



Kierkegaard, Eve and Metaphors of Births

Rasmus Rosenberg Larsen

To cite this article: Rasmus Rosenberg Larsen (2016): Kierkegaard, Eve and Metaphors of Births, Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00071773.2015.1130973>



Published online: 01 Apr 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

BOOK REVIEW

Kierkegaard, Eve and Metaphors of Birth, by Alison Assiter, London, Rowman & Littlefield International 2015, 240 pp.

Kierkegaard, Eve and Metaphors of Birth is Alison Assiter's second book on the Danish philosopher, psychologist and religious thinker Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55). Those familiar with Assiter's first work on Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard, Metaphysics and Political Theory: Unfinished Selves* (2009), will be pleased to discover that Assiter returns to some of the same central topics, but this time from an explicitly (do I dare to say refreshing?) speculative standpoint. Again, as with Assiter's first book, the agenda is an ambitious one, aiming to reconnect philosophical branches that contemporary philosophers are trained to discuss in separation, i.e. ontology, ethics and politics.

It is important to reiterate that Assiter considers her thesis *speculative*, meaning that her project purposively oversteps Kantian epistemological boundaries, by speaking intelligibly (namely, metaphorically) about the noumenal – i.e. speaking intelligibly about “the great outdoors”, to use Quentin Meillassoux's well-known *speculative realist* slogan. It may seem surprising to many readers familiar with Kierkegaard's philosophy, then, that Assiter's intention is to portray Kierkegaard as a promoter of metaphysical idealism, which is not normally associated with Kierkegaard. And because Assiter commences her argument by turning her attention to one of the founding fathers of *German Idealism*, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (1775–1854), one is intuitively pushed to wonder if this really is a book on Kierkegaard.

However, this strange outset might not be as radical as it seems. It has become somewhat of a new trend in Kierkegaard scholarship to vocalize the Schellingean heritage in Kierkegaard's writings – a relationship that until recently has been mostly overlooked or rejected (particularly in the Anglo-American reception of Kierkegaard). Thus, Assiter's methodological approach alone, I believe, makes it an important book on Kierkegaard.

It is Schelling's short and perplexing work from 1809, *Philosophical Inquiries into the Essence of Human Freedom* (commonly known as *Freiheitsschrift*), which stands out as the guiding theme in Assiter's idealistic thesis, and Assiter (alongside with many other scholars) posits this particular work as being the focal inspiration to Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Anxiety* from 1844 – hence the connection between Schelling's *idealism* and Kierkegaard's *subjectivist* philosophy.

It is, however, more openly on Schellingean territory that Assiter advances her thesis, namely, that reality is spawn from a cosmic order. This means that metaphysical reality, down to its most fundamental fabric, contains a meaningfulness, which according to Assiter (and Schelling) can be depicted by the metaphor of birth – that is, depicted as cosmos having the capacity (or the *yearning*) to give birth to itself. For Assiter, then, birth is a metaphor for process and vitality. It is an attempt to shift the philosophical perspective from a Newtonian view of cosmos as mere *passive* meaningless forces, and instead looking at cosmos as intrinsically *active* and purposeful. Conclusively, Assiter holds, her thesis is an ethical rejection of a mechanical nihilistic worldview.

Assiter's idea with the present work seems to consist of two key intentions. First, to portray the metaphorical point about birth in contrast to some more contemporary ideas about seeing nature as contingent and chaotic – a view that Assiter finds represented in Slavoj

Žižek's *The Parallax View* (2009) and Quentin Meillassoux's *After Finitude* (2009). By contingent and chaotic, Assiter refers to the view that nature categorically is without any inherent meaning – and therefore essentially without (teleological) purpose. Second, Assiter wants to demonstrate that the metaphor of birth is not a ludicrous idea of her imagination, but actually something contemporary philosophers of biology adhere to, making it a good point of reference in topics such as feminism, ethics, politics, etc. The idea, Assiter argues, is that by viewing ontology through the metaphor of birth, we quickly realize that it lends itself to an ethics of care, which can be applied to all of reality. To repeat, then, Assiter's conclusion is that nature or reality in its completeness can be seen as a meaningful and purposeful process.

The book develops its thesis over 10 short chapters. In the first two chapters, Assiter walks us through both Žižek and Meillassoux's arguments for the contingent and chaotic status of nature, also illustrating how Žižek has recently used Kierkegaard to argue for contingency, that is, for the opposite of what Assiter argues. Assiter does a good job elaborating Meillassoux's main view (i.e. *Speculative Realism*), which she eventually discards, yet with an explicit admiration of Meillassoux's overall approach.

