be said of death's decision that it is inexplicable. That is, whether or not people find an explanation, death itself explains nothing."⁴² Any kind of explanation that can be given to death is simply a reflection of the subjective views and desires of the person doing the explaining. The mere fact of death does not explain anything. It remains a mystery. We can never know why death takes people when it does. There seems to be no logic in this. It defies human understanding. However, since it is such an important issue in human existence, people want to give death some kind of meaning by saying, for example, that a person's death was "the supreme good fortune" or "the greatest misfortune."⁴³ Thus, both poles of the spectrum are covered in the attempt to make sense of death. (This is a part of what Theunissen understands by the dialectical nature of the discourse.)⁴⁴ But there is no evidence that points in either direction. It is simply inexplicable. Both perspectives reflect a certain view of life but have nothing to do with the nature of death. The earnest person is the one who understands this and refrains from trying to give any kind of explanation. All forms of explanation of death are simply "diversion and absentmindedness in intellectual distraction."⁴⁵ The earnestness that Kierkegaard recommends thus involves the ability to

³⁸ SKS, vol. 5, p. 454 / TD, p. 85.

³⁹ SKS, vol. 5, p. 461 / TD, p. 93.

⁴⁰ SKS, vol. 5, p. 460 / TD, p. 91.

⁴¹ SKS, vol. 5, p. 461 / TD, p. 93.

⁴² SKS, vol. 5, p. 464 / TD, p. 96.

⁴³ SKS, vol. 5, p. 466 / TD, p. 98.

⁴⁴ Michael Theunissen, "Das Erbauliche im Gedanken an den Tod," pp. 40-73.

live with the uncertainty and enigma of death instead of repressing it or trying to think up possible meanings for it. While death itself is certain, what death *means* must remain forever uncertain.

With the concepts of indefinability and inexplicability, Kierkegaard seems to want to establish a clear limit to human knowledge. Here we can clearly see the philosophical aspect of the work. Most talk about death is simply meaningless since in the end nothing can be known about it. It is a mystery. The problem is how we are able to manage to live with such an important thing being a mystery. Kierkegaard clearly thinks that just knowing that with certainty we will die is all we need to know in order to consider our lives carefully. But we must reject any further attempt to extend our knowledge beyond this bare fact to a more concrete picture of death being something positive or negative or something else altogether. The mystery of death is what frightens people, and so it is a difficult challenge to appropriate the earnest thought of one's own death in a way that does not make one constantly anxious, nervous, or morbid, but we must find a way to do so presumably with the help of God.

Kant argued that the metaphysicians continually ran into problems because they made claims that went beyond what could be known. He therefore dedicated himself to clearly establishing the limits of reason so that philosophers could become critical and thus resist the temptation to go beyond these limits. So also with the idea of the indefinability and inexplicability of death, Kierkegaard establishes his own critique of human reasoning and thinking. Death is a thing-in-itself that can never in principle be known as long as we are alive, and so all talk of it ends in absurdity. Although it is not easy, we should resist the urge to pretend that death is something that we can have knowledge of.

IV. KIERKEGAARD'S USE OF SOCRATES

As is well known, many of the Platonic dialogues end in *aporia*.⁴⁶ Socrates' interlocutors propose different definitions to his questions about the nature of, for example, truth, beauty, or justice, and he refutes each of them. In the end there is no positive conclusion or result. Socrates merely arrives at the point that the only thing that can be said is that one cannot know. As in many of his other works, Kierkegaard seems to take a Socratic approach to the issue of "At a Graveside," where it is established that death is something inexplicable. Just as Socrates claims ignorance, so also Kierkegaard's discourse claims ignorance. At the end Kierkegaard, in the spirit of an aporetic dialogue, writes explicitly, "Therefore, the discourse will refrain from any explanation."⁴⁷

It will be recalled that at the end of *The Apology*, after the death sentence has been issued, Socrates says that he does not fear death since he does not know what it is.⁴⁸ He mentions a couple of possibilities and concludes that neither of these represents something to be feared. But the key point is that he refuses to say that he knows for certain anything about death. Kierkegaard seems to refer to Socrates indirectly as "the wise person" in the following passage: "To paganism, the highest courage was the wise person (whose earnestness was

⁴⁵ SKS, vol. 5, p. 468 / TD, p. 100.

