

SOREN KIERKEGAARD

NEWSLETTER NO. 11

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NEWS

The International Kierkegaard Commentary Two Ages, ed. Robert Perkins, has recently been published by Mercer University Press. It will be reviewed in a forthcoming edition of this newsletter.

The Program for the Kierkegaard Consultation Group, which will meet during the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Chicago, December 8 - 11, is as follows:

- I. Prof. Niels Thulstrup, University of Copenhagen, will read a paper on Kierkegaard's concepts of the absurd, paradox and nonsense.
- II. Prof. David Gouwens, Brite Divinity School, will read a paper on "Kierkegaard's Understanding of Doctrine" (abstract included in Newsletter #10).
- III. Reviews of Recent Work on Kierkegaard's Climacus Writings:
 1. Prof. Abraham Khan, University of Toronto, will review Steven Evans' Kierkegaard's Fragments and Postscript.
 2. Prof. John Donnelly, University of San Diego, will review Louis Pojman's The Logic of Subjectivity.
 3. Prof. Robert Perkins, Stetson University, will discuss recent works on the Climacus writings.
An abstract of Prof. Khan's review is included in the section on abstracts in this edition of the Newsletter.
Prof. Sylvia Walsh will chair this session.

Prof. Khan has sent in the following announcement regarding the Kierkegaard Consultation Group within the American Academy of Religion:

The Kierkegaard consultation unit is in its final year and must petition AAR to form another program unit if it wishes to continue to meet as part of the AAR. The quality of participation and high attendance at last year's meeting indicate a strong interest in having a program unit. One of the criteria for establishing a program unit is evidence of sufficient interest in membership. Hence, we are asking all those interested in being a part of a continuing Kierkegaard study group to complete the following form and sent it to Prof. Abraham Khan before December 1, 1984.

Name:

Department & Institution:

Mailing address:

Research interest in Kierkegaard Studies:

Suggestions for focussing programs (areas/topics):

I am interested in having a Kierkegaard program unit (seminar or group) continue at the American Academy of Religion annual meeting and give permission to have my signature or name and institution be appended to a petition to the Program Committee of AAR.

Signature_____

The Kierkegaard Society will hold its annual meeting at the Eastern Division meeting of the American Philosophical Association at the Hilton Hotel in New York, December 27-30. Dean John Elrod of Washington and Lee University is the Coordinator and will chair the session. The program is as follows:

- I. Prof. John Donnelly and Prof. H. E. Baber of the University of San Diego "Self-Knowledge and the Mirror of the Word"
Commentator: Prof. Ronald Hall, Francis Marion College
- II. Prof. Steven Evans, St. Olaf College "Kierkegaard's View of Humor"
Commentator: Prof. Robert C. Roberts, Wheaton College
(abstracts of these papers are included in this edition of the Newsletter)

Dennis Rohatyn, University of San Diego, has produced three audio video tapes on Kierkegaard which are available through Palomer College (Video Tape Bank, 1140 W. Mission, San Marcos, CA 92069). Prof. Rohatyn has sent us the following description of the tapes.

The Relevance of Kierkegaard

Prepared by Dennis Rohatyn and assisted by Gina Fiore, Mark Ryland and Paul Guay.
General Description: I engage in dialogue with three students concerning Kierkegaard's life and work, his influence on subsequent thought and contemporary impact.

We alternate between Socratic discussion and explication of key texts and ideas. We try to present the material in such a way as to interest the specialist while remaining completely accessible to those with no prior background in the subject. The conversations are each approximately one hour long. The first tape is an introduction to Kierkegaard's thought. The second tape deals with the Aesthetic Life as presented in Either/Or, and the third tape deals with the Ethical and Religious stages as they

unfold in the second volume of Either/Or.

We welcome the submission of papers, book reviews and news related to Kierkegaard studies. Send all items to Prof. Louis P. Pojman, Kierkegaard Newsletter, Department of Philosophy and Religions, University of Mississippi, University, MS 38677. The next edition is planned for April, 1985. All material must be in by March 20.

ABSTRACTS

A Review of Steven Evans' Kierkegaard's Fragments and Postscript, by Abraham Khan to be given at the Kierkegaard Consultation Group during the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Chicago, December 8 - 11.

This book is both a conceptual study and an exposition of some central ideas ascribed to Kierkegaard's principal pseudonym, Johannes Climacus. Its discussion is understandably limited to the two works in the authorship, Philosophical Fragments and Concluding Unscientific Postscript. Its primary purpose is to clarify a number of key concepts that are basic to these works and, significant philosophical and religious issues. Hardly a survey or a summary, it focuses on ideas and arguments, clarifying, examining, and critically reflecting on them. This it does by discussing concepts centered around paired key categories that are basic to the two works and which are introduced in a logical order. Although it does not attempt to follow the order of the works the book is, in one sense, a companion volume to them and, in another sense, an independent conceptual study of a number of key issues that are of interest to philosophers, theologians, psychologists, and others concerned with what it means to be genuinely human.

