

Patrick Stokes, *Kierkegaard's Mirrors: Interest, Self, and Moral Vision*, Palgrave Macmillan, Houndsmills, Basingstoke, 2010

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WHEN WE HEAR that the knight of faith is at home in the finite, walking more or less undetected through town with the gait of a contented burgher, or when we hear of an unassuming moral kindness in a next door neighbor helping a child across the street, moral and even moral-religious responsiveness can seem easy, a kind of untroubled, seamless fit-to-world. Of course, that's a kind of ideal. It may be achieved in part, now and then, in exemplary action, but it's a norm notable for its failure to be realized over any sustained period of time. The ideal shimmers in reveries of easy shopkeeper knights, or contented knitting ones. How could it have emerged from an unsentimental appraisal of others and their worlds, full as they are of hardheartedness and cruelty?

If we can effortlessly answer, and fall painfully short of, the moral demands of others and the world, Patrick Stokes wonders how that can be. He proposes that moral perception or vision is a marinate of imagination, will, and cognition that saturates the moral response that is perception's culmination or *telos*. He wonders how a person achieves a self that is crystallized in robust moral vision and response. He shows how imagination uncovers moral suffering, brings it forward *for us*, and delivers its claims -- how imagination uncovers a fitting response, and simultaneously nudges or propels us into action.

Stokes finds in Kierkegaard's texts, as so many others have, unsurpassed genius in displaying (or theorizing) moral-religious fit to world, and equal genius in displaying the many innocent and nefarious ways we inevitably fall short of such fit. "Through the use of literary and

indirect modes of communication, Kierkegaard presents a more fully developed description of moral experience than any other ‘philosophical’ writer of his era.” (7) Stokes is not the first on this expedition, but he is surely one of the best. He sums up his achievement in *Kierkegaard's Mirrors: interest, self, and moral vision*, with admirable clarity:

We have developed, in a sense, a prolegomena to a Kierkegaardian theory of moral perceptualism . . . which has as its *telos* the immediate coextensiveness of vision, volition, and action. . . . It is in the moments that characteristically . . . intervene between perception and action, the moments of indecision, hesitation, and . . . failure to perceive our own implicatedness in that which we see, that the morally ‘fallen’ character of human agency is to be located. It is within this space, within a framework laid out by Kierkegaard the philosopher in the service of Kierkegaard the theologian, that Kierkegaard the psychologist diagnoses the evasions and self-deceptions endemic to human beings. (180)

I.

WHAT IS IT TO RECOGNIZE “our own implicatedness” in the moral worlds we inhabit? We might start with the idea that we inhabit a moral world by imaginatively inhabiting the lives of others, and thus implicating ourselves in their -- or a *common* -- moral world. I put myself in the shoes of another. But that’s only part of the story. I have to know what it's *like to be in my own shoes*, and furthermore, I have to recognize (however tacitly) that in fact *I am standing in my shoes*, even as I (more explicitly) stand in yours. To relate properly to another I must already be properly related to myself. In the idiom of *Sickness Unto Death*, I must already be a “relation

relating (properly) to itself”. If I'm momentarily stunned by grief, or greatly distracted, “beside myself” in debilitating despair, I might be unable to find my way with myself. Being at a loss as to how to be in my *own* shoes, or at a loss as to whether I *had* any to stand in, I'd be in no shape to stand in the shoes of another.

My niece needs comfort and rescue as she totters high in the tree she's inadvisably climbed. My shoes no longer cover the feet of an athlete – I tacitly recognize that fact of my person. I won't climb up to lead her down. My explicit awareness flows to and from the needs of my imperiled niece. Yet I must have a coordinate and inevitably tacit awareness of myself, a species of shadowed self-recognition caught in something like a silent warning, “You're no longer an athlete!”. Tacit *self-recognition* is implicit, and absolutely important, in reliable and explicit recognition of others. To illustrate, Stokes gives us this edgy Kierkegaardian “joke”.

