C. Stephen Evans, KIERKEGAARD ON FAITH AND THE SELF: COLLECTED ESSAYS AND KIERKEGAARD'S ETHIC OF LOVE: DIVINE COMMANDS AND MORAL OBLIGATIONS

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sume that the PSR-denying claim, \( \neg E: \text{There is no explanation for the truth of } P \text{ and so no causal explanation for } P, \) is also contingently true. (Note: Pruss employs only the second conjunct in what I have called \( \neg E; \) however, he derives it from the first.) Let \( W_1, \) be a possible world in which the conjunction, \( P \text{ and } \neg E, \) is true. Since this conjunction is, if true, contingently true, there is a possible world, \( W_2, \) in which it false. The Brouwer axiom tells us that if a claim is true, then necessarily it is possibly true. So, from the Brouwer axiom it follows that in \( W_2, \) though \( P \text{ and } \neg E \) is false, it is nonetheless possibly true. Given Aristotelian modal views, if \( P \text{ and } \neg E \) is possibly true in \( W_2, \) then some thing or things in \( W_2 \) must have causal powers capable of bringing about the truth of \( P \text{ and } \neg E. \) But, it is impossible for anything to cause it to be the case that an uncaused state of affairs obtains. So, the affirmation of the PSR-denying \( \neg E, \) together with an Aristotelian account of modality results in an absurdity. It follows that it is not possible that the Aristotelian modal view be true and PSR false.

Nor is it possible in a brief review to describe adequately the richness of Pruss’s work. It exemplifies analytical rigor and invites continued reflection. Anyone interested in PSR owes Alexander R. Pruss a debt of gratitude.¹

¹Thanks to Douglas Groothuis and Mark Linville for very helpful comments on earlier drafts of the review.


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These two books represent the culmination of decades of reading Kierkegaard’s texts and philosophical reflection on them.¹ They offer both a defense of the relevance of Kierkegaard to philosophy today and a polemic against various (mis)readings of Kierkegaard. Evans is one of few analytic philosophers who sees value in Kierkegaard’s thought and who has patiently and carefully spent time in the Kierkegaardian texts. As a result, he has produced a substantial body of work over some thirty years that brings Kierkegaard’s thought to bear not only on issues in philosophy of religion, but the wider questions of contemporary analytic philosophy as well. Both these books warrant close reading by anyone interested in

¹For simplicity, both Evans and I use the term “Kierkegaard” to refer to the body of thought presented in the texts historically written by Søren Kierkegaard, whether pseudonymous or not. This is not to overlook the immense importance of pseudonymity but to simplify reference.
contemporary philosophical debates, especially in philosophy of religion and moral philosophy (ethics and meta-ethics). However, those interested in the methods and themes of continental philosophy and how Kierkegaard’s texts appear in light of them will find little in Evans’s work but a sustained argument against continental interpretations of Kierkegaard.

*Kierkegaard On Faith and the Self*

*Kierkegaard On Faith and the Self* conveniently presents in one volume a wide-ranging collection of seventeen of Evans’s most important essays on Kierkegaard’s philosophy of religion, ethical and meta-ethical thought previously published between 1979 and 2000 (with minor changes), and arranged into four groups: “Kierkegaard the Philosopher” (Part Two), “Kierkegaard on Faith, Reason, and Reformed Epistemology” (Part Three), “Kierkegaard on Ethics and Authority” (Part Four), and “Kierkegaard on the Self: Philosophical Psychology” (Part Five). There are also two new essays that bookend the re-published material, the Introduction, “Kierkegaard as a Christian Thinker” (Part One), and the Conclusion, “Where Can Kierkegaard Take Us?” (Part Six), giving the book its shape and telos. Taken as a whole they offer, Evans argues, “the kernel” of a “way of reading Kierkegaard” that is consistent and unified, though initially written without any such “detailed plan of attack” (p. x).