Its thirteen clearly written chapters provide an analysis and presentation of human existence according to Climacus' philosophy. The first three are preparatory, setting the study within its proper context, and cautioning about not mistaking the pseudonym's position for Kierkegaard's own position. More specifically, one chapter deals with reading Kierkegaard's pseudonymous writings, the other with reading Climacus, and the third with Climacus' review of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous literature in light of what is said about existence and the existence spheres. Each of the next nine chapters discusses one of the following sets of concepts: existence and passion; existence and the ethical; subjectivity and communication; truth and subjectivity; God and eternal happiness; resignation, suffering, and guilt; irony and humor; reason and paradox; and faith and history. The final chapter reflects critically on objectivity and subjectivity in human existence, posing questions intended to stimulate its reader to further reflection and to suggest that Climacus's philosophy suppresses what is true in the Hegelian perspective, that is, that subjectivity demands outward expression.

A careful, appreciative, and emphathetic reader of Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms, its author, Evans, is not afraid to disagree at the end. Some of his disagreements and judgments, however, are unsettling almost to the point of provoking objections from readers familiar with the turf. To mention three of them briefly, one bears on the conception of the relation between the absolute and the relative. He holds that Climacus sees the "relation only in negative terms; one must resign the relative for the sake of the absolute." (p. 287). This judgment simply does not make sense when we consider that he has already noted (pp. 165) that for Climacus the conflict between the absolute and relative is a hypothetical one and that the possibility of conflict is inherent in the notion of being absolutely related to the absolute. Evans would like to see a position in which the absolute commitment expresses itself in renewed moral striving. Nothing that Climacus has said on the matter, however, rules out such a position. In fact, a careful reading would show that Climacus is set against seeing the absolute commitment to the absolute as an invitation to mediocrity in the

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relativities of life (CUP, pp. 363ff). What makes Evans judgment somewhat strange, if not ambiguous, is that it tends to falsify his understanding of the notion of absolute commitment to the absolute, and hence, his accurate interpretation of Climacus.

Equally strange and unsettling, the second is on the relation between faith and historical evidence. Evans find Climacus' position, one which Thulstrup reiterates, to be misleading. It suggests that there need not be a necessary connection between the two. He proposes instead that a particular kind of historical account is required to make faith a viable possibility and that there are distinguishing characteristics that point to the truth of divinity. But his position presupposes that the crowd adjudicates whether Jesus is God, that empirical evidence can settle the claim as to who is really divine. Climacus doesn't deny that someone other than Jesus might be God, but Evans wants to. The price for maintaining his denial is commitment to objectivity as a factor in determining faith. And this, as Evans knows very well does not square with a faithful reading of either Climacus or Kierkegaard. A faithful reading shows that historical evidence is insufficient to produce certainty about divinity and that, at bottom, faith is determined by how a person views and responds to whatever evidence is available.

Evans treatment of the incarnation as a paradox is also unsettling. He wants to claim that it cannot be known to be nonsense, to be a logical contradiction, without first clearly understanding the concepts of eternity and temporality. But surely it is not necessary for everything to be known about two concepts in order to determine that they are contradictory. Of course Climacus does treat the paradox as an existential one only. But if the paradox were not logically contradictory would it still be a paradox? Would it still be a stumbling block to reason? Would it still be an asset to Christianity? The following two questions express the uneasiness which Evans' position engenders. How much of a clear understanding of two concepts are required for one to know that the two are logically contradictory? Is it necessary to free the incarnation from logical contradiction so as to preserve its existential significance? Evans' position seems to suggest that it would be embarrassing for Christians to believe in a unique piece of nonsense that has universal human significance for existence.

To move from unsettling matters to a shortcoming in the study, I mention that it overlooks the fact that Climacus conceived the problem about human existence as having to do essentially with forgetfulness. In his view the problem arose because his contemporaries had forgotten what it means to exist. Accordingly, he took it as his task not to introduce anything new about Christianity, but to remind his readers of what they already know. Evans treatment pays no attention either to the phenomenon of forgetting which Climacus exposes and describes in detail, or to the art of reminding. Surely, that art is not just a part of the strategy of the Postscript but is also integral to Climacus' philosophy. In fact, by allotting treatment to both the phenomenon and the art Evans would have succeeded in bringing Kierkegaard closer to contemporary philosophy and making him more relevant for today. For a study that purports to be conceptual and to be on Climacus' philosophy, this particular oversight is a serious one.

