Kierkegaard, Eve and Metaphors of Birth
By Alison Assiter
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It has long been thought that there is something inherently problematic about teleology and teleological explanation, when, for example, we make appeal to an object's end or purpose in order to explain or predict what it does: the acorn's end is to become an oak, hence the sprouting; the human being's end is to survive, hence the food and sex; reality's end is reconciliation with God (Hegel), hence the problem of Hegelianism according to many. Hegelianism is going to be significant for *my* purposes as reviewer of this book, and this might suggest that there is nothing inherently problematic with the concept of purpose *per se*, and that Francis Bacon is wrong to suppose that 'Inquiry into final causes is sterile, and, like a virgin consecrated to God, produces nothing'.[1] Such inquiry is doubtless sterile if final causes do not exist, but they do exist in one clear enough sense, although one could respond that *my* purposes are unlike those of a seed, that God's purposes are beyond the pale, and that any supposed purpose in the world is to be explained ultimately in terms of something else, the standard candidate being the efficient causal mechanisms which are the stuff of modern scientific explanation. Ergo, there is no real purpose in the natural world, it is simply something that we project onto inert, meaningless matter.

Philosophers are gradually becoming sceptical about this scepticism about teleology. It presupposes an untenable conception of matter, an equally untenable form of materialism, and a failure to appreciate what there really is. Bring on Spinoza,[2] Hegel, and Schelling rather than Bacon and Descartes, challenge the contemporary fashion for scientistic naturalism, but concede nonetheless that it does not follow from this alternative creed that the movements of a sprouting tree are like those of a purposive human agent, nor that purposive behaviour in general must derive from an external teleological source – as if things in themselves are just machines and there is no real purpose in nature.

[1] *De Augmentis Scientiarum*, Bk III, Ch 5.

[2] Spinoza claims to reject final causes, but to my mind he is best understood as wishing to reject the picture according to which teleology is externally imposed upon a purposeless nature by God, and that nature itself has an external goal.

Alison Assiter's fine monograph is one of several recent attempts in the philosophical literature to challenge contemporary orthodoxy and to revive a picture of nature according to which purposive behaviour belongs to things themselves. Nature thus conceived becomes a 'living system' (161), and it involves a fundamentally ethical dimension (160), for it contains living organisms like ourselves who are 'capable of ethical engagement with one another and with the rest of nature'. (160). It is in the context of describing this dynamic conception of being that Assiter utilizes the model of the birthing process, this process occurring throughout nature when, for example, the seed gives rise to the tree, and, of course, when one human being gives birth to another. Assister is concerned not simply with the processes *within* nature, however, but with nature as a whole, her contention being that the metaphor of birth can be used as a model in terms of which to comprehend this whole. It is here that we see the relevance of Kierkegaard to the scheme of things, for Assiter's Kierkegaard has a similar interest in ontology, holding that 'Being' – Being as a whole included – is to be understood in terms of 'conceptions of birthing – the capacity to give birth as well as a notion of a birthing body' (xiv).

This ontological reading is part of a recent trend in Kierkegaardian scholarship, it lends emphasis to Kierkegaard's German Idealist influence, and it challenges the interpretation according to which he believes that 'reality is, at its core…chaotic' (xv). Reference to 'Being-with-a-capital-B' suggests that we are in deep metaphysical waters, and Assiter makes clear that what is at stake here is a theory about the nature of ultimate reality (xv). She insists that the ontological view in question has some plausibility in its own right (xiv), but that, like all views concerning this level of reality, it has the status of a speculative hypothesis (xv).

Assiter is to be applauded for daring to talk seriously about 'Being-with-a-capital-B'. She poses a challenge to those whose (scientistic) faith forbids such a move, and exposes the shortcomings of 'arguments' which purport to show that reality is, at its deepest core, contingent or chaotic, those of Slavoj Žižek and Quentin Meillassoux being her primary focus. Meillassoux's musings on the relation between thinking and being are also discussed, but they come across as pretty unoriginal, sometimes false, and not a patch on Hegel's brilliant discussion in the Introduction to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. It is worth noting also that when Hegel says that reality is contradictory, he does not mean that it is chaotic. Assiter concedes that Žižek's reading of Hegel is 'unusual' (16f).

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Hegel is relevant to the ontological view Assiter seeks to defend, for her version of this position begins from a Kierkegaard whose work is placed in the context of the German Idealist tradition (29). It will be remembered that the position involves a thesis about being as a whole – namely, that the birthing metaphor can be applied to nature itself as well as the things within nature, and Assiter spells it out with reference to Schelling, Schelling being an important and acknowledged influence upon Kierkegaard. What we have here is Schelling's 'process system', and 'unlike that of Hegel, as he has been read by many, there is an irreducible remainder in nature that 'can never be resolved into reason' (60). The caveat is important, and Assiter notes that Kierkegaard's interpretation relies heavily upon the Danish Hegelians (62).