The first thing to say about this collection of essays is that each one is well-written, well-argued and deserves closer attention than can be given to them here. One of Evans’s virtues as a philosopher is his ability to bring clarity to Kierkegaard’s rather complex authorship. The result may be slightly misleading, however, to readers unfamiliar with the primary texts themselves. On consultation they may find the issues less straightforward than they appear in Evans’s hands. Kierkegaard is an enigmatic writer at best and often there are good textual and philosophical reasons for the various uses to which he is put. Fortunately Evans is well aware of this fact and generally does not present his reading as the only possible way to understand Kierkegaard; it is simply the best one he can discern.

The collective aim of these essays is to correct “deeply rooted traditions of misinterpretation” of Kierkegaard’s texts that cause so many readers to labor under “the illusion that they already understand him” (p. 5). More to the point, Evans seeks to rebut the entrenched interpretations of Kierkegaard as an irrationalist fideist about faith and reason, a relativist about propositional truth, a subjectivist about moral norms, a nonfoundingalist about epistemic justification, and an anti-realist about truth, language and metaphysics. These misinterpretations, Evans suggests, distort Kierkegaard’s texts and ultimately undermine his status as both “a serious philosopher” and “perhaps the greatest Christian thinker since the middle ages” (p. 8), one whose thought is deeply relevant to our contemporary world, sacred and secular (pp. 4–5, 26).

Evans’s thesis maintains that Kierkegaard is first and foremost a Christian thinker, and that as a Christian thinker he makes an important
contribution to wider philosophical thought. Ironically, Kierkegaard’s Christianity is not something one may take for granted in Kierkegaardian circles, even though most of Kierkegaard’s authorship is focused explicitly on Christian themes. The existential subjectivist-irrationalist readings of Kierkegaard promulgated by philosophers like Alasdair MacIntyre, and the so-called “postmodern” literary-ironist readings of someone like Roger Poole saddle Kierkegaard with the view that grounds for one’s beliefs are utterly subjective (or “emotive,” as MacIntyre would have it) and irrational and, as Poole claims, that the Kierkegaardian texts offer nothing by way of propositional truths or doctrines. On the former view, Kierkegaard advances theses that ultimately have no rational basis, while on the latter he advances no theses whatsoever. In both cases Kierkegaard is an anti-philosopher who wittingly or not undercuts the basis for Christian belief, rendering him either a (philosophically) useless Christian thinker or not really a Christian thinker at all. These are the sorts of readings Evans means to quash.

Philosophically, the lynchpin of Evans’s way of reading Kierkegaard, which we encounter in Chapters Two and Three, is the claim that Kierkegaard is a realist who not only believes in the possibility of metaphysics, but is himself engaged in a metaphysical project of sorts. Kierkegaard is “uncompromisingly on the side of realism” if by that one means Kierkegaard believes that there is objective truth independent of human minds (pp. 9, 56–58). And Kierkegaard is a metaphysician if we think of metaphysics in terms set forth by William James as “an attempt to clarify a person’s deepest beliefs about what is real, those beliefs that both stem from and shape a person’s actual life-choices”—what Evans calls “mere metaphysics” (pp. 9, 49; 49–51, 58). These claims both hinge on Evans’s realist interpretation of Kierkegaard’s “truth is subjectivity” (his subjectivity principle) which applies, first, only to moral and religious truth, and second, to the truth of a person’s life and not to propositional truth (p. 58). So far from being a subjectivist about propositional truth, Kierkegaard’s subjectivity principle actually presupposes the objective (realist) truth of propositions. Kierkegaard’s oft-alleged anti-metaphysical texts turn out merely to assert that a person’s spiritual and inward development is essential to the discovery of metaphysical truth (pp. 10, 62–65). Thus the way is opened for a Kierkegaardian epistemology that is (in Chapters Ten and Eleven) a form of modest foundationalism, a Kierkegaardian ethics that is not a form of relativism (Chapters Twelve and Thirteen), and a view of the self that is normative (Chapters Fourteen and Fifteen).