In chapter three, Assiter unfolds Kant's well-known problem of evil, namely, Kant's paradox on *how it is possible to freely do evil*. Assiter's claim is that Kant never actually solved this lacuna in his transcendental philosophy, because he was too entrenched in a *Newtonian* way of thinking. Judging something as morally right and wrong was simply, for Kant, a subjective rational judgement, and likewise when judging something in nature to have an inherent purpose was again a mere act of rationality – the teleological purpose is never really *out there*. Assiter concludes that the reason for Kant's quarrel with freely choosing evil was that Kant was too caught up in the separation of rationality and embodiment (i.e. too caught up in a Cartesian heritage).

The fourth and fifth chapters map both Schelling and Kierkegaard's response to the Kantian emphasis on human freedom as rationality. Assiter's main focus here is to revitalize the arguments from Schelling and Kierkegaard, namely, that we cannot separate the rational will from the sensuous nature of human being. It is an emphasis on human nature as both rational *and* embodied creatures, thus, shifting focus from morality as a product of reason to morality being an ontological (or natural) way of perceiving the world.

Chapter six is, seen from a Kierkegaard scholar's viewpoint, the most novel part of the book. Assiter argues that interpretations of Kierkegaard are misguided when they claim that Kierkegaard was a misogynist, that is, when Kierkegaard in his texts disregards the female sex as lower and insignificant in comparison to the male sex. Assiter's intention is to emphasize that the philosophical inspiration Kierkegaard found in Schelling, and especially his view on nature as a *yearning to give birth to itself*, Kierkegaard epitomized it in his view on the female body. Assiter goes as far as claiming that Kierkegaard saw in woman the idea of time and process naturalized.

The seventh and eighth chapters are a rather original interpretation of Kierkegaard's metaphysics, drawing analogies not only to *The Concept of Anxiety* and *The Sickness unto Death* (1849), but also to his predominantly religious work *Fear and Trembling* (1843). The claim is that Kierkegaard sees *the whole of nature in terms of processes of birthing*.

The last two chapters are, metaphorically speaking, altogether a hydrostatic pressure test of Assiter's complete thesis. In chapter nine she shifts topic and draws interesting analogies about nature as *birthing* to contemporary biology, here under Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela's theories on *autopoiesis*, that is, the notion that biological *systems* have the capacity to self-organize and self-control, and in this concept Assiter finds an analogy to the way of seeing nature from the perspective of a birthing metaphor. In chapter 10, Assiter takes her metaphor to the political sphere and argues that Kierkegaard applies the idea of birth in his

(infamous) political work *Two Ages* (1846), by claiming that a pathological society is a society in rest and deterioration, and therefore, a healthy political system is the disruptive and revolutionary society – a society that manages to give birth to itself.

An unfortunate aspect about Assiter's book, however, is that it posits a colossal speculative argument about a cosmic order, which, regrettably, the book is simply too short to treat fully. The bibliography alone should make most experienced philosophers impressed – including authors, besides the ones already mentioned, such as Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Camus, Derrida, Badiou, Deleuze – just to mention a few. Of course, this impressive list of sources tells us a great deal about Assiter's merit as a thinker, but also tells us that 240 pages can only make up a superficial sketch of the ideas involved in her thesis. I believe the project would have gained clarity by using a deeper and narrower investigative approach.

In conclusion, Assiter has put together a work that has the potential to create an exciting and stimulating debate in Kierkegaard circles. Mostly because she portrays Kierkegaard as an idealist ontologist, that is, a philosopher of not just human nature (i.e. subjectivity), but also nature in its cosmic totality. Thus, what I find most admirable is that with Assiter we have a thinker who has the philosophical courage to suggest that the purported relationship between Schelling and Kierkegaard leads necessarily to bold philosophical consequences. Since Günther Figal's 1980 article, *Schelling und Kierkegaards Freiheitsbegriff*, which gave us the first clue of the Kierkegaardian connection to Schelling's *Freiheitsschrift*, scholars have primarily focused on re-emphasizing the actual possibility of (the early) Schellingean heritage in Kierkegaard, meanwhile forgetting to ask themselves what consequences this connection might have on our interpretation of Kierkegaard's corpus. Assiter's book is an attempt to draw such a long needed consequence.

Rasmus Rosenberg Larsen
University of Buffalo

 rasmusro@buffalo.edu

© 2016 Rasmus Rosenberg Larsen

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00071773.2015.1130973>