

Kierkegaard, Language and the Reality of God

By Steven Shakespeare

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Disagreement has sometimes been rife as to whether Kierkegaard is a 'realist' or 'anti-realist' about religious language. In this book, Steven Shakespeare wants to get beyond this 'arid stalemate', and presents a Kierkegaard committed to something called 'ethical realism', which rejects both 'metaphysical realism' and the view that language about God expresses nothing more than human spiritual ideals.

Chapter 1 opens with an overview of (at least one version of) the realism/anti-realism debate. (It is slightly disorienting that this takes place before a clear overview of the book's plan is given: see pp. 25–7 for the latter). At this point, I should flag a worry. It is sometimes hard to work out exactly where Shakespeare stands on the realism/anti-realism debate. Early on, he tells us that his 'ethical realist' Kierkegaard will turn out to occupy a position 'somewhere between the two' positions (p. 22), but elsewhere he endorses D. Z. Phillips' view that both terms are in fact 'battle cries in a confused philosophical and theological debate' (pp. 228n). If the opposite of a confusion is another confusion – the response Phillips tends to make in denying the charge of being an anti-realist – then the prospects for positions 'in between' two confusions do not seem much healthier.

Shakespeare recognises the importance of seeing that the content of Kierkegaard's authorship cannot be divorced from its form, and this impacts on his entire reading. Chapter 2 sets Kierkegaard in historical and philosophical context via a discussion of empiricist, romantic and idealist views of language, including a discussion of such figures as Hamann, Fichte, Hegel, Grundtvig and Heiberg. By chapter 3, Kierkegaard is ready to enter the stage. What emerges here is that, contrary to the desires of some figures in the history of philosophy, language does not give us 'a direct and unmediated access to reality as it is in itself' (p. 25). Neither is the self directly present to itself: self-consciousness depends upon reflection and therefore language. These twin facts have important ramifications for communication. It is a central Kierkegaardian claim that ethical and religious communication have at their very core an irreducibly first-personal dimension. But if the self is by its very nature mysterious and obscure, Shakespeare claims, ethical and religious communication 'must articulate possibilities for existing, indirectly luring the self into heightened consciousness and commitment' (p. 25). This is one way in which the importance emerges of communication being 'indirect'. (But interestingly, Shakespeare notes how Kierkegaard's voices are sometimes attracted to the very antithesis of indirection: the possibility of a direct, wordless encounter with God, uncluttered by the mess of language. In this respect, the discussion of Abraham in *Fear and Trembling* can be linked with the idea of being 'transparent' to God in texts such as *The Sickness Unto Death*.) There are interesting discussions of individual texts here, such as the failed attempt to demarcate language from music in *Either/Or*. We reach the unsurprising conclusion that for Kierkegaard 'Truth cannot be reduced to propositional truth' (pp. 70ff.), but also the idea that 'The divine Word is the archetype for the human word' (pp. 79ff.). What this means is not that God's Word

provides ‘an ultimate foundation for meaning’ (p. 84), but that it is exemplary in its paradoxicality, mystery and indirection. *Practice in Christianity* insists that Christ, the God-man, is the ultimate sign of contradiction: unable to react to the God-man purely cognitively, therefore, we must react, if we are to react at all, practically, existentially. In other words, one important dimension of the idea that indirect communication involves setting the recipient free is that ‘how we choose to interpret some signs is not just a question for epistemology or semantics, but for ethics and faith. Some riddles are not just intellectual curiosities, but questions posed to our whole way of thinking and living’ (p. 81).

All this takes us, in chapter 4, into a consideration of the connections between language and seduction. Shakespeare explores the deceits of *Either/Or*’s Johannes the Seducer, pointing out that this is central to his topic insofar as, in *Either/Or*, ‘Women are associated with those aspects of reality – dreams, myth, poetry – which Romantic authors took to articulate truths which could not be captured by propositional language’ (pp. 91–2). The seducer desires to control such ‘otherness’, and his uses of language aim at this end: ‘communication’ becomes less that, and more a matter of power and domination. But Shakespeare aims to show that this is doomed, partly because the seducer, at the same time as wanting to control and dominate woman is, *ipso facto*, utterly dependent upon her. What the seducer indirectly shows us, for Shakespeare, is that whatever ethical or religious ideal would fill the void left by the seducer’s doomed nihilism must avoid both ‘an extreme idealization of language and creativity to the point where any constraint on subjective self-creation is abolished’, and ‘an extreme idealization of a lost immediacy, when reality was transparently knowable’ (p. 109).

If language cannot precisely capture reality, it becomes tempting to suppose that a direct, wordless encounter with God might be possible. At times, Kierkegaard seems to be attracted to this idea: most famously, perhaps, in Johannes de Silentio’s treatment in *Fear and Trembling* of Abraham’s (largely) silent encounter with God. But in chapter 5, Shakespeare shows how silence ‘also risks being a contentless abstraction which can be filled by any humanly constructed content’ (p. 115). Thus it can be a form of cowardice and evasion, or worse: *Fear and Trembling* and *The Concept of Anxiety* both show silence’s potential to be ‘demonic’ (p. 128).

