

# Essays in Philosophy

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## Book Review

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*Kierkegaard After MacIntyre: Essays on Freedom, Narrative, and Virtue*. Edited by John J. Davenport and Anthony Rudd. Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 2001. 363pp.

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Both in form and in content, this is an invaluable book for students of Kierkegaard and MacIntyre--and, more generally, for ethicists and others interested in rethinking the subject of ethics.

In form, the book is a conversation built around a short but influential comment MacIntyre made on Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* in *After Virtue*. After excerpting the comment, the editors draw together a cluster of five previously published essays that take issue with MacIntyre's interpretation. These are followed by seven new essays that reexamine both authors in some detail, exploring possibilities for dialogue but also offering fresh insights into "reason" and "narrative" that are themselves substantive contributions to ethics under the umbrella of either "virtue" or "existentialism" (or both). Finally, they include two responses--one that calls into question the virtual unanimity around unified narratives characterized by harmony and one, from MacIntyre, that reconsiders the original interpretation in the light of some twenty years of critical response including (but not limited to) the essays in this collection. The effect is an exemplary philosophical conversation characterized by lucidly articulated arguments, civil disagreement on key points, and honest rethinking of positions in the light of criticism and continued reflection. This collection is as much an invitation to further reflection on key issues in ethics as a finished statement of positions or arguments. In that regard, it is in the spirit of both Kierkegaard and MacIntyre (though its passion is a bit more veiled than is typical of Kierkegaard's work!).

As is appropriate in a volume largely devoted to Kierkegaard, form is not easily separated from content. By embodying a conversation that holds together without implying finality, authors and editors make a case for the kind of narrative that is central to MacIntyre's virtue ethics and, arguably, to Kierkegaard's ethical project as well--arguably, but not self-evidently, because this is one area of disagreement regarding what Kierkegaard was about. That the form of this collection is a key component of its argument tilts it toward Aristotle, Aquinas, and MacIntyre. No one speaks here from the perspective of the aesthetic; and if anyone spoke *for* the aesthetic in this context (as Philip Quinn does to some extent), it would amount to capitulation.

The point at issue (at least one of them) is whether the transition from Kierkegaard's aesthetic to his ethical stage is--as MacIntyre asserted in *After Virtue*--a "criterionless" choice. MacIntyre's response at the end of this collection makes it clear that he is not prepared to retract the claim for the plausible reason that thinking cannot move from aesthetic premises to ethical conclusions (341). But "plausible reason" is part of what is at issue here: if that is the standard, it is a signal that we are firmly ensconced in the ethical. If the circle of "we" is to be drawn wider to include the aesthetic as well, it will require

something other than philosophical conversation--hence Kierkegaard's description of himself as "a kind of poet" rather than as a philosopher or theologian (and hence the form of Kierkegaard's work, which did not try to argue the aesthete out of aesthetics).

The editors set two goals for the book. The first is to respond to MacIntyre's "irrationalism" objection to *Either/Or* and, in the process, "to clarify the senses in which Kierkegaard's own conception of freedom is teleological, and his understanding of the development of ethical personality involves a quest for narrative unity, a commitment to practices involving social values, and a self-understanding conditioned by historical reality" (xix). Here the point is to claim that MacIntyre is closer to Kierkegaard than he thought and that they are equally far from Sartrean existentialism and Nietzschean nihilism. That is an interesting claim in itself, one that deserves extended conversation--a conversation that is certainly facilitated by the five essays gathered in Part One. The second goal, which is the focus of Part Two, is to move the dialogue between Kierkegaard and MacIntyre forward with essays that explore "connections between Kierkegaardian and MacIntyrian interpretations of ethical selfhood" (xix). The label "Kierkegaardian" is unsettling in its own right, and one almost wishes a response from Kierkegaard could be added to MacIntyre's response at the end of the volume. But anyone who writes--even in as many voices as Kierkegaard--risks disciples, and one task for contemporary readers is to discern what is Kierkegaard, what is "Kierkegaardian," and what (if any) of it is to be carried along on life's way. The essays in Part Two are cognizant of this to the extent that they "move beyond the narrower task of responding to MacIntyre's particular critique of Kierkegaard in *After Virtue*, and concentrate on exploring philosophically fruitful relations between MacIntyre's and Kierkegaard's ideas on a wider range of questions" (xix). That wider range of questions is interesting (what else, on the border between the aesthetic and the ethical?), and both Quinn and MacIntyre endorse the turn that will move us into it--regardless of what it is (or is not) "beyond." If we are not to be in the same boat as that disciple of Heraclitus who, contemplating his master's claim that one cannot step into the same stream twice, went beyond it by asserting that one cannot do so even once, I believe we are well-advised to turn from Kierkegaard and MacIntyre, from Kierkegaardians and MacIntyrians, to these interesting questions.

So, into the stream...

