

**Jon Stewart, ed.**

*Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources.*  
*Vol. 9: Kierkegaard and Existentialism.*

Burlington, VT: Ashgate/Lund Humphries Publishing  
Company 2011.

446 pages

US\$124.99 (cloth ISBN 978-1-4094-2641-7)

This impressive collection of essays is the latest installment in the series ‘Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources’, a project of the Søren Kierkegaard Research Centre in Copenhagen. The present volume focuses on Kierkegaard’s reception by existentialist philosophers. As these essays show, Kierkegaard made a major contribution to the development of existentialism through his highly influential analyses of anxiety, freedom, despair, sin, the absurd, the individual and the crowd, and his authorship has influenced most of the key figures identified (rightly or wrongly) as existentialists.

Thomas Miles tackles this volume’s earliest case of Kierkegaard’s reception: Friedrich Nietzsche. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche were unable to engage with each other’s writings—a missed opportunity that surely counts as one of the great disappointments in the history of philosophy. It is therefore illuminating to discover the extent to which Nietzsche did in fact know about Kierkegaard’s thought. In an 1888 letter to his friend George Brandes, a Danish literary critic, Nietzsche wrote of his plans to study Kierkegaard on his next visit to Germany. Since Nietzsche never made this journey, scholars have usually concluded that Nietzsche never learned much about Kierkegaard, but Miles demonstrates that Nietzsche did encounter key aspects of Kierkegaard’s thought through several secondary works. In addition to works by Brandes, Nietzsche also read about Kierkegaard in works by the Danish theologian and bishop Hans Lassen Martensen, as well as the Danish philosopher and psychologist Harald Høffding (268-70). Given the ideas discussed in these books, Nietzsche would have been exposed to a significant challenge to his own thought, since Kierkegaard’s interpretation of Christianity endorses neither nihilistic, other worldly asceticism nor the herd-like conformity that Nietzsche castigates. This is not to say that Kierkegaard would have brought about a change of heart in Nietzsche; Miles shows this by conducting a detailed dialogue between the two thinkers on the question of the best way of life, spelling out how each thinker might have responded to the other on such questions as individuality, self-creation, and meaning.

Two of Kierkegaard’s other early existentialist readers were Martin Buber and Miguel de Unamuno. In his essay Peter Šajda shows that Buber first encountered Kierkegaard’s thought as a university student in 1897 and maintained Kierkegaard as an important influence and interlocutor throughout his life. Buber identifies Kierkegaard as a precursor to dialogical philosophy, yet also criticizes him for contributing to strongly monological trends in 20<sup>th</sup> Century philosophical anthropology (33, 41, 48). Unamuno, the lone Spanish figure in this volume, first encountered Kierkegaard some time at the

end of the 19<sup>th</sup> or the very beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and first refers to him in an essay from 1902. Jan E. Evans shows that Unamuno read Kierkegaard extensively and drew heavily on Kierkegaard's concept of truth as subjectivity, and shared the attendant conviction that existential truth requires indirect communication (386).

Claudia Welz contributes an essay on Franz Rosenzweig's reception of Kierkegaard. Since Rosenzweig's books and letters contain few explicit references to Kierkegaard, this essay focuses on the secondary literature that compares the two thinkers. However, since there is also relatively little secondary literature, the majority of the essay is a lengthy summary of Welz's dissertation comparing Kierkegaard and Rosenzweig on the topic of theodicy. This summary could be helpful for those working on these thinkers or this topic, but given the focus of this volume a shorter essay might have sufficed.

One of the most interesting features of this volume is how it allows the reader to trace Kierkegaard's reception from thinker to thinker. George Pattison contributes a pair of essays examining Kierkegaard's reception by two Russian philosophers: Lev Shestov and Nicholas Berdyaev. Kierkegaard had a merely scattered reception in pre-Revolutionary Russia, but during Shestov's time in Germany he met with Buber and Husserl, whose enthusiasm for Kierkegaard prompted him to seek out Kierkegaard's writings himself (356-7). Shestov in turn introduced Berdyaev to Kierkegaard. Berdyaev's more formative influences, however, included the idealism of Fichte and Schelling as well as the mysticism of Böhme, resulting in a speculative philosophy quite unlike Kierkegaard's. Whereas Shestov echoes Kierkegaard's emphasis on divine transcendence, Berdyaev conceives of God as actualizing his freedom in the world through human beings actualizing their own potential freedom (23, 29). Shestov also played a significant role in the French reception of Kierkegaard, perhaps even comparable to Alexandre Kojève's role in the French reception of Hegel (356). The other prominent influence in Kierkegaard's French reception was Jean Wahl. In contrast to Shestov's emphasis on irrationality and the absurd, Wahl emphasized Kierkegaard's distinctly philosophical merits—a point Alejandro Cavallazzi Sánchez and Azucena Palavicini Sánchez highlight in their helpful discussion (358).

Not surprisingly, there is an essay on Jean-Paul Sartre, but the reader might be surprised to discover how paltry Sartre's engagement with Kierkegaard really was. Manuela Hackel does a fine job outlining Jean-Paul Sartre's reading of Kierkegaard, which, as said, was considerably less sustained or systematic than one might expect. As Hackel puts it, 'Sartre's reading of Kierkegaard never exceeded skimming'. Likewise, Sartre's use of Kierkegaardian concepts was loose, creative, and directed to his own philosophical ends (345-6).

