

Recent Work on Kierkegaard

Kierkegaard, Communication and Virtue by M. A. Tietjen. Indiana University Press, 2013

Kierkegaard: Exposition and Critique by Daphne Hampson. Oxford University Press, 2013

The Paradoxical Rationality of Søren Kierkegaard by Richard McCombs. Indiana University Press, 2013

I propose to treat the books under review here as exemplifying three types of approach to Kierkegaard, three heuristic prisms. At the level of abstraction at which I shall distinguish them, each type of approach has been tried out before in Kierkegaard studies. But, as I hope to indicate, the books in question develop these approaches in new and illuminating ways. In commenting on these books, my aim is to begin to identify some of the relative strengths and weaknesses of the different hermeneutic frameworks they serve to represent.

I. The Theory of Self-Types

Mark Tietjen's *Kierkegaard, Virtue and Communication* takes aim at certain debunking readings of Kierkegaard. Tietjen's main targets are Roger Poole and Joakim Garff, who in different ways seek to pull the rug from under any approach to Kierkegaard - including his own self-assessment - as a religious author governed by serious aims to clarify and edify. One weakness of his book is that Tietjen gives us scant reason to think that the specific targets of his critique are really worth considering. The book's interest will therefore be proportionate to the degree to which its readers feel an antecedent attraction to, or anyway a need to respond to, e.g., Poole's idiosyncratic instructions for how to read Kierkegaard. (There is an irony here: when it comes to the interpretation of Kierkegaard, Tietjen argues at length for a strong version of the so-called Principle of Charity as a hermeneutic 'work of love', but when it comes to Poole and Garff, he writes in such a way as to indicate that he sees very little to love about their work!) Since I am inclined to share Tietjen's negative assessment of the hermeneutic credos of the critics on which he chooses to focus, I shall concentrate here on what I take to be a more interesting question. Granted that edification is among Kierkegaard's aims, the question is: *edify how?*

To this question, Tietjen responds in part by adverting to a reassuringly traditional answer: Kierkegaard's intention is to lead his readers towards a putatively higher 'type of

self’, against the background of a certain theory of the stages of human selfhood. This is not the only dimension of Tietjen’s response; I shall indicate some other aspects below. But the so-called ‘theory of stages’ looms large in Tietjen’s account of what Kierkegaard is really all about. Introducing the terms ‘spheres’ and ‘stages’, for example, Tietjen tells us:

Kierkegaard refers to the aesthetic, ethical, and religious as both stages and spheres of existence. “Spheres” conveys the sense in which they represent “existential possibilities a person can remain in for a lifetime.” However, as stages, Kierkegaard understands them developmentally: “in some sense it is natural for human beings to begin as children in the aesthetic stage and progress to the ethical and eventually the religious stages”. In other words, for Kierkegaard as stages they are teleological. (34)

An unsuspecting reader might naturally take the two passages Tietjen quotes here to be Kierkegaard’s own words. That they are not, and that Tietjen is instead appealing directly here to the authority of C. Stephen Evans, is indicative both of the received status of this line of interpretation (despite a few dissenting voices) and of the fact that one will look in vain to Kierkegaard’s own writings for anything like so straightforward a statement of commitment to a theory that posits types of selves. Notwithstanding its received status, however, I think the idea that Kierkegaard’s work is fundamentally guided by such a theory is far from beyond doubt and that a shortcoming of Tietjen’s book is the way it too easily falls back on the received view. I would like here simply to pose three critical questions to Tietjen’s view in this regard.¹

First, does the Theory of Self-Types approach adequately take into account the idealizing character of Kierkegaard’s portraits of various ‘stages on life’s way’? On a plausible alternative to a view like Evans’, Kierkegaard’s personifications of ‘existence-spheres’ are imaginative exercises, part and parcel of what he calls ‘experimenting psychology’; designed to deliver insights into actual human psychology, to be sure, but *not* intended to posit types of selves that are supposed to be actually instantiated by human individuals. On this alternative view, Kierkegaard’s fictional portraits of, e.g. the lives of pure aesthetes or thoroughgoing ethicists are in the subjunctive mood and sometimes even *per impossible*. Whilst I cannot here defend this view on textual grounds, we may at least

¹ I would like to acknowledge the help of my friend and colleague James Rodwell in formulating the following misgivings about the Theory of Self-Types approach to Kierkegaard.

note that it avoids making the significance of Kierkegaard's work stand or fall with a doubtful set of hypotheses about actual human self-types.

