

## *Interest as Mirror to Our Own Self*

Ionuț Bârliba  
Al.I. Cuza University of Iasi

Patrick Stokes, *Kierkegaard's Mirrors Interest, Self and Moral Vision*, Hampshire, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, 223 pp.

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This book tells us a story about moral experience and about the differences among our moral visions, as human beings (or selves) when we are faced with the same situation. At the very beginning of his book, Patrick Stokes<sup>1</sup> suggests we should make a thought experiment. Let's just say that *you* and *I* are watching TV at this same moment, as a normal every evening habitude. Let's also say that *you* and *I* are quite similar with respect to our 'backgrounds, temperaments, life experiences, moral commitments, political views, and religious beliefs' (p. 1). Now, given our similarities, one might expect that our motivational structures, our ways of seeing things and caring about them will be also similar. In other words, given a circumstance, one expects that we should experience and express the same affective and volitional responses.

Nonetheless, supposing that we watch the same news on TV, for example the events of the Indian Ocean tsunami of

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December 2004, *you* and *I* can experience in different ways the terrible human suffering drawn down by the tsunami. We can both feel pity, distress and also that something must be done but by the time “I sit in my chair and ruminate on the horror of what I’ve seen and the urgency of addressing the problem you leap from your chair and look up the phone number for the Red Cross, so you can call and find out what you can do to help—make a cash donation? Organize a food drive? Get on a plane and join the relief effort? In effect, you have acted, while I have continued to contemplate ineffectually without acting” (p. 2).

It seems that there is a huge difference between us in dealing with the same situation. And it actually is an enormous difference but the question here is what makes us split parts? Patrick Stokes stresses that while *I* see the sufferance of the people affected by the tsunami as morally compelling, *you* see the suffering of others as also morally compelling but compelling *you* (p. 5). *You*, without thinking, leave your chair and dial the Red Cross number, intending to help while *I* remain in front of the TV unable to translate my emotions into action or even into the thought that *I* should do something. Both of our attitudes are in Stokes’s opinion thoughtless but between the two of us it is only me who is to be blamed morally. According to Stokes the whole problem here is one of deliberation. In fact, deliberation is what makes moral philosophy so puzzling when facing such an example as the one given by Stokes. Instead of treating moral philosophy in terms of deliberation, we should understand our moral decisions as being more reflexive in character (p. 181). Moreover, Stokes suggests that when we actually deliberate (when we think about what it is better to do) we risk not rising up moral facts but more weighing moral considerations against non-moral ones. Stokes’s example here is as follows: “I should stop to give that hitchhiker a lift, but I’m worried about my safety and I am also running late” (p. 181).

What Patrick Stokes really wants to bring to our attention through this distinction is that it seems “there is some non-cognitive element in your apprehension of the situation that’s missing from mine, even though our apprehensions are identical on the level of their cognitive and

affective content” (p. 5). The distinction lies here in the fact that while *I* react according to an abstract moral attunement to the world, *your* reaction comes totally from your subjectivity even though cognitively and affectively we put ourselves in front of the situation similarly (we both understand that this is a tragedy and we both feel pity and distress and so forth). Stokes seems to sustain that it is when a deliberation (thought) gap opens up between our moral feelings and our possible reaction (or even better, action!) that we fail as moral agents. A moral demand should motivate us personally and directly. Referring here again to Stokes’s thought experiment, the possibilities of helping those victims of the tsunami should appear to you as “*your* possibilities rather than merely possibilities for a generalized ‘everyone’, which of course would amount to no one in particular” (p. 182).

That non-cognitive element is to be brought into discussion by Patrick Stokes through his book. His thesis is that we should “articulate a new understanding of moral condition in terms of moral *vision* rather than normative deliberation, good will and so forth” (p. 6). By sustaining his assumption, Stokes evokes an author who has an *interesting* view upon moral psychology, namely the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard.

Even though Stokes admits that when treating about Kierkegaard we usually foreground his influence on the development of twentieth-century Existentialism and strands of contemporary theology, the author’s attention is directed towards another crucial innovation in Kierkegaard’s work. It is what Patrick Stokes refers to as the probing phenomenology of moral psychology (p. 7) keeping in mind for his inquiry the guiding concept of *interesse* (interest) and the related one, *bekymring* (concern).

Since I cannot cover in depth in a short review all the issues Patrick Stokes treats in his book I will mainly stress upon the most interesting and original aspects as well as upon those that are most relevant for his thesis.

The book is structured in three parts. The first part entitled *Structures of Subjectivity* deals with “the mechanics of

Kierkegaard's account of consciousness" (p. 12), with the ontology of the self and the role that *interesse* plays therein.

