

Plato's Phaedrus and the Paideia of Søren Kierkegaard

An essay based on an assignment for the class, Søren Kierkegaard – Subjectivity, Irony, and the Crisis of Modernity in the Spring of 2023

Plato's dialogue *Phaedrus* demonstrates a few of the most important or vital aspects of Socrates's influence on the Danish philosopher / theologian Søren Kierkegaard, who so thoroughly modeled his intellectual habits on those of the old philosopher that the whole of Kierkegaard's life became a continual reference to Socrates¹.

Paideia

Paideia is a potent concept in ancient Greek Culture. From Britannia.com:

paideia, (Greek: "education," or "learning"), system of [education](#) and training in classical Greek and Hellenistic (Greco-Roman) [cultures](#) that included such subjects as [gymnastics](#), [grammar](#), [rhetoric](#), music, mathematics, geography, natural history, and [philosophy](#).²

It informs the more common word "encyclopedia", wherein an encyclopedia contains or suggests all the knowledge a person requires to become a useful citizen of the state and not an intolerable bore.

Werner Jaeger, a 20th century classicist chose to entitle his three-volume series, "*Paideia*", emphasizing the significance of this word for the study of Hellenism.

Paideia has like cultural prominence to the concept of "Bildung" in German-speaking countries.

The Phaedrus dialogue itself compares greatly to a so-called "bildungsroman", a novel in the "literary genre that focuses on the psychological and moral growth of the protagonist"³ ⁴. A bildungsroman is often described as a "coming of age" story.

Pederasty and Psychagogia (ψυχαγωγία)

Socrates has his trademark brand of irony on full display in Phaedrus. But more astonishingly his intercourse⁵ with Phaedrus serves up a demonstration of pederasty—the established custom in ancient Athens whereby a worldly man, typically, an elder, takes a younger man of promise

¹ To crib from the full title of Kierkegaard's master's thesis, *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*.

² From [Paideia | education | Britannica](#) on Britannica.com, the basis for the word encyclopedia.

³ Caged from the Wikipedia entry for [Bildungsroman](#).

⁴ Moretti, *The Way of the World*.

⁵ We use this term advisedly not as an act of sex but as an incident of verbal communication between persons.

under his wing and assumes responsibility for his acculturation and moral upbringing (paideia). In the Phaedrus, it is in evidence in its idealized form⁶ against hints of the practice in more brutal and cynical forms.

Plato dramatizes all of this. When Phaedrus proposes to meet Socrates by a plane tree in the country, Phaedrus subconsciously or wittingly invites Socrates to a tableau that mirrors the site of a famous rape scene in Greek mythology. From Emily Emison's "Learned by Heart: Pederastic Reading and Writing Practices in Plato's Phaedrus"⁷,

In this rustic setting, Phaedrus suggests he and Socrates go find shade beneath the ample branches of the tallest tree nearby—a plane tree—in order to read Lysias's speech and converse in cool repose. The symbolism of the plane tree would have been familiar to any Athenian and should not be lost on modern readers: it was under just such a tree that Zeus, in the form of a bull, raped Europa.

What was the Phaedrus thinking, practically inviting Socrates, a homely old man, to molest him outside of city limits where the rules of society may not apply? Does his desire to meet in the country, outside the walls of the city, betray Phaedrus as a rube? Could Phaedrus be that naïve, so uncultured as to be unaware of a popular story about Zeus and that desperately in need of a mentor and an education (paideia)? So, it would seem.

In the same dialogue, Lysias⁸ feigns to seduce Phaedrus putting a kind of contorted logic on display that only a sophist could love, arguing that Phaedrus should sleep with him because he is *not* a lover and therefore prone to be more faithful and constant.

Thus, ever so subtly Plato paints a picture of Phaedrus's vulnerability grounded in a dire need for an upbringing, an upbringing which, it gradually becomes clear, he will be lucky to obtain in Athens where there are sophists lurking about, willing to seduce him with pretty words and arguments, take his money, and steal his "virtue" before the prophylaxis (προφύλαξη) of a paideia might shield him from such fraudulence.

