

## Kierkegaard at the APA (?) <sup>1</sup>

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We can thank Steve Evans for giving us such a rich body of work, over a dozen books over three decades, nearly all on Kierkegaard. Protocol would have me consider at least an argument here or there from that impressive record, but as you may suspect from my title, I have other plans. I'll hover over the detail of Steve's work – I hope not too high -- to consider a question raised by its aims. There are six parts ahead.

### One

Kierkegaard can offer us APA-style arguments and the materials to start them; it's good to lay them out in detail and test them, as Steve (and others) do. I'll say more about Kierkegaard's arguments, but I'll also spend considerable time on a question that has increasingly haunted me. The question is this: What if Kierkegaard wants his APA-style arguments to finally drop out of view? And if he wants them to disappear, Why? To what end?

Kierkegaard gives endless (and endlessly intriguing) arguments, and he also provides much else: jokes, lyricism, theatre, comedy, irony, tragedy, testimony, confession, parables, music criticism, sermons. Perhaps these can past muster within the argument culture of the APA as “speech acts”, or as instances of what Stanley Cavell dubs “passionate utterance” -- speaking or writing that is “improvisation in the disorders of desire”. <sup>2</sup> Such utterance serves as an invitation to realign mood, will, the heart, or imagination.

A wider focus on what is not argument shows Kierkegaard's extraordinary literary expressiveness, his poetry, striking narratives, and polemics. Jamie Ferreira quotes two writers who back the virtue of interweaving poetry and philosophy. From the poet's corner, we have Robert Frost: “*a poetic philosopher or a philosophical poet are my favorite kind of both*”. And

our philosopher is Wittgenstein: “*philosophy ought only to be written as a poetic composition*”.<sup>3</sup>

Joining philosophy and poetry lets writing be maximally transformative. It effects transfigurations of imagination, intellect and consciousness, of passions and the heart. Poetic philosophy (or philosophical poetry) stirs the soul, excites the will, transforming our desires, apprehensions, and aspirations. It accomplishes “improvisation in the disorders of desire.” For Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard this mix of writing can cure troubled souls. Accordingly, APA conservatives have two counts against Kierkegaard.<sup>4</sup> First, he’s a poet, and thus lacks philosophical rigor. Second, he attends to disorders of the soul – his own and a reader’s. On most accounts, this moves him well outside the bounds of philosophical analysis.<sup>5</sup>

Argument formation is not the greatest good in the Kierkegaardian lexicon. The focus is moral, religious, or spiritual formation. Good argument aims for clarity, precision, and sound links among statements, but that’s not the best game in town for Kierkegaard. He’s taken with passions that promise change, with hope to counter despair, assurance to counter anxiety, patience or peace to counter sickness of soul. Kierkegaard writes through these passions, transfiguring consciousness toward a more open tilt toward neighbor and God, and toward the infinite ways we relate to the world and ourselves.

## **Two**

Kierkegaard’s categorical imperative is “*Change your life!*”. If arguments play a considerable role in our work to hear and heed that counsel, all to the good! Not so long ago, APA conservatives assumed that Kierkegaard exiled rational argument from his kingdom. After all, he spoke approvingly of paradox and subjectivity. And this casts reason to the winds, putting *him* beyond the pale -- beyond civil conversation generally, doesn’t it? It’s been a battle to invert this picture of an irrationalist Kierkegaard and bring him to the APA as a master of deflationary argument and analysis – as well as a physician of the soul. Steve has been a driving force in establishing a Kierkegaard not a bit allergic to good argument. He has provided painstaking

reconstructions of Kierkegaard's dialectical works, and more recently, of *Works of Love*. But the path was uphill all the way. Whatever cachet Kierkegaard had among theologians, existentialists, poets, or dramatists in the 50s and beyond, APA professionals took him to be the arch irrationalist.<sup>6</sup>

How things have changed! In the early '80s I suggested to a quite empty APA room that Kierkegaard's Abraham was not out of his mind, nor was Kierkegaard. Abe was undergoing what I called a moral-spiritual dilemma. He was the site of conflicting cares. Crowds next door were listening to Walter Kaufmann lament the scandal that Kierkegaard would support Abraham's climb up Moriah. By the mid-80s, out of reach of the APA, I gave my second Kierkegaard paper at St Olaf at a conference organized by Steve – perhaps the first. There I suggested to a room quite pleasantly filled that Kierkegaardian subjectivity was no more dangerous than Harry Frankfurt's notion of second order cares or volitions, or Charles Taylor's view of self-interpretation. I could dress up Kierkegaard as a pillar of APA respectability.

