



REVIEWS

T M. W. Sinnett, *Restoring the Conversation: Socratic Dialectic in the Authorship of Søren Kierkegaard*, St. Andrews: Theology in Scotland, 2002, £12.99, ISBN 0951613626

Dr. Sinnett tells us in his Preface that the origins of this work lie in his study of 'dialectical theology' at St. Andrews - and his acknowledgement of a debt to the powerful teaching of the modest George Hall is good to see. In St. Andrews, he says, he 'caught the Kierkegaard bug' and, like others, he has never been rid of it. Yet, even if he had not told us, we would have guessed that there are several other motivations to the composition of the book, one such being his research on the political philosophy of Eric Voegelin. It is, therefore, not surprising that this is not an easy book to read. Slim in appearance (though that is largely the deceptive impression of the format and page-count) it might be thought to be no challenge to one's reading interest and stamina; but only a few pages suffice to make one aware that it is a book that demands close attention. Part of the problem lies, as has been suggested, in the fact that the intellectual keys to the problem and the tools used in the task of laying bare what might be called 'the secret' of Kierkegaard are - at least for an English speaking audience - rather unusual.

Dr. Sinnett's purpose in the book is to present and to demonstrate the perspective from which, as Kierkegaard himself in *Point of View* declared, 'all his works can be understood in every detail.' He also describes it as that of restoring the 'missing conversation', calling to our attention 'the dialogical context in which Kierkegaard has placed his writings and by means of which his authorship may be understood as a coherent whole'. In this regard he sees a comparison between Kierkegaard and Plato — not merely because both wrote dialogues but perhaps more particularly because their philosophical and literary inspiration derives from Socrates. This would have been a difficult theme to expound though not at all a strange or even novel emphasis in Kierkegaard study. However, after a comparatively brief



consideration of (Plato's) Socrates as a literary and philosophical background to Kierkegaard, Dr. Sinnett turns to two recent philosophers, Gadamer and Voegelin, to clarify the notion of questioning. The result is that an already complicated issue is further complicated. Yet when one has thus honestly recorded a reviewer's difficulty it must also be said that the admirable determination to let Kierkegaard speak for himself is so clear that one cannot but continue to read on to the end.

The book is divided into two parts which are contextualised by the introductory first chapter. Part I is entitled 'Something in Common with Socrates' and is meant to explain the significance of Socrates for Kierkegaard - that he was the originator of irony whose dialectical philosophy was the pursuit of 'the question method'. From a discussion of the Socrates of Plato's dialogues Dr. Sinnett proceeds to elucidate what Kierkegaard understood by 'Socratic dialectic', setting out the theory elaborated in *Concept of Irony* and Kierkegaard's Socratic practice of 'clearing the woods'. To understand the crucial importance of questioning he has recourse to the work of Gadamer and Voegelin. He contends that the formers' discussion of 'the logical structure of openness' matches what *Concept of Irony* says about Socratic dialectic and the Socratic art of asking questions. Voegelin makes a connection between Kierkegaard's view of Socrates' role *vis a vis* Athens and Kierkegaard's own role in Christendom. Moving on in the argument we are back with the Socrates of the *Symposium*, the point being that Kierkegaard's picture in *Concept of Irony* is correct. One of the most important points made here is the emphasis on the art that is the necessary concomitant of the philosopher's craft. To recall Dylan Thomas' great poem 'In my craft or sullen art' is by no means a distraction though it is an exploration that *space forbids*. At this point Dr. Sinnett returns to *Point of View* and makes a distinction that is more important than clear in the argument between the second and the first reality. It is derived from the Austrian novelist Heimito von Doderer and is the distinction between some imaginative fantasy of reality that serves to shield one from the harsh truth of actual reality. This idea of Second Reality is, says Dr. Sinnett, 'very adequate to Kierkegaard's understanding of Christendom'.

Part II, ('Educating the Poet'), begins by once more taking up the notion of the authorship as a conversation between Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms, particularly those of *Either-Or*. First it considers the way in which 'the Question' is formulated in the first of the *Two Upbuilding Discourses* (the relative temporal coincidence of which with *Either-Or* is emphasised) - 'The Expectancy of Faith' - and concludes by stressing that what is stressed is that God is the only 'teacher'. The comparison between the 'perplexed man' to his friend and that of the Judge to the young poet leads to the examination of 'the poetic life'. Hence we come to the second upbuilding discourse based on James 1:17 which explains the paradox of grace as one of being challenged to 'endure the astonishment - the contingency - of finding ourselves unaccountably in the right before God'. The relevance of *Either-Or* is clear, suggesting that it is an 'answer' to the predicament with which *Either-Or* ends - that *vis a vis* God we are eternally in the wrong. Chapters VIII and IX then seek to compare the Judge's efforts to guide and assist the young poet with the apologetic efforts of Kierkegaard himself that has been described in the preceding chapter. The concluding chapter seeks to stress that 'the conversation was resumed with the republication of *Either-Or*.' The 'Three Devotional Discourses' commend three virtues - *silence, obedience and joy* - which are the respective responses to the poet, Judge William and the Jutland priest.

It is clear from this laboured attempt to expound the argument of the book that this is by no means a simple, straightforward argument either in terms of its thesis or in regard to the evidence that is adduced from the text for that interpretation. Let me say immediately that I warm to Dr. Sinnett's sense of the coherence of Kierkegaard's oeuvre and of its main argument. For myself over the many years that I have spent reading Kierkegaard I have been more irritated by his subtlety and perverse showmanship which makes his argument unnecessarily (and sometimes misleadingly) complicated than Dr. Sinnett seems to be. All that being said, I am not completely persuaded by the argument that *Two Upbuilding Discourses* is directly related to *Either-Or*. It cannot be doubted that much of what Kierkegaard says in *propria*

persona can be said to be an answer to the views of the pseudonyms; but on Dr. Sinnett's own admission, Kierkegaard's life was ironical.

Furthermore, there can be no denying that the Kierkegaard of the 1850s was a very different person from the ironical author of the 1840's. Merely because we see a coherence in his oeuvre we cannot conclude that some of his writings are 'answers' to the problems raised in others. If Dr. Sinnett's argument is right then it should be possible to set out a much simpler literary plan of campaign than the very complex argument of this book. A more lengthy discussion of these issues would take up the confusion that lurks in the use of the concept of contingency; but that is not possible. What is entirely convincing is the book's constant assertion that from the outset Kierkegaard was a religious author. In this respect the conjunction of the discourses and *Either-Or* is right; but the very text (*The Preface to the Lilies of the Field and the Birds of the Air*) bears out only the plan of an aesthetic work being coincident with a religious one.

In conclusion I should once more warn against the temptation to abandon the effort of reading this book. It is unfortunate that the style does nothing to lighten the burden of the very complex argument so that it is often rather difficult to press forward in one's grasp of that argument. Part of the difficulty derives from the fact that sometimes a point of departure in the authorship is not kept before the reader's attention with the result that one has to refresh one's memory as to what particular text is being discussed. However, I must repeat what I have said and what indeed will be obvious from this discussion: this is a significant and most helpful contribution to Kierkegaard study.

Professor J. Heywood Thomas
Emeritus Professor of Theology,
University of Nottingham