Kierkegaard, who knew the Phaedrus well, was deeply smitten with the life and mind and morality of Socrates. He admired Socrates as a martyr because martyrdom was an explicit demonstration of passion and a life "lived poetically". It also undoubtedly reminded Kierkegaard of a theory fashionable in his lifetime that Socrates prefigured Christ.

It is amusing if not useful to think of Kierkegaard's relationship to Socrates as mirroring many aspects of the Athenian tradition of pederasty, not in its debauched form⁹ but in its nobler and idealized form as a means of lifting a young man to a higher plane of being, exactly as Plato had

⁶ This idealized form is akin to what persons call "Platonic love" though often without the connection to its origins in the pederastic tradition of ancient Athens.

⁷ Emison, "Learned by Heart."

⁸ What Lysias gives up in the category of candor, he gains in the category of creative contortions of logic.

⁹ I fear it bears analogy to sexual abuses in the Roman Catholic Church which is heinous for the trauma it brings into the world and for the stain it creates which all but blots out the potential for good that can arise when a young man seeks guidance from a man of the cloth.

imagined it and the character of Socrates, in his dialogues, exemplified. The term for this is psychogogia (ψυχγωγία) which Socrates equates to midwifery (maieutics) in which the mentor is attendance as the pupil gives birth to ideas innately in his soul¹⁰.

In this conceit, we more readily understand the use and necessity of passion, as Kierkegaard liked to insist, of how without passion and love, meaning doesn't exist.

Here is Kierkegaard mocking Hegel as a "systematician", who built a virtual world without a spark (i.e., devoid of passion).

It is more remarkable when a systematician entertains us with a report that he became an adherent of the system through a miracle, something that seems to suggest that his systematic life and career do not have this in common with the system: to begin with nothing.

How could Socrates have so transformed Kierkegaard without an intense love and passion driving the young Dane to absorb the aspect of Socrates deep within, fully absorbing it, until it became an integral part of his being?

This is in fact what happened¹¹.

Self-Knowledge

Scholar¹² Christopher Moore points out in his article, *How to 'Know Thyself' in Plato's Phaedrus*, that the hagiography of Socrates produces a single direct utterance of his desire to "know himself" on one occasion and that occurs in the Phaedrus on lines 229e5-6¹³.

But for these things I have no leisure at all. The cause of it, my friend, is the following. I am not yet capable, in line with the Delphic inscription, to know myself.

Given the rarity of this confession, it seems a dead certainty that a young Kierkegaard had perused these very words. John Lippitt all but confirms this in his article "Self-Knowledge in Kierkegaard" in a section called "Youthful Reflections", which we paraphrase here.

At 22 years of age Kierkegaard takes a trip to Gilleleje, a small northern village in Denmark. There, in a letter to a student friend, he reports that the trip enables him "to focus upon my inner self, it spurs me on to comprehend myself, my own self, to hold it fast in the infinite variety of life, to direct towards myself that concave mirror with which I have attempted until now to comprehend life around me."

¹⁰ One wonders in which notebook or text Kierkegaard compared Socrates, the midwife, with the Christian notion of being born again.

¹¹ Not wishing to throw anything away, not even a lock his hair, so to speak, Kierkegaard formalized the transformative effect Socrates had on him into the notion of "appropriation".

¹² Scholar: a person endowed with abundant leisure (συχολή).

¹³ Moore, Christopher, "How to 'Know Thyself' in Plato's Phaedrus."

On that trip, Kierkegaard records a journal entry about finding “the idea for which I am willing to live and die”.

As Lippett observes, “here the young Kierkegaard downgrades the importance of any theorizing in which the subject is not himself passionately engaged.”

Unsurprisingly, in that same year, Kierkegaard writes in his journal:

One must first learn to know oneself before knowing anything else.

But merely drawing a connection between the Delphic maxim, Socrates, and Kierkegaard is too easy as Kierkegaard himself indicates.

While considering Hegel’s view of Socrates¹⁴, Kierkegaard remarks:

In the old Greek culture, the individual was by no means free in this sense but was confined in the substantial ethic; he had not as yet taken himself out of, separated himself from, this immediate relationship, still did not know himself. Socrates brought this about, but not in the sense of the Sophists, who taught the individual to constrict himself in his own particular interests; he brought the individual to this by universalizing subjectivity, and to that extent he is the founder of morality.