Anyone wanting to make a philosophical case for Kierkegaard in those days would double-check their logic against Steve's, who served as a kind of intellectual conscience. His recent book continues his work to make Kierkegaard's arguments accessible. *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self* exhibits what's best in his engagements with the APA. To give you a sense of the scope and depth of these essays, let me quote at length from a recent piece in *The Review of Metaphysics*; you may recognize it as my own. (I know that Garff disapproves of self-plagiarism and repetition -- I hope it's excused in a pinch.)

*Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self: Collected Essays* gathers 19 chapters by an astute and seasoned Kierkegaard scholar. Evans takes up questions Plantinga or Alston might raise for religious epistemology (and to a lesser extent, ontology) as these are latent especially in *Unscholarly Postscript* and *Philosophical Crumbs*. Those familiar with “reformed epistemology's” response to classical foundationalism will be immediate beneficiaries in following the links to Kierkegaard, who thus gains a respectable voice in

current analytical debates about justified belief, reliable perception, and the role of "properly basic beliefs". Kierkegaard is thus rescued from an extreme existentialist voluntarism or irrationalism (and from some skeptical variants of postmodernism). Evans also offers differentiated sketches of recent debates in metaphysics. At issue are realism and anti-realism, voluntarism in belief formation and formation of self.

Evans takes up Kierkegaard's definition of the self as "a relation to itself and to another," and its dovetail with recent preoccupations with "the other." The Abraham-Isaac story is not a valorization of absolute obedience to divine commands but a suggestion that ordinary civic ethics does not exhaust what can be asked of us. We find a corrective to MacIntyre's early view that Kierkegaard promotes Sartrean 'radical choice'. And Evans corrects the view that Kierkegaard's neighbor love denigrates preferential loves.

The book's great strengths map its inevitable limitations (*I continue here, more or less quoting*). Its evident excellence, drawing Kierkegaard into a powerful Anglophone tradition, guarantees that many issues will fly under the radar. Here are a variety of questions that an APA approach will miss:

- *What do poets and dramatists - W.E. Auden or Ibsen, for example -- find so alluring in Kierkegaard's evocation of faith and the self? (Auden published the first anthology of English translations in the early 50s.)*
- *The seeds of continental philosophy are sown in discussions in Paris in the '30s. Hegelians and Heideggerians, Levinas and Sartre triangulate their positions with constant reference to Kierkegaard. He was the beacon around which they clustered. What do these 'continentals' find in Kierkegaardian faith, morality, politics, and selfhood, and how does it contrast with Anglophone accounts?*
- *Kierkegaard's heartfelt, beautifully composed sermonic-like discourses give us an under-discussed religious dimension to "the" aesthetic. Why are poetry,*

*narrative, and literary elaboration so central to explorations of virtue, faith, and religious passion?*

- *Are testimony or confession, prayer or edifying discourses, forms of 'passionate speech', speech that springs (as Cavell has it) as an "invitation to improvise in the disorder of desire"?*
- *Why is an autobiographical, first-personal frame so prominent in conveying moral-religious insight? Why are Rousseau's first-personal Reveries of a Solitary Walker or Kierkegaard's self-revealing Journals so philosophically effective?*

There's a quite general matter of the tone bound up with Kierkegaard's transformational aims.<sup>7</sup> By and large, the philosophical discipline that Evans enlists seeks certainty, bit-by-bit, about realism, free will, properly basic belief, and so forth. It seeks a kind of philosophical certainty and clarity. Yet Kierkegaard often wants to *induce* uncertainties, to *destabilize* philosophical confidence as a precondition of self-transformation. Like Socrates, Kierkegaard is inclined ultimately to disown philosophical knowledge – other than knowledge of ignorance. Argument, he intimates, will deliver far less than expected. We can't count on it to provide substantive declarative results sufficient to transfigure a soul. Kierkegaard aims to instill urgency around matters of life and death, to induce change in consciousness and orientation, change that is only infrequently related to argumentative success. To please intellect alone cannot be sufficient.

Let me return to the question of Kierkegaard's status -- not just in the APA, but less parochially as a philosopher, broadly conceived.

### **Three**

In my first years of writing I would never have called Kierkegaard a tragi-comic knight of interminable writing -- and withholding. Perhaps I shouldn't now! Back then, I proceeded on what seemed like a reasonable assumption. Because *Postscript*, for example, looked (from a

certain angle) like a great philosophical tome, it should be read, I thought, as continuous with the big dialectical works of Hume or Kant. We could more or less disregard the rather quirky and amusing surface. Sidestepping the glitter and tears, you'd discover something any roughly analytical philosopher could respect. My task back then was to make the argumentative core more apparent. Of course, there was pathos, mimicry, exhortation, lyric, pure fun, anxiety, dynamite, jest and tragedy. But these seemed to me to be little more than superficial distractions, and frankly I didn't know what to do with them anyway.