A barefoot peasant comes into the city to buy a pair of shoes – and to down a drink or so, to celebrate. In a drunken stupor, he passes out in the middle of the street – then finds himself startled rudely half-awake by an impatient cab driver. He should get out of the way or his legs will get run over. The poor fool looks out at the unfamiliar shoes and stockings, and waves the driver on, explaining casually that there is no problem! The legs to be broken are not *his*. (99) Now this peasant can be roundly faulted for not caring a whit for his neighbor's legs. But more to the point, he's in an infinitely comic *mis*-relation to his own. Beyond the bounds of social status and identities of record, we are something to ourselves. We should – but so often don't – recognize who and what we are, recognize that elusive ‘something’ (or relation) that we are to ourselves, to our limbs and bodily strengths or weaknesses, but also to our loves and fears and aspirations.

Kierkegaard's master-concept *interesse* (or 'interest') is the key to exposing the relatedness that *is* the multifold self (or selves) we are. It appears preeminently in the account of consciousness and doubt in the understudied *Johannes Climacus*. Taking bearings here, Stokes delineates *interesse* as a tacit, non-focal self-awareness (or relatedness) in play while explicit, focal awareness is directed elsewhere. It becomes the center around which Kierkegaard's army of critical and explanatory ideas will march; or better, it consolidates that army by weaving in and around its lines and regiments, the explanatory key not only to passion, subjectivity, and consciousness, but also to vision, vocation, imagination, choice, self-recognition, double reflection, despair, knowledge, and more. Overshadowed by other entries in the lexicon, *interesse* nevertheless is the ever-present key to "our own implicatedness" in the moral worlds we so tenuously inhabit. It points to a "between" (an "inter") holding apart (and together) two levels: it is a "between sort of being." Consciousness is divided such that a "between sort of being" is essential to holding things together, a "between" that even *constitutes* consciousness.

II.

MY IMMEDIATE CONSCIOUSNESS of slipping gets articulated by wildly flailing arms as I aim to catch my balance as I lose it on ice. This immediate awareness of being off balance and needing the corrective that flailing provides has a powerful and tacit counterpart we could identify (roughly) with the fundamental need (seldom forefront in consciousness) to prevent the bodily harm implicit in violent falls. I am directly aware of flailing but not directly aware, at that moment, of the counterpart and non-immediately articulated harm-prevention need. Yet there must be a "between sort of being" that seamlessly holds these two levels of awareness together (and apart) – one more immediately articulated than the other. *Interrese*, then, is an "interested

connective” between a *tacit* self-making vector of fundamental need and sustenance (with its *telos*, “preserve thyself, minimize self-harm!” with its attendant “it’s *you* that’s falling”) and an *explicit* awareness-responsiveness (with *its telos*, “flail until steady!”).

In *The Concept of Mind*, Gilbert Ryle spoke of the systematic elusiveness of the “I” that lies behind any explicit awareness of “I” -- that *has* that explicit awareness, as it were. I failingly seek the “I” that declares “I choose myself”, or says “I see I’m late.” Stokes speaks of the tacit connection between subsurface vectors and more explicit and directly conscious ones as “non-thetic” relatedness to oneself. (126-30) Reliable response to the ‘otherness’ of ice is coordinate with reliable tacit or non-thetic recognition of myself as one who shuns nasty falls or concussions. Of course *after* the flailing, I might *then* bring the counterpart need to explicit attention -- perhaps chastising myself for being deaf to the danger of slick days. But then I will be focally aware of chagrin, regret, embarrassment, and self-chastisement. The counterpart, unarticulated ‘self-recognition’ will be something like acknowledging a need to explain myself to myself after moments of crisis have passed.

If two levels of unfolding consciousness are *properly* linked, they will be aptly kept apart. *Interesse* has a regulative function and can fail as a good “between sort of being”. (59) We know that the ice dancer in the midst of her routine is aware of her body in flow, even though her body is not an explicit, focalized object of consciousness. Were our dancer to think too explicitly, focally, about aspects of *how* her body skims, or how the *crowd* sees her float, she would commence a *mis*-relation to her flowing; *that* sort of awareness leads to falls.

