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Standing at the Crossroads

Julie A. Johnson

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Standing at the Crossroads

Julie A. Johnson

*“What I have said to you so often I say once more, or rather I shout it to you:
either/or; aut/aut.” - Kierkegaard*

For
Mom and Dad

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Preface

Although the subject of this thesis was not the one that I originally intended to write about, it has proven to be a most interesting challenge. What can be more important than the principles that you choose to guide your life? Most people will find themselves standing at the crossroads at some point in their lives and it is at that time that they must choose those principles; principles that will ‘either’ lead to the life of an aesthete ‘or’ the life of an ethicist. This is the fundamental either/or.

My director, Dr. Husain Sarkar, approached me with this topic which was also to be the subject matter for a philosophy course he was teaching that semester. Under his patient and dedicated direction I gained more from this one project than I could have ever imagined. I believe Dr. Sarkar, with diligent red pen in hand, spent almost as much time on this thesis as I did. I am very grateful to him for his encouragement and guidance. Also, I must thank Dr. Edward H. Henderson and Dr. Robert McMahon, who both took time out of their busy schedules to serve on my committee and provide very useful and interesting comments.

Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to cull out not only the meaning of Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*, but also to provide the criticisms of the text by others and myself. My hope is that the thesis will show that Kierkegaard's work has some major "potholes." Chapter 1 has been devoted to expository work. I have attempted to explain some of Kierkegaard's most difficult passages here. Chapter 2 contains the criticisms of several authors who have published or lectured on this text: Alastair Hannay, Alasdair MacIntyre, Anthony Rudd, Husain Sarkar, and Mark C. Taylor. These authors are divided on two accounts: First, while some argue that the *Either/Or* is not a radical choice, others state that it is. Second: the ethical connection to the religious is debated. My own criticisms are found in Chapter 3. The *Either/Or* is obviously a fundamental choice between the aesthetic life and the ethical life. My criticisms are an attempt to show that Kierkegaard provides inadequate argument for the truth of the ethical system because he offers no independent criteria, this leads to the radical choice. However, I do recognize the difficulty of this task, which can lead to an infinite regress. Furthermore, Kierkegaard assumes that there is a close bond between the ethical and the religious, but I cannot find one between them. My conclusion is that Kierkegaard simply makes too many unargued-for assumptions.

Chapter 1

Understanding the Either/Or

CHAPTER 1

UNDERSTANDING THE EITHER/OR

Soren Kierkegaard's *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*, is a collection of letters between friends -- an entourage of finely selected words and phrases -- each determined of a 'better way of life.' The arguments of Kierkegaard's fictitious characters, the Aesthete, who remains unnamed, and Judge Wilhelm, an ethicist, lead to no conclusion, leaving the reader to make the final decision. In this essay, I do not wish to determine the final conclusion to the debate, but I seek only to interpret and scrutinize a small portion of the *Either/Or*, namely pages 477 through 535. The passages found on these pages come from Judge Wilhelm's writings, in which he proclaims that there comes a time in life when the individual must stand at the crossroads and choose. The individual must make the fundamental choice: either he will choose the ethical life, or he will remain an aesthete.

This fundamental choice, the either/or, has two major flaws. First, it is a radical choice; there are no independent criteria provided by Judge Wilhelm that would allow an individual to make the choice based on reason. The choice is based solely on intuition or preference. Once the individual has made the choice, then, and only then, does he gain reasons for the decision. Second, Kierkegaard automatically connects the ethical to the religious. In order for the individual to find his ethical self, he must recognize his connection to God. I would like to argue that this connection is

unnecessary. Religion may well be a higher form of existence than the ethical, but then it is a step beyond, not necessarily attached to, the ethical.

I have dedicated Chapter 1 to expository work; my understanding of the *Either/Or*. My aim is to first provide a basic knowledge of the content of the *Either/Or*, and then to clarify it with examples and explanation. Chapter 2 is composed of what authors, Alastair Hannay, Anthony Rudd, Mark C. Taylor, and Husain Sarkar, have to say about the text. It deals with their interpretation and criticism, not mine. Finally, in Chapter 3, I want to show what the flaws are that plague the *Either/Or*.

