Religious Studies **44**, 485–504 © 2008 Cambridge University Press
Printed in the United Kingdom

Book reviews

Religious Studies **44** (2008) doi:10.1017/S0034412508009682

Edward F. Mooney *On Søren Kierkegaard: Dialogue, Polemics, Lost Intimacy, and Time*. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007). Pp. xi + 266. £56.99 (Hbk); £18.99 (Pbk). ISBN 0754658201 (Hbk); 0754658228 (Pbk).

The anti-academic, even anti-intellectual tone of Kierkegaard's authorship raises the question of how one is to write, as an academic, about his philosophy of existence; it raises, in fact, the question of the scope and limits of philosophy. In the case of Edward Mooney's latest book, the reader's response to these questions may well determine her response to *On Søren Kierkegaard: Dialogue, Polemics, Lost Intimacy and Time*, which offers neither fresh scholarly research, nor an account of Kierkegaard's significance within the history of philosophy, nor critical analysis of his claims. Mooney also sidesteps the theological issues arising from Kierkegaard's uncompromising elucidation of the human condition, and of the demands of a properly Christian life. Instead, he presents – in a distinctively 'West Coast' literary style influenced, no doubt, by Stanley Cavell's writing – an extended meditation on Kierkegaard that offers multiple interpretations of key themes and texts, and engages in generous dialogue with other contemporary scholars. Mooney is especially sensitive to the existential import of Kierkegaard's work, and to the various literary strategies associated with this; perhaps this is the reason for his eschewal of more orthodox forms of academic commentary and debate, and also for his own lyrical prose style.

In the first chapter Mooney announces that 'looking at texts becomes musing on the self or soul not only of … Kierkegaard, or of a soul he lays bare in writing. It becomes musing on the self or soul of an intimate acquaintance. I muse the labyrinths of my soul' (6). Throughout the book this 'musing' nevertheless remains generalized, shrinking as much from personal confession as from conventional critical analysis. Mooney returns periodically to the tension between academic and existential approaches to Kierkegaard, and to his insistence on the priority of the latter:

> Redemptive or saving knowledge is *self-knowledge*, what we find in ourselves to pledge, to own, to *testify* to, to claim as *orientation*: it's tactile knowledge woven into the very fabric of acting, living, undergoing. It's knowledge exemplified *there in that life*, not in

> propositions. Academic festivals that celebrate cognitive advance have their place, but our deepest need is contact, wondrous contact, through particular encounters – *as* particular persons, *with* particular words and things, *with* particular persons – one by one (226).

This might accurately summarize a certain aspect of Kierkegaard's thought, but the reader who finds such ideas easily accessible in the primary texts may well expect something more from a commentator: interpretation, for sure, but also scholarly analysis and criticism.

On Søren Kierkegaard is divided into three parts, and over half of its thirteen chapters are versions, more or less revised, of essays and articles published over the last ten years. The first part, however – 'Kierkegaard: a Socrates in Christendom' – consists of four chapters of newly written material. The first of these chapters ends by stating that the aim of part 1 is 'to evoke the ambiance Kierkegaard inhabits and the vista he enjoys and suffers' (19), whilst parts 2 and 3 attempt to balance this broad evocation with more detailed discussions of Kierkegaard's texts. Mooney's view that the comparison with Socrates affords an instructive starting point for grasping the significance of Kierkegaard's authorship as a whole is incontestable, for the parallels between the two thinkers are striking. For Socrates, the greatest obstacle to his Athenian contemporaries' intellectual and moral enlightenment was their presumption to be already enlightened, already in possession of the truth, and therefore it was this presumption that his ironic questioning sought to unsettle. For Kierkegaard, his Danish contemporaries' presumption to be Christians, to have faith, constituted the greatest obstacle to their living genuinely Christian lives, and his strategies of 'indirect communication' aim to challenge such presumptions. Whilst Socrates provoked his interlocutors into seeking wisdom, Kierkegaard provokes his readers into becoming Christians. In addition to articulating, in his own way, this basic insight, Mooney offers a compelling argument for the importance of such a Socratic-Kierkegaardian figure: Christendom, he suggests, will always be in need of a severe critic, a persistent questioner.

