

Hough, Sheridan. *Kierkegaard's Dancing Tax Collector: Faith, Finitude, and Silence.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. 169 pp.

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Even casual readers of Kierkegaard are aware of difficulties peculiar to his work: the use of personas under various pseudonyms; the range of genres used in aid of reflection; the complex interplay of philosophy, theology, and biography in the Danish thinker's oeuvre. For all these difficulties, however, there remains an organic unity in the thought of Kierkegaard, insofar as his body of work can be read as the years-long *durcharbeiten* (working through) of the question of authentic selfhood vis-à-vis the relation to the Absolute (and by extension, to one's neighbor).

Sheridan Hough's *Kierkegaard's Dancing Tax Collector: Faith, Finitude, and Silence* is a succinct discussion of this particular question, inspired by the figure described by Johannes de Silentio in *Fear and Trembling*. The epigraphs by which Hough introduces the book already contain Kierkegaard's point: How do the words of James 1:17-21 ("Every good and perfect gift is from above . . .") describe the disposition of the knight of faith? Hough displays a comfortable familiarity with

the work of Kierkegaard, and is able to draw upon various texts in order to achieve an “existential-phenomenological” and “comprehensive” reading. One could say that Hough is familiar enough with the steps of Kierkegaard’s thought that she is able to weave them into a dance routine. As Hough notes, her work is “not a ‘post-modern’ hop through various spheres of existence, but a cumulative investigation of what the life of faith promises” (p. x). In *Fear and Trembling*, the figure of the tax collector is described as someone who “enjoys and takes part in everything, and whenever one sees him participating in something particular, it is carried out with a persistence that characterizes the worldly person whose heart is attached to such things . . . *everything engages him with a composure in existence* as if he were a girl of sixteen . . .” (p. 8). In stark contrast to Abraham, the knight of faith whose few words do little to elucidate the magnitude of his sacrifice, the tax collector represents another way to be a knight of faith.

As Hough follows the steps of Kierkegaard’s tax collector, she comes to an acknowledgment that “faith is ineluctable, opaque, and realized at every moment by a way of being in the world” (p. 6). It is no accident that this turn of phrase echoes Heidegger, inasmuch as Heidegger was inspired by Kierkegaard’s project. Faith’s manner of being in the world, however, is not to be confused with Heidegger’s notion. Perhaps Kierkegaard would see in Heidegger something of Hegel, against whom Kierkegaard railed. Rather than a

Weltgeist or even *Sein*, the locus of existence for Kierkegaard is the self. Hough elaborates: “Human beings are born, but *selves* are created. A human being, Anti-Climacus tells us, is a creature of opposed dimensions, a ‘synthesis’ of infinity’s endless reach and finitude’s sink full of dishes Every human must negotiate this divide, for every person is located in an utterly specific historical, economic, cultural, and indeed bodily circumstance, all of which alters (or becomes more intransigent) over time” (p. 23). Furthermore: “This constitutional human tension, the opposition between a person’s finite circumstance and the infinite possibilities for transformation, is everyone’s birthright; a *self*, Anti-Climacus claims, is only established when a person ‘takes a stand’ on this existential opposition” (p. 24). Ultimately, a person “takes a stand” in relation to and with the Absolute.

For Hough, Kierkegaard’s tax collector possesses what she calls an “epistemic flexibility,” which allows the tax collector to recognize that “every good and perfect gift is from above.” The relation with the Absolute allows for the transformation of human experience, even experience that might be understood as negative, into “good and perfect gifts from above.” As Hough writes, “the ‘flexibility’ that characterizes faith paradoxically understands the fixed, limited, and finite conditions of a person’s life to be infinitely flowing with possibilities for grace and goodness” (p.29).

The “epistemic flexibility” that characterizes the tax collector allows this figure of faith to embrace all the spheres

of human existence as conceived by Kierkegaard. Hough uses the next two “movements” to elaborate on the possibilities and limits of the aesthetic and ethical spheres. As Hough notes: “Our tax collector dwells in faith, meaning that he resolves the native synthetic tension of being human by living out the life-task that is uniquely his. There are, however, other (and ultimately unsatisfactory) ways of resolving the competing demands of being human: here is where the journey to selfhood—and to faith—begins” (p. 39). Hough makes use of other Kierkegaardian personae: Johannes the Seducer, in order to demonstrate the failure and frustration that attend pleasure; Judge William, who develops the ethical sphere by appealing to the radical efficacy of choice. Johannes the Seducer discovers that “the aesthete operates at the mercy of the ‘external condition’: beauty fades, faculties wither, fortunes disappear, and the call of desire creates a trail of satiation and depletion” (p. 69). Judge William extols the formative character of choice; in contrast to the Seducer’s fleeting affairs, the judge upholds marriage as an exemplary choice. For Judge William, “marriage becomes the ideal mechanism for repairing the constitutional tension between freedom and necessity: life’s ordinary, daily chores are now suffused with the significance of the absolute resolution to share that life with another person” (p.70). Marriage, defined by Judge William, reveals what Hough calls the “choice-constituted self.” The problem here, however, is that Judge

William's account never transcends the organized definitions of the ethical sphere in order to confront and engage the absurd—which is where the Absolute dwells.

Hough rounds out the dance with a meditation on faith and sin, again in the context of selfhood. Hough writes: “Faith is founded on a person’s unique vocation; when a person makes a commitment to that life-project, she must, as we just said, resign herself to its impossibility: then, of course, she simply takes up that task ‘by virtue of the absurd’, which turns out to be another way of saying that ‘with God all things are possible . . .’” (p. 94). Opposed to this, sin would mean that “a person turns away from their vocation, and fails to commit to their unique life-project” (p. 95). In order to become truly oneself again, and re-establish the absolute relation to the Absolute, it is necessary, Hough says, to confess. To confess means to exercise “epistemic flexibility” and come to an awareness of oneself in relation to God. “What the person ‘finds out’ in confession is something that was already present to her or him in the collection bag of repentance: but these transgressions are now admitted as part of the very constitution of who one is. I, as a sinner, am not looking on at the rubbish-heap of my failings; I am my failings. I am simply a sinner, clothed in my recognition of that sin, standing before God” (p. 104). Related once more to God and to oneself, the tax collector attains the joy of communion. “Having become whole through confession, the

tax collector can draw close in existential communion His delight in his immediate, finite circumstances is his thanksgiving, a thanks only made possible by his encounter with God, through confession” (p.116). Hough concludes the text with further meditations on suffering and love.

Hough presents a faithful rendition of themes found throughout Kierkegaard’s corpus, albeit presented in a novel fashion. The musical metaphor Hough uses is reminiscent of the technique called “sampling,” in which riffs and motifs are borrowed from different musical pieces in order to provide emphasis or counterpoint to the new composition. Moreover, Hough’s tone is conversational, which is no easy feat as she draws together various elements of Kierkegaard’s and situates them in the context of the Dane’s work, and the history of ideas. This latter element, however, provides one misgiving regarding this work. What Hough achieves is an overture, so to speak, of Kierkegaard’s thought, with the occasional sample from other composers (thinkers). This “sampling” sometimes feels strained, as though Kierkegaard’s work could not stand on its own, and needed some other thinkers to buttress it. The digressions into Nietzsche and Plato, in particular, made for awkward chords in a consistent progression. This is a minor misstep in an otherwise edifying dance.

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