Thankfully, Evans’s insistence that Kierkegaard is not a wild-eyed religious fanatic who jettisons reason altogether has now become, largely

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because of Evans’s work collected in this anthology, a rather standard reading of Kierkegaard’s so-called subjectivity principle. Furthermore, one hopes that other philosophers heed Evans’s admonition (Chapter Nineteen) that Kierkegaard’s thought is particularly germane to our increasingly postmodern times. But there are questions about Evans’s approach to Kierkegaard. For starters, Evans habitually collapses metaphysical questions to their epistemological dimensions, privileging epistemic over hermeneutical reflection, in order to demonstrate how it is that what Kierkegaard actually opposes are certain modern epistemic assumptions, such as infallibilism, classical foundationalism and unmediated access to reality as it “really” is, etc. Thus, all the statements in the Kierkegaardian texts that appear radical are, once Evans is through, really just affirming what is (now) generally acceptable to the philosophical mainstream in analytic philosophy.

A good example of this is when Evans feels he must rescue Kierkegaard from antirealism—a view which, as Evans himself admits, encompasses a range of positions on the nature of reality and its relation to human cognition—lest Kierkegaard collapse back into the irrationalist and anti-Christian (mis)readings of him. Antirealism, however, may mean anything from a nonfactualist view, according to which the propositions or sentences of a discourse do not express genuine predicative judgments and make no claim about the world (or some external state of affairs) so that no claim about the world could render them true or false, to a perspectival view which holds only that for any proposition $p$ we assert as true, the conditions under which “that $p$” is true are contextual and limited to the perspective from which it is made. The former Evans no doubt wishes to avoid, but why the latter? Evans circumvents the antirealist charge by (among other things) defining the sort of metaphysics Kierkegaard opposes as focused on its presumed epistemic status, and not the object of study for metaphysics. That is, Kierkegaard certainly rejects some forms of metaphysical inquiry—such as Plato’s or Hegel’s—but he does so, Evans claims, only because of the presumed epistemic status of their metaphysical claims, and not because they engage in metaphysics simpliciter. There are textual reasons to challenge this notion, but even a realist might be forgiven for feeling a bit cheated when she discovers that all Evans apparently means by calling Kierkegaard a realist is that Kierkegaard is interested in metaphysics (and truth) in the “Jamesean sense” that seeks to elucidate our actual life commitments. Kierkegaard’s metaphysics has “no hint of finality or certainty, no claim to absolute knowledge but rather a confession that theoretical evidence is not decisive” (p. 51). James certainly was no friend to anything like traditional metaphysics insofar as it inquires into the nature of Being or Reality as it really is, and could be quite comfortable instead with a form of discourse that focuses merely on Being/Reality-as-it-comes-to-us. Generally this works as an account of the status of metaphysics in Kierkegaard’s thought, but is this what characterizes metaphysical inquiry generally? Historically? Rejecting
Nagel’s famous “view from nowhere” and admitting that the kinds of truths available to humans are of a second-order is not tantamount to heresy or philosophical suicide. What is more, Kierkegaard’s subjectivity principle sits quite comfortably in some of these kinds of perspectival versions of antirealism. I therefore see no reason why one could not continue to understand Kierkegaard as a Christian whose thought has continuing philosophical relevance while eschewing a realist metaphysics. As a matter of fact, Kierkegaard’s relevance to postmodernity in particular might be even greater.

We find another typical example of Evans’s method of collapsing metaphysical questions into epistemological ones when he writes:

If we ask why Kierkegaard believes in an objective reality as what knowledge attempts to approximate, the answer seems to be that this is part of the structure of belief or faith. That is just what a belief is or does. The mind independent character of reality is precisely what gives belief its risky character. Belief is just the human attitude that takes this risk and takes what is apprehended as real. . . . Kierkegaard seems to be of the opinion, shared by Hume and Reid and Moore, that certain kinds of beliefs are just natural though perhaps not inevitable; they are called forth by life itself. Skepticism is difficult; one must work to be a skeptic. (p. 44)

