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## Book Review: Kierkegaard: An Introduction

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be challenged most, for they will need to become “kerygma-oriented,” which is to be reoriented under the divinely appointed lordship of Christ. As such, there is no place for “lone-ranger philosophers who choose their questions apart from the philosophical needs of the community of God’s forgiven and redeemed people,” nor for “an exclusive or competitive ‘smarter-than-thou’ spirit,” for they will be “united in a common Good News ministry of unselfish redemptive love” (232). This is truly philosophy revamped!

Inherent within the general argument of the book is the point that human beings have a grave predicament: destructive selfishness and impending death. The only solution is reception of divine aid—the power of perfect love—and Moser’s concluding chapter argues that this aid and power is not flaunted to those who will use it for harmful or disparaging purposes. It is received only as one is freely willing to allow cognitive and spiritual transformation of oneself toward divine goodness and love. In so doing, there is the unmatched benefit of a “grounded hope” in defeating selfishness and entering into eternal fellowship with the One who offers perfect love, both now and beyond the grave.

This is an impressive, indeed momentous work—one already receiving wide attention in journals, classroom discussions, and the blogosphere. It is a much-needed clarion call to a renovation of our understanding of evidence for God, and I am confident that it will in many respects reorient epistemological discussions regarding the possibility of knowledge of divine reality.

*Kierkegaard: An Introduction*, by C. Stephen Evans. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Pp. 195. \$27.99;

*Kierkegaard*, by M. Jamie Ferreira. Blackwell Great Minds. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009. Pp. 196. \$29.95.

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What makes a good introduction? Two works by noted Kierkegaard scholars take very different approaches towards this endeavor. Evans’s *Kierkegaard: An Introduction* is structured thematically. Themes such as selfhood and the stages of existence delimit the contours of Kierkegaard’s overall project. Evans presents Kierkegaard as a philosopher of selfhood, one who seeks to move a reader from an inauthentic to an authentic existence grounded in a reasonable faith as the basis for selfhood. Ferreira introduces Kierkegaard by examining the texts of the authorship chronologically, with her introduction intended to aid a reader reading Kierkegaard. She utilizes both the pseudonymous texts and the upbuilding or religious discourses side by side to lead a reader through the unfolding of Kierkegaard’s

thought. As introductions, then, the texts provide different avenues to explore this difficult thinker, while at the same time highlighting various assumptions about the nature of an introduction. Whereas Evans's intention is to help a reader see the broad outlines of Kierkegaard's philosophical thought, Ferreira creates a work designed to be read alongside the Kierkegaardian texts.

Evans begins his work with a brief sketch of the life of Kierkegaard and an overview of Kierkegaard's works. This chapter addresses two difficulties with reading Kierkegaard. The first views Kierkegaard as merely a religious thinker, one who can be understood only within the framework of Christianity. Instead, Evans sees Kierkegaard as a philosopher whose primary goal was to portray "the basic structure of human existence as it is lived" (18). This task is a philosophical endeavor and the introduction as a whole proceeds to develop a portrait of Kierkegaard as a philosopher.

The second difficulty deals with Kierkegaard's authorial intention. Unlike a number of Kierkegaard scholars who read Kierkegaard as a precursor to the postmodern view of the inability of language to convey intention, Evans trusts Kierkegaard's claim from *The Point of View for My Work as an Author* that the authorship serves a religious end. He critiques the postmodern approach to Kierkegaard's work as incoherent because the overall arc of Kierkegaard's thought is focused on becoming Christian, an arc which correlates with Kierkegaard's stated intentions. Thus, Evans sees "Kierkegaard's authorship as a whole in light of his declared intentions" (15). Though controversial in Kierkegaard scholarship, Evans's claim is well supported; his introduction provides an effective basis for a beginning reader to assess the adequacy of this view.

Having dealt with these difficulties, Evans moves to the themes of pseudonymity and indirect communication. This movement allows him to establish the central fulcrum of Kierkegaard's thought: the idea of authentic selfhood. He also details Kierkegaard's fundamental assumption that authentic and true selfhood is impossible, but is nonetheless the endless task for each self.