Chapter 6 aims to set out, via a reading of several texts from *The Concept of Irony* onwards, the ‘ethical realism’ that Shakespeare sees Kierkegaard as endorsing. Shakespeare, though clearly influenced by anti-realists such as Don Cupitt, does not ultimately want to endorse such a position. Accordingly, against commentators who emphasize such anti-realist sounding claims as Anti-Climacus’ that ‘God is that all things are possible’, Shakespeare insists that the conclusion sometimes drawn from this – that God refers to nothing beyond the self in its ideal, infinite form – does not follow. Shakespeare insists that the self is ‘derivative, established by an irreducible relation to an otherness that is not its own’ (p. 173). Shakespeare’s central idea is that something of Kierkegaard’s God is ‘shown’ in the way Kierkegaard’s texts are structured. Such texts of indirect communication, insofar as their author is ‘hidden’ and insofar as they respect the ‘otherness’ of the reader by ‘throwing’ him into freedom, ‘provide a practical analogy for the creativity of God’ (p. 179). God’s reality becomes known through how our own existence is transformed. As I understand Shakespeare, what prevents this being a variety of anti-realism is that in this process we are ‘wholly receptive’ to something genuinely ‘other’, as well as ‘wholly responsible and free’ (p. 27).

In chapter 7, Shakespeare takes this idea further, tackling the important question of how, if we cannot describe the transcendent without betraying its transcendence, we are to speak of God at all. Here Kierkegaard finds a surprising ally, Aquinas, as Shakespeare draws on the latter’s view of the importance of analogy in our talk of God. Analogy steers a middle course between God-talk that strives for an inappropriate certainty, and having to rest content with total silence about the divine. The idea behind what Shakespeare calls ‘the analogy of

communication' is that, just as a Kierkegaardian author is hidden, so God is hidden in the 'text' of creation (p. 183). God can be known only in 'the practice of faith hope and love' (p. 183). In other words, from a disengaged perspective, God cannot be 'known' at all. 'Knowing God' becomes a possibility only for the passionately engaged, and through the choices and struggles of a life of faith. But the idea here is not of faith as a kind of promissory note which, once presented, makes clear what was previously obscure. A key role for the idea of analogy is preserved, in that while faith claims that it is God who makes 'language, communication and creativity possible' (p. 184), it does not claim to be able to explain *how* God does this. This has significant implications for some much disputed Kierkegaardian passages. For instance, there is a famous journal entry in which Kierkegaard claims: 'When the believer has faith, the absurd is not the absurd—faith transforms it' (JP 1: 10). Shakespeare plausibly and interestingly reads this not as meaning 'that the paradox receives some conceptual resolution for faith, but that the believer learns to relate to it in ways other than the conceptual' (p. 203).

In the final chapter, Shakespeare seeks to compare some 'post-modern' readings of Kierkegaard with readings rooted in narrative theology, the former coming out on top. However, the full potential of narrative approaches to Kierkegaard is not explored. This is partly because the 'narrativism' Shakespeare discusses is rooted entirely within theology. It is an interesting and open question as to whether the recent turn towards narrative in ethics – in such thinkers as Macintyre, Nussbaum, Ricoeur and others – might not have something important to say here.

This book has much to commend it. Though Shakespeare is clearly influenced by Derrida, the book is – for the most part – written in a clearer and more accessible prose than is often the case with those similarly influenced. The summaries at the end of each chapter provide useful summaries for orientation.

I shall mention here just a couple of gripes. At one point, Shakespeare makes the interesting suggestion that in Kierkegaard's texts, 'Concepts like "sin", "despair", "revelation", and so on may function more as limit concepts ...less as positive referents than as negative concepts which point beyond semantics to the need for a practical, existential response' (p. 73). But sometimes, Shakespeare allows his sympathy to such a line to sanction using other terms – terms that do have far more of a positive concrete content in Kierkegaard – rather too vaguely. 'Irony' is often used in such a way, especially by those of a deconstructive bent. But Shakespeare also plays somewhat fast and loose with the term 'satire', several Kierkegaardian texts being said to be 'satirical' in contexts where, as far as I can work out, all Shakespeare means is something like 'self-subverting' (e.g. p. 172). The problem with this is that it comes dangerously close to presenting a Kierkegaard who falls foul of his own objection to the ironist who, he insists, must occupy a distinct ethical position if he is to avoid 'infinite absolute negativity'. A text might be self-subverting for a very good reason – say, to show a reader his temptations towards a position which he is ultimately brought to see as confused – but this would need to be shown on a text by text basis. It seems to me that Shakespeare reaches his conclusion that 'Kierkegaard's religious discourses ...ironically deconstruct themselves, betraying the impossibility of their ideal by the contradictions inherent in trying to present it' (p. 128) rather too quickly.

Second, and relatedly, some of Shakespeare's claims seem rather bolder than the evidence provided actually supports. While there may indeed be something ironic about the need to use language in order to recommend silence, I don't see what justifies the claim that such an ironical recommendation 'creates new possibilities of self-knowledge by calling our whole reflective standpoint into question' (p. 124). Equally hasty seems the conclusion that 'there is no narrative which does not contain within itself an irreducible reference to that which it cannot represent' (p. 129). I don't see how this very broad claim can be substantiated in the

way in which Shakespeare attempts to substantiate it, namely by a reading of one particular narrative (the story of Abraham in *Fear and Trembling*).

Nevertheless, despite such occasional tendencies to overplay his hand, Shakespeare's is a well-written, frequently engaging study on an important subject, and is well worth reading.