

## BOOK REVIEWS

### The *Event* of Kierkegaard's Thought

*Kierkegaard's Instant: On Beginnings*

by David J. Kangas

Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007. 256 pp.

ISBN: 0-253-34859-5. \$35.00. Cloth.

*Review by Mark J. Fratoni*

Kierkegaard may be a 19<sup>th</sup> Century philosopher, but David Kangas's book *Kierkegaard's Instant: On Beginnings* is not a work in the history of philosophy. This is not to say that Kangas, who currently works as a Lecturer in philosophy at Santa Clara University in Berkeley, CA and has also served as translator and member of the editorial board for the forthcoming critical edition of *Kierkegaard's Journals and Notebooks*, lacks a grasp of the history of philosophy. On the contrary, his extensive background in Neoplatonism and German Idealism inform his reading of Kierkegaard. Rather, Kangas's book is not a work in the history of philosophy because it does not take questions concerning the origins of Kierkegaard's thought as primary, and it does not attempt to systematically unpack the significance of Kierkegaard's thought for later thinkers. To approach Kierkegaard historically would reduce his thought to a fixed moment in a totality. In Kangas's strikingly original reading, he liberates Kierkegaard from the burden of being "an individualist," an "irrationalist," or "the first existentialist." Rather, Kangas attends to the *event* of Kierkegaard's thought: "An event signifies what is still underway, that whose meaning is not yet secured" (p. 39). An event introduces a rupture in the continuity of history. Kierkegaard does not belong to an epoch; his thought participates in the very spacing of history.

Kangas's book is a meditation on the philosophy of time in Kierkegaard's early work. The term "instant" introduced in the title refers to "a beginning that cannot be interiorized, appropriated, recollected, represented, or possessed" (p. 4). Whereas German Idealist philosophers such as Hegel and Fichte understand self-consciousness as absolute ground, capable of fully possessing itself, Kangas's central thesis is that for Kierkegaard the instant of the subject's coming-into-being remains refractory in principle to self-

consciousness. Self-consciousness is always too late to appropriate the event of its own coming-into-being.

What is at stake in this philosophy of time is a theory of subjectivity. If the subject is constituted in a moment that is in principle unrepresentable and prior to presence, then a fundamental fracture is built into the structure of subjectivity. Kangas asserts that “the distinctive mark of Kierkegaard’s thought . . . is to show the ineradicable difference and nonidentity at the heart of self-consciousness” (p. 196). An absolute otherness resides at the core of the subject; this is what Kangas calls “the exteriority of interiority” (p. 195). Thus, Kierkegaard “reopen[s] the question of transcendence by means of the question of beginning” (p. 4); what is at stake in Kierkegaard’s break from German Idealism is the very possibility of anything outside the subject.

Part of what this reading opens up is a critique of the tendency in Kierkegaard scholarship to take the stages of existence (aesthetic, ethical, and religious) as different phases in a temporal totality, which turns Kierkegaard into a philosopher of development, positing stages that aim at the telos of authenticity in the religious stage. Kangas argues instead that this traditional reading is ironically Hegelian (Kierkegaard would merely be translating the teleological form of Hegel’s thought into the register of existence). In Kangas’s view, each stage represents a different stance vis-a-vis the groundlessness opened up by the instant.

Kangas moves from Kierkegaard’s philosophy of time to his theory of the subject to the existential/spiritual problematic opened by that theory of the subject. Kangas argues that “the trajectory of idealism, and perhaps the destiny of the West, is to have expelled any essential vulnerability from the conception of the subject” (p. 197). However, if as Kierkegaard maintains, the subject cannot appropriate its own beginning, then it is fundamentally vulnerable because it is groundless, without foundation. Kangas argues that for Kierkegaard faith is releasement, in other words—“becoming one’s own groundlessness, becoming nothing, letting go of one’s self-understanding as foundation, letting go of the conception of being (and of God) as what grounds and secures the self’s being” (p. 197). In other words, Kangas locates Kierkegaard in the trajectory of Meister Eckhart, who first used the term releasement (*Gelassenheit*) in the context of Western spirituality. Thus, although Kangas approaches Kierkegaard’s early texts with all the rigor of a professional philosopher, his religious studies background greatly enhances his analysis. All too often, philosophers have simply ignored or minimized

the religious dimension of Kierkegaard's texts; Kangas's knowledge of both the Western philosophical and religious traditions allows him to see clearly the centrality of religious questions in Kierkegaard's work.