For the most part Mooney's discussion of the connections between Kierkegaard and Socrates is uncontroversial, but a noteworthy exception is his resistance to the commonly held view that Kierkegaard ranks Christianity above Socratic philosophy. Chapter 2 offers an interesting discussion of this issue, concluding with the claim that 'Socrates needs Christian charity and love of neighbour, and Christ needs Socratic interrogation and vision. Each supports cognitive and interpersonal humility. It might well seem *unChristian* for a Christian to place herself in advance of a pagan – of *any* stature, let alone the stature of a Socrates' (31). This chapter – perhaps the strongest in the book – also considers the crucial question of whether Kierkegaardian Christianity is, in fact, possible. Shortly before his death, Kierkegaard wrote in *The Moment* of his 'Socratic task of revising the definition of what it means to be a Christian',

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412508009682 Published online by Cambridge University Press

indicating that his refusal to call himself – or anyone else – a Christian was motivated by a concern to 'keep the ideal free'. Reflecting at length on these words, Mooney suggests that, for Kierkegaard, 'the Christian ideal is just too high for mere mortals to attain' (35). This is an important (and, I think, correct) interpretative decision, but its philosophical implications could be considered further: Vanessa Rumble, for example, has argued that Kierkegaard's treatment of impossible ideals – specifically, the ideal of indiscriminate 'neighbour love' – anticipates Jacques Derrida's insistence on the impossibility of ideals such as justice, forgiveness, hospitality, and so on. And from a theological perspective, it seems strange not to consider the significance of sin with respect to the question of whether the Christian ideal can be realized.

Part 2, entitled 'Love, ethics, and tremors in time', begins with a discussion of alternative hermeneutic strategies: the 'charitable' and the 'suspicious'. In fact, this distinction can be traced to Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*, where it is subjected to a certain deconstructive pressure. Mooney presents a hostile critique of Joakim Garff's controversial biography of Kierkegaard, which is attacked for employing the tools of psychoanalytic theory in the service of a hermeneutic of suspicion; Mooney advocates and outlines a more charitable principle of interpretation. This critical exercise is philosophically interesting – as opposed to merely opinionated – insofar as it applies to the preceding reflections on Kierkegaard's 'Socratic task', and also, more generally, insofar as it brings us back to the question of what philosophy is, or might be. Does philosophy always involve some degree of suspicion, or can it be wholly charitable? Can we distinguish between charitable and uncharitable suspicion? It certainly seems reasonable to read charitably in order to reach the best possible understanding of a philosophical text, at least before adopting a more suspicious stance in order to test its claims rigorously.

The next, sixth chapter of the book offers a short reflection on the motif of 'the glance' or 'the glance of an eye' (*Oieblikket*) that takes in *Repetition*, *The Concept of Anxiety*, *Stages on Life's Way*, and a scene from the film *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Mooney's interpretation of the Kierkegaardian glance is philosophically promising, hinting at parallels with Hegel, Heidegger, and Proust on time and selfhood – but what is presented as the 'bare beginning of an answer to our double question: how ''the glance'' starts history and how it fits in with repetition' is bare indeed. It is also disappointingly obscure, in contrast to the clarity of most of Mooney's prose:

> Both the glance and repetition invade clock and suffered time as a light arising from the eternal that is equal to our need. However illusory this repair may seem from an 'objective' or 'natural' standpoint, it is definitive of Kierkegaardian faith that such a repair is a possibility – for now but dimly glimpsed, but glimpsed nonetheless. Glimpsed, we might say, in a glance that starts and grounds a life… . As meaning intersects the present, the glance recedes toward origins, and proceeds to gather in the future from its uncanny open possibilities. (114–115)

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This evidently gestures towards Heidegger's account of ecstatic temporality, but the tantalising allusion is left undeveloped.

The remaining chapters of part 2 focus on Kierkegaard's three pseudonymous texts of 1843: *Either/Or*, *Fear and Trembling*, and *Repetition*. Mooney manages to find a new angle on the much-discussed *Fear and Trembling*, which he imaginatively reads – drawing on George Pattison's monograph, *Poor Paris!* – as a literary parody of the 'spectacular diversions' of Tivoli, the amusement park that opened in Copenhagen in the year *Fear and Trembling* was published. This produces an interesting reading of the text, but does little to illuminate the philosophical issues at the heart of Kierkegaard's provocative interpretation of the story of Abraham and Isaac. The same general criticism applies, in fact, to Mooney's close readings of other texts. Although one of the strengths of *On Søren Kierkegaard* is its engagement with secondary literature, Mooney does not discuss Jon Stewart's recent translations of texts by Danish Hegelians such as Martensen and Heiberg, and by their critics, which provide an indispensable background to Kierkegaard's thought, and particularly to his earlier pseudonymous works. This means that Mooney misses an opportunity to flesh out his perceptive account of these works as exercises in 'indirect communication' with details of the philosophical and theological issues at stake in Kierkegaard's polemical response to his Danish contemporaries.