Nevertheless, the book has its merits. It is a solid piece of study and an aid to entering a small but significant portion of the authorship. The reader who is interested in seeing the relevance of Kierkegaard's thought for contemporary debates on certain philosophical and religious issues, who wants a substantial discussion of central themes and ideas in the authorship, or who is less familiar with the different parts and thrust of Kierkegaard's writings will find the volume quite useful. The serious scholar will find that it offers a fresh approach to the study of Kierkegaard's thought and that it provides an opportunity to anticipate familiar landmarks

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and even to become reacquainted with some of them from a different perspective. In short, the book deserves attention. It's a contribution to be appreciated.

Papers to be delivered at the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association in New York (Dec. 27-30):

Steven Evans "Kierkegaard's Theory of Humor"

Many people view humor and a serious religious life as antithetical. This paper attempts to elucidate Kierkegaard's view of humor and thereby to explain his claim that humor is essentially linked to a religious life, as well as human existence generally.

John Donnelly and H. E. Baber "Self-Knowledge and the Mirror of the Word"

In his Journal and Papers #3902, Kierkegaard writes: "Paganism required: know yourself. Christianity declares: ...know yourself - and look at yourself in the mirror of the Word in order to know yourself properly. No true self-knowledge without God-knowledge."

Our paper attempts an interpretation of Kierkegaard's Sickness Unto Death. Therein, Kierkegaard distinguished three senses of despair, and ultimately appears to claim that any equilibrium in the self comes from God. The task of forging a self requires the voluntary synthesis of possibility and necessity, facticity and infinitude, leading to the harmonisation of the temporal and the eternal. All persons have at least an inchoate self (whether given, assumed, or self-generated); but the task before us is to forge a self, to develop a distinctly ethico-religious personality. Yet Kierkegaard's true self is no Leibnizian monad enclosed in splendid isolation, for the Kierkegaardian individual stands in a "redoubling" relationship to God and neighbor. We also attempt to elucidate the logic of community from that of the numerical, the crowd.

Pace Hegel, Kierkegaard contends that there cannot be any natural harmony or nomological fusion of selfhood. The freely constituted self constantly holds fast, however tenuously, the synthesis of the temporal and the eternal. If that voluntary control falters, despair enters, either psychologically as the "disrelationship in a relation which relates itself to itself," or ethico-religiously as sin. Despair is a rupture in the dialectical constitution of the self, leading either to our perdition or our sanctification.

Kierkegaard describes the self as "a relation which relates itself to its own self." This rather obscure description, we suggest, is motivated by Kierkegaard's assumptions about the nature of personal identity and consciousness, coupled with his analysis of despair.

Kierkegaard's distinction between unconscious and conscious despair requires him to make a corresponding distinction between simple and reflective self-consciousness. Kierkegaard holds also that all consciousness is strictly speaking, self-consciousness: what we should ordinarily understand as consciousness of an object or state is, on his account, properly understood as the self's consciousness of itself as standing in a relation to that object or being in that state. This account of consciousness leads him, improperly we believe, to understand reflective self-consciousness as consciousness' consciousness of itself; thus consciousness is what he calls a "positive" relation - a relation which relates itself to its own self.

If this account of consciousness were correct, and given Kierkegaard's further assump-

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tion that consciousness is criterial for personal identity, then it would follow that the relation of personal identity inherits the positive character of the consciousness relation and thence that the self is a relation which relates itself to its own self.

It is not enough to be who I think I am (despite Kierkegaard's encomium on subjectivity) or who I choose to be (despite his panegyric on freedom). Rather, a person must strive to be who he should be. In the pursuit of self-knowledge, "the task is to relate objectively to one's own subjectivity." (Journals and Papers, #4571). The upshot of Kierkegaard's analysis is that no person who is not religious, more specifically Christian, can form or be a true self. The secular, virtuous person, is, for Kierkegaard, splendidly vicious.

We also consider the view of Elmer Klemke that Kierkegaard is a harbinger of so-called Wittgensteinian fideism, wherein the various stages of life provide their own criteria of intelligibility, so that the propositional element in a person's interestedness is diminished, as the personal commitment yields its own standards. We argue that Kierkegaard's apparent radical fideism destroys his otherwise often brilliant psychological forays into the nature of selfhood. That is, Kierkegaard holds (1) the more conception of God the more self, and vice-versa. But (2) any epistemic-metaphysical attempt to conceive of God is impossible, given Kierkegaard's asseveration that rational belief in God is absurd. However, given (1) and (2), any similiar attempt to conceive of the self is also impossible. So that the quest for self-knowledge is a failure along with the impossibility of a natural theology.

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Evans, C. Stephen, Kierkegaard's "Fragments" and "Postscript:" The Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1983), xiv and 304pp.

Evan's book is one of the members of a very small class of books that could be called "the best in English," a class, perhaps, with only four or five members. Two features help to account for the structural excellence of the book.