Thus, even from the first chapter we can see that Patrick Stokes's main focus is on the concept of *interesse* (interest), one of the concepts belonging to Kierkegaard's psychological vocabulary, along with other more evocative terms such as 'passion', 'despair' or 'anxiety'. His investigation proposes to employ Kierkegaard's use of the term *interesse* as a vehicle for exploring the role of self-referentiality in Kierkegaard's phenomenology of moral selfhood (p. 18). Stokes begins his analysis from the concept of *interesting*, as being a specific aesthetic category. In his famous *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard speaks about the *interesting* as a key determination to be followed by the aesthete's interest (the best example here would be Johannes the Seducer from the *Seducer's Diary*).

However, the *interesting* as an esthetic category might produce knowledge but it cannot increase the degree of self-reflection. This ability of self-reflection is what Patrick Stokes tries to determine by introducing the second sense of the term *interesse* (this second meaning would be translated in English more often with *interest* than with the aesthetic *interesting*). This other sense, distinct from the aesthetic one, plays a more significant role in Kierkegaard's account of moral psychology. On page 28 Stokes quotes, in a conclusive way, a remark of Koch who marks the distinction between the two meanings of the term *interesse*: "*Interesse* in the esthetic sense is an expression for emptiness and despair, *interesse* understood as an essential preoccupation is an expression for striving in the direction of the individual."

An important part of Stokes's analyses is represented by the parallel he draws between consciousness and the selfhood considering that both are sites where opposites are brought together. Kierkegaard states that human experience is a 'place' where opposites collide. In the case of consciousness, we can notice the contradiction between ideality and actuality. To put it more clearly, language, which is linked to ideality, cannot capture what is essential for the experience of the existing individual, the 'actuality' of their existence. Language can only

organize the realm of particulars by slotting them into general categories (p. 43). The strongest example of the failure of language is to be found in Johannes de Silentio's (one of the pseudonyms that Kierkegaard used in order to sign his writings) presentation of Abraham's situation in *Fear and trembling*. Abraham cannot articulate anything that in human terms might excuse him from attempting to kill Isaac (p. 44).

Still, consciousness is the medium where ideality and actuality (reality) are related to one another and when this relation emerges, *interesse* (as a sense of involvement) will rise. To put it more simply, when you are conscious (about yourself) you immediately start to care about things. To be conscious is to be interested (p. 57).

Turning his attention to the concept of the self and to the ontological structure of the selfhood presented by Kierkegaard (aka Anti-Climacus) in *The sickness unto Death* Patrick Stokes points out that "The self, too, is a 'place' where polar opposites (such as infinite/finite, temporal/eternal, freedom/necessity) are brought together, apparently in some sort of 'synthesis'. "...just as the description of consciousness as a place of collision is inadequate without qualifying consciousness as 'interested', so too a mere syncretion of polar opposites does not, in itself, constitute selfhood" (p. 64).

In the second part of his book, entitled *Moral Vision*, Stokes continues his analysis from *The Sickness unto Death* by directing his attention towards one specific form of despair: the despair of infinitization, the despair which lacks finitude. We can create through imagination a fantastic self which carries away into the infinite so it becomes further and further removed from the concrete, the actual being that he is (p. 74). At the same time ethical imagination represents the way of apprehending possibility (as the effect of the act of infinitude) and actuality simultaneously. As Stokes states, "ethical imagination is a faculty for *seeing possibility in the world*" (p. 87). What is to be kept in mind from this whole analysis of the imagination is its connection with *interesse*. Stokes claims that the imaginative experience needs a property of self-referentiality, which he identifies with *interesse* (as being a relationship *inter-esse*, between beings). Hence, we as possible

selves visualize our possibilities through imagination, even though we as actual selves are not yet them (p. 89).

Other important aspects treated by Patrick Stokes in the second part of his book are the theme of self-recognition as a key description of moral imagination and the metaphor of the *mirror*, as the paradigmatic experience of self-recognition. The idea of self-recognition implies “an experience of identifying oneself with an ideal self posited in imaginative moral contemplation” (p. 95). In other words, to *see* oneself represents the ability of recognizing oneself through one’s imagination under ethical and religious determinants. This recognition is an immediate and decisive experience. It is a matter of qualitative *leap* “from seeing something to seeing something as what we recognize it to be” (p. 101).

To strengthen his idea Stokes reminds us of that story Kierkegaard tells about the drunk barefoot peasant who didn’t care about the carriage which was about to drive over his legs because he didn’t recognize them with shoes and stockings. Stokes appeals to this funny example to illustrate the role of vision and *interesse* in apprehending oneself in one’s concrete moral situation. The drunken peasant has to debate in a situation where there is nothing to debate. Recognizing your own feet is not a matter of epistemic deliberation. The peasant lacks in recognizing his own feet even though he can see the danger. The peasant fails to do what we would expect from him. That is to grasp his situation immediately and get out of the way (p. 100). The peasant fails to recognize himself, an immediate action which is an intrinsic feature of recognition.