Thus, the desire for self-knowledge naturally propels one towards an estrangement from “the crowd” where the white noise of chatter drowns out the authentic, inner voice of the individual (see also Kierkegaard’s “The Crowd is Untruth”¹⁵).

The biblical tradition, echoed in the New Testament, of retreating to the desert for some “me time”¹⁶ suggests how invested biblical prophets were to facing the naked self, even if in so doing, they found that the “self” was an abject void.

Kierkegaard must have seen the connection between self-knowledge and several seminal passages in the New Testament where, for example, the physician is exhorted to heal him/herself or a guiltless person is enjoined to cast the first stone. How does a physician go about healing oneself? These are paradoxes.

In *Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard himself (or is it, “Johannes Climacus”?) cites the passage (same as Moore above) in the Phaedrus where Socrates declares his devotion to the Delphic imperative to “know thyself”. Only this time, years after his trip to Gilleleje, he pounces on an aspect of the dictum that is commonly glossed over. It is a paradox! Chapter III, entitled “The Absolute Paradox”, thus begins:

¹⁴ Kierkegaard and Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*.

¹⁵ {Citation}

¹⁶ Long before the expression “digital detox” was first uttered or gained appeal.

Although Socrates did his very best to gain knowledge of human nature and to know himself—yes, even though he has been eulogized for centuries as the person who certainly knew man best—he nevertheless admitted that the reason he was disinclined to ponder the nature of such creatures as Pegasus and the Gorgons was that he still was not quite clear about himself, whether he (a connoisseur of human nature) was a more curious monster than Typhon or a friendlier and simpler being, by nature sharing something divine (see Phaedrus, 229 e).² This seems to be a paradox. But one must not think ill of the paradox, for the paradox is the passion of thought, and the thinker without the paradox is like the lover without passion: a mediocre fellow.

Jon Stewart in *Søren Kierkegaard: Subjectivity, Irony, and the Crisis of Modernity*¹⁷ explains how this chapter “subtly” advances from the paradox of self-knowledge to the Christian doctrine of the incarnation, also, in Kierkegaard’s mind, a paradox.

Kierkegaard finds the idea of paradox useful for zeroing in on the essence of faith. Though the so-called rational mind urges us to reconcile myth—stories that are difficult for us to believe or rationally accept—paradoxes forestall that.

From *Philosophical Fragments* (P. 39):

Just as the lover is changed by this paradox of love so that he almost does not recognize himself any more... so also that intimated paradox of the understanding reacts upon a person and upon his self-knowledge in such a way that he who believed that he knew himself now no longer is sure whether he perhaps is a more curiously complex animal than Typhon or whether he has in his being a gentler and diviner part

(σκοπῶ οὐ ταῦτα ἀλλ’ ἐμαυτόν, εἴτε τι θηρίον ὃν τυγχάνω Τυφῶνος π ολυπλοκώτερον καὶ μᾶλλον ἐπιτεθυμμένον, εἴτε ἡμερώτερόν τε καὶ ἄ πλούστερον ζῶον, θείας τινὸς καὶ ἀτύφου μοίρας φύσει μετέχον.

Phaedrus 230 a)

There is no limit to what Kierkegaard appropriates from Socrates.

The Greek that Kierkegaard cites appears in the Jowett translation as:

¹⁷ Stewart, *Søren Kierkegaard*.

I investigate (σκοπῶ) not these things, but myself, to know whether I am a monster more complicated and more furious than Typhon or a gentler and simpler creature, to whom a divine and quiet lot is given by nature¹⁸.

Here where Socrates, per Kierkegaard, establishes the task of gaining self-knowledge as a paradox, Socrates also associates it with myth.

And, as Moore points out, this association is not accidental but already alluded to in the concept of “myth-rectification”, a process whereby the sophists like to rationalize myth instead of taking myths at face value, as mysteries beyond our ken. Socrates demurs, “reasoning” that he cannot claim to be up to the task of interpreting myth when he cannot even interpret himself.

Socrates hesitation is a matter of principle. His critique of the sophists is that they all too facilely skate past the task of knowing themselves in the rush to opine on other things to make them look smart.