The Tale of Chuck Alderman

The tale of Chuck Alderman is a fictitious one, its purpose being simply to provide a background for what is to come. As you read the following sections, keep in mind Alderman's characteristics before and after he makes the fundamental choice. What is of utter importance is the transition from the one lifestyle (immediacy and emptiness), to the other (continuity and fulfillment). This story is not infrequently mentioned in what follows and is used to illustrate key themes in Kierkegaard.¹

Chuck Alderman is a well to do stockbroker. He works hard to support his lavish bachelor pad and rewards himself for his success at least three times a week at the local pub. There he and his friends drink, play pool, and get rowdy as if they were still

¹For illustrations, see pp. 8-9, 11, 14, 19, 26, 36-37, 39

lamenting their carefree college days. Some of his buddies have had the misfortune of getting married, but the majority have managed to steer clear. For Alderman, Friday evenings are spent charming every lady at the singles bars with his wit and charisma. Every Sunday, he wakes up early to play golf with some other members of his country club. He is as refined and graceful on Sunday mornings as he is loud and raucous on weeknights with his friends. Such is the life of Chuck Alderman.

One Sunday morning, Alderman wakes up especially early, but he doesn't get out of bed. This particular morning he is feeling exceptionally empty. He's been noticing lately that every time he goes out with his friends its always the same old stories; somehow they're just not as funny anymore. His wit and charm can make any woman swoon, but it doesn't make him happy. His conversations with the country club members are the worst. At best they are formalities -- weather, family, future -- at worst they are meaningless, void of any real substance.

Today, as he lays in bed contemplating life, he feels restless, as if something is missing. He doesn't know who he really is: Is he the obnoxious drunkard? Is he the ladies man? Or, is he the country club snob, with nothing important to say? Everything that used to make him happy doesn't bring him the same pleasure that it once did. This morning, instead of pulling on his favorite plaid pants and picking up his shiny new golf clubs, he takes a drive to no place in particular. The road takes him to a familiar place, one he has not been to in decades. It is the small town where he used to come and visit his grandmother during the summer. Three times a week, he and his grandmother would help out in the soup kitchen across the street from the church they attended. Outside the soup kitchen today, people are just beginning to line up, hoping for

something hot to warm their bellies. Stepping out of his flame red Porsche, Alderman slowly walks towards the building. To the right of the serving line, Alderman notices the same inscription that was there when he was young:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.*

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.

*Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.²*

Switching his gaze back to the serving line, Alderman observes the grateful smile of those so much less fortunate than he. As they walk past him, each nods a warm hello, their sincerity astounds him. Alderman is standing at the crossroads; he can either walk away untouched, back to the life he knows, or he can allow the circumstances to change him. However, if he walks away now, he will never experience this kind of pull again. Suddenly, Alderman rolls up his sleeves, greets the other volunteers and takes up his old place at the end of the line, serving vegetables. With each serving of broccoli, he feels his life taking on a new meaning.

Although he makes the choice to live ethically when he suddenly decides to help at the soup kitchen, the enormity of this decision does not hit him until later. He is kept busy most of the morning with one task or another -- handing out clothes, reading

²Matthew 5:3-10.

stories to the children, cleaning up -- and has no time to contemplate what this would mean for his life. In the evening, however, he sits on the steps of his grandmother's house and watches the comets burst into life and disappear. In a sky full of steadily shining stars, the comets are mere flickers. The pleasure that they bring lasting only a moment and then fading away.

Sitting on the porch steps, Alderman begins to see a resemblance between his own aesthetic life and the flickering comets. The enjoyment that he receives from getting drunk with his friends, dancing the night away with every lady in the bar, or golfing with other members of the country club, is only momentary. Like the comets, it is there, and then it is gone, leaving Alderman searching for something else. He thinks of his grandmother and all the good that she did in her life despite her meager existence, remembering the peacefulness and dignity that she always carried with her. She was truly a happy woman.

These reflections lead Alderman to realize how different his life will have to be if he is to live ethically. He now better understands what the choice he had made within himself meant. As the days and weeks go by, the emptiness starts to leave him and he makes a firm commitment to helping others. In his new lifestyle he recognizes his separation from God and seeks to remedy it.³

³Kierkegaard assumes that the leap to the ethical life includes the religious. Although I do not agree that this is a necessary qualification, it has been added to the story in order to completely represent Kierkegaard's view.