At this early point in my philosophical education, I believed that Wittgenstein loved Kierkegaard because Wittgenstein could see a reputable, constructive argumentative core at the heart of the Dane's writing, and that he liked what he saw. I now think I was utterly wrong on that score. As I now see it, neither Kierkegaard nor Wittgenstein are interested, in the final analysis, in worthy arguments. Arguments, when they have a role, are in the service of achieving *worthy lives*.

I wanted back then to have Kierkegaard preside over APA discussions. I didn't consider if he would *want* to be present. If I could show that Johannes de Silentio, properly paraphrased, could converse with the likes of Bernard Williams, Harry Frankfurt, or Charles Taylor then I would have achieved what's best in philosophy. I still think I achieved something in those days, but I don't believe that my achievement stands for victory in reading Kierkegaard. The big battle lies elsewhere, wherever poetic, religious, and philosophical transformations take place. It's ongoing in and outside the halls of academia, on the streets, among families, and in solitude -- and it's never won.

#### **Four**

In a recent seminar on an old favorite of mine, *Fear and Trembling*, I set aside the search for "the" argument of the book in order to emphasize the difficulty of identifying exactly what sort of book was at hand. To that end, I provided two lists, the first, a number of possible argumentative aims, and the second, a number of possible genres the book might exemplify.

Argumentatively Kierkegaard might deliver:

- a critique of bourgeois market society (preface)
- a critique of direct communication (epigraph)
- a critique of religion as bible-based hero-worship
- an attack on rule-based and bureaucratic conventional morality
- a critique of holiness as a cloak for power, for a claim to absolute sovereignty: mothers weaning, shopkeepers strolling, knights sewing, point toward humility and abdication of power
- a critique of faux-religious voyeurism: keyhole fixations on blood-curdling terror and violence
- a critique of the Spectacular City – the flashing site of continuous bustle, circus, theater, not to mention commercial smoke and mirrors
- a critique of the assumption that religious writing, and writing about religion, has only one register: he delivers insight in voices of terror, praise, satire, parable, evocation, detached analysis
- a critique of “simple” readings: Could Abe have dallied, rushed, stabbed himself, asked God to do it, refused, obeyed in despair or deception?

And on the other hand, here is a list of the text’s interpretative genres. Each would provide a different literary mood but also a different ‘world’ as background for interpretation:

- the carnivalesque and bawdy
- the fairy tale or fable
- the satirical or farcical
- the tragic
- the labyrinthine unfathomable
- the grotesque, the sublime
- the dialectical, the lyrical
- the fantastical and dreamlike
- the antinomian and apophatic
- the eu-catastrophical, the genre John Davenport credits as providing an unexpected finish that’s miraculously good<sup>8</sup>

Let me supplement this motley of genres with a whimsical quote from Polonius. He’s

announcing the itinerant players who have arrived at the castle and are about to perform a play Hamlet has devised. To expose the perfidious King and Queen, Hamlet will give them his “Mousetrap”. Here is the billboard for the players:

***THE BEST ACTORS IN THE WORLD,  
EITHER FOR TRAGEDY, COMEDY, HISTORY, PASTORAL,  
PASTORAL-COMICAL, HISTORICAL-PASTORAL, TRAGICAL-HISTORICAL,  
TRAGICAL-COMICAL-HISTORICAL-PASTORAL,  
SCENE INDIVIDABLE,  
or  
POEM UNLIMITED***

Kierkegaard gives us a bevy of Hamlet-like mousetraps and what Polonius calls a “Poem Unlimited”.

**FIVE**

The prevailing mood of academic and APA-style thinking and writing is cool, objective, and dispassionate. This mood does not sit well with Kierkegaard’s satire, fun, lyrics, anxiety, dynamite, and poetry. How does one deal with these apparently extra-academic frills? The answer opens up once we acknowledge Kierkegaard’s first-personal address and his imperative to change. And that in turn leads to acknowledging that philosophy is wide enough for autobiography, confession, testimony, and the poetic. A wider philosophy can assume the ancient role of transfiguring the person, healing the soul, making space for a more worth life.