Kangas's awareness of the significance of Kierkegaard's work for spiritual praxis gives his book a relevance that extends beyond his primary audience of philosophy and religion graduate students and scholars. In his conclusion, Kangas argues that his reading of Kierkegaard leads to the concrete stance of "accepting suffering in terms of its general possibility, for the very subjectivity of the subject lies in its suffering temporalization" (p. 197). He ultimately concludes with a reference to Kierkegaard's edifying discourses which, he argues, "address the human condition in terms of this irremissible exposure, this suffering, its inability to posit time" (p. 198). (Here's hoping that the sequel to this book will be on the unfairly neglected edifying discourses!). Although Kangas writes in scholarly prose that may not be easily accessible to laypeople, he reads Kierkegaard with an eye toward what is at stake for spiritual praxis—namely, a spirituality beyond consolation that accepts the reality of suffering as it is, rather than using God as a ground of meaning that justifies and redeems suffering. Thus, educated clergy and laypeople, as well as spiritual practitioners in a variety of traditions could benefit from wrestling with Kangas's reading of Kierkegaard.

As a clinical psychologist in training, I also see the potential import of Kangas's book for psychotherapy. So, for example, in his chapter on *Either/Or I*, Kangas reads Kierkegaard as offering a "phenomenology of trauma":

The trauma is less an experience than a quasi-experience, for what defines trauma is a tear in the fabric of presence itself. Consciousness is exposed to more than it can integrate and, unlike the experience of the sublime, does not recuperate itself in a secondary moment. The effect of the traumatic event is a dephasing of consciousness from its own temporality: the temporal "now" is no longer lived as an integral moment, relating to past-present and future-present, but placed out of time and out of being. (p. 53)

The eloquence with which Kangas manages to describe "experiences" in which the subject runs aground on its own limits makes his book relevant for philosophically-minded psychotherapists interested in developing a vocabulary appropriate to the suffering of their patients. Furthermore, Kangas's emphasis on the absolute limits of the subject's ability to posit itself calls

into question any approach to psychotherapy that would make something like “agency” or “the construction of meaning” its primary goal.

Students of Levinas will hear in Kangas’s approach to the theme of beginnings in Kierkegaard the echoes of some key Levinasian concepts like anarcho in *Otherwise than Being* (1974/1981), diachrony in “Diachrony and Representation” (1982/1987), and hypostasis in the early text *Existence and Existents* (1947/1978). Furthermore, Levinas’s critique of theodicy in essays like “Useless Suffering” (1982/1998) and “Transcendence and Evil” (1978/1987) seems to have influenced the existential/spiritual problematic Kangas opens through his analysis of Kierkegaard’s texts. However, Kangas does not do violence to Kierkegaard by reducing him to a mere precursor to Levinas or something like “the original postmodern philosopher” (in the way that Sartre, for instance, tried to turn every philosopher he could find into an existentialist). Kangas is clearly influenced by 20<sup>th</sup> Century thinkers such as Levinas, Derrida, Nancy, and Shurmann, but like the jazz musician who “learns his scales and then forgets them,” Kangas has assimilated their ideas and is now using them to do something uniquely his own.

*Kierkegaard’s Instant* is tightly argued; Kangas lays out his central thesis in the introduction and conclusion with astonishing economy. Furthermore, each of the six chapters is about one of Kierkegaard’s early texts which Kangas uses to demonstrate his central thesis. Kangas devotes a chapter to each of the following texts: *The Concept of Irony, Either/Or 1*, *Johannes Climacus (De omnibus dubitandum est)*, *Repetition, Fear and Trembling*, and *The Concept of Anxiety*. Although all the chapters are thematically related and flow well together, they could easily be read as self-contained essays. Someone with a particular interest in *The Concept of Anxiety*, for example, could profit from reading the chapter devoted to it without reading the entire book. Thus, part of the value of Kangas’s book is that the notion of the instant that Kangas unearths serves as a hermeneutic key that allows for fresh readings of many of Kierkegaard’s most famous works.

Style is no mere secondary consideration when reviewing a book about Kierkegaard—certainly one of the most “literary” of all philosophers, along with Nietzsche. Given that Kangas, in true apophatic fashion, has in some sense written a book about that which is impossible to speak, his prose style is impressively lucid. He manages to unpack the aporetic moments in Kierkegaard’s texts without watering them down or falling prey to oversimplification. Although Kangas demonstrates deep familiarity with the material, his prose sparkles with the joy of surprise, and in this sense,

he *performs* the theory of temporality he describes in Kierkegaard's work. Kangas's work transcends exegesis; rather than merely writing *about* philosophy, he *does* philosophy.

In conclusion, as the subtitle reminds us, *Kierkegaard's Instant* is a meditation on beginnings—multiple layers of beginnings. It examines the theme of beginnings in the context of Kierkegaard's early work (the beginning of his philosophical canon). It is also the first book by David Kangas, marking the beginning of what we can only hope (in a decidedly un-Kierkegaardian mode of anticipation) will be a series of books as exciting and original as this.

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### Notes

1. An echo of Lacan's (1986/1992) term "extimacy" can be heard here.