

***Spirituality and Human Nature***

DONALD EVANS

Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 1993, x + 314 pp.

Anyone familiar with either Donald Evans or his writing will know that he represents an uncommon mixture of traditions and convictions, at least in this day. He is both an accomplished philosopher and a self-confessed mystic. These are not worlds that have mixed well in recent memory, because of suspicion on both sides. Philosophers have been wary of mystics because the statements and commitments of the mystic are not easily communicated, critiqued or defended. Mystical pronouncements are not usually very philosophically rigorous, and yet mystics claim a greater access to reality than the philosophers. The hard intellectual work of the philosopher seems pushed to the side by the mystic in favour of an indefensible, incommunicable intuition. On the other hand, mystics have been wary of philosophers because often philosophers have been too sure of themselves, too confined to one way of seeing, too unwilling to allow that a particular theory of reality does not describe reality itself.

In his latest book, *Spirituality and Human Nature*, Evans attempts both a defence of mysticism and a rapprochement of mysticism with philosophy. His version of mysticism is in no way anti-rational; in fact, it takes rationality very seriously. The defence, therefore, is not on mystical grounds but on philosophical grounds.

The introduction to *Spirituality and Human Nature* sets the agenda for the book. In a structure strongly reminiscent of Kierkegaard's stages on life's way, Evans distinguishes between three levels of spirituality: the psychological, the spiritual, and the mystical. The first level assumes we have a repressed emotional unconscious that accounts for our own tendencies towards narcissism, and from which we must be delivered. The second level recognizes that the psychological level is grounded in a spiritual reality, equally repressed, that needs to be uncovered. The third level is another Kierkegaardian move, which grounds and centres the spiritual level in mystical awareness. Each level finds its fulfilment in the one above and/or inside it.

The four sections of *Spirituality and Human Nature* deal in their own ways with this structure. The first three chapters, grouped under the heading "Spirituality and Depth Psychology," make no attempt to defend the mystical view of the world. Here Evans simply assumes as true claims about the nature of Spirit, our basically narcissistic nature and the psychic and mystical realities that define our existence. This section reads like a phenomenology of mysticism from the inside, borrowing heavily from depth psychology. Evans sketches in various ways both the importance and the ultimate inadequacy of simply dealing with psychological narcissism. Readers versed in depth psychology or philosophy may be uncomfortable with the easy move from the psychological life to talk about life energies, chakras and out-of-body experiences, but it is not Evans's intent to defend at this point; only to explicate.

Those sceptical of the claims made in the first section may well be irritated with the fact that they are not defended. Evans is aware of the necessity of defence, and in the next section, "Spirituality and Skepticism," tries to make room for the mystical world-view. This is the most philosophically interesting section. He challenges three assumptions he believes are held by those who would reject mysticism *a priori*:

*impersonalism* (the dogmatic rejection of any truth-claim that requires personal transformation to be adequately understood and appraised); *perspectivism* (the dogmatic rejection of any truth-claim based on direct experience of reality); and *positivism* (a species of impersonalism, the dogmatic rejection of any truth-claim that cannot be tested scientifically) (pp. 101-2). The intent is to make room for mystical experience to be at least rationally respectable, if not rationally accessible.

The third section outlines a mystical ethics, partly in response to Kai Nielsen's critique of religious ethics. Evans argues that ethics is possible because it is grounded in a mystical humanism that establishes good and evil for us. Mysticism has been criticized for sanctioning the withdrawal of the individual from the world, thereby making ethics irrelevant.<sup>1</sup> Evans tries to show that, far from undermining ethics, mystical humanism is necessary to establish the starting point of true ethics. The analogy to Kierkegaard's move from the ethical to the religious level is especially strong at this point.

The fourth section, "Spirituality and Religion," includes essays about the place of spirituality in a socially and religiously diverse world. Mystical humanism, Evans argues, is not quietistic ("Spirituality and Social Action"), but provides a true grounding for social action. It provides the basis for tolerance, understanding and even intimacy amongst religious traditions ("Spirituality and Christian Openness").

There are two kinds of readings that one might give of *Spirituality and Human Nature*: the sympathetic and the critical. I will present both these readings, and leave it to the reader to decide between them.