One of the book's better features is the taking up of themes in what might appear to be a repetitious fashion. For instance, the concept of "existence spheres" is discussed in the second chapter in a "rough and ready" fashion. Later this theme is taken up in detail in numerous places throughout the manuscript and in various conceptual contexts. The development is well done and this and other concepts are refined thoroughly in the process. The advantage of this procedure is that the reader will not be choked at the first mention; he is given enough to prepare him for the next occasion the concept is discussed. This is an artfully wrought authorial achievement.

Another feature that elicits excitement is that the manuscript is a conceptual study. I usually approach Kierkegaard through Hegel and the history of philosophy. Evans has attempted an analysis of Kierkegaard's categories, and he has admirably succeeded in unpacking some of Kierkegaard's most prolix concepts. Taught by Paul Holmer at Yale and inspired by the later Wittgenstein, here is a philosopher who can write a balanced analysis, clear and not over-refined. This methodological program is one of the chief merits of the book. However, one will still find many illuminating critical insights into Kierkegaard's relation both to the history of philosophy and to subsequent philosophic and theological controversies.

Philosophically every chapter is a contribution to the field. One cannot, however,

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summarize them all here. Of particular interest is the manner in which Evans attempts to untangle the relation of Kierkegaard to the pseudonyms through the use of the Journals. Also, the essay on the ethical in chapter five is as good as anything on the subject positioning itself, as it does, toward Marxism, Utilitarianism and the tradition of "soul-making." However, Evans is no mere disciple; he would also gladly be Kierkegaard's teacher as the criticism shows (p. 86 ff).

The discussion of communication (chapter six) takes up a number of thorny issues not as well discussed elsewhere: God as communicator, the likenesses and differences between Socratic and Christian maieutic and the pseudoproblem of thinking objectively about subjectivity.

The seventh chapter is an excellent treatment of Kierkegaard's view of truth, though I think more historical grounding could have improved it considerably. Particularly, a strong polemic could have been raised against some of the dogmas of modernity and against numerous misunderstandings of Kierkegaard's thought by his commentators.

The treatment of immanent religion (chapters eight and nine) constitutes perhaps the major exposition in the secondary literature. Especially interesting is the distinction between Anfaegtelse and Fristelse (pp. 173-76) which Evans treats as bearing on the subject of suffering. I have not read anything so succinct on the subject.

The discussion of irony and humor, again, is excellent. The issue whether irony and humor are existence spheres which can be universalized bothers many who see an elitism pervading Kierkegaard's thought. Evans, again, stills such fears or criticism. Evans has worried deeply about humor and its place in Kierkegaard's thought, a place that was perhaps not clear to Kierkegaard himself. Evans has considered all the texts and made the best case possible for the coherence of Kierkegaard's thought. I am not entirely convinced, but Evans' effort was heroic. Evans was more worried about coherence and consistency than Kierkegaard was. This is the first point where it is possible that Evans has belabored the issue.

The isomorphism of the content of the Christian gospel and its appropriation is argued in a way no other secondary author has ever done. This throws considerable light on the old canards of "irrationalism," subjectivism and the paradox, and will be hotly debated, not because any argument can hold out against Evans, but because so many other philosophers have given different views of the paradox. The paradox, being that which thought cannot think, emerges as anything but the irrational. This discussion is a major contribution to the book.

The chapter on the paradox and history is excellent and necessary for the completeness of the volume. Most of these concepts have previously been very well worked. However, Evans' effort is conceptual not comparative or historical and his exposition has a certain freshness, for he works his views against some current discussions of inerrancy among Protestant fundamentalists today. An even more interesting exercise would have been to have rubbed the Kierkegaardian fling against the Bultmannian steel.

Is not a reviewer supposed to say something against a book? Perhaps so, but affectation must be avoided. Still, a few negative criticisms seem to be in order. First, Evans said all too little about the passions. The concept of despair could have been developed in more illuminating detail (p. 36 f) and at almost every point the decisive category of choice is undeveloped, a concept Judge William denied to the aesthetic, and a concept introduced by the Judge which influences every subsequent category. He does take up the concept within "the leap (p. 274 f)." There is little discussion of how the Fragments and the Postscript differ from each other, and that would be my major criticism, the first being Christocentric and the latter being anthropocentric.

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Here a lot needed to be said about those poles of Kierkegaard's thought as well as the significance this distinction has on the internal processes of these two works.

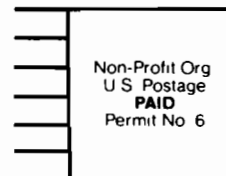
Much more of a like sort could be said, but one must stick to the book in front of one, not a book that should be written, and I would not want to denigrate an excellent, perhaps even great book about Kierkegaard.

Robert L. Perkins
Stetson University

The Kierkegaard Newsletter appears twice a year (in October and April). Readers are invited to submit news, reviews of books and articles to the editor. The Newsletter has a subscription list of 400 names.



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