I. The Crossroads

A. The Fundamental Choice

There comes a time in life when an individual is faced with the Choice. One stands “at the crossroads”⁴ and is presented with an either/or of such intensity that it reaches to the core of one’s very self. According to Kierkegaard, there is no compromise, it is either one or the other. This is the moment “when [the] soul [is] matured in the hour of decision.” (477) The individual is no longer a child being told what to do and simply follows instructions, but a mature adult. Decisions cease to be referred to one’s elders and are laid to rest at the feet of the individual. It is when the individual has reached this stage, a point in his life where he must turn or continue along the same path, that he encounters the fundamental choice.

One of the most dramatic turnarounds in history is the story of Saul found in Acts, Chapter 9. Saul, a pharisee, had made a career out of persecuting Christians. In this particular story, Saul is on his way to Damascus in order to search out the Christians who resided there, “. . . if he found any there who belonged to the [Christian faith,] whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.”⁵ However, on the road to Damascus he is struck by a brilliant light and he hears the voice of Jesus asking why he is persecuting him. When Saul opens his eyes, he is blind. The Lord instructs Saul that he will only regain his sight once Ananias, a

⁴Soren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*, p.477. All page numbers in parentheses refer to the pages of this book. For more information, see the bibliography.

⁵Acts 9:2

Christian disciple, places his hands on him. Saul had reached a crossroads and he made his fundamental choice. He could either continue his life of relentless persecution, or turn, and lead an ethical life as one of God's most outspoken disciples. This either/or, this fundamental choice, bored its way to the very core of Saul's being. His name was changed to Paul and he became one of the most renowned disciples in the Bible.⁶ Although not all moments of decision, not all crossroads, are as spectacular as Paul's, this example provides some insight into the profoundness of the fundamental choice.

Each individual must face this Choice. To quote a common cliché, "Life is full of choices." True enough, but these are particular choices. As important and consequential as they may seem, their significance is only secondary to that of the fundamental choice. Not by any means to say that they should be taken lightly, for even particular decisions can and do have a serious effect on an individual's life, but that they should be made bearing in mind the fundamental choice. "[T]here is only one situation where this phrase [I stood at the crossroads] has its absolute meaning, namely where it points on the one hand to truth, righteousness, and holiness, and on the other to desire and susceptibility, and to dim passions and perditions," (477)

As Chuck Alderman watched the hungry, the meek, and the poor thankfully

⁶Other biblical examples include the story of Zacchaeus found in Luke, chapter 19 and the calling of the twelve disciples found throughout the Gospels. Please note: These examples automatically include a leap in faith from the ethical to the religious. For Kierkegaard, this creates no difficulties; these two concepts are so closely interwoven that the step to the ethical *is* the step to the religious. (A point that I will argue against in Chapter 3.) For now, these examples are only meant to illustrate exactly how fundamentally and intensely the Choice can affect one's life.

accept their meals, he no doubt stood at the crossroads. On the one hand, he could become a servant to others, on the other, he could continue to serve himself; the absolute meaning of the choice was before him. In that instant, he was faced with the fundamental either/or.

What, then, is this choice? Is it the choice between good and evil? No, at first glance, it is the choice between the ethical life and the aesthetical life. A person is to live ethically or aesthetically. In choosing the ethical life, the individual chooses the “absolute either/or” which is “the choice between good and evil.” (485) These -- good and evil -- are the categories of the ethical life. “Through choosing it I do not really chose between good and evil, I choose the good, but by virtue of choosing the good I choose the option between good and evil. The original choice is constantly present in every subsequent choice.” (520) The choice to live the ethical life is good; “I choose the good . . .” In the ethical life then, the individual has the option to choose between good and evil in his particular choices. This lifestyle does not inherently include a perfect nature. As humans, even as ethical beings, we are still fallible and subject to sin. However, the choice to live ethically is “constantly present in every subsequent choice.” An ethical life does not presume that we will choose the good every time, but that we set this as our goal and are continually reminded of it.

