

On Søren Kierkegaard: Dialogue, Polemics, Lost Intimacy, and Time

By Edward F. Mooney

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The Preface to Edward Mooney's latest volume declares its intention to "work a space where theology and philosophy, literature and ethics, poetry and scripture, artistry and sacrament can mingle, affording mutual attractions and inter-animations [...] I hope that this fruitful comingling points to new possibilities for philosophy and theology." The series of meditations that follow, on a variety of Kierkegaardian topics, succeeds admirably – not to mention elegantly – in enacting this intention.

"Enacting" is precisely the right word here, for this text accomplishes the fusion of academic analysis and prayerful reverence that is the topic of its final chapter. Mooney's prose has always had a refreshingly poetic cast to it, a style that explicitly seeks to overcome the gap between a *scholarly* understanding of the existential dimension of Kierkegaard's work and a properly *existential* grasp thereof. The "city of readers" of Kierkegaard's work, as Mooney puts it, has been expanding since 1855, but the question remains whether *this* city "has done better than Copenhagen at *heeding* the aim of [Kierkegaard's] mission" (p.37). To this readership Mooney offers the stark reminder that "We are full-time human beings even as we're professional academics" (p.228) and that "Kierkegaard's aims outstrip the aims of solely *academic* philosophical work. [...] Academic work can ask readers to *see* the truth, but it falls short of asking anyone to *live* in that truth" (p.131). He enjoins us to remain open to the first-personal direct address of Kierkegaard's writing, "the unnerving shift from reading him to *being read*" by Kierkegaard (p.6).

Part One considers at length the relationship between Socrates and Kierkegaard, a relationship that Mooney claims is ultimately one of identity: seen from our interpretative perspective, Kierkegaard *is* Socrates in precisely the same sense as that in which Kierkegaard claims Socrates *has become* a Christian (p.54). Mooney argues that

Kierkegaard's Socratic identity is motivated not merely by Kierkegaard's love of Socrates' inquisitorial and deflationary dialectic, but by the *irresistible* aspect of Socrates himself, the way Socrates *in his person* embodies a commitment to love and piety well beyond the warrant his abortive dialectical inquiries can furnish him with. In this manner Socrates instantiates what Mooney calls "tactile" knowledge, an embodied, non-theorised knowledge, inaccessible to rational interrogation (but the contours of which can be traced through the negative action of dialectic).

Mooney's claim that Kierkegaard simultaneously bears Socratic and Christian identities depends upon a somewhat controversial claim: that the Socratic is neither surpassed by nor subordinated to the Christian, for there can be no possibility of a coordinating scale of value by which to rank them: "Since neither Christ nor Socrates is dispensable, both are *indispensable* [...] we lack an *independent standard* for calibrating their comparative indispensability" (p.28). Mooney cites five textual grounds in support of the claim that the Socratic need not necessarily give way to the Christian. I won't rehearse these all here but his fourth ground deserves a special mention. Mooney claims that "Johannes Climacus supports the idea that "B Religiousness" is an advance on "A Religiousness," but he leaves the existential *feel* of the *transition* to the Christian under-described" (p.30). Kierkegaard's "attention to the experiential tenor of the contrast between Socratic and Christian attunements is scant indeed" (p.48). This paucity in the description of what, subjectively, is given up and gained through the transition from "Socratic" to "Christian" religion stands in sharp contrast to the "fulsome" descriptions of the Aesthetic/Ethical transition given by e.g. Judge William. Still, the *Postscript* could equally be read as claiming that Religiousness B's actuating paradox makes the life it generates essentially indescribable, just as Abraham's faith puts him beyond human communication.

A key element in Kierkegaard's Socratic project, with its emphasis on openness and attunement to "tactile knowledge" is his use of words as "arcs of meaning" that, in their otherness, compel personal response. In light of this capacity of texts to compel subjective engagement, Mooney calls for a recovery of the Humanities:

Sites among the humanities open text-like worlds – worlds that Kierkegaard spits out, cities of words and notes and steps. We're asked to imagine felt contours of rising or descending life, of fluid grace or tempestuous disorder. Intimacy with how these are lived out is the opposite of abstraction, but *also* the opposite of fact or method. (p.73)

The re-acquisition of such “lost intimacy” and its incorporation into moral formation is now firmly beyond the scope of academic theory, for “cultivation of one’s moral person has no obvious place; it’s not in the curriculum” (p.79). Mooney effectively defends something like the “Liberal Humanism” so out of vogue in English Literature departments, yet he mounts his defence not from a position of pre-theoretical naivety but from a concern to anchor theoretical activity in the existential needs of reader and student. In an age where Humanities educators increasingly seem to feel they must articulate the value of their disciplines in purely instrumental terms in order to survive, the call is timely.

