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A Review

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C. Stephen Evans and Patrick Stokes agree that Kierkegaard is a "philosopher of the first rank" (Evans, 2009, p. 18), whose thought contains an "astonishingly rich repository of philosophical insight" (Stokes, 2010, p. 183). If many contemporary philosophers have yet to accept these conclusions, this is partly due to the internal quarrels that have too often plagued Kierkegaard scholars. The newcomer who picks up the *Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard* could easily be taken aback by the sheer ferocity of the specialized debates that it contains, rather than being inspired to look further into Kierkegaard's work. Evans (1998), who is the author of one chapter in the *Cambridge Companion*, is singled out by another contributor (Poole, 1998, pp. 61-2) as the chief advocate of interpretations that are overly literal, "blunt," and guided by dogmatic assumptions.[1] At the same time, Evans has been established for years as one of the most prominent Kierkegaard scholars in the Anglophone philosophical community.

His newest book, *Kierkegaard: An Introduction*, confirms that Evans has many virtues as a reader of Kierkegaard; on the other hand, he does have certain limitations as well. We will first address the themes that Evans is especially good at illuminating, and then say a few things about what else in Kierkegaard's thought might be worthy of attention for the philosophical reader, beyond the topics that are highlighted by Evans. To illustrate how the approach taken by Evans might be supplemented by refocusing on themes that are not captured by the more "traditional" account that he admittedly favors, we will refer to another new book, *Kierkegaard's Mirrors* by Patrick Stokes—an excellent debut that is deserving of appreciation in its own right.

First of all, Evans rightly notes that Kierkegaard's interpretation of human existence, although it involves decidedly religious categories, is not relevant only to readers who are already inclined toward religion (Evans, 2009, p. 16). As George Pattison says in his recent book on Kierkegaard as a philosopher, judicious readers ought neither to accept nor to reject

his ideas solely by virtue of their affiliation with Christianity. We should instead try to decide whether or not Kierkegaard's writings offer "a persuasive or adequate depiction of the human condition" (Pattison, 2005, p. 165). One reason for doing this is that we cannot appreciate Kierkegaard's unique notion of what it means to be religious if we view his work through the lens of a prior acceptance or rejection of Christianity, as we already understood it *before* encountering Kierkegaard's writings. As Evans argues, we must be open-minded in coming to terms with an idiosyncratic author who shares the Socratic conviction "that individuals must discover the truth for themselves," (Evans, p. 29), and who calls for a return to the "conception of philosophy that inspired the Greeks" (Evans, p. 4)—that is, as the critical search for a general understanding of reality that could inform a life of wisdom. This affinity for the spirit of Greek thought, which is evident in many of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous and signed writings, is being increasingly recognized as a key to his work. Indeed, it may be that our attitude toward the classical notion of philosophy as a way of life will serve as a better indication of how much we could learn from Kierkegaard's writings than our feelings about religion—although this last suggestion might be taking the analogy between Kierkegaard and the ancients further than Evans himself would.

Kierkegaard portrays human life as "open-ended" and "unfinished," containing a tension between our limiting conditions and our boundless sense of possibility (Evans, p. 20; see also pp. 48; 168). On the one hand, we are contingent beings, born into a certain historical situation and made of certain genetic material; on the other hand, we have the capacity to imagine endless ways in which our life could potentially unfold. This "basic incongruity" lies "at the heart of human existence" (Evans, p. 132): and Kierkegaard spends a lot of time providing a diagnosis of the various ways in which we can fail to resolve the incongruity in an adequate way. Evans aptly characterizes the "aesthetic" life, in which a person resists forming sincere commitments or developing "enduring passions," drifting in "imaginative recreation" without becoming engaged in the world in a wholehearted and consistent manner (Evans, pp. 72-79; 91). Without unifying concerns and abiding cares, such a life deteriorates into an incoherent series of burdensome moments. For this reason, Kierkegaard concludes that "an understanding of human existence must include an understanding of what today would be termed our emotional lives" (Evans, p. 21). It is our passions—our "enduring, sustained" patterns of caring—that provide us with "direction and continuity" in our life as moral agents (Evans, p. 34). This may sound as if it pertains primarily to ethics; yet, as Evans notes, the affective dimension of human life has an epistemic

significance for Kierkegaard, no less than an ethical one.

Rather than seeking a "view from nowhere" in order to find our way to the truth, we must "stand somewhere and trust that our perspective, including our emotional 'take' on the world," can provide us with an accurate view of things (Evans, p. 64). Furthermore, any beliefs we may hold about explicitly religious matters are not insulated from the rest of our rational convictions; rather, they can be located on a continuum with countless other beliefs that we reasonably maintain about issues that involve some degree of uncertainty (Evans, p. 160). None of our most important beliefs can be proven either logically or empirically, but this is no reason for suspending judgment. And it is not the case that our only options in the face of uncertainty are comprehensive skepticism or mindless faith. As Patrick Stokes explains more clearly than Evans does, Kierkegaard is interested in the philosophical question of how to comport oneself with respect to important yet uncertain matters. While Evans is willing to suggest that we already know what we need to believe, and that our task is simply to believe it, Stokes shows that Kierkegaard's texts engage in a critical search for "ways of knowing" that might be relevant to matters that we cannot be indifferent about (Stokes, pp. 161; 169). We must hold views about "how the world stands" and "how I stand in relation to it"—in other words, *how things are* and *what my life means*—to be able to live and act, rather than being paralyzed by doubt (Stokes, p. 150). Furthermore, holding views about such issues is compatible with the task of striving to improve one's understanding, and continuing to work out more adequate views through philosophical questioning and analysis.