In choosing the aesthetical life, the individual does not choose evil, but indifference, as far as indifference can be considered a choice. According to Kierkegaard, indifference is no choice at all, it is a life without an absolute goal or a determined focus. Furthermore, it is a life without the categories of good and evil.

The fundamental choice, then, taking a second look, is the “literal and strict

expression of the ethical.” (485) The either/or cannot be, strictly speaking, the choice between the ethical and the aesthetic life because the aesthetic life is not a choice. According to Kierkegaard, one does not decide to be an aesthete, but simply defaults into this lifestyle through a lack of choosing. Therefore, the fundamental choice is the ethical; to choose is to choose the ethical. Either one chooses the ethical or one does not choose; “So the either/or I have presented is in a sense, absolute, for the options are choosing and not choosing.” (491) It is for this reason that Kierkegaard writes, “Only when one can get a person to stand at the crossroads in such a way that he has no expedient but to choose, *does he choose what is right.*” (486, Emphasis mine) An individual forced to stand at the crossroads and choose faces two options, but only one can be chosen, namely the ethical. So, if the individual “has no expedient but to choose,” the choice is the ethical life, implying that this is what is “right.”

Once again, the aesthetical life is not a choice, but indifference. It is “wholly immediate.” (485) Kierkegaard writes that the aesthete may choose to be a priest, a barrister, a hairdresser, or a bank teller (484), but these choices are finite, they may or may not last. The aesthete’s life is based on whims and fancies, “. . . [O]ne chooses for that moment only and can, for that reason, choose something else the next instant.” (485)

In the finite world, there is a multiplicity of possibilities for one’s life tasks and pleasures. The aesthete is indifferent towards these possibilities, choosing one and then another; he exists entirely in the finite realm. It is only the fundamental choice, Kierkegaard claims, that can bring him out of this realm and into something more concrete, namely the infinite. Kierkegaard states that this infinite world is the domain of

the ethical. Again, the choice can only be of the ethical. The ethical individual does not change from moment to moment as the aesthete does, but is concrete in the infinite. There is one infinite life task for the ethicist, whereas the aesthete has numerous immediate or finite tasks.

B. "Full Meaning"

When the individual has reached the crossroads, and has subsequently made the fundamental choice, he does so with some understanding, but not a full understanding. "And although to some extent my life has its either/or behind it, I know very well that there may still be many a situation, in which its full meaning is yet to be encountered." (478) Kierkegaard wants to suggest that the individual does not grasp the "full meaning" of his decision right away. Understanding is a life-long process. As the individual continually applies the fundamental choice to the particular decisions in his life, the "full meaning" of this choice becomes clearer and clearer. Chuck Alderman begins to realize the meaning of his choice as he sits on the steps of his grandmother's house watching the night sky. His understanding of that decision growing gradually as he makes the necessary changes to his life. His aesthetic way of life slowly evolving into the ethical. Weeknights are now spent volunteering at different rest homes and Sunday mornings are spent in church. Losing his lust for material goods, his bachelor pad is no longer as lavish as it once was; the money he would have spent on expensive furniture and decorations now goes to charities. Focusing on what is right and wrong in his every day decisions, eventually, he will arrive at the "full meaning."

One would assume that understanding becomes particularly clear when the

individual faces an extremely powerful situation or wrenching circumstance. In a more dramatic illustration than the Alderman case, when a person is forced to choose between saving his own life or that of another, the fundamental choice will have an enormous effect on the outcome of that decision. The individual is forced to determine his actions based on the categories of good and evil. It is at this time that the “full meaning” of the choice will become apparent.

C. The Moment of Choice

The moment of choice is extremely important - “. . . to win yourself, to take possession of yourself.” (482) Choice is not outside the chooser, but within. This is why the individual cannot remain indifferent when faced with the choice. According to Kierkegaard, the choice affects the personality; the personality is formed by the choice. “Choice itself is decisive for a personality’s content; in choice personality immerses itself in what is chosen, and when it does not choose it wastes consumptively away.” (482)

The story of the Israelites escape from bondage in Egypt provides a prime example. In chapters seven through eleven of Exodus, Pharaoh faces ten plagues and is given ten chances to let the Israelites go. Six times he refuses, “Pharaoh’s heart became hard and he would not listen to them, just as the Lord had said.”⁷ However, four of the last decisions were made for him, “But the Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart,

⁷Exodus 7:13

and he would not let the Israelites go.”⁸ Pharaoh had an opportunity to make the choice, but he did not choose; instead, he “hardened his heart.” His personality -- his stubbornness, his lust for power -- made him callous and he was no longer given the chance to choose.