Some of the most interesting chapters of Patrick Stokes’s book are the ones which discuss the metaphor of the *mirror* (chapters 7 and 8). This experience of looking in the mirror and seeing myself is not just one of immediate recognition but also an immediate evaluative one. The function of the *mirror* brings to the foreground one’s moral and volitional involvement. This self-recognition in the *mirror* is a matter of seeing our involvement in what we contemplate. The involvement implies necessarily an evaluative process which confronts us and forces us to change the qualifications under which we live (p. 103).

But what if we can also see the others as a mirror to ourselves? Stokes underlines that the ethical and religious development along with self-understanding are dependent on relating to the others (p. 134). But isn't it possible to lack in seeing the other as distinctive individuality if they are absorbed only "as imperatives into an ethical look" (p. 135)? In the last pages of the second part of his book Stokes turns to the *Sickness Unto Death's* construction of moral vision (which states a tension between the concrete and the ideal, the actual and the imagined individual) (p. 141). The point here is that when we look at the other we don't see "a person *and* moral demand, but a person who constitutes, *in their concrete specificity*, a moral demand in themselves" (p. 141).

In the last part of the book Stokes discusses around subjectivity and objective knowledge and the possible suggestion of Anti-Climacus that all fields of human inquiry (including astronomy, mathematics and physics which do not include *me* at all) are legitimate "insofar as they tell me about myself in a way that speaks to my moral condition" (p. 170). The decisive point here would be that Kierkegaard does not speak of the object of knowledge but rather about the *interest* that such knowledge presents. Thus more important is what motivates the end towards which the process of knowing is directed (p. 172). The implication of the self here is not as an "object" of knowledge. We would rather say that knowledge of "something" is permeated with personal interest.

There are at least three reasons which in my opinion qualify Patrick Stokes's books as a remarkable appearance on the stage of the quite dense second literature written in the last decades on Kierkegaard's thinking. The first reason would be the very choice of the concept *interesse* as the key term of Stokes's inquiry. In the context of the primacy of concepts such as despair, anxiety, repetition, inwardness or selfhood, Stokes found an important place for *interesse* in Kierkegaard's so called moral psychology.

Moreover, the approach of the book is quite interesting because Stokes's way of explaining Kierkegaard's specific use of the term *interesse* is more thematic than chronological. Thus the author does not follow the concept throughout the

kierkegaardian corpus from the beginning to the end underlining each occurrence and every change in meaning and context. Stokes points out that this kind of approach would keep the philosophical value of *interesse* at a minor level. Therefore his method is “one that seeks to uncover a foundational sense of *interesse* and then show how that sense ramifies through Kierkegaard’s more conceptually or descriptively fully fleshed works. We move from the foundational ontology to the descriptions of cognition and imagination in concrete situations and consider how the structural features of the ontology express themselves in the experiences of actual selves” (p. 11). By reconstructing the meaning of *interesse* Stokes also opens the way for new approaches to texts such as Johannes Climacus’s *De omnibus Dubitandum Est* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* or Anti-Climacus’s *The Sickness Undo Death*.

The last reason that makes this book remarkable is the use of that ingenious thought experiment which opens and closes Stokes’s study and which makes Kierkegaard’s sometimes blunt conceptual discussion lighter. The way *you* acted when hearing about those victims was so immediate that *your* perception, imagination and volition were all immediately combined. Stokes says here that this is actually how it should be and that this is how we should react to moral demands (p. 182). But *I* (*I* from the thought experiment) totally miss the point in the situation described in the experiment. *I* am the best example of the failure of Kierkegaard’s moral vision (*I* am no better even compared to the drunken peasant because *I*’ve also failed to see my involvement in the situation before me; p. 182). And even when, as Stokes writes in the last “scene” of his experiment, we (*you* and *me*) meet the next day and discuss about the tsunami and the victims of it, *I* lack in understanding *your* actions. Finding out that *you* called the Red Cross to find a way to help makes *me* feel admiration but according to Stokes admiration here is only a strategy of evasion (p. 183). One can admire another’s talent in singing or in some other skill while a moral exemplary action should stand only as a task of emulation.



**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Patrick Stokes is a researcher at the University of Hertfordshire and also a postdoctoral fellow at the *Søren Kierkegaard Research Center* in Copenhagen. *Kierkegaard's Mirrors, Interest, Self and Moral Vision* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) is his first published book on Kierkegaard's philosophy. He is already well known for studies such as *The Naked Self: Minimal vs. Narrative Selfhood in Kierkegaard* (2010), *'Interest' in Kierkegaard's Structure of Consciousness* (2008) or *Kierkegaard's Mirrors: The Immediacy of Moral Vision* (2007) and for his interest in themes like: *consciousness, moral vision, self* and *interest* in Kierkegaard's philosophy.

Address:

Ionuț Bârliba

Al.I. Cuza University of Iasi

Department of Philosophy

Bd. Carol I, 11

700506 Iasi, Romania

E-mail: ionutbarliba@gmail.com