We know that the lover is somehow inchoately aware of herself in love – she has a warm glow about her, and delights in it! Nevertheless, it would be disastrous for her to attend *explicitly* to aspects of her being in love, as she meets her lover for coffee, for example. She

might reflect lovingly on her love in solitary reverie after the assignation, when her lover is absent. But too explicit a focus on being in love can derail her grace in balancing her cappuccino or in negotiating her discussion of *Middlemarch*. In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard gives new meaning to the blindness of love. He writes that love is like an arrow in flight; but if it thinks about itself flying, or looks at how its flying measures up, it will fall like a stone. (144) Leaping a gap between promontories, one looks down -- and with that, instantly plummets.

Of course the impulse to look at one's flight is irresistible, and in retrospect, we stand back to observe. But this non-amorous, reflective project has its dangers, too. Rather than including only a *tacit* acknowledgment of an aspect unseen, one might look at the doubleness of consciousness with a fully objective stare. But then, "As soon as I as spirit become two, I am *eo ipso* three." (45; JC, 169) Looking objectively at myself as a threefold, I'd then become fourfold; staring at *that*, a fivefold, and so on in a dizzying regression. Of course, I might block explicit reflection's tilt toward a regress by letting the standpoint from which I appear explicitly tripartite to continue only under a tacit restraint, the acknowledgment that for my then-operative self, that's enough -- and enough is enough. "Go no further!" my shadowed self declares. It's enough to see that I'm tripartite. And at times it's *too* much to see even *that*. If I am suddenly called to respond to a child in need, all objectively reflective projects are suspended: first-personally, I am SelfPerceptionResponse, unified in a temporally and spatially unsegmented flash. (144)

Tacit unexplicated self-recognition and concern for self are essential, then, as Stokes reconstructs Kierkegaard's *interesse* -- essential to the more overt or immediate engagements of agency, passion, responsiveness, cogitation, or perception. Put somewhat paradoxically, consciousness is based on an "interested relatedness" to pre-consciousness. Alert action

underway is based on an “interested relatedness” to a darkness it dare not know. Love flowers in an “interested relatedness” to what it can and cannot know.

III.

SO FAR WE HAVE LOCATED in the unfolding of fluid action a ‘between sort of being.’ Dancing or losing balance displays the subtle relatedness of shadowed-but-essential self-recognition, on the one hand, and on the other, overt, immediate action. Imagination is crucial here – a “reality-oriented” imagination that *intensifies, sharpens, refines* my dynamic links to world and others. This is *not* imagination as a fantasy-oriented, childish *escape* from the world and its demands. (78f.) As it refines, imagination “brings forth.” (6) Imagination as *instar omnium*, as the “faculty of all faculties” (as Kierkegaard has it), is essential as I *tacitly* acknowledge that my being itself is at stake in avoiding concussions. And it is essential as I strain for a better immediate perception of surfaces ahead: I imagine that *that* might be black ice, and alter my course accordingly. This needn’t be much of a temporal sequence. I might see, and change course simultaneously, much as a quarterback sees an opportunity and responds to it in a single ‘movement’. But where in this complex structure of imaginative awareness and response does specifically *moral* vision, *moral* claim, *moral* imagination or response fit in?

If we take our bearings from a single, exemplary act of simple kindness, or more ambitiously, from the sublime movements of knitting or shop-keeping knights of faith, then the responsive flow of moral adepts turns out to be surprisingly similar to the responsive flow of a fluid dancer. (Johannes de silentio’s dancing knight of faith does not stumble.) This insight can startle! If the moral is at issue, we habitually presuppose moral *struggle*, quandary, or defeat, or disquisitions on the morally *good will* or pure intention, or debates about *principles* of practical

wisdom or about utilitarian *outcomes*. Or we move toward genealogies of how specific configurations of moral or moral-religious imagination evolve and take hold, and we move toward attendant worries about “moral relativism”. But none of this is salient in the discussions at hand.

Startling or not, Kierkegaard sets most of what passes for contemporary moral theory to one side. He begins with an immediacy of meaning taken to be this side of theory or critique. He feels confident, for example, that he can refer to and elaborate “the lily in the field” (or as he says, in the dung heap), without backtracking to explain the hold of moral purity or corruption in Western European cultures, or its specific shapes therein. Kierkegaard evokes the lily confident that a minimal meaning is accessible, the Biblical lily already partially embedded in the milieu he and his audience share. His task is to refine or deepen local moral imagination, to give moral adumbrations.

