

**KIERKEGAARD AND THE LIMITS OF THE ETHICAL** by  
**Anthony Rudd**, *Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1993.*

This book is concerned to shed light on the problematic status of ethics and religion in the modern world and to offer possible solutions by making use of Kierkegaard's ethical thought. This, Rudd hopes, will 'show analytical philosophers that Kierkegaard is relevant to their concerns, and offers a fertile source of ideas which can be applied to contemporary debates' (p. vii). In the opening chapter Rudd argues that modern ethics is determined by 'disengagement' or the 'disengaged view', namely, 'the outlook that is obtained at the end of a process of self-transcendence, of abstraction from what is particular and peculiar about one's own standpoint' (p. 1). This has resulted in increased emphasis in modern ethics on human autonomy and the decline of social role and religious belief as sources for an understanding of the nature and purpose of human existence. Consequently, Rudd writes, 'It seems as though the process of disengagement is destructive of morality . . . because it undermines any argument we might make to establish a stable and determinate identity' (p. 18). In the remainder of the book Rudd attempts to show how some of Kierkegaard's leading ideas can offer a critique of the disengaged view and also provide a way out of the difficulties it has created. In Rudd's words, 'Kierkegaard's conclusion is that the purely disengaged approach to knowledge can eventually lead only to scepticism, which is not theoretically refutable, but which can only be broken with by an act of will, a refusal to accept the validity of the wholly disengaged stance' (p. 27).

To bring out the significance of Kierkegaard's contribution, Rudd introduces the term 'project', which he defines as 'a pattern of purposive action . . . which aims at the achievement of certain psychologically understandable goals' (p. 86). Such projects, Rudd claims, 'give meaning to a person's life and continuity to his character' (p. 86). In other words, by committing himself to a project the individual's life comes to acquire a centre around which the disparate elements of the self can be brought together into a coherent and integrated whole. But what are the projects to which the individual should commit himself? Rudd denies that Kierkegaard holds that it is commitment to the project and not the project itself that is important and attempts to prove 'that a substantive ethic can be derived from the necessity to make commitments to projects, without the projects themselves having to be specified' (p. 99). Rudd then goes on to show how the four cardinal virtues (prudence, justice, temperance, and courage) 'are necessary for the conduct of any worthwhile human life' (p. 99), a fact which provides us with 'a basic rational morality that holds good for every one, whatever his or her projects may be' (p. 10). But this still raises the problem of what specific project one should adopt, and here we run up against the fundamental weakness of the ethical sphere, namely that there is no way of distinguishing between valid and invalid projects. Indeed, Rudd claims that under the concepts developed according to purely ethical

criteria an individual's resolve to become a Nazi can be regarded as a valid project since it too could involve the development of the cardinal virtues and could endow his life with purpose. This problem can only be overcome, Rudd argues in the final chapter of his book, by finding a foundation for ethics that lies outside factors inherent in human existence. To justify this argument Rudd turns to Kierkegaard's concept of the teleological suspension of the ethical and the transition from the ethical to the Christian sphere of existence.

The weakness of the ethical sphere is that nothing in it can make a claim to be the *absolute* telos. There is simply no way of deciding how to choose between the different *tele* on offer in the ethical sphere. With Christianity, however, this absolute telos is provided from outside rather than being chosen on the basis of factors arising from the natural existence of the human being. In Rudd's words, 'An absolute telos . . . cannot be derived from any purely naturalistic understanding of human nature. But in the religious sphere it is given; it is the primary overriding task for each individual to bring him – or herself into the right relationship with God' (p. 134). It is on this foundation provided from outside, from God himself, that an ethics can be constructed that avoids the debilitating consequences of disengagement.