The choice must be made almost instantaneously. The “full meaning” will not be realized yet, but will come with time. Life does not stop when the moment of choice is at hand, so in every moment that the individual takes to ponder the decision, the reality of life continues to impress upon the individual its alternatives. The personality is predisposed to one side or the other, so that in each moment that passes without choosing the personality is “positing” either one choice or the other.

Imagine a crowded highway. It has only one lane and cars travel at a furious pace in only one direction. Some distance down the highway, there is one left hand turn, one crossroad. Drivers can either choose to turn or simply continue on their way. However, there is no time to check the map. The cars in the rear are moving too fast for the motorist to slow down and there is no place to pull over. The decision must be made quickly if the individual is not to be run over. “[T]here is a danger afoot that at the next moment it may not be in my power to make the same choice, that something has already been lived that must be lived over again.” (483) The instant of choice arrives and the individual has made no decision, either because he fears what lies beyond the turn, or because he is paying too much attention to the road ahead. In either case, the driver passes by the turn. A decision has been made, but not by the driver. He is forced to continue down the same path by the ever-present stream of traffic pressing

⁸Exodus 10:20

him forward. The driver has missed his chance and there is no turnaround. Such is life; such is the reality of the choice.

One cannot erase moments of life and live them over; there is no turnaround. If the individual hesitates because he fears the consequences of the choice, or if he is paying too much attention to life's activities, the moment of choice will come and go. Life is constantly pressing us forward such that one's personality is developing too fast to slow down.

Standing in front of the soup kitchen, Chuck Alderman had the opportunity to walk away. However, if he had, similar situations could never again have the same impact on him. Each time he walks away from the crossroads, he is pulled deeper and deeper into the aesthetic life. Its hold on him becomes so strong that he is unable to break free, and the "dark powers" of his aesthetic existence make the decision for him. The moment of choice would have come and gone. "The personality already has interest in the choice before one chooses, and if one postpones the choice the personality makes the choice unconsciously, or it is made by the dark powers within it." (483)

II. Logic, Nature, and History

It is Kierkegaard's view that the choice at hand must not only be made quickly, but, even more crucially, it must be made freely. Although there were philosophers in his day, such as Hegel, who attributed much to necessity, for Kierkegaard, there must

be an element of freedom for the choice to exist. This element of freedom, Kierkegaard claims, is found in the 'internal' history of the individual.

Thought and philosophy share the same categories, namely those of logic, nature, and history. Logic and nature are based in necessity, so the philosopher is able to mediate⁹ these categories. (488) A simple, logical illustration of their necessity will provide clarity:

A or B; not A; therefore B

$$\begin{array}{l} 1. A \vee B \\ 2. \sim A \\ \hline \therefore B \end{array}$$

Given the conditions, B is the necessary conclusion.

The necessity of nature can be similarly illustrated: Given normal circumstances, if a penny is dropped from the Empire State Building, it will go up, it will stay level, or it

⁹As a student, Kierkegaard went to Germany and was confronted with the dominance of Hegelian thought. For Hegel, truth is found in the synthesis of two contradictory claims; a "higher unity." James Albert Pait, in his article, "Kierkegaard and the Problem of Choice", provides a synopsis of this point: "Any statement immediately implies its contradictory, by the passage from any position to its opposite is the truth of both. Thus the positing of a position and its opposite form their truth only in a new synthesis which is compounded of both yet is not exhausted by either." (239) Kierkegaard refers to Hegel's synthesis of contradictions or opposites as "mediation." He alludes to this when he writes, "philosophy turns to the past, to the whole of world-historical experience, it shows how the *separated elements come together in a higher unity*." (487, Emphasis mine)