He assumes, and we assume with him, a minimal acquaintance with the goodness of charity and badness of cruelty, and assumes that we (or his audience) can identify uncontested examples of each. The examples will inhabit a moral space that is shaped by passion, resolve, choice, imagination, and so forth. It would be churlish or petty to contest the purity of lilies or the repulsiveness of dung. This is not to deny the obvious, that there is plenty of display in the Kierkegaardian corpus of alternative interpretations of life – contested interpretations set out as stages or spheres of existence. But such displays are not the development of a moral theory of the right or the good in the manner of Kant or Mill or Hume.

There are several corners from which a sketch of this moral space can begin. Stokes begins and ends his book with a disturbing yet familiar scenario. I “see” or “know” what must be morally done yet am unmoved. You “see” or “know” what must be morally done exactly as I

do, and instantaneously do it. A frightened child (my example) needs help crossing the street. With impeccable moral perception, you see the child in need, see that that situation is *yours*, and deliver apt moral response instantaneously: your sight of the child and reaching for its hand fold into a single response. With what is *apparently* impeccable moral perception – at least *objectively* impeccable perception -- I too see the child in need, know I should respond, but don't. I don't take the situation as *mine*. *Your* objective sight of the child, seeing yourself subjectively implicated in it, and reaching for its hand, meld into a single response. *I* stand idly by, or walk on, inexcusably.

Things could be worse. I could objectively see the moral need but *delight* in not answering it. More demonically, I could see the child's need, know what I should do, and push it violently into traffic. In some cases of moral breakdown an objectively impeccable moral eye is coextensive with evil or demonic disregard. Hannibal Lecter is remarkable for his fine-tuned objective moral discernments and his fine-tuned implication in evil, his evil tastes.

When perception and its coordinate tacit self are moral through and through, impeccable perception flexes back to implicate that morally good-enough self *that I am* -- and that I *recognize* that I am. Unfortunately, well short of being evil, I can nevertheless operate only partly in moral space. My *objectively* adequately moral perception of the needy child might implicate me only as "a dispassionate objective viewer." My operative self (at the moment) would then be but an objective recorder, someone who notes down a 'child-in-need event' as part of an anthropological survey. A richer response flexes back to implicate a richer self (and a tacit richer self tacitly 'projects' a richer response). Then I identify a child's need, not just as an onlooker, but as someone morally engaged. I know where I stand, and my limbs move

effortlessly to help. Moral perception, response, and person are of a piece, like the dancer's graceful flow across ice.

Interesse holds the duplexity of immediate and not-so-immediate consciousness together, and ties my moral perception to the sort of perceiver I might be -- and also ties my actual situation to the situation I hope for or think should be realized. There can be an actual-ideal seamless co-extensiveness. I see exactly in what *is* exactly what *should* be. But this seamlessness can be absent or broken in any number of ways. My child is about to step into the street, I feel faint, grasp for a steadying pole, and fail to grasp her. My reality (I miss her arm) is severed from my moral aspiration (to have grabbed her). Moral perception is successful when I am not explicitly aware of any gaps: the perceived need to aid the child is continuous with my actually aiding her. When gaps between reality and aspiration obtrude, the necessity of *interesse*, better perception, and better implicated selves is accentuated.

IV.

ALTHOUGH STOKES CANNOT offer a full-fledged reading of *Works of Love*, he brings his rich discussions of self-recognition and imaginative perception of others to bear on this text. I'll give what I take to be key aspects of his reading, providing elaborative illustrations that I hope convey its spirit and detail without straying too far beyond it. Stokes reminds us that in discussing neighbor and preferential love, Kierkegaard says "your wife must be first and foremost to you the neighbor; that she is your wife is then a more precise specification of your particular relation to each other." (136).

