

Arne Grøn, *Thinking With Kierkegaard: Existential Philosophy, Phenomenology, and Ethics*, ed. Bjarke Mørkøre, Stigel Hansen, and René Rosfort (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023).

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Arne Grøn's *Thinking With Kierkegaard* marks an achievement both for Kierkegaard studies and for scholarship in general. As part of the *Kierkegaard Studies* series of monographs from De Gruyter, this mammoth 614-page collection offers 35 essays. It is a treasure trove for anyone interested in thinking alongside Kierkegaard about the topics of existential philosophy, phenomenology, and ethics. The title is apt, as the editors explain, "Grøn's engagement with Kierkegaard is not primarily concerned with interpreting particular themes of the authorship . . . He is much more interested in thinking *with* Kierkegaard than *about* Kierkegaard" (xi). Although Grøn does occasionally participate in theorizing about authorship or biographical motivations, he largely sticks to the philosophical ideas found in each text and their importance for the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Thinking alongside Kierkegaard then largely means that Grøn walks side-by-side with each text, seeing where it leads and what the implications are for existentialism, phenomenology, and ethics. Grøn is certainly a master of this and seems to think this outcome is inevitable for any would-be reader of Kierkegaard. As he hints at the beginning of one of his essays, "even a reading of Kierkegaard, which has no philosophical ambitions sooner or later runs into philosophical questions" (110). One would hardly describe Grøn's approach as without philosophical ambitions, but his phenomenological temperament produces a reading that explores the philosophical implications of Kierkegaard's thinking in a rather free and wonderful manner. In turn, he is not likely to get caught up in debates about pseudonymity and the meaning of each text in general or potentially unanswerable questions like "what Kierkegaard *really* means." Such is what I take to be the charm of Grøn's method and the meaning of title, *Thinking With Kierkegaard*.

For Grøn, Kierkegaard is first and foremost a thinker of existence. Thus, the editors have done an excellent job in placing the existential philosophy section first, which emphasizes its importance for understanding Grøn's work. Most of the essays found herein delve into concerns about the self, subjectivity, temporal experience, worldhood, and other existential concerns relating to what it means to exist as a finite creature. Grøn is aware of the challenge in describing such things, not only for Kierkegaard, but for himself

as well, since existence is not something that stops and waits for us to study it. He explains, “what the difficulty of ‘thinking existence’ brings into view is the difficulty of existence which is to be carried out in existence” (9). That is, thinking about existence doesn’t allow us to stand outside our own existence, but instead brings into sharper focus the particularity of ourselves and our thinking.

Bringing thinking and existing together is essential to understanding Grøn’s project, because he argues that “existential thinking concerns the human condition to which thinking itself belongs” (19). Since thinking is a part of existence, to bring thinking into an understanding of existence is part of what makes us individual selves (21). The rest of the essays in this first part are dedicated to fleshing out these ideas in relation to different aspects of existence. Thus, having existence first in order is important because these subjects and themes pervade the latter two sections of the book and color the thinking that takes place there as well. Grøn’s attempt to think existence while existing also reveals his interest in phenomenology, an approach that attempts to consider phenomena as they appear to us in existence.

The second section of the book deals with phenomenology, and it is also the shortest portion of the book. Given the challenges of thinking existence, Grøn seeks the conditions under which subjectivity appears and how it is cultivated. He once again realizes the inherent challenges since phenomenology is “a search for the beginning” (217), while “existential thinking deals with existence preceding thinking” (19). Thus, phenomenologically we must begin where we stand in existence and can only move out from there. This is further complicated by the challenge in bringing subjectivity into focus, which remains somewhat opaque and aloof. Yet, it is Kierkegaard’s interest in this slippage that makes his work rife for phenomenological analysis, according to Grøn. Thus, “it is important to read Kierkegaard’s thought of subjectivity as a countermove, in response to the possibilities of forgetting what it means to be a subject” (222). The paradox of being clear that subjectivity often means being unclear is a theme that emerges from Kierkegaard’s work. Grøn takes this as his launching point.

This paradox is a constant concern of both Climacus pseudonyms, to whom Grøn devotes much consideration in these essays. Given Grøn’s phenomenological bent, the essays in this section primarily deal with the subjects of consciousness, time, despair, and subjectivity, but Grøn also considers the dialectical conditions under which existence can be communicated. To Grøn’s credit, he never loses sight of the problems and concerns raised in the existential philosophy section but rather builds upon and further elucidates them. In doing so, Grøn’s phenomenological work has one further concern. He seeks to

understand the ways in which Kierkegaard influenced and formed later phenomenological thought. It is no secret that Kierkegaard had a significant influence on thinkers like Heidegger, Ricoeur, and Levinas, but Grøn thinks through how various Kierkegaardian texts anticipated these thoughts and helped form the analysis which would appear in these later thinkers.