One question involves the relationship between the universal and the particular, which, as Peter Mehl points out in his essay, bears on the question of what is "essentially human." Mehl contends that Kierkegaard's view of the "essentially human" is more Hegelian than Kantian, a reminder that where one places Kierkegaard vis-a-vis Hegel and Kant is likely to have a significant impact on how one reads him. The point is not to abandon division of the world into Kierkegaardians and MacIntyrians only to take up dividing it into Hegelians and Kantians. The point is to widen the conversation and (like Kierkegaard and MacIntyre) keep it in historical perspective. Carrying the conversation through history by including Kant and Hegel is a good way to turn attention to Kierkegaard's contribution to understanding concrete universals (31). Several of the contributors to this volume note that Kierkegaard resists not only the universalizing, abstract tendencies of Hegelian philosophy but also the tendency to lose sight of the embodied character of human existence. If we encounter reason at all, we encounter it in its human manifestation--and that means in the flesh. The human is not only "rational" and "accountable," but also "sensual"--"a participant in the phenomenal world" (18). More to the point, as several contributors to this volume suggest, the rational is itself embodied--hence sensual and concrete. This is an important move in Kierkegaard, who was unwilling to abandon the particular human being in favor of a "universal" abstraction. In their criticism of MacIntyre, the authors of the first five essays take him to task for

attending exclusively to *Either/Or*--and for appearing to reduce Kierkegaard to that work. Important though that work may be, Kierkegaard's groundbreaking psychological analysis unfolds over the whole body of his work. Moving toward *Works of Love*, it becomes increasingly clear that Kierkegaard is attentive to the social dimension of human being and to the relational character of moral truth. For all his talk about the individual, Kierkegaard was acutely aware that the task of becoming a subject is not a strictly individual one: it is a social process, and that makes it a potentially fruitful process to explore from the perspective of "virtue" ethics.

Emphasis on the transition from the aesthetic to the ethical focuses attention on the presumed "choice" that MacIntyre maintains must be criterionless and therefore arbitrary. But Kierkegaard associates arbitrariness with the demonic and does not put transition from stage to stage in the hands of irrational, isolated individuals. Transitions occur in the context of developing subjects--and, once the choice is confronted, the developing subject has moved out of the aesthetic into the ethical sphere. "Choosing" between the aesthetic and the ethical is something that can only happen within the ethical--and, when it happens, "choosing" the aesthetic is, within the ethical, sin.

Here it is important to note that Kierkegaard's *Lutheranness* seems (oddly) to elude the participants in this discussion. As surely as Luther could maintain that the Christian is simultaneously free and bound (a perfectly free lord *and* a perfectly bound servant), Kierkegaard could emphasize choice and adopt Lessing's "leap" while harboring deep distrust of the will and associating its arbitrary exercise with the demonic. That Kierkegaard was quintessentially Lutheran (philosophically and theologically) means that he insisted on the real presence of the universal *in* the particular (without the need for miraculous transformations) and on the presence of freedom in the practice of a perfectly bound servant (that is, a servant who is subject to *everyone*.) This should also prove helpful when Lillegard, for example, tries to understand Kierkegaard's hostility toward philosophy conceived in terms of disembodied rationality. That hostility echoes Luther's characterization of philosophy as a "whore." Like Luther, Kierkegaard could simultaneously espouse that characterization and practice philosophy passionately.

Reading Kierkegaard as a Lutheran thinker holds promise in making the connection between virtue and vocation. For Kierkegaard, as for Luther, reason is personal--and that means it is revealed face-to-face. Vocation is less a matter of "choosing" a path from which one never deviates than of embodying a character--a structure of being--in relationship. That may prove important in terms of Quinn's suspicion of harmonious unified narratives as well. The claim that our lives are structured narratively sometimes seems predicated on the assumption that we are their authors. But it is more in keeping with Kierkegaard's vision to think of oneself as the ensemble of characters (not, it is important to emphasize--*one* of the characters) in a narrative, a perspective akin to the one Quinn attributes to Wayne Booth.

Kierkegaard's rejection of "the day Christianity and the world became friends," cited by Kirmmse as (seemingly) meriting MacIntyre's rejection of Kierkegaard (206) is also illuminated by Kierkegaard's Lutheran (or, more precisely, his deeply incarnational) outlook. It is not entirely surprising that MacIntyre, to the extent that he is a Thomist more than an Aristotelian, would trust that portion of the world identified as the Church more than the Lutheran Kierkegaard. It would be wise for philosophers to jettison the sectarian dimensions of that contrast as quickly and completely as possible; but the philosophical dimensions are critical, I think, to the project of this book and the continuing conversation MacIntyre invites at the end. MacIntyre tilts toward what amounts to a "high" ecclesiology in his advocacy of communities that can sustain coherent narratives and moral identities. Kierkegaard

paradoxically tilts toward a high ecclesiology that is simultaneously highly suspicious. Lutheran thought (and, sometimes, Lutheran practice) has placed tremendous weight on the Church, which is understood (in the imagery of the Augsburg Confession) as wherever the Gospel is proclaimed and the sacraments rightly administered--that is, as the place where we encounter God in the world. Kierkegaard's attack on Christendom was predicated on the failure of the established Church in Denmark to be such a place--and that is an attack that might appeal to thinkers sympathetic with MacIntyre's approach. More importantly, it is a *practical* argument that locates Truth in an encounter--in a structure of relationship--rather than in an institution. That makes a place for a teleological suspension of the ethical, a "place" in which the aesthetic and the religious are indistinguishable from the perspective of the ethical, a place where there is nothing to be said. That has always been a problem for ethics, which finds nothing impossible to articulate--an interesting moment in a conversation that ethics must pursue but cannot contain.

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