

Book Review



Hall, R.L. (2010) *Human Embrace: The Love of Philosophy and the Philosophy of Love: Kierkegaard, Cavell, Nussbaum*. Penn State Press. 272 pages.

In this book, Ronald L. Hall sheds light on some themes shared by three important figures of western philosophy, who have, on the surface, different philosophical interests and approaches. He refers to Søren Kierkegaard, a Danish existentialist philosopher who uses many quasi-fictional characters in his works to explore the question of how one can have an authentic faith in transcendence or God. Secondly, he refers to Stanley Cavell, whose interest is in epistemology and language, and finally, he refers to Martha Nussbaum, whose interest is mainly in the intersection between philosophy and literature. However, despite these distinctive interests, Hall argues that there is a common theme in which all are interested and which all mutually develop, namely the philosophy of “love,” or how to embrace our humanness.

In Part I, starting with Kierkegaard, Hall compares the different kinds of existence represented by two characters, Abraham (as discussed in *Fear and Trembling*) and Socrates. Hall engages with the idea of how the individual can cope with the dialectic of paradox and eventually take a leap of authentic faith. Hall uses the example of Abraham, who in Genesis 22 is commanded by God to sacrifice his son Isaac, to assert that even though the foundation of human existence is anxiety, an individual has to find a way to cope with it, or live with the persistent temptation in his soul and try not to escape from it. He contrasts the deaths of Socrates and Abraham, the latter defined as “the knight of existential faith,” to further claim that even if human existence is vulnerable, Abraham decides to embrace his suffering and have faith in transcendence, and unlike Socrates, eventually makes his way to an afterlife. This shows that submitting is the only way for one to continue living well as a human being.

In Part II, Hall considers Stanley Cavell as a philosopher whose work was influenced by Kierkegaard, arguing that “Cavell seems to be attracted to something in Kierkegaard’s way of thinking” (Hall 1999: 88). By this, Hall means that

Cavell places the Kierkegaardian dialectic and temptation at the center of his philosophical reflection, especially when he engages with skepticism. Just as (as discussed in Part I) Kierkegaard urges humans to overcome their own temptation and take the leap to faith, Cavell also claims that an individual will complete their affirmation of the self only when they overcome a dialectical context. This will happen when an individual determines to pursue a specific kind of knowledge in the modern world. According to Hall, Cavell uses Descartes's point of view to declare that, with modernity, human beings began to picture themselves as a God, and that this idea shapes how we consider something to be objective. Simultaneously, it also shapes how we distinguish between the ideal knowledge of modern science and the human predicament which an individual has to overcome.

In Part III, Hall demonstrates how this duality has influenced Nussbaum's philosophical work. He explains how Nussbaum divides events in human life into two kinds: the uncontrolled event, or *Tuche*, and events that are controlled, or *Techne*. However, as human existence primarily involves exposure to events that are uncontrolled, this causes fragility beneath our existence or in our deepest core, since everything in the world can happen independently of our will. For instance, we always await great things happening to us, as the sun shining on us, as it were (Hall 1999:177). But at the same time, such a manner opens us up to many future possibilities and bad situations, which makes us anxious. Therefore, Nussbaum suggests that, to overcome this anxiety, humans have to transcend the duality of *Tuche* and *Techne*, or transcend their own self by seeking "philosophical voices" in the specific culture. This is the only way that *Tuche* will completely vanish and one can continue living well as a human being.

To sum up, not only does Hall find similar concerns reflected in the works of Kierkegaard, Cavell and Nussbaum, but he also reveals new insights into these three philosophers. In addition, by following his theme of paradox and duality, Hall succeeds in showing us how important embracing our own humanness is and how it can be considered an alternative path to the pursuit of our own happiness.

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