It is this system of interweaving contradictions that Kierkegaard finds antagonistic to his own views. "In [Hegel's] attempt to reconcile all opposites within a system, he fails to allow for the ultimacy of choice." (Pait, 241) Obviously, choice is an extremely important concept for Kierkegaard. Not only choice, but the freedom to choose. In life, there is always an either/or. "This two-volume work seeks to delineate two ways of life, the aesthetic and the ethical; the title indicates their incompatibility." (Pait, 241) Kierkegaard is not so much interested in a synthesis of contradictions, but a "radical choice" between them. According to Kierkegaard, the lifestyle of the ethicist and the lifestyle of the aesthete are "incommensurable." Truth is found in freely choosing.

will go down. Due to the law of gravity, the penny cannot go up or stay level.

Therefore, the penny will go down, a necessary conclusion.

History is not confined to necessity. In history, “even the humblest individual has a dual existence.” (489) The individual has a history in both outward and inward works. The outward works are “the works through which he belongs to history.” (489) These works are the individual’s actions which affect his society, his family, etc., his interactions with the world outside him. This is history as philosophers see it; as necessity.

On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-five Theses to the doors of a church in Wittenberg, Germany. Appalled by the blatant corruption of the church, Martin Luther started an avalanche that would change the face of Christianity forever. His outward works had a profound historical significance. “The individual acts, but this action enters into the order of things which sustains the whole of existence . . . it is absorbed into and transformed by the world-historical process.” (489) For the philosopher, according to Kierkegaard, Martin Luther’s act was exactly as it should have been. It was a necessary act. The philosopher “keeps at a distance the reflection which would point out that everything might have been otherwise.” (489) Looking at history in such a way, there can be no either/or.

Kierkegaard does not deny the necessity of history, but adds a second nature, that of freedom. Freedom reveals itself in the inward works of the historical individual -- his hopes, dreams, goals, fears. Here, the individual is able to choose; here is the either/or. Nothing can take this choice away from the individual. “[T]he inward work belongs to himself and will belong to him in all eternity; this neither history nor world-

history can take from him, it follows him either to his joy or to his sorrow.” (489)

The inward work of Martin Luther was the culmination of what must have been an intense internal struggle. As an ordained priest and Scripture scholar, his decision to act against the church -- an extremely powerful church -- was monumental. After having devoted his life to both God and the ministry of the Church, he found them pitted against one another. Either he must choose to follow in the ways he felt were holy and just under God, the ways of good and evil, or he must choose to follow God’s church on earth, run by mankind and subsequently distorted and misguided by mankind. The choice he made inwardly, courageously, and freely will not soon be forgotten.

In the wake of his charges against the established church, Martin Luther was excommunicated and had to flee to Germany. The church could force him from his home, disallow him as part of its flock, and even threaten his life, but it could not take away his choice to live ethically; his choice to live under the categories of good and evil. This choice is a free one, it “is the true life of freedom.” (489) It is this either/or “which makes a man greater than the angels.” (490)

Kierkegaard insists that “as truly as there is a future, just as truly is there an either/or.” (490) Freedom is crucial to the fundamental choice. Without this essential freedom, Kierkegaard’s argument collapses. If the individual is not free to choose, then there is no choice, no either/or, only necessity. “So it is freedom I am fighting for [. . .], for the future, for either/or.” (490)

III. The Aesthete

In the *Either/Or*, it is the Aesthete¹⁰ that Kierkegaard, through Judge Wilhelm, implores to choose; and choose freely. But what sort of individual is this Aesthete? What characteristics does he possess that keep him from an ethical existence? Judge Wilhelm finds the nature of the Aesthete without serenity, his life lacking continuity, and his spirit wanting something more. Without making the fundamental choice, he cannot escape from this life.

A. A Life of Immediacy

“I have remarked in a previous letter that the experience of having loved gives to a man’s nature a harmony that is never entirely lost; now I want to say that choosing gives to a man’s nature a solemnity, a quiet dignity, that is never entirely lost.” (490) In choosing, the individual finds himself in his freedom -- “consciousness unites” and the “I chooses itself.” (491) To come to the point of understanding oneself, to be in complete unity with one’s self, this gives to a person a sense of peace and security. There is no longer a constant searching among finite multiplicities, a constant switching of tasks and pleasures. The self completes its search and comes to rest in itself. (491) Not a different self, but the same self with all its aesthetic qualities only in an absolute form, an ethical form. “. . . [O]nly then is life beautiful, and that only in this way can a person succeed in saving his soul and gaining the world and not abusing it.” (492)

¹⁰The “Aesthete” here refers specifically to the aesthetic individual found in the first part of the *Either/Or* to whom the Judge writes.