Either way, we are concerned with the process ontology of one who dedicated his work *Fear and Trembling* to Johann Georg Hamann, Hamann being someone 'for whom God embodies himself in nature and history'. The theistic dimension of Kierkegaard's position is clear, and Assiter is open-minded enough to take it seriously in the process ontology/theology she seeks to defend. We are told that 'nature as a whole creates itself and therefore creates the creative force that gives rise to other dependent beings', and that '[u]nderlying all this, in order to avoid an infinite regress, there must be something that precedes all Being, Schelling's *ungrund*' (117). This *ungrund* has its ground within itself, it is the 'yearning of the one to give birth to itself' (117), and it 'can never be made comprehensible to reason' (118). We are to suppose that reason must have a partial grasp of this process – perhaps by virtue of participating in it – or else the birthing metaphor couldn't get off the ground in the first place, although it remains open that our modelling capacities in this context are generated by something other than reason (Schopenhauer's position).

The picture which emerges involves a dynamic conception of nature and God, God being the '"power" that sets the process in motion' (129) – a 'power' which involves a 'longing to give birth to itself' (141). Assiter describes it as a form of pantheism, albeit one which is 'not necessarily incompatible with conceiving of God as, in a sense, transcending nature' (86). So it is perhaps better described as a form of pan*en*theism (God is nature-involving, but not reducible to nature), although there is a real issue about what the pantheism/panentheism distinction really amounts to, and how either or both of these positions relate to theism. Many Christian theists I know describe themselves as panentheists, and Spinoza's position tends to be presented in an unduly reductive manner. Contrast Paul Tillich:

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> [t]he phrase *deus sive natura*, used by people like Scotus Erigena and Spinoza, does not say that God is identical with nature but that he is identical with the *natura naturans*, the creative nature, the creative ground of all natural objects. In modern naturalism the religious quality of these affirmations has almost disappeard, especially among philosophising scientists who understand nature in terms of materialism and mechanism' (*Systematic Theology*, 1957, vol 2, p.7).

Assiter would second most of this, and it raises the questions of how far she is prepared to go in the direction of God, and whether this move can be defended. Her use of the pantheist label is, I have suggested, inconclusive in resolving the first issue. However, in the context of spelling out Kierkegaard's position, she emphasises the importance of viewing God 'as a capacity or power', adding that 'the rest of nature shares something of the same characteristics' (128). Elsewhere she describes this power in terms of love (139), claiming that it is a process of 'longing to give birth to itself' (141). We are told also that we have a picture according to which God is '"something" that is neither "some thing" nor "no thing"' (159).

Much of this is consonant with Christian theism, for it is central to this framework that God is not a thing. However, it is not ruled out that the notion of substance is applicable in this context, for substance admits of a dynamic interpretation, Spinoza's '*deus sive natura'* being an obvious case in point. The notion of power is ambiguous as it stands, and the temptation is to suppose that a powerful God is equivalent to an omnipotent and coercive controller. Quite the opposite of the God of love, although there is a conception of non-coercive power which is more appropriate in this context. The theologian Sarah Coakley, for example, talks of 'the subtle but enabling presence of a God who neither shouts nor forces, let alone 'obliterates'.[3] We might note also that her position owes much to that of the Neo-Platonist Pseudo-Dionysius, his God being 'yearning on the move, simple, self-moved, self-acting, pre-existent in the Good, flowing out from the Good onto all that is and returning once again to the Good.[4]

The idea is familiar, but can it be defended? Assiter claims that the position has the status of a speculative hypothesis, and one might suppose that this is the only reasonable stance given that we are

[3] 'Kenōsis and Subversion', 35.

[4] *Ibid*., 315. The extract is from Divine *Names*, IV.13–15. The emphasis is Coakley's.

concerned here with the nature of ultimate reality. We might ask, however, whether it is a speculative hypothesis that nature is to be comprehended in teleological terms, and how *this* question relates to the more ultimate issue with which she is likewise concerned. A certain kind of naturalist will say that it has been revealed by modern science that there is no teleology in nature, and no God, of course. It is unclear what kind of evidence would secure either of these conclusions, and unclear in any case that anything within science could legitimate them. To be sure, we can try to justify such rejection on the ground that the real stuff of reality is non-teleological, but this is simply to contradict the claim at issue, and the rejection has been justified on dubious philosophical grounds, namely, grounds which presuppose the truth of reductive materialism.[5] So it is unclear that the question of nature's teleology is a straightforwardly empirical matter, and the question of God raises similar issues. Is this question *more* speculative than the question of nature? In one clear enough sense it is on exactly the same level, namely, the sense at issue when we concede to the likes of Spinoza, Schelling, Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Assiter herself, and reject the framework which forces a dualism between nature and God.

Assiter leaves the reader with a wealth of fascinating questions, some of which I have been unable to discuss – her chapters 'Kierkegaard on Women' and 'Kant, Freedom, and Evil' are cases in point. It is heartening to bear witness to the receding tide of scientistic naturalism, and to the growing philosophical interest in Absolute Idealism. Philosophers are waking up to the fact that this position has nothing to do with losing 'the great outdoors' (to repeat a phrase of Meillassoux), and that the question of God – or Being-with-a-capital-B – is one of *the* philosophical questions.

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[5] These matters and more are discussed in John Hawthorne's and Daniel Nolan's fascinating 'What Would Teleological Causation Be?', in John Hawthorne's *Metaphysical Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 265–284.