International Journal of Philosophical Studies Vol. 14(2), 271–305

Book Reviews

The Philosophy of Kierkegaard
By George Pattison
Acumen, 2005. Pp. xii + 205. ISBN 1–84465–031–6. £14.99 (pbk).

This book is part of a series of introductions to leading Continental philosophers, and George Pattison wastes no time in addressing the question of whether or not Kierkegaard's thought lends itself to being included in such a series. Early in his Introduction, he admits that even to speak of 'Kierkegaard's philosophy' is to use a problematic phrase: 'Martha Nussbaum has shown how the novels of Henry James can be fruitfully used in deepening moral philosophy, but if this suggests that philosophers should be more open to the kinds of insights to be found from literature it by no means leads to us thinking of James as a philosopher rather than a novelist' (p. 3). Even if Kierkegaard's work offers a perspective on philosophical issues, this is not necessarily a reason for calling him a philosopher, Pattison claims. And yet it seems that, although Kierkegaard describes himself as a kind of poet, his literary work has different ambitions than the novels or poems of a James or a Shakespeare. What is it that distinguishes Kierkegaard from these authors? Pattison suggests that his corpus of pseudonymous and signed

writings can be seen as a sustained attempt to deal with traditionally philosophical issues, and to provoke his reader to think about the importance of those issues and the adequacy of different ways of coping with them. The variety of literary styles employed in Kierkegaard's writings, then, is a consequence of 'his own passionate and painstaking concern' for the problem of *how* best to achieve these goals (p. 43). In other words, an authorship that is driven by questions that are central to Western philosophy could *for that very reason* bear little resemblance to much of that same tradition – that is, if the author harbours doubt as to how well the standard methods of philosophy are able to handle the very questions that philosophers tend to think about. Pattison therefore groups Kierkegaard with Heidegger and other revisionary figures for whom the life of philosophy is defined by the attempt to find the best possible way of thinking and writing about abstract and ultimate issues. Works such as *The Concept of Anxiety* and *Repetition* force us 'to revisit fundamental questions about our very conception of philosophy, and about its relation to religion and to literature' (p. 11).

As Pattison points out, many of the philosophical problems with which Kierkegaard is concerned have to do with the concept of personality, and the related categories of existence, subjectivity, passion, and character. His frequent refrain is that the world of becoming is the background to thought, so that any attempt to develop a philosophical understanding of existence is grounded in the reality of the existing subject, more concretely than Hegel and Descartes are willing to acknowledge. The philosopher does not have any access to a 'view from nowhere' from which to begin without presuppositions, and the aims of foundational epistemology lead to a perverse mode of thinking which is intoxicated with its own processes to the exclusion of anything but thought about thought itself (p. 66). As Pattison points out, Kierkegaard views this as a distinctively modern perversion, since Socrates and other ancient Greek philosophers 'never forgot that what they were concerned about was the actual, existing human being' (p. 195). The disinterested pursuit of abstract truth leaves out the passionate interest in existence which is characteristic of Kierkegaard's subjective thinker, and which is essential to attaining the sort of wisdom that is worthy of the name. Theoretical philosophy, according to Pattison, often fails 'to acknowledge the claims of *existence*', and it is therefore guilty of adopting what Kierkegaard calls 'the aesthetic point of view' (p. 33). In making this connection, Pattison links the project of such a work as the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* with that of *Either/Or*. There is not a critique of modern philosophy on the one hand and a moral diagnosis of fallen modes of life on the other. Instead, Kierkegaard's revolt against systematic abstraction is connected with his vision of what human existence at its best would look like: the philosopher who has misguided ideals tacitly confesses his own failings as a human being. After all, the Kierkegaardian subjective thinker who is passionately concerned about existence should not believe in the project of a 'universal

ontology' that would apply to any and every manifestation of being (p. 86). On the contrary, his account of the human condition might have more in common with the work of a literary artist than with that of a scientific phenomenologist.

