

C. Stevens Evans, Kierkegaard: On Faith and the Self **Baylor University Press, Waco, TX, 2006, 385 p**

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This volume is a collection of previously published essays by C. Steven Evans of Baylor University. Evans is a well-known figure in Kierkegaard studies and this thematically organized compilation of a number of his essays on Kierkegaard will no doubt be welcomed by scholars as an important addition to the secondary literature on Kierkegaard's writings.

The most important of the themes that organize and run throughout this collection has to do with Evans' career-long effort to defeat the usual charge that Kierkegaard is some kind of fideist, irrationalist, subjectivist, or anti-realist. Evans' recurring claim is that Kierkegaardian faith not only does not defeat reason, realism, objectivity, and the like, but presupposes and upholds them all.

Evans' defense of Kierkegaard as being no enemy of reason (objectivity, realism, etc.) is based in large part, at least in these essays, on his interpretation of Kierkegaardian faith as parallel to the position regarding religious faith that has come to be known as reformed epistemology, especially as that is given expression in the work of Alvin Plantinga.

While reformed epistemology rejects traditional foundationalism, what is sometimes referred to as evidentialism, it clearly does not reject reason. Evans' suggestion then is that Kierkegaard can be rescued from the charge that faith is irrational if we read him as saying something close to what Alvin Plantinga has said regarding properly basic beliefs. As the argument goes, we start with the assumption (and hardly anyone would challenge this) that Kierkegaard's view of faith is not an evidentialist one (that is, faith is not something arrived at on the basis of evidence or argument). But then Evans draws a conclusion from Kierkegaard's non-evidentialism that is different from the usual ones. Evans argues that Kierkegaard's non-evidentialism does not force us,

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as is often thought, to understand faith as an irrational leap. Rather, we can now see that faith may be a rationally justified commitment even though it is not arrived at via evidence or argument. As Evans sees it, faith in God is exactly, or almost exactly, what Plantinga describes as a properly basic belief. And certainly for Plantinga such beliefs are not irrational.

Evans argues that with the proper clarification and interpretation, Kierkegaard can be understood as making a sustained and rigorous kind of apologetic defense of the Christian view of faith. As Evans puts it, Kierkegaard, at least via Climacus, does not reject all apologetics but allows for a “kind of apologetic argument” (p. 134). And it is clear that the kind of apology that Evans has in mind is parallel to that used in reformed epistemology.

Evans’ argument for the connection between Kierkegaardian faith and properly basic beliefs will be variously received. Many will see in this what Evans sees, a way to answer the critics of Kierkegaard’s putative irrationalism. Others will reject this connection as misconstruing Kierkegaard, who after all was an irrationalist. Still others will be confounded by Evans’ reading of Kierkegaard, especially those who read Kierkegaard as pursuing a project more closely aligned with Wittgenstein’s philosophy, I mean those like D.Z. Phillips, James Conant, Stephen Mulhall, Stanley Cavell, and others.

One of the usual complaints regarding Kierkegaard is that his style of writing, being less than straightforward, that is, indirect, makes it difficult to comprehend. Some have even thought that this style was reason enough to dismiss his work as not really counting as serious philosophy. But Evans vehemently objects to this charge and tries to make the case, from a number of different angles (including a discussion of Kierkegaard’s concept of humor and irony, his use of religious language, his ideas about the relation of ethics to religion, and his philosophical psychology), that Kierkegaard is a serious and indeed rigorous (systematic?) philosopher.

However, to make this case, Evans goes to great lengths to state directly what Kierkegaard went to great lengths not to state directly—thinking that these were matters that could not be so stated. While Evans’ efforts to present Kierkegaard in a more straightforward way will no doubt be welcomed as clarification by many frustrated readers of Kierkegaard’s work, it will strike others as a disservice to Kierkegaard, as a kind of oversimplification, even an abstraction, of the otherwise rich texture of his indirect communication project. One might well ask in reading these essays: if this was what Kierkegaard was really trying to say, then why didn’t he just say it plainly as Evans does?

One of the blurbs on the dust cover of this volume says that “these essays are at once conceptually rigorous and spiritually uplifting.” While there is a measure of truth in this comment, some might be convinced otherwise on both counts. First, take the issue of the conceptual rigor.

There is certainly a sense of carefulness that shows itself in these essays, but certainly it is not the kind of carefulness one finds in Kierkegaard himself. For Kierkegaard a bold venture was half the battle. For Evans, guarded qualifications are the rule. Evans’ carefulness seems to aim at avoiding offending reason, while Kierkegaard was careful to offend it. But even when Evans says that we must safeguard the Christian possibility of offense, there is usually a “nevertheless” to follow (p. 296). But of course not every

reader will be offended by this tact, indeed some will sing its praises, but it is hard to think that any reader will not sense a pervasive guarded carefulness in Evans' defense of Kierkegaard's positive appropriation of reason even when Kierkegaard was trying to undermine it, or at least a narrow (Enlightenment) version of it. Philosophers learn the hard way to protect themselves. Kierkegaard himself felt the blows of a harsh audience. But then Kierkegaard could not find a way not to offend in his discussion of the Christian offense to reason.

Carefulness, however, is not the same as conceptual rigor. And while there is a great deal of this in Evans' arguments, there are remarks throughout the volume that make Evans' conceptual rigor at least uneven. Let me cite just two examples. In his discussion of the debate between realism and anti-realism he asks the question: "Is truth 'objective,' somehow independent of us human beings, as realists claim, or is truth somehow a product of human thinking, as the 'anti-realists say?'" (p. 9). It is hard to see this distinction as conceptually rigorous. Indeed, it seems confused. Truth and reality are not the same things. And why must anti-realists deny objective truth? "Washington was the first President of the US." This claim is objectively true, but is not a truth that is independent of human beings, whatever this would mean, if anything; indeed it is a truth that is "a product of human thinking." You might call this a version of the idea that truth is subjectivity. Evans' distinction between realism and anti-realism, far from being conceptually rigorous, seems like a false "either/or."

Later in a discussion of knowledge, Evans says: "Whatever knowledge we have is fallible..." (p. 188). Certainly this comment does not betoken a very rigorous concept of knowledge. As Austin once rightly said, "if I know that p then I can't be wrong." Surely Evans means to say that every claim to knowledge is fallible, rather than whatever knowledge we have is fallible. I may claim to know that p and not know it, but I cannot know that p and be wrong that p.

Finally, I turn to the second point of the blurb, to wit, that these essays are spiritually upbuilding. I have a picture of what it means for a piece of writing to be spiritually upbuilding and I get this from a number of sources, not the least of which is Kierkegaard himself, especially, for me at least, in the pseudonymous writings. Evans' style, however, is a far cry from this standard. From my perspective, I can only describe Evans' writing style as plodding. While this may not be spiritually upbuilding, it may certainly come as good news for those who crave a slower, more systematic pace than they find in Kierkegaard's more flamboyant style. And in the end, Evans' way of representing Kierkegaard's ideas may very well make them accessible to people who have given up on understanding him. In this respect, I think Evans' work has an important role to play in the Kierkegaardian secondary literature, and even the potential for being spiritually upbuilding, at least indirectly.