Rudd's book without doubt constitutes a valuable and insightful analysis of Kierkegaard's ethics and its significance for modern ethical debate. It is not, however, without its problems. A minor irritant is the surprising number of typographical errors; for example, the word 'worldly' is almost invariably spelled 'wordly'. A more serious problem is present in Rudd's analysis of Kierkegaard's concept of belief as an act of will. Rudd concentrates exclusively on belief in the purely epistemological sense (in Kierkegaard's terminology, 'belief *sensu laxiori*'), which Kierkegaard does indeed describe as an act of will. This concept of belief is introduced, however, only as a prelude to his discussion of belief as faith (in Kierkegaard's terminology, 'belief *sensu strictissimo*'), which Kierkegaard on several occasions *denies* is an act of will. Rudd would thus seem to be guilty of a onesided interpretation which ignores a major problem in Kierkegaard scholarship, namely how belief *sensu laxiori* and *sensu strictissimo* are to be reconciled, which possibly undermines his thesis that Kierkegaard's emphasis on will offers a solution to the crisis of disengagement. A further problem is the neglect of Kierkegaard's anthropology, which would have provided a useful way of distinguishing between valid and invalid projects. On the basis of Kierkegaard's anthropology the project chosen by the Nazi, for instance, would not bring about a coherent self because it is incapable of effecting an adequate synthesis of the constituent elements of the self and fails to recognize that the self is grounded in and gains its coherence through a relationship with God. Also somewhat disappointing is the book's conclusion, especially the final paragraph, where Rudd writes, 'Ultimately, however, it is only each individual's felt need for meaning that can determine the choices and commitments that he or she will make. Philosophy can clarify what is

involved, but it cannot absolve the individual from the task of making his own decisions for himself' (p. 175). This seems to detract from much of what Rudd was saying in the bulk of his book, namely that there are certain criteria which can guide us in making ethical choices. Furthermore, although it is true that these choices are ultimately up to the individual and that it is philosophy's task to clarify what is involved in these choices, Kierkegaard himself is surely aiming at more than this, namely at guiding the reader to the position where it becomes possible for him to make what Kierkegaard sees as the *right* choices. Having said this, the weaknesses of Rudd's book are not sins of commission but merely of omission. The book remains a fine piece of work and provides many valuable insights into Kierkegaard's ethical thought and its significance for contemporary ethical theory.

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**ALMIGHTY GOD: A STUDY OF THE DOCTRINE OF DIVINE OMNIPOTENCE** by Gijsbert van den Brink. *Kok Pharos Publishing House, Kampen. 1993. Pp. xii + 316. No price given.*

This book aims to provide a theology which coheres with a Christian Reformed tradition, one which is conceptually coherent, and one which reflects the theologian's human situation more generally. The subject is a 'classical' doctrine of divine almightiness, developed in Christian discussion, and meeting with growing dissatisfaction since 1918.

To find an object-doctrine recognisably fathered within the tradition, he outlines (Ch.I) (1): the career of 'almighty' or its cognates in Christian discussions, essentially following de Halleux et al. for his data; (2): the medieval distinction(s) made by the contrasting determinants *de potentia ordinata/ absoluta dei*, as applied to putative attributions to divine power; and (3): Descartes' celebrated remarks on the creation of the eternal (mathematical) truths. On (1), he wants to be more precise than his sources, by distinguishing 'three types of divine power' (49), but a conceptual difference of any kind between his A-power and B-power is not obvious, and is not made plain. On (2), he considers the distinction as used from its adoption by Aquinas to a little beyond the time of Calvin: under 'Rise and original Function', 'Complicating Factors', 'Scotus and Ockham', 'God's Absolute Power and Late Medieval Extremism', and 'Reformed Protest and Correction'. He concludes: 'from a philosophical point of view the most important merit of the distinction has been to provide a conceptual tool for counteracting any form of Graeco-Arabic necessitarianism by expressing the contingency of creation'; and 'the major source of . . . quarrels about the proper interpretation of the distinction consisted in an underlying confusion about the relation between God's power and the being God is, i.e. the other properties which make up His character' (92). (But can God be said with literal truth to have a 'character'? Should God's power or 'other properties' ascribed