Evans is surely correct here, as far as he goes. Surprisingly, Evans quickly skips from the fact that in Kierkegaard’s texts belief (or faith) is a natural cognitive disposition to the conclusion that such beliefs entail a full-blown metaphysics of precisely how it is that their propositional expressions are true (i.e., “objective,” “realist,” etc.). Evans takes the approximate knowledge of objective reality and objectively risky character of belief in the Kierkegaardian texts to affirm the objective certainty of the existence of the external world and the realist interpretation of the mind-/language-world connection. In all this Evans dismisses the fact that, first, Kierkegaard’s position might be compatible with a version of alethic realism (to use Alston’s term) that does not require that the notion of objective truth be drawn out in a metaphysically robust way, and, second, the ultimate aim of the Kierkegaardian subjectivity principle is to point the reader away from these sorts of philosophical accounts in the first place. Kierkegaard does not exhibit a lot of interest in making the objects of our beliefs, especially Christianity, any easier or safer or more comfortable for his readers, though his goal is not to make it more difficult than it really is. He seems rather to emphasize that such abstract pieces of philosophical reasoning only end uncertainty and that living well requires a different philosophical approach—one that begins and ends with the concerns of oneself as a subject. None of this means that Evans is wrong about Kierkegaard per se, or that his reading lacks a high degree of explanatory cogency, but it does provide a warning that we might be moving away from precisely the approach to Kierkegaard’s texts which render their rich philosophical insights most edifying.
Kierkegaard’s Ethic of Love

Kierkegaard’s Ethic of Love picks up and develops at book-length one of the main conclusions of Kierkegaard On Faith and Self, namely that Kierkegaard’s thought has importance for Christian ethics insofar as it provides the basic resources for an account of how an ethic of duty can be linked to an ethic of virtue by way of divine command theory. Evans has two primary concerns in Kierkegaard’s Ethic of Love. The first is to develop, examine, and evaluate the view that moral obligations depend on God found in the writings of Kierkegaard (pp. 5–6). The second is to show how this view of moral obligations, while rooted in religious faith, contributes to a pluralistic society without compromising its convictions (p. 7). In regard to the first matter, Evans’s Kierkegaardian account follows Robert Adams in claiming that moral obligations are grounded in the commands of a good, loving God, particularly the command to love God and one’s neighbor as oneself. The classic question here is, then (as per the Euthyphro dilemma), how one parses out moral obligations in reference to God: Does the normativity of God’s commands inhere in God’s being or in the goodness of what is commanded? As to the second issue, Evans argues that his Kierkegaardian divine command theory demonstrates how moral obligations can be objective, overriding and universal in the double sense that all persons in a pluralistic society, whether religious or not, are subject to them, and that all persons must be treated equally (because of the command to love one’s neighbor) in a pluralistic society, regardless of age, race, gender or creed.

Evans argues that Kierkegaard’s version of moral obligations, by rooting God’s commands in God’s broader teleological vision of the good, shows just how wrong-headed typical charges of arbitrariness are to divine commands (p. 9). Such a theory of divine commands, grounded in the preeminent command to love one’s neighbor as oneself, is humanistic in that it understands moral obligations as successfully directed towards human flourishing, thus effectively linking deontological and aretaic approaches (p. 300). For Evans, Kierkegaard’s conception of the self as a spiritual and moral agent enables “him to import a Kantian dimension to what seems formally to be an Aristotelian framework” (p. 22). Thus the ethical task for each person is the Aristotelian goal of becoming oneself, but the self one must become is the self God commands one to become (p. 23). Personal happiness and flourishing, for Kierkegaard, cannot be defined purely or even mainly in terms of Aristotle’s natural goods. Ultimately human flourishing is measured by an individual’s spiritual and moral development. As such, human flourishing and self-development are inextricably bound to one’s relation to God and requires obedience and the crucial passions of faith and love.

There are three features of this account that recommend it to a pluralistic society, despite its overtly Christian character. First, the command to love, while grounded (because of sin) in special revelation, is also promulgated
by general revelation through human moral conscience. Thus all humans encounter the call of God to love the neighbor, however distorted this may be because of sin, and such a divine command can commend itself even to humans who do not accept such a revelation (pp. 161–162, 301). Second, as Kierkegaard unpacks the command to neighbor-love, it provides a non-ad hoc egalitarian basis for ethics. God is “the middle term” in every genuine case of neighbor-love and thereby provides the foundation for human love. Thus, in neighbor-love the other is construed through the infinite equality of God’s love for his creation and in the unconditional solidarity of being God’s children (pp. 113, 300). Third, Evans presents this Kierkegaardian account of moral obligation as outstripping the naturalistic alternatives by providing what they cannot; namely a satisfactory account of why such natural desires for dominance should not legitimize the victimization of others, why human persons should be obligated to those unable to contribute to society, and why we cannot seriously maintain that racists and successful criminals are merely mistaken (Chapters Ten–Twelve).