Evans then shifts to the theme of the stages as the means to focus on selfhood. The book hits its stride once the stages and selfhood become the main focus. It also permits Evans to present the reasonableness of Kierkegaard's project, thereby emphasizing Kierkegaard as philosopher. As such, Evans tackles several difficulties associated with Kierkegaard within philosophical circles. One is MacIntyre's view, from *After Virtue*, that Kierkegaard is a proponent of "radical choice" because he provides no reasonable criterion for what type of self to become. Evans states that MacIntyre's view of reason and choice rests on a faulty assumption that a self must choose to give force to a reason for action, rather than understanding the reason itself as carrying such force. Indeed, Evans argues that within Kierkegaard's presentation of the stages, reasons such as satisfying desires and leading a satisfying life give each account a reasonable criterion.

A further difficulty Evans addresses concerns Kierkegaard's connection between truth and subjectivity, a challenge to classical foundationalism. Evans showcases Kierkegaard's self as existing temporally, thus lacking any atemporal standpoint (as in Spinoza's *sub specie aeternitatis*) for certainty, and as essentially comprised of desires and loves. But Evans argues that Kierkegaard is not an irrationalist, but instead is concerned with the appropriation of truth as an act that each particular subjective self must make, one that must include both the emotions and reason in order for truth to be true. With this grounding, Evans moves through the aesthetic and ethical stages, giving a chapter to each theme, as well as a chapter on both Religiousness A and Christian existence.

The final chapter details Evans's view on Kierkegaard's challenge to the contemporary world. This final chapter, as well as his view of the stages themselves, rests upon Evans's reasonable approach to Kierkegaard. In Evans's view, Kierkegaard's contemporary relevance is through his critique of irrational accounts of faith as well as his attack upon Christianity (or any religion) that becomes too intertwined with social and political power.

Yet, this focus on Kierkegaard as philosopher means Evans largely slights the theological and religious themes within the Kierkegaardian corpus. For example, it is only at the end of his book that Evans addresses the importance of Christ. It also means that he avoids Kierkegaard's later writings because "it would not be appropriate in a book on Kierkegaard as a philosopher to dwell at great length on some of his late writings, since they deal largely with theological themes" (191). This lack of dealing with Kierkegaard as both a philosopher and a theologian, or even of attending to the tensions between philosophy and theology, means that Evans's work misses a fuller understanding of Kierkegaard's thought. Instead, Kierkegaard comes across merely as a provocative philosopher.

Ferreira's work takes a far different form. Rather than working thematically, she develops Kierkegaard's thought by working chronologically through the whole authorship. Her aim is "directly geared at helping readers who want to pick up a given book of Kierkegaard's" (vi). This method is distinctive within the annals of introductions, most of which focus on elucidating themes as in Evans's work. A further distinctive aspect is her examination of the authorship diachronically, for she "addresses the authorship in its distinctive structure, as a kind of double helix in which the pseudonymous works and the upbuilding or religious discourses are examined in light of each other" (vi-vii).

Because Ferreira's focus is on helping a reader pick up a text, little attention is given to the historical Kierkegaard. Instead, the first chapter introduces the challenges of reading him. Here she develops Kierkegaard's self-proclaimed image of himself as poet as a means to help a reader intertwine Kierkegaard's authorship style with the content of his thought. She describes Kierkegaard's authorship as both a "performative provocation" and "provocative performance;" his texts "are designed to build up or encourage, as well as awaken and provoke. In other words, they are

designed to be appropriated by the reader" (2). This upbuilding poetic performance helps a reader move towards a certain type of existence, and it is this image that Ferreira stresses as a key hermeneutical device for a new reader to see in the authorship as a whole.

A further image used by Ferreira is one of concentric circles, specifically regarding authorial intention. Whereas Evans trusts Kierkegaard, Ferreira suggests that there is no possible way of knowing precisely why Kierkegaard wrote. Instead, his authorship must be seen as an act of "transubstantiation," an idea that comes from Kierkegaard's *From the Papers of One Still Living*.