By putting it in these terms, Pattison confronts the question of how Kierkegaard's writings are related to later philosophy. This is yet another aspect of his attempt to locate Kierkegaard in the history of ideas, and it becomes especially prominent during his discussion of anxiety. Pointing out that Kierkegaard himself uses the term 'psychology' to describe what he takes himself to be doing, Pattison asks whether or not he ought to be classified 'as a kind of proto-phenomenologist' (p. 47). When he writes about anxiety, for instance, Kierkegaard is obviously interpreting a certain kind of experience and trying to describe its intentional structure. He uses the biblical story of a fall from innocence as an allegory of how a person goes from a state of preconscious infancy to self-conscious adulthood: the experience of anxiety has to do with the simultaneously exciting and terrifying awareness of one's own boundless possibilities. Sartre and Heidegger in different ways build on the idea that the intentional object of anxiety is nothing in particular: it is just 'the anxious possibility of *being able*', according to *The Concept of Anxiety*, which precipitates a concern 'about what the world means to us and what our lives mean for the world', as Pattison characterizes it (p. 70). This in turn leads us to recognize the possibility of developing a self which is more than merely momentary. However, the prospect of remaining suspended in a state of spiritual adolescence does hold a romantic appeal. This is partly because we inevitably compromise some of our indefinite potential by taking on a more limited ethical identity. To accept my concrete moral identity is not only to accept my own individual history with all its imperfections, but also to come to terms with all the other historical circumstances that 'have shaped the world that I now inherit as my world', for better or worse (p. 95). Pattison gives a lucid account of what it means to affirm the conditions of one's thrownness or facticity: to live as a white male in a European society, for instance, is to inherit a legacy of violence and exploitation that is at odds with the values I myself want to uphold. Yet just as the self 'does not and cannot create itself out of nothing', according to Kierkegaard, a person is not free to will that the given conditions of his existence be radically different (p. 62). One need not be a religious fanatic to believe that it makes sense to use a vocabulary of guilt and repentance in explaining all of this, even if it is religious philosophers such as Marion who have so far paid the most attention to this notion of the ultimate givenness of the self.

As readers of Kierkegaard, we are continually invited to consider the plausibility of a religious framework of interpretation. This is the single greatest obstacle to regarding his work as a contribution to philosophy, as Pattison concedes – but without sounding unduly apologetic. Religious faith

does not require a person 'to accept nonsense or to believe six impossible things before breakfast'; it is a matter of being committed 'to a particular life-view that serves as the basis for one's self-understanding and action' (pp. 166-7). Even in his religious discourses, which Pattison rightly aligns with the Dane's more 'philosophical' writings as part of a unified project, Kierkegaard uses such phases as 'is it not so?', appealing to the experience of his readers and asking if a specific kind of existential perplexity might have arisen for them (p. 69). Since Kierkegaard believes that genuine questions occur to us in the context of ordinary life, and that there is no such thing as a single 'correct' vocabulary to explain what subjectivity ought to mean to an existing person, his work does not offer 'phenomenological analyses of ethical situations' so much as 'means of stimulating the kind of deliberative processes that are appropriate to moral decision-making' (p. 132). This is not to say that Kierkegaard's work is irrelevant to phenomenology, but that his moral psychology, or his philosophical anthropology, begins with an appeal to common human experiences and proceeds to make a case for the plausibility of understanding them in a certain way. The perspective passionately advocated by Kierkegaard is a heterodox Christianity based less on fear and trembling than on love, as Pattison cogently argues: 'the Kierkegaardian religious self is not only the possible ancestor of the philosophy of existence in both its secular and religious versions (which ... it surely is)', but it is also in line with a tradition that goes all the way back 'through Plato (especially the discourse on "eros" in *The Symposium*), through Augustine, through some strands of medieval mysticism and on into the present day' (pp. 163–4). What ought to move us to accept or to reject Kierkegaard's ideas is not first and foremost their dogmatic content, but whether or not we find that they offer us 'a persuasive or adequate depiction of the human condition' (p. 165). Since Kierkegaard represents this condition as an ambiguous, unstable, fragile, and difficult one, we are faced with the question: is this *not* how it is? Can we not recognize ourselves in this picture? Pattison is clearly on the side of those of us who *do* find in Kierkegaard's writings an urgently relevant, and philosophically rich, conception of human existence. Furthermore, it is one that attributes a dignity and significance to our life and its cares that can hardly be matched by any secular world-view that might be available to us as an alternative. This is why Kierkegaard has managed to fascinate a number of philosophers, and Pattison does a superb job of explaining that fascination, even to those who do not yet count themselves among the fascinated. Drawing on an extensive range of historical and contemporary research, *The Philosophy of Kierkegaard* orients the serious reader toward what is most important in Kierkegaard's work – regardless of whether it is called phenomenology, religion, psychology, literature, or none of the above.

Colorado College *Rick Anthony Furtak*