⁴⁶ See Mjaaland's useful account in his "Death and Aporia: Some Reflections on the Problem of Thinking Death in *At a Graveside* (1845)," pp. 405-409.

⁴⁷ SKS, vol. 5, p. 468 / TD, p. 100.

⁴⁸ Plato, *Apology*, 40b-41d.

indicated expressly by his not being in a hurry with the explanation) who was able to live with the thought of death in such a way that he overcame this thought every moment of his life by indecisiveness."⁴⁹ Socrates was able to live with the enigma of death and did not approach it as a problem that could be solved. It should be noted that Socrates does of course address this issue directly in the *Phaedo*, which is the account of his final discussion with his friends before his execution.

Kierkegaard also follows Socrates on this point with the idea of what he calls "the equilibrium of indecisiveness."⁵⁰ Even though one would very much like to know with certainty about death, or to pretend to know, for Kierkegaard, the key is to maintain the uncertainty about it. We must always keep in mind that we cannot know what death is, whether it is complete annihilation or a blissful afterlife. We must accept this *aporeia* and cease trying to find a way to solve the mystery and say something more about it. Thus, the real difficulty is to hold on to the uncertainty firmly.

This Socratic motif fits nicely with what Kierkegaard says at the end of the text when he claims that he is not teaching anything with the discourse. He explains,

The person who has spoken here is, of course, not your teacher, my listener; he is merely letting you witness, just as he himself is doing, how a person seeks to learn something from the thought of death, that teacher of earnestness who at birth is appointed to everyone for a whole lifetime and who in the uncertainty is always ready to begin the instruction when it is requested.⁵¹

Thus, like Socrates, he claims to have no knowledge of death and to teach nothing. With the discourse Kierkegaard has merely enjoined his reader to reflect on the issue of death and its connection to oneself and one's own life. If anything is a teacher, then it is death itself, which should serve as a wake-up call for the living. While Socrates does not teach, he does critically examine people who claim to know. Kierkegaard offers a parallel to this when he writes, "But the uncertainty of death is the pupil's rigorous oral examiner [*Lærlingens strænge Hører*]."⁵²

In *The Apology* Socrates gives an account of why he goes around Athens and questions people in the way that he does.⁵³ He explains that the Oracle at Delphi said that there was no one wiser than he was, which surprised Socrates very much since he never regarded himself as wise or as having knowledge of anything. He then tried to disprove the Oracle by finding someone who knew more than he did, which he believed would be an easy task. However, upon questioning people who boasted of knowing different things, he discovered that in fact they did actually not know anything. From this experience Socrates concluded that the meaning of the Oracle could then only be that he knew more than the others simply due to the fact that he knew that he did not know anything at all. The others were ignorant, as he was, but, by contrast, they did not know this and continued in their unfounded claims to knowledge. There is an analogy to this in "At a Graveside." The one who thinks earnestly about death knows that death is inexplicable and thus cannot be known. Such a person thus refrains from making any boastful or clever claims to know what death is. They are, like Socrates,

⁴⁹ SKS, vol. 5, p. 465 / TD, p. 98.

⁵⁰ SKS, vol. 5, p. 465 / TD, p. 97.

⁵¹ SKS, vol. 5, p. 469 / TD, p. 102.

⁵² SKS, vol. 5, p. 467 / TD, p. 100.

⁵³ Plato, *Apology*, 21a-23c.

aware of their own ignorance. However, those who are not earnest about death are unaware of this and speak without hesitation about death as if they knew what it meant. Like Socrates' interlocutors, they thus live in an illusion that they have knowledge of something that in fact they do not know anything about.

Also like the aporetic side of Socrates, Kierkegaard does not develop a doctrine. He does not establish a positive set of propositions or beliefs for his readers to follow. Instead, by presenting a couple of basic concepts and images, he gets the readers to start the process of thinking about death for themselves. Here one can see a perfect marriage of content and form with regard to Kierkegaard's way of writing. With regard to content, his point is that the earnestness of death means thinking about one's own death. It is obvious that this is not something that a teacher, or anyone else for that matter, can do for someone else. The teacher can only think about death earnestly by thinking his or her own death. So also each reader can only properly address the issue by thinking of their own death in the first-person. With regard to form, Kierkegaard presents this merely by offering suggestive images, stories, and concepts which are intended to induce the readers to start thinking for themselves about their own deaths. It is not that Kierkegaard is being unphilosophical here, but rather he is following a very specific model for philosophy, namely, that of Socrates.