The third and final section deals with ethics. Anyone who has delved into Kierkegaard's ethics will be unsurprised to find the centrality of love of self and love of neighbor pervading this section. This section launches with Grøn's essay on *Works of Love*, where thinking with Kierkegaard about love leads Grøn—to use M. Jaimie Ferreira's phrase—to a “transforming vision.” As Grøn explains concerning *Works of Love*, “the discourse aims to do something to its reader, changing his or her perspective or vision” (405). Thus, much of Grøn's ethics section considers the twofold way in which thinking through Kierkegaard's ethics can transform our vision of ourselves and of the neighbor. The transforming of our vision is meant to lead to a transformation of how we act in the world. Thus, as we learn of our duty to love the neighbor we learn to see them in a different light, which transforms how we see ourselves and how we act in relation to others.

Grøn asks in one of the early essays, “is ethics the limit of phenomenology?” (424) This shows that Grøn's considerations of phenomenology naturally led him to consider ethics. This question informs much of what is considered in the various essays, which deploy phenomenological language to consider such phenomena as visibility, vision, and self-transcendence. In trying to get ethics into his sights, Grøn is inevitably led from Kierkegaard to later phenomenological thinkers. One finds an especially fascinating consideration of dialectics and recognition which bears on Grøn's later analysis of the relationship between Kierkegaard and Levinas. Grøn dedicates much time thinking through the way transformative vision is found in Levinas and how its origin can in part be attributed to Kierkegaard. This section ends with numerous considerations of ethics in light of theological considerations of time, faith, hope, love, and anticipation.

The text that delivers Grøn's essays is excellent both in its design and layout. It is a large tome, and the binding is strong with an attractive cover bearing a contrasted image of Kierkegaard's initials in his own handwriting. The organization of the text is well-planned, placing the essays in a way that is both clear and easy to navigate. Helpfully, Grøn's writing is also remarkably consistent and systematic even in its exploratory and occasionally meandering style. At times, the tome reads like a text written by Husserl or Heidegger, whom Grøn clearly takes some influence from.

One other point should be addressed for the prospective reader. Grøn published in multiple languages throughout his career, and this text contains both English and German essays. Thus, it is worth noting to any readers who may not be able to read in languages other than English that the German essays are left untranslated. However, if one wants to find out what the German essays contain, the editors have provided a helpful summary of each essay in the chapter guide section at the beginning of the book.

Despite its many achievements, Grøn's work is not without its potential flaws. Some will be skeptical of his method and overall project. For instance, although Grøn is clear about his intentions in seeking only to think *alongside* Kierkegaard, some may suspect this is self-deception, as a reader always brings something to the text. Without rehearsing the debates in hermeneutics and literary theory about what the reader's relationship to the text is, it is simply worth noting that any attempt at pure thinking alongside Kierkegaard hardly comes without philosophical baggage. Additionally, some more historically minded thinkers may find there is not enough attention paid to pseudonymity or the historical context of golden age Denmark.

Such readers may also be sensitive to Grøn's penchant for and comfort with anachronisms. For example, Grøn habitually and perhaps too comfortably attributes twentieth and twenty-first century concepts and ideas, such as "oneself as another," "ek-sistence," and other later existential concepts, as well as terms from cognitive science, to Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms whenever he feels it explanatorily useful. This is not to say that these ideas can't be found in Kierkegaard, nor that they aren't earned or argued for by Grøn. It is simply to flag this for any potential readers. Further, Grøn is by no means the first to do this as it is quite common in existential scholarship.

Nonetheless, a reader sensitive to such anachronisms may be irked by the presence of Heideggerian, Ricoeurian, or Levinasian readings of Kierkegaard being masked as a pure thinking *alongside*. Similarly, such readers may be frustrated to find Kierkegaard's thinking dragged into debates about intentionality and situated cognition. Grøn could reply that the above examples are precisely what it means to think with Kierkegaard, but such a response may feel unsatisfactory to some.

Regardless, when it comes to the attempt to think alongside Kierkegaard, Grøn's work certainly sets the standard very high and his scholarship is worthy both of celebration and prolonged time spent with this collection of his essays. I highly recommend that anyone interested in exploring Kierkegaard in relation to existential philosophy, phenomenology, or ethics should pick up this book. Such thinking alongside Kierkegaard with Grøn will enrich one's own existence and repay abundantly for the time spent doing so.