Second, can the Theory of Self-Types approach do justice to the various ways in which the term 'stages' actually figures in Kierkegaard's writings? These are indeed various. Rather often, for example, the context for the term 'stages' (*Stadier*) is a discussion of the development, within human psychology - whether at the individual or collective level, conscious or preconscious – of some particular psychological phenomenon: anxiety, for example, or erotic desire. But we should not, I take it, saddle Kierkegaard with the hypothesis that preconscious stages of erotic desire, for instance, are types of selves! Then again there is the apparently quite different context of the idea of a developing authorship that is it governed by an overall communicative goal. Thus, both Kierkegaard and his fictional author, Johannes Climacus, present their respective authorial projects as needing to take place in certain stages, as governed by the aim to 'reintroduce Christianity into Christendom'. At the very least, we need answers to how these stages in different sorts of processes – within the development of particular psychological phenomena, within specific projects of authorship - are related to the curious hypothesis that human individuals instantiate one of three types of self at various stages of their maturation.

Third, can the Theory of Self-Types approach do justice to Kierkegaard's talk of 'spheres' as well as 'stages'? In the passage cited above, Tietjen seems to treat the terms 'spheres' and 'stages' as different ways of talking about types of self (where the only difference is that 'stages' immediately connotes development). But this can't be quite right. For we find in Kierkegaard's writings the notion of spheres applied to all manner of things, including for example: nature, spirit, the transcendent, the somatic, logic, reflection, being, becoming, subjectivity, knowledge. Surely we don't want to say that, e.g., *logic* is a type of self! Of course it is open for Tietjen, in response to this point, to emphasize that, on his view, the overlap is rather between '*existence*-spheres' and 'stages'. But in that case we shall need to know why *existence*-spheres are so different, *qua* spheres, from the spheres of nature, logic, becoming etc. Sorting out these issues calls for careful work on Kierkegaard's crucial notions of spheres, and *existence*-spheres, not least, I submit, by tracing these back to his appropriation of Schleiermacher's conception of spheres *not* as types of selves but as general modes of human cognition and comportment.

Against the background of these concerns, it is notable that Tietjen's central thesis, that Kierkegaard is a serious Christian author, can be defended in ways that do not rely on associating him with a developmental theory of self-types. Resources for such a defence

include Tietjen's own account of Kierkegaard's aim to reawaken a sense for the distinctive register of religious concepts, and specifically 'the Christian religious'. (In the third part of his book, Tietjen provides a valuable overview of Kierkegaard on faith. Readers who have no stake in the dispute with Poole et al. are recommended to start here.) Further, these resources also include the valuable support that Tietjen offers, towards the end of his book, on behalf of an approach to Kierkegaard as a kind of virtue theorist who seeks not only to clarify but also to help us to cultivate the Christian virtues. But none of this, I submit, relies on the doubtful postulate that human beings instantiate one of exactly three types of self, 'in some sense naturally' progressing from the first, to the second and then onwards and upwards to the third.

II. Historicism and the Historical Kierkegaard

Though it is not a term she uses, I think it is fair to say that Daphne Hampson's *Kierkegaard: Exposition and Critique* exemplifies a *historicist* approach to Kierkegaard. Certainly, Hampson's approach is consonant with, and draws upon, the strongly *historical* emphasis of much recent work on Kierkegaard, as represented not least by numerous recent publications coming out of the Søren Kierkegaard Research Centre in Copenhagen. Thus, Hampson has an eye for the colourful biographical detail, such as Kierkegaard's endearing complaint about people who pass by horses who cannot feed because they have their nosebags tangled, without helping, or his (merely surmised) visit to a brothel as a young man. More importantly, it is clearly a major part of Hampson's aim to put Kierkegaard firmly (back) into the line of a distinctively *Lutheran* theological tradition. Beyond this, however, throughout her book, Hampson offers substitution-instances for something like the following scheme of argument:

- 1 Kierkegaard correctly discerned the metaphysical and epistemological foundations of Christianity, on his distinctively Lutheran understanding of the latter.
- 2 'We today' can no longer find these epistemological and metaphysical doctrines at all credible.

Therefore, 'we today' can no longer find (Lutheran) Christianity at all credible.