Kierkegaard's experiences have been self-reflectively "transubstantiated" from immediate experience to a conscious awareness within the authorship. In the process, many different ways of interpreting his ideas are opened up, with various possibilities (i.e., religious, philosophical, biographical, and so on) circling outward from the central circle that is his life. For a contemporary reader, these heuristic circles mean that there is no "right" way to understand his thought. His works can be viewed multivalently as in having valid theological, philosophical, literary, and aesthetic perspectives, all of which circle outward from the originating center of Kierkegaard's life. Kierkegaard's thought thus becomes freed for a reader's own appropriation of the "truth" of Kierkegaard.

Ferreira is conscious of the difficulty inherent in any introduction to a thinker. Unlike Evans, she wants to avoid prescribing what Kierkegaard said and instead give the reader the freedom to engage a text on its own merits. In this dance between over and under-specification, she takes the task of writing an introduction quite seriously. It is also within the spirit of Kierkegaard's own stated intention: helping a self appropriate truth.

But Ferreira does recognize the need to provide entry points into Kierkegaard's thought to give a reader a way into this task of appropriation. Consequently, following the introductory chapter, the book begins to encapsulate the works for a specific period, beginning with *Either-Or* and the *First Upbuilding Discourses*, published in the first half of 1843. Each chapter follows this chronological structure, allowing Ferreira to connect the threads between the pseudonymous and upbuilding or religious discourses for a particular time period. Her final substantive chapter, on *Practice in Christianity, Discourses*, and the "Attack," leads the reader to Kierkegaard's final period of the direct attack upon the Danish Church in 1854. In this way, she is able to work through Kierkegaard's entire corpus, a daunting task considering the brevity of her introduction.

The structure of Ferreira's book is helpful for even experienced Kierkegaardians because of the way it sets up the exploration of his texts. For instance, though *Either-Or* is largely devoid of traditional Christian themes, paring it with the *Upbuilding Discourses* (published only three months later) provides an interesting link between the aesthetic and ethical stages and the highest good being the gift of faith. A number of questions arise as a result: Should these differing types of works be read together as the

means to think about the Christian faith as the deeper foundation for A and Judge William? Might the despair of the aesthetic stage be ended only by the gift of faith as described in *Upbuilding*? She does not hint at such possibilities, but lets readers come to their own conclusions.

Yet, it is partially because of this chronological focus that at times her analysis suffers from a lack of depth. This is especially true with her development of the upbuilding discourses, which do not have the vitality or analytical clarity of her development of the pseudonymous texts. Another shortcoming is the fact that reading Kierkegaard can be a daunting task, what with his use of terms such as *incommensurability*, *qualitative*, *necessity*, and *passion*. By merely working through the texts, she often does not provide the necessary definitions that would provide a reader the conceptual tools to best enter into the text. Maybe a short chapter on key themes as a part of the introduction would have alleviated this difficulty.

These two works offer different ideas about the function of an introduction. Evans's details the philosophical themes of Kierkegaard's thought, whereas Ferreira helps a reader work through the authorship. Though each has limitations, both texts can provide a means to begin to access this important thinker.

*Panentheism: The Other God of the Philosophers: From Plato to the Present*, by John. W. Cooper. InterVarsity Press, 2007. Pp. 368. \$28.00 (paper).

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Cooper has produced a lucid, fascinating and highly readable book; and it reads like a heresy hunt. Heterodox "panentheists" are lurking in large numbers among the thickets of two millennia of Christian thought, some of them among the most admired and celebrated thinkers of the Christian tradition. Cooper is on the scent of these heretics and tracks them down relentlessly. Indeed, he can ferret out a panentheist in manifold and diverse quarters: from the brooding mystical speculations of Russian orthodox thinkers, the austere and rigorous teutonic theologies of the twentieth century to the colourful American narratives of liberation and ecological post-colonial deities. Cooper also provides very useful summaries of neglected and influential thinkers such as Lotze and Dorner.

Cooper rightly points out that Platonism is a source of much in Orthodoxy and heterodoxy within the Christian tradition. Anselm or Aquinas are obviously drawing upon Platonic tenets. Cooper is also quite correct to avoid the all too common confusion between pantheism of the broadly Spinozistic-Stoic kind and the insistence upon transcendence with Neoplatonism proper. He quite rightly corrects influential works that confuse pantheism with panentheism (130). Cooper is also quite candid about "classical" theism's deep debt to Platonism, and the paradoxical proximity