The aesthete, however, remains in immediacy. According to Kierkegaard his life does not contain the solemnity or dignity of the ethical individual. He does not reveal his true self to himself or to others, but masks himself with his finite qualities, "You are witty, ironic, observant, a dialectician, experienced in pleasure, you can calculate the instant, you are sentimental, heartless, all depending on the circumstances. But beneath all this you are all the time only in the moment . . ." (493) By repeatedly immersing himself in these finite attributes, it becomes increasingly difficult for the aesthete to make manifest his true personality, to understand his true nature. The self is still searching, but instead of seeking a concrete self in which to permanently reside, he jumps from one temporary pleasure to the next. The aesthete "is so inexplicably woven into the circumstances of life which lie outside him that he is almost unable to reveal himself." (480)

Before his choice to live ethically, Chuck Alderman was a prime example of such an aesthete. Masking himself with his wit, his charm and his refined social skills, he moved from one group to another, constantly searching for ways to amuse himself. However, there is certainly no dignity in rowdy drunkenness, nor is there solemnity in playing cat and mouse games in singles bars. In the end, Alderman did not know who he really was. He was so enamored with his way of life that that life has buried his true self, hidden it from him, making the search for his self inordinately difficult.

B. Two Variations, One Theme

The aesthetic life view, despite its many variations, shares one common theme, "one must enjoy life." (493) There are various ways in which to "enjoy life," and none of

these are discounted. However, each aesthetic variation, no matter how distinct, remains in immediacy. "Great as the differences within the aesthetic sphere may be, all stages have the essential similarity that spirit appears not in the form of spirit but in the form of immediacy." (494)

Kierkegaard gives examples of two different types of aesthetes. The one who finds outward pleasures and the one who finds inward pleasures. "But the person who says that he wants to enjoy life always posits a condition which is either outside the individual or in the individual, but not posited by the individual himself." (493) For the first type of aesthete, the pleasures they seek are outward pleasures. They spend their time searching for things which lie outside them. These individuals make "wealth, glory, nobility, etc., life's task and content." (495) Such things are not posited by the individual, for they exist independently of him. No matter how diverse the pleasure, "from plain philistinism to the greatest intellectual refinement. . . " (494), they are all immediate or finite pleasures.

The second type of aesthete also seeks to enjoy life, but his pleasure comes from within. His enjoyment of life consists in exercising his talents, "a practical talent, a mercantile talent, a mathematical talent, a poetic talent, an artistic talent, a philosophical talent." (496) Although the aesthete is able to expand these talents to their fullest, it was not he who created them; it was not he who posited them. The individual's talents are with him at birth, but remain in immediacy; a beautiful voice gets raspy with age, the loss of a hand hinders the great artist, bankruptcy destroys the means by which one practices a mercantile talent. Kierkegaard writes that it is possible for the talent to be raised out of its immediacy, but it is "a condition not posited by the

individual.” (496)

According to Kierkegaard, the basic deficiency of these two life-views is the lack of continuity; “You are always hovering above yourself, . . . you see below you a multitude of areas of learning, insight, study, observation which for you, though, have no reality but which you quite randomly exploit and combine so as to adorn as tastefully as possible the palace of mental profusion in which you occasionally reside.” (505) He is lost in multiplicity and has no coherence to his life. “[L]ife’s task and content,” consist of immediate and finite things. One fancy is as good as another, and the aesthete changes as his whims carry him along. Kierkegaard wants to point out the immediacy in which these things exist. In immediacy, each moment has no recollection of the moment past; each instant brings new possibilities. The individual is caught up in “whims and fancies,” which run this way and that, never keeping still. The individual is constantly subject to change, thus his life lacks continuity. Because his desires are constantly changing, the true self is not involved. The true self is found in the infinite, it is concrete.

