Foreword

I write this Foreword in "fear and trembling." That may seem an overly dramatic remark, but it is nonetheless true. I have read *On Kierkegaard and the Truth*. In fact, I have read it twice. I also had the advantage of taking Mr. Holmer's Kierkegaard course in 1962. It was my first year at Yale Divinity School, and while I am sure I missed some of the subtle arguments Mr. Holmer was making, I at least got something of the "big picture" he was developing about Kierkegaard's work. That "big picture" is on full display in this book.

So why do I approach this Foreword with trepidation? I do so because it is no easy task to say rightly what Holmer has to say about Kierkegaard. He spent his whole life immersed in the works of Kierkegaard. As this book makes apparent, he had command of the complex authorship that bears the name "Kierkegaard" that few possess. His account of Kierkegaard, moreover, challenges much of the scholarly consensus about Kierkegaard—a consensus not only present at the time Holmer was writing this book but one that largely remains today. This being the case, it's fairly easy to understand why someone like myself, i.e., someone who is not a Kierkegaard scholar, would be fearful of saying something stupid.

Admittedly, although I have read many of Kierkegaard's major works, I do not *know* them well enough to know what I am reading when I am reading Holmer on Kierkegaard. So my main concern in writing this is that I not mislead the reader about Holmer's reading of Kierkegaard. In short, I do not want to write, as Bertrand Russell did in his Introduction to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, a Foreword that suggests I did not understand what Holmer was about in his account of Kierkegaard.

That Russell failed to understand Wittgenstein is understandable given the challenge Wittgenstein presents to most of the ways the work of philosophy was and continues to be understood. Russell's problem was not just that he misunderstood Wittgenstein, but that

he had no idea that he misunderstood Wittgenstein. I hope I will not make that mistake. Just as Holmer reminds us that Kierkegaard wrote in a manner to make his reader do intellectually demanding work, so Holmer's way of writing about Kierkegaard is meant to make those who would read Holmer on Kierkegaard do hard work. Holmer assumes it would be a kind of betrayal if he wrote about Kierkegaard in a manner that let those who would read Kierkegaard not do the work required to understand Kierkegaard. So *On Kierkegaard and the Truth* is similarly demanding.

Holmer described the challenge of writing *about* Kierkegaard in a review he wrote in 1970 of Vernard Eller's book *Kierkegaard and Radical Discipleship: A New Perspective*,[1] for the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. He begins the review by observing that a book on Kierkegaard makes special demands on the author. It does so because few authors are as inquisitive as Kierkegaard, and yet they write at such length and with such virtuosity but finally do not seem to tell you that much. Moreover the demands Kierkegaard makes are of such a variety—intellectual, poetic, ironic, argumentative, humorous—that any attempt at summarization becomes misleading.

Perhaps even more demanding, Holmer observes, is Kierkegaard's use of humor and uncompromising irony to call into question what one may well believe with great seriousness but has not really thought through. Accordingly, Holmer observes that Kierkegaard castigates our assumed competencies that too often reflect the consensus represented by the best intellectual and religious circles. Kierkegaard does so, moreover, because he wants to hit very close to our hearts. His target, however, is not the unsophisticated laity nor the "unwitting fool or obviously second-rate drooling commentator." Rather his foes are the truly distinguished, that is, the best of the religious, the most taxing of the intelligentsia, and the zealous scholar who keeps up with all of "the latest."

Kierkegaard's prose often appears deceptively simple, but as Holmer observes in chapter 9 of this book, in fact, his writing is "aristocratic." It is so because he presupposes that his readers have a certain kind of sophistication formed by the philosophy of the day. Kierkegaard does not, therefore, bother to instruct his readers on ru-

1. Vernard Eller, *Kierkegaard and Radical Discipleship: A New Perspective* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968).

dimental metaphysical or logical issues but rather seeks to expose and critique what he regards as clear metaphysical mistakes.

Kierkegaard writes to those he assumes are as well acquainted as he is with Plato, Descartes, Aristotle, Hegel, Kant, as well as biblical writers. Perhaps even more daunting, he assumes his readers suffer from large intellectual problems that he expects the reader will recognize as his own.

So my little worry about writing on Holmer on Kierkegaard does not compare with the challenge Holmer faced by writing on Kierkegaard without betraying Kierkegaard's mode of writing. Holmer knew, moreover, that Kierkegaard knew that his work would often be written about by many who would try to make him but another philosopher or theologian with a "position." Positions give the appearance that the one holding "the position" wants you to agree with his views without having the way you live challenged. In short, Kierkegaard was well aware that many who followed him would try to normalize his work.

Normalization meant that Kierkegaard was thought by many to be an "existentialist." For others, "truth as subjectivity" was used to legitimate positions that Kierkegaard spent a lifetime trying to defeat. It took someone with the philosophical sophistication of Holmer to show, and showing is the right word, that Kierkegaard's philosophical arguments cannot be so easily domesticated. For, as Holmer observes, to write on Kierkegaard knowing what Kierkegaard said about those who would write on him requires a person that is either extremely wise or foolish. Holmer was no fool.

Holmer's account of Kierkegaard is, like Kierkegaard's own work, deceptively straightforward. One is tempted to think you understand what has been said so you can go on to the next chapter. But Holmer has written on Kierkegaard in a manner meant to make you linger on what has been said because what has been said should make us reconsider our fundamental categories of understanding. Kierkegaard was struggling with the difficulty of, as Holmer puts it, writing objectively about subjectivity. The claim that truth is subjectivity, therefore, is an attempt to make us think less about ourselves by directing attention to what such a sentence means for the concept of truth.

What Holmer will not let us forget is that Kierkegaard was a skilled philosopher who practiced his craft in a manner that would force us to recognize that philosophy is about matters of the everyday, that is, matters that entail questions of what it means to "exist." It is not accidental, therefore, that Kierkegaard took Socrates to be the exemplification of the philosophical life. For philosophy is one of the ways, as Holmer observes, that we have to get us back to where we are. That is, philosophy, at least as it was practiced by Kierkegaard, is the difficult work necessary to resist the presumption, a presumption at the heart of the modern philosophical tradition, that the philosopher knows what can be known in a more determinative manner than the person of faith.

Holmer, of course, does not let us forget that Kierkegaard, able philosopher though he may have been, was first and foremost a religious thinker. Kierkegaard took as his task the reintroduction of Christianity into Christendom. Holmer quite rightly argues that contrary to some interpretations of Kierkegaard, Kierkegaard was not calling into question work in biblical criticism. Rather he was rightly reminding his reader that faith cannot be secured by more historical knowledge because we already know all we need to know to be a disciple of Jesus.

Drury reports that he and Wittgenstein once passed a street preacher who was yelling at those who gathered to hear him. Wittgenstein remarked that if the fellow believed what he said he would not use that tone of voice. That seems to me to be a nice description of Kierkegaard's work, and it resonates with Holmer's attempt to help us understand Kierkegaard's work. Kierkegaard, through the development of what Holmer characterizes as a literature of reflection on "vivid examples," was trying to help us discover the tone of voice required by those who seek to live truthful lives.

"Fear and trembling," therefore, seems an appropriate disposition for approaching the work of both Kierkegaard and Holmer. For neither will let us forget that God is not an object to be described but a living reality that would have us worship and love the One alone who should be worshiped and loved. Kierkegaard was only interested in matters that matter. So this is not just another book "about Kierkegaard"; rather, this is a book that forces us to read Kierkegaard

as if our lives were at stake. In the process I think you will find that the fear of God makes joy possible.

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