In *A Doll's House* (my example), Ibsen has Hosmer say to Nora, "First and foremost are your duties as a wife and mother!" Nora says, "I no longer think that: first and foremost I am a

human being!” Nora might have said, “I am to be loved first and foremost as a person, second, as wife and mother.” (And some years earlier, in exasperation, she might have said, “*If only God would command that my person comes first!*”) Now if in the drama’s present Nora *renounces* her status as wife and mother, nevertheless, at least as Kierkegaard has it, she must *still* be loved as a person. Whatever else is owed to the person next to you (the neighbor), at the least you must love them, treat them, regard them, as persons, or as objects of singular worth in God’s eyes. Now it’s obvious that whoever is next to you can hardly be *solely* a person. He or she will be a store clerk, wife or fellow-sailor, a favorite uncle or friend. But these titles mark a “more precise qualification” of *just being human* – being “the neighbor”. Nora’s humanity suffuses whatever other status she might have – say “womanhood,” or unknowing but skillful “domestic.” Her role as wife and mother is at the moment contested. If we *hear* her desperate testimony, for her to have endured solely as wife, for her to have had “wife” put *first* – would mean that she has thereby failed to exist.

Ideally, persons (and husbands) see wives as persons *and* wives. Imagination works to enable such perception of two or more tiers or aspects at once. One sees “person-my-wife-graceful-dance partner” in a single flash, perhaps one aspect salient, but all present. And imagination can undo tiers or aspects that others see. In *A Doll’s House*, Nora struggles out from under being solely a doll, then out from under being a wife and mother, to declare herself first and foremost “a human being.” Her struggles open up the necessity for there being *commands* to love -- where none are present in “preferential love.” Her husband is blind enough to need a command to straighten him out (though there is little chance he will hear it).

My preferential relation to my favorite uncle or student will take care of itself, let’s suppose, without any need of external imperatives or commands, divine or otherwise. Yet I may

need a sharp and emphatic command when I am tempted *not* to love those without allure, for whom I have no preference, and perhaps have an aversion; when I fail to acknowledge as persons those deserving regard, and perforce thus exclude them from love; or when I pass by the deserving dead whom I may hardly know at all (I think of those listed on a war memorial). To love another as human (or ‘neighbor’) or at least show them tender regard when I feel nothing immediately but aversion or passing indifference, or when I know little about them, may be a perfectionist demand -- but it is no less intelligible or admirable for that. The dictum “Love Thy Neighbor” counteracts the inclination to love only those who stand in special relations of preference to us -- and to love them only so far as we grant the claims of that special role to be pertinent to us. If I am a *mench*, however, I will see as persons both those *in* favor and *out* of favor, and perhaps some who are neither in nor out.

Nora may have moved out of her nominal husband’s favor; he certainly has no preference for her as she has now become. But Nora remains a person, or in Kierkegaard’s idiom, a neighbor. If I am beholden to see those both in and out of favor as persons, I can ask why others aren’t too. So I might ask to be loved (or regarded) *first and foremost as a human being* -- whether I happen to be (and you favor) rich or poor, white or black, female or male, student or teacher, gay or straight, mother or daughter, old or young. The harried mother pleads with her teenagers, *Just treat me like a human being!* In a theological idiom, we are *commanded* to love the person (not just the attire or role in which they now appear).

The ideality and generality of being human co-exist in imagination with concrete particularity. In good enough moral perception, I strip off neither your particularity, nor your ideality. I love (and prefer) your special way with children and plants, even as I see that like all mortals you will suffer loneliness and death, and that claims to love will arise from these very

general features of your person (my example). Schopenhauer addresses persons not as “dear Reader” but as “fellow sufferers.” Preferential love is non-general, not for “humanity in general.” It is for particulars rather than for mothers or neighbors or mortals or victims *en masse*.

If moral vision allows me to see you both as friend and as mortal, this vision flexes back to implicate my tacit moral stance: am I a self who loves *only* what I prefer? Well, do I *prefer* mortals or humanity? (As opposed to what?) Am I a self who can answer a command to love even those who are objects of reservation, or my *aversion*? Of course in the best of cases, self-reflexive non-preferential love for neighbors (or persons generally) completes itself in relation to particular neighbors or persons, one by one – she with a dog in tow, he with a cap askew, she with a severe bearing. Or in a more heartbreaking case, I see the emaciated ill-clad child before me both as a particular starving child with an adorable smile and as one of thousands who are victim to genocide. (140-41)

The universal thus shimmers in the particular. Seeing the lily, I see purity and the hand of the divine. Seeing the hand of the divine does not compete with seeing a lily, any more than seeing a starving child competes with seeing global disaster. Just so (as I hear Stokes), my attention to your particular startling beauty (and my preference for it) is compatible with simultaneous wonder that such persons exist at all – just as *persons*, beyond startling beauty (or lack of it), and that *you* are one of them. And I should think it would be compatible with wonder even at whatever hand has come to add to the earth such bloom.