Part Two extends this critique by directing it against a “Hermeneutics of Suspicion,” against which Mooney asserts the primacy of a hermeneutics of trust and charity. This move has important consequences, for “To grant the priority of trust and contact is to refuse the priority of theory” (p.97). Mooney’s chosen example of the hermeneutics of suspicion is Joakim Garff’s already-controversial biography of Kierkegaard, with its stated aim “to uncover the cracks in the granite of genius.” Mooney sees this goal as symptomatic of a misplaced lack of trust that closes off the sort of “tactile” knowledge we encounter in a sympathetic reading, the moments that can only be expressed in the sudden declaration that “*This is Kierkegaard!*” (That such knowledge is available to us in an *Øieblik* is argued for in Chapter Six, which connects it with the notions of repetition and the experience of temporality). Mooney takes issue with Garff’s “recurrent digressions along sexual paths that do little to illuminate the life, and even less to illuminate the texts” (p.104) as an example of the distortions such a hermeneutics will generate. However, Mooney does allow for a more charitable interpretation of a project of “uncovering the cracks” that could potentially legitimate Garff’s discussion of Kierkegaard’s sexuality beyond the merely voyeuristic interest Mooney is prepared to

concede to it (p.98). Sexuality is one of the key *animating* features of any human life, especially of its non-theoretical *attunement* towards others and “tactile knowledge” of the world (compare e.g. Christopher Cordner’s description of the erotic/romantic “hit” of the other).¹ Hence ascribing Kierkegaard’s prodigious authorial output to sublimated sexuality might not be merely to “take Kierkegaard *down* a notch” as Mooney sees it (p.98), but instead open up aspects of the author’s humanity and vulnerability. The risk of the “hermeneutics of suspicion” may well be descent into mean-spirited “exposé”, but perhaps the potential risk of the hermeneutics of trust is something like unedifying hagiography.

The chapters that follow engage closely with specific texts and take up a variety of Kierkegaardian themes. Chapter Seven turns to Alasdair MacIntyre’s treatment of *Either/Or* in *After Virtue*. This is ground Mooney has covered before, but here he argues that Kierkegaard’s approach to moral dialogue falls outside MacIntyre’s three modes of inquiry (Encyclopaedic, Genealogical, “Tradition”), occupying a “rogue” position that emphasises both the humility of the will (with a relinquishment of assertive freedom) and a corresponding receptivity – a form of living exemplification of truth beyond theory that Mooney labels Socratic (pp.127-132).

Among the many themes that Mooney weaves almost musically through his text is a concern for the adoption of roles (hence Kierkegaard toys with the personae Faust, Anti-Faust, the Master Thief, the Wandering Jew, Polemicist, and of course Socrates). Mooney develops new readings of certain Kierkegaardian pseudonyms in this light. Chapter Seven draws a connection between the spectacle of Tivoli and the appearance of *Fear and Trembling*, casting Johannes de silentio as a carnival tout and showman, presenting a peep-show of spirituality. Mooney sees something similar at work in the *Postscript*; Climacus appears to offer us not a treatise but a series of *tableaux* that present various moral options and constitute, in a phrase of Hannay’s which Mooney endorses, an “itinerary for personality” (Chapter 11, especially pp.178-83). Repetition is another recurring theme (here and throughout Mooney’s work), discussed at length in

¹ Cordner, Christopher *Ethical Encounter* (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001)

Chapter Nine. A concern for an existential openness and attunement, beyond the theoretical and abstract, animates and structures all these readings.

This concern finally plays out in Part Three in discussions of the *Postscript* as offering ethical exemplars, bringing Stanley Cavell's model of ethical perfectionism into contact with Kierkegaard's authorial project of showing us our "next, better selves." In this connection Mooney develops a new and nuanced account of the structure of Indirect Communication, one that apparently dissolves some of the more problematic readings of *how* the *Postscript* communicates, if at all. Again, "tactile" knowledge – what's communicated beyond the merely propositional in Lear's "No!" or Molly Bloom's "Yes" – is what is essentially at stake in indirect communication. Mooney also engages at some length with the question of Climacus' revocation of the text, developing its multi-faceted place in this communicative strategy. Mooney finishes with a discussion of the *Upbuilding Discourses'* capacity to both excite and still academic response, raising the perhaps uncomfortable –precisely by dint of its urgency – question of the relation between academic and personal, "prayerful" reading of Kierkegaard.

These comments have done little to convey the richness of themes and eloquence of execution that characterise this book. Kierkegaardians will find much of value here – both as professional academics *and* as full-time human beings.