The consciousness involved in philosophical reflection, then, is distinctively *interested* in what it is reflecting about: as Stokes says, "consciousness *per se* is interested" (Stokes, p. 53). Stokes compares the Kierkegaardian idea that first-personal thought contains a sense of one's one involvement in what one is thinking about to what phenomenologists[2] have described as the intrinsic "mineness" or "self-referentiality" that our intentional states possess: in being aware of the world we are both *aware of things around us* and *aware of our own "take" on those things*. The "contemplator's relation to the object of consideration is contained *simultaneously* in the apprehension," in such a way that "everything I am conscious of" involves "*my* consciousness" and a sense of how whatever I perceive pertains to me (Stokes, pp. 55-56). In explaining that Kierkegaard offers much to the elucidation of these ideas, Stokes makes a connection that is original but also textually well-grounded. He integrates the epistemological concerns of the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* with the moral psychology developed in *Either/Or* and *Works of Love*.

Moving to more obviously ethical matters, Stokes demonstrates that Kierkegaard's phenomenological epistemology lays the ground for a "theory of moral perceptualism," in which moral cognition is defined not so much by deliberation and decision-making as by "vision" and "apprehension" of what is normatively salient (Stokes, p. 180). Here, Stokes draws upon such Anglo-American thinkers as Murdoch and Frankfurt in order to refine his own compelling Kierkegaardian account of how "my sense of involvement and implicatedness, my *interestedness*," is built into the structure of moral perception itself (Stokes, p. 57). At "the very heart of moral agency" is "an immediate self-referentiality built into vision"; without taking this into account, we cannot define "what it is to perceive moral situations correctly" (Stokes, p. 11). Practical reason is thus defined in terms of a discerning apprehension in which I myself am implicated in what I discern and accountable for responding to it. Indeed, all apprehension that is not "disinterested" (Stokes, p. 176) will essentially involve one's own subjectivity. By contrast, Evans seems more eager to assure his reader that Kierkegaard does not endorse "epistemological subjectivism" and that he does care about "objective, propositional truth" (Evans, pp. 58-63) than to explore his radical claims about truthfulness and subjectivity.

One virtue of *Kierkegaard's Mirrors* is that it shows how the work of Kierkegaard can make a valuable contribution to some central areas of philosophical inquiry. Stokes uncovers themes in Kierkegaard's work that have often gone unnoticed by commentators. Evans, on the other hand, is rather defensive in differentiating his more straightforward reading from the "radical" views of some more recent Kierkegaardians, who (according to Evans) take a superficial interest in Kierkegaard's literary devices while steering away from "being challenged" about "issues of ultimate importance" (Evans, pp. 12-13). Now, it is evident that Kierkegaard's texts make a direct and intimate appeal to their reader, provoking him or her to think about urgent questions: to deny this would be to miss the point altogether. But it does not follow that one must either take a dogmatic view of "what Kierkegaard hoped we would learn from his texts" (Evans, p. 16) or else be merely a dilettante with no sincere interest in learning from his work. As is the case with many other philosophers, Kierkegaard often makes claims are in conflict with other claims he has made before, either because he has not worked out a consistent position or because his position has changed over time. It is true that Kierkegaard considered himself a religious author until the end of his life, as Evans observes, (Evans, pp. 10-11), but this does not settle the question of whether his late religious writings are consistent with his earlier works. If we rely too much on a "top-down" appeal to the intentions of the creator, as if these

were an Archimedean point on which we could base a single authoritative interpretation, then we are at risk of reducing a work to something less than it is. Evans does not intend to do this to Kierkegaard's rich and complex writings, but he might have reminded us more often that there are other stories to be told about these texts than the one he offers. One can agree with Evans that Kierkegaard's *Works of Love* advocates a "divine command" theory of ethics, for instance, while wishing that he had spent more time on the complementary readings of this text that he mentions all too briefly, in passing (Evans, pp. 182-83). *Works of Love* is a resource for the philosopher interested in moral perception, as Stokes has shown, and Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* makes suggestive remarks that outline an epistemology of personal knowledge. Overall, what is so refreshing about the approach taken by Stokes is that he does not tell us what Kierkegaard thinks so much as show us what we might learn from him. His appropriation of certain Kierkegaardian ideas may do more justice to Kierkegaard's philosophical significance than any one-volume introduction to Kierkegaard's thought could possibly do.

Notes

[1] Poole's critique is somewhat erratic, but he does have a point. In his own contribution to the same volume, Evans (1998, pp. 158-9) writes that "only an objectively existing [divinity] could create a world," despite the conflict between this claim and many statements made in the very text that Evans is discussing. Why couldn't a God with subjective existence serve as the basis of the world—as Schopenhauer's "will" appears to do, for instance?

[2] Stokes refers to such phenomenological thinkers as Husserl, Heidegger, and Sartre—and, more recently, Dan Zahavi.

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