Kenneth Colston

Meeting Socrates:

Educating Modern Philosophers

Have any of you faithful readers of Peter Kreeft's many, many books ever wondered what it would be like to attend his philosophy course at Boston College? Save yourself ninety grand in freshman fees, and cough up instead a hundred bucks, plus or minus (Word on Fire lists it now at ninety-seven on their website), for his eight-volume inquisition of modern thought.

Reprinting the original *Socrates Meets* series from Ignatius Press (and St. Augustine's), Word on Fire packs together Kreeft's fanciful critique of post-classical philosophy into a handsome white, red, and gold box that will stretch only five and three-quarters inches (fourteen centimeters on the Continent) across your Greats shelf. Since Socrates is the main character in these dialogues, the conceit takes the last four hundred years of big brains back two millennia. The result is a leisurely cram-course, sprightly but pointed, illuminating, and a little annoying, like the gadfly himself: Kreeft imagining Socrates in dialogue with Machiavelli, Descartes, Hume, Kant, Kierkegaard, Marx, Freud, and Sartre. Get ready for terse definitions and close reasoning, with enthymemes here in place of the much longer syllogisms (and minus Kreeft's self-described bad puns).

The set and history (and first edition, 2003) begin with Machiavelli, but Kreeft (in his own voice in the Introduction) makes the case for modern philosophy to begin with Descartes (first edition 2007) on seven points of convergence with Socrates: revolution, originality, quest of knowledge of the self, body-soul dualism, essential emphasis on epistemology, new methodology, and divine commission. (You've heard of Socrates visiting the Delphis oracle, but did you know that the "Spirit of Truth" visited Descartes in a dream on November 10, 1619?) In the first half of this second volume of the set, Socrates trips up the first several paragraphs of *The Discourse on Method*. He makes Descartes say simultaneously that all men are equally rational and yet only he has understood the fatal flaw in all prior human reasoning, that philosophy is the certain science of happiness and yet also the route to power, that all prior philosophy is full of errors yet shares his goal of penetrating beyond the appearances. Plato's cave, with its divided line of images, experience, deductive reason, and intuition of the forms, is surprisingly similar to but more apt than Descartes's stove-heated room of methodological doubt.

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The second half of this volume is a shortcut elucidation of the key elements of the famous Cartesian Method in six steps, more to demonstrate its shortcomings, but also to show its influence. Kreeft's Socrates makes Descartes state the rules mostly in his own words at sufficient length: 1a) "to avoid hasty judgment and prejudice": 1b) to include only clear and distinct indubitable judgments; 2) to divide them into as many parts as possible; 3) to proceed from simplest and easiest thoughts to most composite and "to suppose an order"; 4) "to make enumerations so complete and reviews so general" as to omit nothing. In other words, Descartes wishes to eliminate Plato's intuition of forms and to make philosophy entirely rational, but (Kreeft's Socrates says) making the test of a rational philosophy reason itself begs the question. Leaving the rules in supposed shambles, his Socrates then takes up the six steps, which contain the most interesting parts of the book. Did you know that the mind-body dualism (step three) reintroduces extreme Gnosticism into Western thought and ultimately replaced, with Malebranche's God of two separate created worlds, the "evil genius" of doubt that Descartes believed he had chased away? Or that Descartes's proof of God (step five) was essentially Anselm's ontological proof, that Aquinas had criticized it, that it buttresses the proof of the material world (step six), and that both deny the axiom of non-contradiction? These are as surprising to see worked out as to learn that Descartes proposed a simple morality of convention and tradition but actually made the French Revolution possible by eliminating tradition as a source of truth.

In his first book of this series destroying the demons of modern philosophy, on Machiavelli, Kreeft similarly pits Machiavelli against both his similar unstated assumptions and explicit claims: that knowledge is the search for power, not truth; that the claim that only visible facts are real is in fact a metaphysical idea; that altruism and comity explain why ecclesiastic states are more stable than dog-eat-dog ruthless lying principalities; that love has a stronger ultimate pull than fear; that action and judgment require and even admit an ideal standard; that *virtú* is eternal and *fortuna* ephemeral. With more sympathy for the tortured Florentine than for his ideas, in a sad last chapter Kreeft allows the founder of modern political philosophy to catalog his lamentable suffering from Lady Luck. After all, Socrates's victims in this set are imagined to be in purgatory and figures of hope. The intellect must be

fixed for the will to be good.

By the time Kreeft's Socrates meets Hume (volume three, 2010), the methodology is well established: lead the critique with proofs of self-contradiction, tease the modern master with gentle points of commonality as seekers of truth, show the bad consequences of error, and correct wayward thinking in essential passages with step-by-step syllogisms. In the case of Hume, the most formidable skeptic in the history of philosophy until Derrida, eluding skepticism is particularly tricky because the Scot puts forth a moderate, charming form of intellectually suicidal rationalism: i.e., "probabilism", which begins with the denial of essences. Kreeft's Socrates overcomes this mistake first by giving up the idealism of Plato and offering the moderate realism of Aristotle: essences come to be known firmly through the process of abstracting universals from particulars. This move, away from Socrates's most famous student and toward his student's student, also saves epistemology from subjectivism and ethics from emotivism. The second big challenge is Hume's famous dismissal of causation as a mere "constant conjunction" of objects through the "medium of custom". The gadfly here makes important distinctions: between the conjunction of physical objects (billiard balls) and that of ideas (desire, love); between weaker reasoning from cause to effect and firmer reasoning from effect to cause; between "the three meanings of because"—the relation of premise to conclusion, relation of cause to effect, and the relation of motive and action. Hume, Kreeft asserts through Socrates, conflates all three meanings. With this work against skepticism behind him, the Christian reader can enjoy the takedown of agnosticism, leaving miracles and faith in the supernatural possible, but Kreeft imagines his Hume not in hell but in purgatory, like his Socrates, like the bedazzled reader, humbler for the rocky journey. As a kind of bonus, we learn many logical tools to deal with any thinker: the fallacy of four terms, Clifford's Law, the fallacy of the undistributed middle, and the three tests of truth (no logical fallacy, no false premise, and no ambiguous term).