Socrates thus in the Phaedrus gives Kierkegaard the idea of paradox as a roadblock¹⁹ where a person who pretends he can explain it is disingenuous and intellectually dishonest.

In Phaedrus 229d, we encounter the word ἐπιανορθοῦσθαι translated by Jowett as “explain” but by Moore and others as “rectify”.

It doesn’t matter, Kierkegaard learned the utility of paradox from Socrates and how to treat religious myths as sacrosanct. Whereas the wise old man knows better than to question the paradox of “self-knowledge”, Christians should know better than to attempt to rationalize the myth of incarnation or sully it with analysis or attempts to rationalize it²⁰.

The Irrelevance of Chronological Time

A transcendental concept infiltrated Kierkegaard’s thought in which chronological time is accidental and not fundamental and our relationship to past, present, and future is of little consequence. It doesn’t matter, for essential things, whether we walked to and fro on earth as contemporaries of Jesus or encountered him through the medium of time or translations of the revealed Word. There is a difference between Jesus Christ, the historical figure, and the idea of Christ, which Kierkegaard pseudonymously purports as a vital distinction. It is not necessary to say, somewhat cryptically, that Christ rose from the dead to appreciate the significance of that miracle. Rather we can say that the concept of Christ, His legacy as spirit, survived his death. There is no need to mince words of a mystical spirit escaping from the tomb. It is sufficient to say that the idea of Christ survives in the minds of millions of people to this day, i.e., did not die. This simple prosaic assertion is everywhere in evidence some 2,000 years hence.

¹⁸ Compare to Blaise Pascal’s Pensée #420: “If he exalt himself, I humble him; if he humble himself, I exalt him; and I always contradict him, till he understands that he is an incomprehensible monster.”

¹⁹ Seemingly related to Kant’s “noumena”.

²⁰ Joseph Campbell expresses a similar regard towards the rites and rituals of the Catholic Church in his *The Power of Myth* interviews.

His writings consistently demonstrate a desire to dispense with chronological thinking and with it the nuisance of teleology. Examples of time-bending are on display in *Philosophical Fragments*. A conversation with the AI robot, ChatGPT²¹, yielded a perspective on Kierkegaard's attitude toward time, which I supply here, after editing it for clarity:

Kierkegaard believed that time was not a fundamental aspect of reality but rather a human construct that helps us make sense of the world. He argued that the present moment is the only one that matters, and the past and future are irrelevant distractions that prevent us from living authentically. The idea of progress or teleology, which suggests that history is moving towards a certain end or goal, is meaningless.

In Philosophical Fragments, Kierkegaard argues that the significance of Jesus' life is not in his historical existence but rather in the personal relationship that individuals maintain with him in the here and now. This idea underscores Kierkegaard's belief that only the present moment matters, and that individuals must seek salvation—not in the myths of progress or teleology—but in the choices they make and in the actions they take.

Kierkegaard's "Platonic relationship" with Socrates showed Kierkegaard that chronological time has little bearing on the experience. It plainly didn't matter that Socrates was dead almost two thousand years before Kierkegaard was born or that they never met in the flesh. And yet the experience for Kierkegaard had the same ardor as an intense love affair. It made it easy for Kierkegaard to attach transcendent properties to the notion of a messiah or the revealed Word.

Is This Still Relevant?

If Thoreau's maxim still holds that "most men lead lives of quiet desperation", the Socratic-Kierkegaardian connection offers solace. It advances the theory that these desperate denizens of the here and now are beguiled by the false promise of "progress" or the suggestion of teleology that "it's all going somewhere."

It's a platitude among modern-day technology leaders²² that they're "out to change the world", vaguely but nonetheless cruelly suggesting that technology can do anything of true significance like eliminate poverty, reduce economic inequality, find a drug for narcissism, or make tyrants play nice.

A Socratic-Kierkegaardian minded person would not get suckered into these delusions which puts persons in the uneasy state of yearning for something that's right around the corner but which never comes.

It's far better, our philosophical duo suggests, to stay grounded in the here and now and cheerfully embrace its contradictions.

²¹ Poplett, "Conversation with ChatGPT on Kierkegaard's Concept of Time or The BOT Thinks I'm a Moron."

²² Giridharadas, *Winners Take All*.

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