Three out of the four chapters that make up part 3 focus on *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* – or, as Mooney translates the complete title, *An Unsystematic Appendix to Scraps of Philosophy. A Mimic-Pathetic-Dialectic Compilation: An Existential Plea or Intervention*. The first and lengthiest of these chapters uses Cavell's concepts of 'acknowledgement' and 'one's next self' to anchor a discussion of the key *Postscript* themes of subjectivity and appropriation. It is not especially clear what fresh philosophical resources these concepts bring to the familiar themes; indeed, the Cavellian approach seems to leave us with a liberal, humanist, somewhat sanitized version of Kierkegaard's analysis of the spiritual life. The thorny issue of sin – which presents problems that, however inconvenient for the secular commentator, are essential to Kierkegaard's anthropology – is here, if not passed over entirely, reduced to an 'idea of incompleteness' (192). Similarly, there is little consideration of the apparently universal psychological phenomenon of self-deception that both contextualizes and qualifies the famous claim that 'subjectivity is truth', and which for Kierkegaard constitutes a sizeable obstacle to progression to 'one's next and better self'. The chapter ends with a discussion of the 'ethical sublime', another concept borrowed from George Pattison. The following, shorter chapters revisit the theme of indirect communication, and discuss the pseudonym Johannes Climacus's revocation at the end of the *Postscript*.

The thirteenth and final chapter of the book considers Kierkegaard's religious discourses. Instead of commenting on specific texts, Mooney attempts to

articulate – with the help of William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* – the way in which the discourses seek to instil a religious attitude of prayer, a 'space of silence' hospitable to self-reflection. As well as addressing the question of how a discourse can produce silence, the author returns here to the issue of the relationship between academic and spiritual or existential modes of reflection. Noting that Kierkegaard prefaces his religious discourses with an intimate address to the existing individual, whom he calls 'my reader', Mooney asks, 'Can I escape the passing thought that these words are addressed quietly, revealingly, to me? And if I am indeed now privately addressed, how am I to respond? With abstractions, formalities, or scholarly disquisition?', and he reminds us that 'we are full-time human beings even as we're professional academics' (227–228). It is hard to disagree with the latter statement, and the questions Mooney raises are, no doubt, among those that Kierkegaard would have 'his' reader reflect on. But are the alternatives of academic and personal response as opposed as Mooney suggests? And are the religious discourses not – as Heidegger recognized – as philosophically rich as Kierkegaard's pseudonymous, so-called 'aesthetic' texts? Although Mooney does not deny the philosophical significance of the discourses, he does not give this any attention. A more particular question that arises from this closing chapter is how exactly we are to delimit what Mooney, after James, calls 'felt conviction', which 'should be discredited when it slides towards zealotry [and] equally discredited when it slides towards 'mere preference', or 'subjective choice'' (239).

As a whole, *On Søren Kierkegaard* presents a clear and, at times, very eloquent series of reflections on an important aspect of Kierkegaard's authorship. It is accessible enough to be read by undergraduate students – although they would probably gain more from one of Mooney's excellent earlier books, *Selves in Discord and Resolve* (New York NY & London: Routledge, 1996) and *Knights of Faith and Resignation* (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 1991) – and Kierkegaard scholars will naturally be interested in Mooney's perspective as well as in the opportunity to witness his debates with fellow specialists. Other academics, however, may struggle to gain much insight into the philosophical and theological significance of Kierkegaard's thought. One suspects that substantial editing would produce a much better book; its impact would certainly be enhanced if it were at the least less repetitive, a little less wordy, and more of a coherent whole. The book as it stands is perhaps less than the sum of its parts, for each chapter, taken separately, offers valuable insights and also testifies to a sincere and thoughtful engagement with Kierkegaard's work.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412508009682 Published online by Cambridge University Press