If you wanted to read just one book in the series, it would probably be volume four on Kant (first edition, 2009). Kreeft makes the case for Kant as the most important philosopher after Thomas Aquinas because he effected a "Copernican revolution" in *both* epistemology and ethics. Kreeft has more sympathy for the ethics (I don't), and he brings out much of Descartes and Hume in criticizing Kant. Like the experienced teacher helping the flailing student, he lets Kant summarize his ideas amply before jumping down his throat with objections, and he even offers four homely analogies to Kant's revolutionary hypothesis that the mind only structures reality: as a sieve filters, as eyeglasses color, as a secretary classifies, and as a baker cooks. In hearing Kant say that this hypothesis was an attempt to save religion and science from dogmatism and skepticism, Socrates laments that it does neither, for both believers and scientists hold that their claims are true in the "old" sense of conforming to things as they are.

Kant makes Socrates ask him for "it", the inevitable charge of self-contradiction, before he summarizes the "what" of his revolution, and Socrates unleashes four volleys: the mind must be aware of something to think before it thinks, and therefore objects of thought are not merely subjective; that if we only know "phenomena" or appearances we cannot say that the "noumena" or things-in-themselves in fact exist; that in order to understand the limit between "phenomena" and "noumena" we must understand the latter, which we have denied to be knowable; and that if the objects of thought cannot be known then Kant's philosophy cannot be known to be true. Kreeft's Kant is mercifully allowed, however, to keep going with the suggestion that the reader might try to solve these problems for himself or read further in Kant, as Kreeft says his own best ever philosophy teacher (and unpublished) made him do.

Throughout his examination of this supposed revolution Socrates lets Kant summarize his ideas from the "far too difficult for a beginner" *Critique of Pure Reason*. The mind, per Kant, constructs four types of judgments, whereas per Hume it formed only two, "relations of ideas" ("Bachelors are unmarried") and "matters of fact" ("It rains in the spring"): analytic *a priori* (Hume's "relations of ideas"), synthetic *a posteriori* ("matters of fact"); analytic *a posteriori* (a null set); and, unknown to Hume, but the most exciting, synthetic *a priori*. Kreeft's Kant offers four examples of these last, denied by Hume: 1) mathematical propositions like "A line is the shortest distance between two points"; 2) physical laws such as "Every event has a cause" and "Force equals mass times acceleration"; 3) metaphysical principles like "God exists" and "Will is free"; 4) moral principles like: "Treat others as you will them to treat you." He goes on to list the four "antinomies" or irresolvable contradictions to reason: time and space are both limited and unlimited; matter is both reducible and irreducible; all events are necessary but some are freely chosen; all being is contingent and some beings are necessary. Antinomies exist, however, only because the two opposing propositions follow false premises. For example, good argumentation has proved that God's foreknowledge is incompatible with man's free will only because it is assumed falsely that He is in time, and in fact Kreeft's Socrates, like the good Thomist philosopher he is re-imagined to be, finds nothing wrong with this solution. Hume's narrow skepticism at least fades without all the false premises revealed.

God as only a knowable Idea, "the ultimate unconditioned condition of all experience", a subjective transcendental rather than an objective transcendent, is advanced before and criticized after Kant's equally revolutionary ethics is explained. This Big Idea neither binds nor commands or even nudges, for the only purely good thing, the good will, is autonomous and content-free. Kreeft is more admiring of this philosophical explanation of the Sermon on the Mount as the formulations of the categorical (objectively necessary) imperative than he is of the epistemological revolution as its weak foundation: Act only so that the action can be willed universally (Golden Rule); treat persons as ends; the will legislates freely for all. Kreeft does criticize Kantian ethics as "human command" theory, but he accepts its intellectual compatibility with robust Christian ethics while noting the loss to society and to souls as a result of the dethroning of happiness and love and a personal God as the end and motives for morality. Duty is a heavy yoke, the "kingdom of ends" colder and more abstract than the City of God.

If you've read the set this far, you're certainly over the hill with more than eight hundred pages behind you and the knotty key features of anti-metaphysical epistemology down and done. Marx, Freud, and Sartre seem easier fare, and Kierkegaard is a surprise choice awaiting us. Plus, I'm dying to see if Kreeft is willing to put any of these errant knaves in hell.

Kenneth Colston's reviews and essays on literature have appeared in The New Criterion, Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture, The New Oxford Review, First Things, Crisis, Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, and* Commonweal.