Recently I’ve been meditating on Kierkegaard’s discourse “At a Graveside”. I think Kierkegaard wants us to think as if we were both in the open grave and standing meditatively at its edge. This is to think and write posthumously. But in thinking with Kierkegaard, we do not only consider ourselves as if dead. We also consider others as if risen from the dead. In entering the place of his discourse, I try to hear Hamlet, Faust, Quixote, and that consummate

figure Socrates. Kierkegaard let them speak from the dead. They become his essential others, prompting him, as it were, posthumously, from beyond the grave, giving him – and we who read him -- words and moods for exploring tiny pockets and then vast panoramas of life. I said that they speak from the dead. But it's also true that in listening, we raise them from the dead – and that we pass over to share their ghostly realm to better understand them. At a limit of imagination, philosophy – love of wisdom – might be *writing out our lives from beyond the grave, with the help of our essential (and ghostly) others, whom we raise from the dead.*

It can seem, at least some of the time, and less fantastically, that Kierkegaard is a loquacious Wittgenstein. His investigations are a series of fragmentary dialogues kept alive by the romantic ideal of saving us from abstraction, distraction, and disenchantment. Kierkegaard puts heart and soul back into ordinary life – back into moral, aesthetic, and religious life. To come closer to his *Postscript* idiom, Kierkegaard's soul-forming writing is dialectical and mimic-pathetic. Its details are but a postscript or addendum to life -- for what matters is its existential contribution. His words are not *about* therapy, nor about metaphysics nor epistemology nor standard-issue ethics. They are not really “about”, but immersed *in*, your soul and mine. And in the end, as we know, our ministering interlocutor revokes his disquisitions. He leaves us to cope on our own.

## SIX

Why the question mark at the end of my title, “Kierkegaard at the APA ? ” I don't mean Kierkegaard should be refused entry, or that there isn't indeed great value in APA-style rational reconstructions of large spans of Kierkegaard's disquisitions. I mean that Kierkegaard would not be altogether happy here.

Kierkegaard loved Hamlet, who communed with ghosts, was thoroughly literary, full of self-doubt, and as melancholy and anxious as Faust. And Kierkegaard loved the madness of that knight Quixote, jousting to bring old faith to a forgetful and cruel world. And he loved Socrates, on whom he conferred a ghostly post-pagan (perhaps mad) Christian status. As he put it, “I

can't believe that Socrates has not become a Christian.” His task, he said, had always been to follow Socrates. I think that's right, and I'd only add that his task was *also* to follow Hamlet, Faust, and Quixote.

We should be able to dance with his ghosts, as he danced with these, and as he danced with death, writing somewhat in its embrace. We should be able to move gracefully with him, and with death, without looking over our shoulders for APA approval.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I thank Alastair Hannay for loaning this title.

<sup>2</sup> See Stanley Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, Harvard 2005, p. 185, and my discussion, *On Søren Kierkegaard: Dialogue, Polemic, Lost Intimacy, and Time*, Ashgate, 2007, p. 53-6.

<sup>3</sup> Jamie Ferreira, *Kierkegaard*, Blackwell, 2009, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> The American Academy of Religion welcomes the philosophical-poetic more readily than the American Philosophical Association. The Modern Language Association can't escape writing that's transformative or poetic-philosophical (think of Dante, Thoreau, or Cervantes). Within the APA, the latter will not be heard, and even Plato or Hume can be stripped of literary or religious garments. Iris Murdoch, Sabina Lovibond, Cora Diamond, Martha Nussbaum, and Stanley Cavell herald a welcome breach of the walls that segregate literature's broadly religio-moral concerns from mainstream philosophy. And it's increasingly acknowledged that ancient philosophy was a spiritual discipline meant to purify a way of life. Philosophy *as* life allows us to follow Rick Furtak in linking Kierkegaard and Thoreau to the tradition of Socrates, the Stoics, and others. (See his *Wisdom in Love: Kierkegaard and the Ancient Quest for Emotional Integrity*, Notre Dame, 2005, and ed., *Thoreau's Philosophical Significance*, Stanford, forthcoming.

<sup>5</sup> To my chagrin, the very aspects of Kierkegaard's writing that make him valuable to me make him *persona non grata* in modern universities. Deans and department heads become upset as he disrupts the jurisdictions of philosophy, religion, literature and poetry, belonging nowhere and everywhere. A tragicomic knight has no departmental fit. More disturbingly, he asks us to collude in care for the souls of those we attend, making an erotic-spiritual claim a secular university especially must disown.

<sup>6</sup> Hegel, Fichte, Schiller and Nietzsche, Tillich, Sartre and that *bete noir*, Heidegger, had no standing either.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Rorty ended a recent talk on William James' *Varieties* with the conclusion that although James' arguments were worthless, he would be endlessly read because he was clearly a good man and could teach us to be good. What's depressing is that Rorty delivered this in a final throwaway line. Something so

important deserved more serious attention. How can good writers be evidently worthy persons, offer bad arguments, yet teach us to be good?

<sup>8</sup> See John Davenport's "Faith as Eschatological Trust in *Fear and Trembling*," in *Kierkegaard on Ethics, Love, and Faith*, ed. Edward F. Mooney, Indiana University Press, 2008.