

authentic repetition, by suggesting this requires a conversation with the dead that must be ‘frank and ongoing’. He continues: ‘*Authenticity liberates the possibility of choosing one’s own ancestors,*’ and in particular choosing ‘*someone who fosters the becoming of who one already is, someone whom one “makes one’s own” through elective affiliation and unconditional allegiance.*’

Whether or not Harrison’s analysis of Heideggerean ontology strays into the anthropological or not, I do like the idea of choosing one’s ancestors as an act of liberation. I’ve felt rather disaffected with mine, and plan to recruit some new ones as soon as possible. If that’s escapism, not authenticity, who’s to say?

From the perspective of therapeutic practice rather than academia, *The Dominion of the Dead* is short on what I would call real death, for want of a better term, rather than the literary or philosophical variety. I mean the kind of death that occurs when someone you know or love dies or is dying, perhaps slowly, perhaps painfully, perhaps unexpectedly. The kind of death that is talked about in therapy. The deaths that leave families unravelled, that cause financial distress, that bring the dread of loneliness, or that rob us of a particular future we imagined. The ordinary and extraordinary deaths of refugees, or children, or celebrities, or grandparents, or airline passengers, or our pet. The forms of death we fear, or hope, for ourselves.

This wasn’t Harrison’s intent or realm of inquiry, and his book can’t be faulted on these grounds. His academic ‘dominion’ is determinedly generalised, large-scale, and distant from the everyday – notwithstanding his inclusion of particular historical examples and anthropological evidence. Nevertheless, despite its emotional remoteness, I think the book does offer the practitioner an important view of a larger context for the particular experiences of death we may hear about in our consulting rooms. It is a helpful enlargement of our thinking about death, and a call to pay heed to the importance of the cultural legacy of the dead, including our own ancestors, whether chosen or given. Perhaps giving our dead ‘a future’, as Harrison suggests, may be one possibility to consider as we each face the inevitable deaths to come.

Andrew Miller

Soren Kierkegaard: Subjectivity, Irony & the Crisis of Modernity

Jon Stewart (2015). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

I had high expectations of this book having enjoyed an online course of the same name that preceded this publication. Jon Stewart, who also led the online course, clearly has a passion for Kierkegaard, one that is brought to life by the illustrations and depictions of life in and around Copenhagen in the nineteenth century.

I was not disappointed. This book is written with the same precision and

passion that Stewart teaches with, and, for me, the passion is contagious. It is a book that clarifies some of the more obscure and academic aspects of the enigmatic and controversial Søren Kierkegaard's life and writings, whilst also giving it a contemporary feel and relevance.

As I read the book I could see the relevance of Kierkegaard's writings in my work as a psychotherapist. Yet I also wrestled with its applications, in an aporetic state at times, feeling lost, but engaged, in the enormity and profundity of his thinking.

In his preface to this book the author Jon Stewart sets out his stall clearly in terms of his approach to looking at Kierkegaard's work and life, and also in terms of the contents of the book. He wants to look at the 'central strand' of his thought which derives from Socrates and, in doing so, seeks to explicate Kierkegaard's method, motivation and style of writing. This Socratic strand, Stewart argues, is present throughout Kierkegaard's writings.

He differentiates his book from other introductory works on Kierkegaard, many of which have looked at the 'so-called stages of existence' i.e. the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious/spiritual. Stewart is critical of this 'cliché' saying that it is too schematic and that Kierkegaard himself may not have conceived of his work in this holistic sense, arguing that the repetition of this scheme in secondary literature has promoted its centrality.

Stewart is also keen not to separate Kierkegaard's biography from his thought and instead seeks to contextualise this geographically, historically, and temporally.

Interweaving Kierkegaard's life with his work paints a vivid picture of a somewhat isolated and aloof man, an introverted, but provocative figure to those around him whose own passion for theology, philosophy and literature would lead him to become such an influential writer and thinker.

Finally, Stewart adds that, whilst he wishes to highlight Kierkegaard's genius he should not be placed on a pedestal, as he believes he has been by apologists in secondary literature, but rather seen for who he was: 'a human being with the shortcomings and weaknesses of other human beings'.

The Crisis of Modernity, Irony, and Subjectivity

Whilst Jon Stewart is an academic (Professor at the Søren Kierkegaard Research Centre at the University of Copenhagen), and his work scholarly, from the beginning of the book, and throughout, he writes in an accessible and open style. This would seemingly offer something both to those coming to Kierkegaard for the first time, and to others who may have read Kierkegaard before but for whom Stewart provides additional background and a fresh approach.

The title of his book immediately draws the reader's attention to themes that run throughout the text. To take the title from back to front: Stewart opens his book by inviting the reader to reflect on 21st Century living and

to contemplate our place in the world, particularly with regards to technology, alienation and instability. He then introduces Kierkegaard as a Danish ‘gadfly’, a philosopher, literary author, psychologist, and theologian who provoked, inspired, and irritated his contemporaries, always thinking as he walks the streets of Copenhagen. The influence of Socrates is already clear.

Kierkegaard’s second published book *The Concept of Irony* (1841) was actually originally written as his master’s thesis at the University of Copenhagen and reflects his interest in Greek culture and literature, specifically around the life and thoughts of Socrates. It discusses irony in the way it is used critically to question beliefs, thoughts, and assumptions that we might hold about a range of fundamental ideas about how we choose to live.

In fact Stewart sees *The Concept of Irony* as an essential text if we want to understand his philosophical and religious thinking, even though it has been somewhat dismissed both by critics, and indeed Kierkegaard himself, as an insignificant early work.