Accordingly, Kierkegaard's significance for us today is the way in which he brings into relief the sheer historical strangeness of (Lutheran) Christianity from 'our' perspective. Hampson

provides some interesting arguments for Premise 1, albeit ones that are hardly decisive with regard to whether Kierkegaard admits of being pinned down as ‘a Lutheran’. These arguments include the claim, for example, that a Lutheran understanding of Christianity requires a certain conception of time, one which Kierkegaard thoroughly works out. Roughly, the idea here is that the Lutheran understanding of the Christian as a justified sinner, *simul justus et peccator*, requires (as the point is sometimes put) a radical shift from a chronological to a kairological conception of time. On such issues, Hampson’s expositions, if understandably sketchy given the breadth of her scope, are well worth the read. It is illuminating, for example, to read *Fear and Trembling* alongside Luther’s remarkably close reflections on the *akedah* in his *Lectures on Genesis*. And Hampson is surely right that in his understanding of sin and grace, for example, Kierkegaard is closer to Luther than to Aquinas. Construed in a suitably cautious way, as the claim that there is a strong (and sometimes neglected) Lutheran dimension to Kierkegaard’s thought, Hampson’s thesis has much to recommend it.

Hampson’s second premise – that Lutheran Christianity is without credence from ‘our’ perspective – is ambiguous between normative and descriptive readings. This is a point on which she seems to equivocate. Sometimes, Hampson seems merely to want to make a rough empirical generalization (without, however, offering any data to back this up). She writes for example of the Lutheran ‘theo-historical belief system’, commenting that in her own case ‘together, I take it with most 21st century Europeans, I lack any such’ (95). At other times, however, Hampson seems to be saying something much stronger: viz. that we today *cannot* make (credible) sense of Christianity. Thus, she writes of the doctrine of incarnation that, whilst this may have made sense to Kierkegaard, given his Lutheran framework, for us today to accept this doctrine would somehow mean to abandon the whole of modern science: ‘everything we thought we knew about how the universe functions (since Newton or before) is undone’ (96-7). Naturally, Hampson’s conclusions are infected by the same equivocation. At times, she seems to be saying merely that since Kierkegaard challenges ‘our’ most basic *de facto* assumptions, his work can help us to properly notice these assumptions – and perhaps go on to properly defend them or, if the arguments so lead us, to give them up. But at other times Hampson surmises that Christianity has become truly ‘unthinkable’ for we enlightened folk. Given Scientific Progress and our ‘new mathematical model in which time and space are interchangeable’, she declares, ‘[t]he theological understanding inherited from the ancient times … no longer makes any sense’ (309)

On this normative, modally strong, reading of Hampson's argument, however, it is often difficult to see how it gets beyond flat assertion. Consider just one example.

Astonishingly, Hampson claims that 'living as we do after the rise of Nominalism in the late Middle Ages, doubting the existence of universals ... we think that what is real is what they [sc. 'the universalists'] called the particular example of that universal' (83). Hampson seems to think that because we are all Nominalists these days, we cannot take seriously traditional Christian formulations of the uniqueness of Christ. But we are certainly not all Nominalists these days. On the contrary, one of the most important and ongoing movements in late 20th and 21st century metaphysics, encompassing such major figures as Hilary Putnam and Kit Fine, is often described as a return to a broadly Aristotelian conception of essences and natural kinds. That Hampson shows no awareness of such developments, or of the philosophical issues at stake within them, seriously weakens her argument at this crucial point.

Hampson credits Kierkegaard with helping her to see why 'I should not wish to be a Christian' (vi). In a field in which authors are often cagey about their own theological commitments, there is no doubt something refreshingly honest about Hampson's book in this regard. (But I confess that I did baulk at her readiness to interpolate her own verdicts into the 'exposition' parts of her chapters – 'Exactly! Kierkegaard and I are on the same page' (73) and so forth.) In my view, Hampson is right to draw attention to the metaphysical and epistemological foundations of Kierkegaard's conception of the predominantly non-metaphysical character of the claims that Christianity makes upon us. But the critical question, of course, is whether these metaphysical and epistemological commitments can be defended or at least rendered intelligible (and if not, whether this tells against Christianity or only against Kierkegaard). It is at this point that Hampson's historicism leaves us philosophically in the lurch.