V.

THERE ARE MARVELOUS chapters here, with more themes of great interest than I can possibly cover in a short review. I’ve said nothing about Stokes’ provocative and illuminating discussion of

mirrors (Ch 7) – how the face of another can serve as a mirror in which we can see ourselves (for good or ill). Self-recognition *requires* the face of others. At the limit, as Kierkegaard has it, we live under the gaze of God. (108) Might I also live under the gaze of my cat, or my son – each face resonating with a tacit self that is operative at the moment? I’ve said nothing about Stokes’ fine discussion of subjectivity and objective knowledge, how it’s possible to do mathematics or genetics (where we seek objectivity above all) without jettisoning the self’s subjectivity. (Ch. 10) I can surely *know myself subjectively* as a lover of astronomy and of stars even as my focalized attention is on stars as objective targets and not at all on *me*. I have not mentioned his discussion of volition, and the Sartrean distortion of Judge Wilhelm’s injunction to *choose* oneself -- as if self-choice meant looking at mug-shots of possible future selves I might be (or become) and then choosing . . . well, *that* one as myself. And responsibility for self then becomes less a choice (of the self that I am and will be) than a strong yet tacit sense of the moral seriousness of the journey toward whomever I will have become. (167) We act forward but understand only backward. In another context, Stokes reminds us that to be ‘interested’ in one’s perceiving (and thus implicated in one’s moral perception) is not to be selfish or ego-centric. In finding you in the scope of my moral vision I’m crucially interested, implicated, but not in myself *rather* than you (which would be self-centered). I regard you wholeheartedly, and tacitly recognize that it is *I* who is wholehearted. But to have a focused regard for *you* is quite other than being focused wholly on *me*.

Stokes presents *interesse* as a structural feature of the self, in contradistinction to passion. (165) If *interesse* is self-constituting and indispensable, passion can be self-disruptive. It can be a dissipating free-floating swoon or a self-destructive onslaught of irrational anger; it can be, at another extreme, an excessively detached dispassion, or cynical indifference. Structurally,

proper passion needs a self-reflective link to a tacit sense of self, and in both excess and deficit, *interesse* has a separate and essential role as a bridge between immediacy of expression and deeper regions of self from which expression springs.

Stokes quotes from Eckhart: in relation to God, one will “see God’s image in all things.” In the same sentence, Eckhart says that all things *taste* of God. (127) This raises a large question about privileging vision over other modes of perception in a “theory of moral perceptualism.” Can we have transforming and self-constituting taste, touch, or smell? Political society can have a moral stench, self-recognition can be a matter of being in touch. We speak of the touch of love. We can thirst after God, and smell the divine in the lily. Our sense of being grounded, morally or religiously, might be like the proprioceptive sense of the position of our limbs and of where we stand – a perception that is non-visual, even non-passional, and perhaps even like Kant’s *sensus communis*. Moral perception, or perception of the divine, we might think, can be tracked through several *modes* of perception.

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IN A WONDERFUL EXHIBIT of archival retrieval, Patrick Stokes has written a fine account of an underappreciated theme, *interesse*, as it crops up here and there through the course of the Kierkegaardian *oeuvre*, its systematic implications heretofore largely unnoticed. This careful and creative tracking allows us to see anew the familiar philosophical motifs that become the bread and butter of so much Kierkegaard commentary – subjectivity, selfhood, passion, love, imagination, and so forth. It is no small achievement to have opened the door to a reassessment or reconfiguration of this presumably familiar territory. But I found in working slowly through the successive chapters of this book that Stokes was accomplishing just that. He’s found a

powerful new prism through which to cast the beams of the enigmatic texts that concern us, and through which to grasp anew what moral vocation or vision might mean.