Kierkegaard was fascinated by Socratic dialogue and the apparent negation of any solid outcome or conclusion of his interlocutors. Socrates would bring others to a state of aporia (‘being at a loss’, or ‘being unable to answer’; Stewart, 2015: p 14). However, after further reflection Kierkegaard saw that the result of this was not purely negative but would lead to a deeply subjective sense and re-evaluation of one’s beliefs or values.

‘Socrates led his interlocutors into the process of philosophical thinking, since they could not simply be passive recipients of a teaching presented by Socrates or someone else’ (*ibid*, p 15).

Here we can see not only the roots of Kierkegaard’s own philosophy and style of writing, but also a foundation for later thinking in the field of existential psychotherapy.

Context and Irony

Throughout the book Stewart contextualises the development of Kierkegaard’s thinking. For example, he looks at the time Kierkegaard attended the University of Copenhagen and of the popularity of Hegel at the University at that time. He also looks at the influence of some of Kierkegaard’s peers and lecturers at the time (e.g. Martensen). All of this would provide a platform for Kierkegaard to engage in critical dialogue with the ideas that would become central to his work: autonomy; freedom; subjectivity, and so on.

In particular Stewart considers Kierkegaard’s examination of Hegel’s interpretation of Socrates with regards to individual freedom and the story of modern existence (*ibid*, p 44). For both Hegel and Kierkegaard their interest in Socrates was not only a historical one but one where, ‘Socrates was a symbol of the constellation of modern issues that concern freedom, alienation, and relativism – the problems of our world of the twenty-first

century' (*ibid*, p 45).

Where Kierkegaard would take issue with Hegel was over the evolutionary notion of his dialectic resulting in an 'Absolute Spirit', instead again emphasising the importance of individual autonomy.

Further on in the book Stewart considers Kierkegaard's concept of irony, and in particular the influence of the Danish scholar Johann Ludvig Heiberg, who himself was heavily influenced by Hegel's historical perspective. Stewart here describes Kierkegaard's concept of irony as a subjective, authentic stance in the face of prevailing social norms and trends.

'For Kierkegaard, the ironist is the one who perceives the present crisis clearly. But the ironist has no clear picture of what the future will hold. He has only vague intuitions. Thus, his goal is less to build the future than to expose the contradictions of the present' (*ibid*, p 78).

Once again here I can see the influence of this on contemporary existential psychotherapy.

I am reminded of an article recently in *The Guardian* by Oliver Burkeman ('Therapy Wars' 7th January, 2016) challenging the apparent efficacy of CBT as the current dominant therapeutic model. Whilst Burkeman focusses on recent research done at the Tavistock in favour of psychoanalysis I also feel that existential psychotherapy too offers a valid alternative to CBT.

The existential psychotherapist here can be seen as the ironist, one who rather than aim to correct the person's, questionably, faulty cognitive and behavioural disposition would instead help illuminate and examine the contradictions within that person's narrative. In the therapeutic encounter the person remains the focus of this endeavour but hopefully benefits from the intersubjective dynamic that therapy provides.

Stewart clarifies that the point of Kierkegaard's concept of irony is not just to mock others, 'Instead, the justification for irony from a historical perspective is that it is used to focus on and develop the principle of subjective freedom' (Stewart, 2015: p 79).

Here the illuminating of truth for the individual in a world of other truths would lead to a contextualised knowing of oneself in terms of perspective, values and beliefs, and one's relationship to the world.

Conclusion

Whilst Stewart's book is a relatively short one he manages to convey a very thorough examination of Kierkegaard's life and work. What I was left with was a curiosity about how Kierkegaard himself would have viewed the modern world. In particular I would have been fascinated to see how he may have related what he is saying for the implications of a more secular view of irony. Whilst Kierkegaard was well-known for his critique of the Danish church at the time, he remained a devout Christian, and implicit in his treatise is that a notion of God lies at the root of this

subjective enquiry.

What Kierkegaard here calls “the secrets of God” cannot be learned as a form of objective knowledge, but instead must be appropriated inwardly by each individual

(*ibid*, p 103)

However, again Kierkegaard was clear that this did not provide the truth *per se*, but as a way towards that truth, or as Stewart sums up,

Thus, irony as a negative force is not the truth itself but rather prepares the individual to find the truth on one’s own.

(*ibid*, p 104).

Sentences like this are useful as a succinct summary of some of Kierkegaard’s most profound thinking and seem very much in the spirit of Kierkegaard, offering not a conclusive view but one open to further, and continued, examination of our existence.

Stewart’s book conveys a passion for Kierkegaard’s writing as well as a vivid description of his life in, and occasionally beyond, Copenhagen in the mid-19th century. This passion provides a base for further exploration of this extraordinary thinker, and of the contemporary relevance of his work to our lives to-day.

Malcolm Freeman

Diagnoses and Beyond: Counselling psychology contributions to understanding human distress

Martin Milton (ed) (2012). Ross-on-Wye: PCCS Books.

As a counselling psychologist, I am forever sucked into the vortex of diagnoses and labels that all lead to the client wanting an answer, a quick result but more importantly a way to relieve themselves of the anguish and torment they are experiencing. I find myself wanting to offer a client a proposed diagnosis in order to give them something to work with, something to hold onto that allows them to justify the emotional suffering they are experiencing. It is also a way of me to feel that I have given them something useful (and quick) in order to alleviate their pain. Nonetheless, I find myself pulling away reminding oneself that human distress is part of life and that the label is just a label, it can be worn or taken off where possible or if chosen to.

In IAPT services, assessments are tailored to support the client to understand their distress and work towards a formulation that maps out their treatment plan and goals. It is all too common in such services that having a label