This book is important for several reasons, but one of the chief reasons is its polemic (found primarily in Chapter Three) against the standard account of Kierkegaardian ethics and the (in)famous “teleological suspension of the ethical,” shifting the focus of Kierkegaard’s ethics away from *Fear and Trembling* and on to *Works of Love* where it should be. “The point of [*Fear and Trembling*],” Evans helpfully reminds us, “is not to help us get clearer about ethics, but to help us get clearer about faith” (p. 75). The main point of *Fear and Trembling* and its suspension of the ethical is to call into question the identification of faith, which is about “the absolute,” with ethics, which is closely identified with Hegel’s *sittlichkeit*—the ethical duties people have by virtue of their concrete social relations (pp. 69, 83). For a positive account of ethical life one must look instead to *Works of Love*, which is written later under Kierkegaard’s own name, as opposed to the pseudonymous *Fear and Trembling*, as it gives specific content to the formal accounts of the ethical given in the earlier works (p. 111).

Evans has made a provocative and powerful contribution to meta-ethics by showing how Kierkegaard’s thought may help us bring ethical approaches that understand moral obligations in terms of duty together with virtue approaches, united under a divine command theory. Once again, however, Evans has creatively deployed the concepts involved. In the section in which he argues that Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous Climacus is a deontologist, Evans also tells us that what he means by this is that Climacus’ ethics focuses on duty rather than simply achieving good consequences (p. 99). Evans further clarifies that his emphasis on deontology is not meant to focus on actions rather than the achievement of character in moral assessment (p. 99n). But isn’t this precisely the point of difference between virtue and traditional deontological theories of moral obligation? It is not, after all, as if Aristotle and especially Aquinas would be surprised by the suggestion that moral obligations could be packaged in the form of commands. What is at issue for Kant and his ilk is precisely the orientation of duty towards
the contingent imperatives of human flourishing as opposed to the intrinsic nature of actions. This comes even clearer into view when one brings divine commands into play, as the command of God immediately implies that actions are, in fact, not intrinsically good—a point which generates the Euthyphro dilemma in the first place. From an overtly Christian perspective, such as Evans’s Kierkegaardian one, the motivation to understand moral obligations in fundamentally deontological terms is lost. As Evans has developed Kierkegaard’s position, God gives us commands (which really amount to just one) so that we love God, as opposed to merely obey, and thereby fulfill our telos as individuals created by God. This is precisely how Evans sidesteps traditional objections to divine command theory, but this is essentially a version of Aquinas’ answer as well. Subsequently, I doubt whether Evans will change the mind of anyone who comes to the book staunchly committed to a virtue approach to moral norms, but they may find new and creative ways to articulate and defend their position.

Conclusion

In both books Evans is a careful and appreciative, but at times critical, interpreter of Kierkegaard, who capably brings Kierkegaard’s thought to bear on contemporary issues in philosophy. Evans remains conscious that he is offering us a particular reading of Kierkegaard and that no reading of Kierkegaard—including his—is incontestable. The result is a Kierkegaard whose views cannot be ignored by analytic philosophers interested in contemporary questions in philosophy of religion, ethics and meta-ethics.


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All essays within this anthology appear for the very first time, save section one of Alvin Plantinga’s “Materialism and Christian Belief.” Dean Zimmerman’s introduction provides a succinct and insightful discussion of theology and its relationship to analytic philosophy (particularly analytic metaphysics). He explains how analytic philosophy is no longer the enemy of theology, and then just before summarizing each chapter, remarks that the spirit of the volume is very much in line with analytic philosophy that is the friend of theology.

Idealism

The more substantive portion of the volume starts with a rather interesting section on Idealism. In “Idealism Vindicated,” Robert Adams explains that one of the main reasons why Idealism is currently rejected by many