It would be completely absurd to present this message with a well-argued philosophical treatise that reached the conclusion that one must think one's own death. Theunissen primarily reads the discourse as a philosophical work that can be placed in the history of Western philosophy going back to the ancient Greeks. But this seems to miss the point about the message to the individual that Kierkegaard is trying *not to teach* but rather to evoke from the readers themselves.

Likewise, it would be absurd to present this as work of theology that presented arguments for the dogma of immortality. Both the philosophical and the theological approaches miss the point. It is absurd to present this issue in a straightforward discursive manner as if one were describing some kind of objective knowledge. Instead, the whole point is to get the readers to think of their own deaths on their own. They cannot be assisted in this by philosophical or theological treatises in which others think of death in the abstract. The point of the discourse is to enjoin me as an individual to think of my death. There can be no substitute for this. It is something that only I can do on my own.

V. CONCLUSION

"At a Graveside" contains elements of literature, theology, and philosophy, but the work cannot be adequately characterized by confining it to any one of these fields or the customary genres used by them. Instead, it is a combination of all of them. While there are literary elements such as storytelling, the discourse as a whole is certainly not a continuous story. While "At a Graveside" concerns theological questions about life after death and God's plan for the universe, none of these are treated in a manner that would be recognizable by systematic theology. Finally, while the discourse addresses philosophical questions of epistemology, philosophers would find a paucity of actual arguments for or against the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. Kierkegaard's main goal is not to establish a positive doctrine or certainty. Instead, he uses different elements from these different fields to stimulate the readers to think in earnest of their own deaths. This is a goal that is very different from telling an entertaining story or establishing a theological or philosophical doctrine. Given that Kierkegaard's goal is different from that of these fields, it makes sense that he would need to

seek a new genre to attain it. He thus draws on different elements from literature, theology, and philosophy, but avoids committing himself solely to any of these fields individually.

Some people believe that we need to embrace some form of life after death for the sake of our psychological stability since we cannot live a happy life with the morbid thought of dying on our minds all the time. From this perspective, the burden of death is too heavy to bear. How one can accept living one's life with the view that one might possibly be forever annihilated with death as will everyone else, including one's loved ones? However, Kierkegaard seems to believe that this is going too far since it involves making a claim for something that we simply cannot know. It is an attempt to define or explain death in some way. Thus, Kierkegaard would regard this solution as being unpersuasive from an epistemological perspective. For Kierkegaard, in the end this disposition would simply be engaging in wishful thinking with regard to life after death. This cannot really help us to be reconciled with God or human existence. According to his view, it is impossible to rest assured as if there were some kind of certainty about life after death. One can say that one believes in it, but this will not prevent the dark thoughts about death from creeping into one's mind or coming out in one's dreams when one is in despair. So the proposed psychological solution is ineffective with regard to practical side of living a more peaceful and assured life. There is no real solution in the sense of something quick and easy. Rather, thinking earnestly about death is a lifelong struggle that one must continually work at.

What might seem strange to some readers is the fact that Kierkegaard, although a Christian author, does not seem to have a view of immortality. His repeated claim that it is all over seems to emphasize the fact that with death all consciousness disappears. This offers little consolation or hope. This is surprising for some readers since hope and an afterlife are key Christian conceptions. But Kierkegaard's vision of Christianity is much more rigorous and demands that the believer continues to struggle with the mystery of death.

For many people, the idea is that immortality holds the key to the problem of the meaning of human existence. By contrast, for Kierkegaard, the focus is on the brute fact of death and on what this might be to us in our lives. He believes that the earnest thinking about death is what is important. It is the only thing that is really in our power. We can use the fact of the inevitability of our own death and the finitude of our own life to change how we live. Reflection on our own mortality provides an unaccustomed perspective that is important for every one of us. For Kierkegaard, there is no point in speculating about life after death since nothing can come of this. What is certain is that we will die. The question then becomes what this means for our lives and how we should live them.

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