### 1. The Sympathetic Reading

The central question Evans addresses is this: "Is it possible to be a mystic and still be considered rational?" He answers in the affirmative, and he builds a good case for his conclusion. Much of his case comes in the form of a critique of partial or deficient kinds of rationality. In other words, he does not attempt to show that mysticism is rational in the way science is rational, but rather that that kind of rationality is itself only partial, contingent on a broader sense of reason. It is a rationality that works well for some situations, but does not work at all for others.

This critique of objective reason is not particularly new. Kierkegaard, Marx, feminists and post-modern thinkers have all made similar charges. But Evans does not want to throw in his lot with them, at least to the extent that they represent the "perspectival" option. He insists that there is an objective, pure reality—it just cannot be accessed by repeatable, agreed-upon methods of reason. Objective reality only opens itself to the one so attuned.

Evans does not draw back from controversy. It is a difficult thing these days to take a stand on anything, but Evans does, and usually backs these stands up with reasonably good argument. There is something in here for everyone to get annoyed about, and yet even so, the arguments are not frivolous. There is a refreshing lack of academic posturing here. While some Christians may not like his comments on openness to other faiths, for instance (in "Spirituality and Christian Openness to Other Faiths"), the argument is sober, and is advanced with great sympathy for the Christian position. There is no simplistic reduction of all religions to a single core, thus denying the uniqueness of particular traditions.

The main virtue of this book is that it reintroduces an old option into the philosophical picture—that, when a person claims some spiritual experience or ele-

ment in his life, maybe the claim is really true. The possibility of a spiritual reality cannot be dismissed *a priori*. Evans is at his best when he is making this option a live one.

## 2. The Critical Reading

While the sympathetic reading can be centred around the question "Is it possible to be a mystic, and still be considered rational?" I think the critical question is: "Is it possible to *not* be a mystic, and be considered rational, on Evans's account?" At times, the answer seems to be no.

I am quite convinced that Evans is a mystic, and not only because of his reports of his own mystical experiences. Along with these reported experiences, he exhibits a self-assurance that has typified mystics through the ages. He does much more than simply make room for mysticism to be rationally respectable. Mysticism is supreme rationality, or at least the position that ultimately legitimates all other rationality. In places, he goes from making mystical reality a live option to making it the only reasonable and truly human option for those who are not blinded by their own narcissism. He does not advocate completely abandoning perspectives, but there is a sense that they are only valuable inasmuch as they match up with the mystics' intuition of reality.

It is the ambiguity between affirming the importance of perspectives (which Evans does, at times) and the inability to explain why we should not just set all perspectives aside in favour of mystical intuition (an implication of his position, I would argue) that is troubling. While it is at least possible that perspectives could struggle between themselves to come to better understanding, that struggle seems irrelevant to understanding the spirit that makes those perspectives possible. And if that is true then dialogue does not seem to be significant. We should all strive for the mystical state that would make sense of all perspectives, and leave perspectives behind.

One result of this problem is that it is difficult to imagine how mysticism could ever be criticized. It is one thing to say that mysticism cannot be criticized by the person who holds some form of impersonalism. That person, it could be argued, does not even have the right frame of reference from which to formulate a criticism. It is something else entirely to reject the move of Buber (for instance), a thinker who was clearly not criticizing mysticism from the outside. Buber rejected mysticism because it did not allow for true human and divine dialogue. Like those he criticizes, Evans seems to reject the possibility that Buber's move away from mysticism was actually legitimate. If Evans wants mysticism to be rationally respectable, it must at least be criticizable from within the tradition. I see no evidence that it is criticizable from anywhere, within or without.

To be fair, this is not an issue that is unique to Evans. It is, in fact, the distinction between Meister Eckhart's mysticism, in which the self is emptied so that the source can live through the self and, paradoxically, individuate the self, and Buber, for whom the source comes in relation, and the self is created in that dialogue. Evans is on Eckhart's side in this dichotomy, a side that has great power but also potential problems.

Perhaps it is the ambiguity (or, more charitably, paradoxicality) of this book that convinces me that the writer's message comes as the working out of a mystical life. Is it the perspective that is affirmed, or the mystical source that is affirmed?

Evan's answer is that both are. Whether this is true is, I suppose, up to the one willing to engage him at more than an academic level.

### **Notes**

- 1 This criticism is outlined and addressed by James Horne in *The Moral Mystic* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press for the Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion, 1983).

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