III. The Socratic Paradigm

Hampson's Kierkegaard is a Lutheran. However, as Richard McCombs' *The Paradoxical Rationality of Søren Kierkegaard* helps to show, we might with at least equal justice call Kierkegaard a Socratic. Indeed, at one point McCombs characterizes his own project as a response to the charge that, 'since he numbers both Luther and Socrates among his heroes' Kierkegaard could only ever end up in a hopeless muddle about the relation between faith and reason:

For Socrates said that he was “the kind of person who did only what seemed best to him on rational reflection,” while Luther described reason as a *whore*, “this pestilent beast,” “the fountain and headspring of all mischiefs,” and “the enemy of God”. (148)

We are to see, however, that what emerges from Kierkegaard’s response to Christian thinkers including Luther, as qualified by his lifelong devotion to Socrates, is no muddle, but a robust, if distinctive, commitment to reason and rationality.

McCombs’ argument to this conclusion, in prose which is lively if scarcely precise, involves the denial of what may seem to be an obvious fact about Kierkegaard, namely that he posited in-principle limits to human reason. Thus, in one rare (and hand-wavy) engagement with the secondary literature, McCombs sets himself in opposition to ‘most commentators’ on *Fragments* for whom this text aims to persuade us to accept certain ‘limits of the [human] understanding’s capacity for knowledge’ (164). One may reasonably doubt that this can really be what ‘most commentators’ think, if only because, as stated, the claim looks to be obviously false, given that *Fragments* expressly disavows any argument for the *truth* of the hypothesis that the highest things are beyond the reach of human understanding. Be that as it may, McCombs’ positive thesis is indeed novel and bold. Rather than setting in-principle limits on human reason in the manner of Kant, we are to see that, in Kierkegaard’s real view, genuine rationality involves transcending the *de facto* limits of one’s (current) understanding, in and through the very process of recognizing these limits.

If this smacks implausibly of Hegel’s insistence, against Kant, on *Geist*’s potential to transcend its own finitude, then presumably McCombs’ rejoinder is that Kierkegaard works out a conception of reason that is itself decidedly unHegelian, based instead on a Socratic paradigm of concrete ethical self-understanding and caring for one’s own good. *Contra* Hegel’s conception of pure thought, it is a ‘subjective’ or concretely subject-oriented mode of understanding that Kierkegaard thinks is capable of transcending itself in and through the recognition of its own limits; and it is this subjective kind of rationality that he thinks Socrates so richly exemplifies, albeit without the benefit of the further possibilities of self-knowledge and transcendence that, within the Christian framework, are said to be capable of arising out of an encounter with the God-Man, Jesus Christ. Far from involving a criterionless leap in the dark (as it perhaps must look from the outside), McCombs’ Kierkegaard thinks that religious faith is essentially continuous with a Socratic form of rational inquiry in which genuine advances in self-understanding are made through the very

recognition of one's limits, 'before God'; and that this is true, for all its distinctiveness, in the case of Christian faith too.

I think McCombs is onto something of first importance here. But his exposition falls short in a number of respects. For one thing, he does not himself provide a discussion of how Kierkegaard stands in relation to Hegel vis-à-vis the limits of reason. As I have just indicated, this is a serious lacuna given the power of the more standard story that Kierkegaard represents a move away from Hegel in this regard, back to something closer to Kant's conception of absolute limits constitutive of human finitude. For another thing, McCombs provides only a sketchy defense of his view as a reading of Kierkegaard's texts and (like other critics who emphasize their indirectness) appears to stand in need of a robust criterion for distinguishing what we are, from what we are not, supposed to take seriously therein. McCombs is vulnerable in this connection to the charge that he picks and chooses when to say that Kierkegaard is just 'pretending to be irrational'. A more substantive issue is this: if faith is, on Kierkegaard's view, a form of rationality then what becomes of his characteristic emphasis on the *riskiness* and *uncertainty* of faith? If the answer is that Kierkegaard's 'robust commitment' to rationality and reason is lax enough to allow us to count as rational anyone who is ready to risk everything out of a passionate desire for some highly improbable turn of events then there must be a worry here that the terms 'rationality' and 'reason' are being stretched beyond recognition.

Of the three approaches distinguished here, the Socratic Paradigm is in my view by far the more promising. Nonetheless it seems clear that further work within this approach is needed in order to make it precise and defensible and also to properly integrate, within it, both the Lutheran dimensions of Kierkegaard's thought, of the sort emphasized by Hampson, and virtue-theoretical considerations, of the sort emphasized by Tietjen.