Simone de Beauvoir's reading of Kierkegaard, on the other hand, turns out to be a more interesting case. Ronald M. Green and Mary Jean Green outline Kierkegaard's influence on several points, such as Beauvoir's break with the totalizing aspects of Hegelian thought, as well as her emphasis on individual choice, freedom, and the ambiguity of ethical responsibility (11-14). When it comes to Kierkegaard's view of

womanhood, though, Beauvoir appears to identify him as a clear enemy of feminism, as she does in *The Second Sex* when she quotes several misogynistic passages from *Stages on Life's Way*. The problem with these quotations is that Beauvoir attributes them to Kierkegaard rather than the various pseudonyms speaking in the text, an interpretive move comparable to identifying all the speeches given in the *Symposium* as Plato's view. Beauvoir also seems to oppose Kierkegaard when she quotes him in an epigraph in *The Second Sex*: 'What a curse it is to be a woman! And yet the very worst curse when one is a woman is, in fact, not to understand that it is one.' At first glance this quotation seems to imply that Kierkegaard is perpetuating faulty views regarding the inferior rationality of women, but in fact Beauvoir uses it to highlight the failure of women 'to recognize the truth of a situation they have been taught to misread.' In this regard, then, Beauvoir takes Kierkegaard to be an ally arguing that women can only become free by recognizing the falsity of their situation (18).

The volume included several other strong studies of prominent French philosophers, including Gabriel Marcel (Jeanette Bresson Ladegaard Knox), Jacques Maritain (Nathaniel Kramer), and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Elisabetta Basso), though the last is somewhat unexpected given how little Merleau-Ponty discusses Kierkegaard or his works. As Basso shows, for Merleau-Ponty 'Kierkegaard' is less an object of scholarly inquiry than the designation for a particular sort of philosophical stance or style that was influential in France at the time (234). Leo Stan contributes a pair of insightful essays on Albert Camus and Michel Henry, who is also a surprising inclusion in the volume on existentialism rather than, say, the volume on Francophone Philosophy. Editorial decisions aside, Stan's essay does an excellent job expositing Henry's notoriously difficult thought in relation to Kierkegaard

Two figures vital to the existentialist reception of Kierkegaard are the German philosophers Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger. István Czakó provides a detailed overview of Jaspers' engagement with Kierkegaard, which was abundant in Jaspers' early book *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen* (a 'landmark analysis of key Kierkegaardian categories') (160), through to the lengthy analysis of Kierkegaard in Jaspers' posthumous work *The Great Philosophers*. Yet however significant this engagement was, Jaspers' reception of Kierkegaard remained ambivalent. He read Kierkegaard at length and with great care, and made considerable use of his insights in his own thought. For example, his conception of *Existenz* as 'the self that works on itself in cognizance of its relation to its constituent power' (184) is a paraphrase of the definition of the self in *The Sickness Unto Death*. At the same time, Jaspers always maintained that he was no 'adherent' of Kierkegaard (189). His most decisive point of departure was to neutralize the specifically Christian content of Kierkegaard's thought, which he took to be 'philosophically unacceptable', in favor of a decidedly philosophical faith in his much more abstract conception of 'Transcendence' (162-6, 171).

Jaspers in turn proved to be influential on Heidegger's reception of Kierkegaard. As Vincent McCarthy notes, in the years leading up to *Being and Time* Heidegger relied on Jaspers' exposition of Kierkegaard's concepts of the individual, subjectivity, passion, anxiety, and death, in addition to his own borrowing of key Kierkegaardian concepts like

repetition, curiosity, inclosing reserve, and the moment (101). Although Kierkegaard's influence is evident throughout *Being and Time*, Heidegger scarcely acknowledges his Danish predecessor, deeming him a merely religious thinker offering ontic/existentiell rather than ontological/existential insights. McCarthy suggests that Heidegger presents a clarification and systematization of these Kierkegaardian insights, but that he was 'not nearly humble enough' to acknowledge this debt. McCarthy also identifies another major issue for Kierkegaard-Heidegger interpretation: those reading Kierkegaard and Heidegger from the perspective of Christian theology will balk at Heidegger's secular phenomenology, which is a contemporary form of Pelagianism in contrast to Kierkegaard's more Augustinian emphasis on the need for divine grace (114). Whether one agrees with McCarthy's claim—that Heidegger 'mined Kierkegaard's insights and concepts *for all they are worth*' (emphasis mine)—likely depends on one's stance on this issue.

Overall, this volume is a rich resource for Kierkegaard scholars. There have been other essays on Kierkegaard in relation to many of these thinkers, but the great merit of this volume is the way it collects thorough, detailed, and up-to-date studies of Kierkegaard's influence on these thinkers, as well as bibliographic information on the relevant scholarship. If one is looking for a flaw, one might object that the volume (and the series as a whole) is a little *too* thorough; perhaps there is no need for essays discussing Kierkegaard's minimal influence on Rosenzweig or Merleau-Ponty, for example. On the other hand, these essays will still be helpful for researchers seeking to determine whether a given thinker in fact engaged with Kierkegaard's thought. Consequently, this volume (like this series) will serve as the ideal first stop for researchers seeking to understand Kierkegaard in relation to other major philosophical, theological, and literary figures.

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