C. The Effects of Immediacy

1. Nero

Kierkegaard gives the example of Nero, the emperor. Nero lives in the particular aesthetic life-style which “teaches ‘Enjoy life,’ and interprets this as ‘Live for your desire.’” (496) He spent a lifetime fulfilling these desires. Every whim and fancy that happened across his mind, including the burning of Rome, was his. As an old man however, there came a point when there was very little else that could amuse him. His

life had been spent in immediacy. However, the pleasures that these immediate things provided him were also immediate. These pleasures are finite pleasures, fading away as the desire is fulfilled. Once the pleasure is gone, some new form of entertainment must replace it. After a whole lifetime of satiating every desire -- nothing was denied Nero as emperor -- new amusements are few and far between. What else can amuse an individual after he has burned the city of Rome? Kierkegaard writes of Nero, "His soul is lackluster, only witticisms and flights of fancy can bring him to life." (498) It is here that Kierkegaard falls into a discussion of melancholy.

2. Melancholy

"There comes a point in a man's life when immediacy is as though ripened and when the spirit demands a higher form in which it will apprehend itself as spirit. In its immediacy spirit coheres, as it were, with the whole of earthly life, and now the spirit wants to gather itself out of this dispersion, and make itself self-transparent; the personality wants to be conscious of itself in its eternal validity." (499)

Nero knew melancholy. It is a "hysteria of the spirit;" (499) the spirit desires to escape immediacy and rest in something more concrete. A grieving person knows why it is that he grieves, and yet knowledge of the cause does not remove the grief. Melancholy is of a different sort. A melancholic individual does not know why it is that he is in such a state. He does not realize that it is his spirit revolting against the immediacy in which it has been placed. The spirit desires nothing other than to latch on to the concreteness of the infinite and stop floundering in the multiplicity of the finite. When this drive is repressed, melancholy sets in and is only removed when the individual discovers the source, his grounding in immediacy. For Kierkegaard,

melancholy is as sin, "the sin of not willing deeply and sincerely." (499)

IV. Despair

Finite, immediate, and melancholic, such is the life of the Aesthete. But what, then, is the Aesthete to do? How is he to obtain the solemnity and dignity of an ethical life. Kierkegaard writes that he is to "Despair!" and in doing so he is to choose his self.

A. Defining Despair

According to Kierkegaard, the aesthete lives in despair. When an individual despairs, he realizes the immediacy of his life and the contingency of his life plans. However, discovering that this is the state of his life does not bring about something new. The individual's life has always been contingent. Thus, Kierkegaard concludes, the aesthete has always been in a state of despair albeit unknown to him. "It turns out, then, that every aesthetic view of life is despair, and that everyone who lives aesthetically is in despair whether he knows it or not." (502)

To be in despair, then, is to be living the life of immediacy. But, there is much more to despair than this. "Despair" is not used in its customary sense, but takes on a different connotation. It is not a finite despair. Kierkegaard gives the example of a painter who has lost his sight. Once his sight returns, his despair is gone. This is despair over a "particular thing," a finite despair. The kind of despair that Kierkegaard envisions is despair over life as a whole.

In *Sickness Unto Death*, a much later work of Kierkegaard, he defines despair as a separation from God.¹¹ As a Christian philosopher, Kierkegaard believes that each individual maintains an ontological relationship with God. In despair, this relationship is not recognized. Despair is overcome by acknowledging this relationship and thus forming an epistemic relationship. As the “I chooses itself” in its infinite relationship with God it becomes concrete in its eternal validity and thus overcomes despair.

B. Despair of Thought

Addressing the Aesthete in a letter from the fictitious Judge Wilhelm, Kierkegaard refers to his despair as “despair in thought.” (503) “Your thought has hurried on ahead, you have seen through the vanity of everything but you have not come any further.” (503) In his thoughts, the Aesthete places himself in a lofty position. He is above life’s trivialities, “. . . your thought has taken everything from you but it has given you nothing in its stead.” (507) He occasionally enjoys finite pleasures, but finds them “worthless.” (507) “[L]ife has lost its reality . . .” (503)

The Aesthete realizes the meaninglessness of the finite things, which he so easily uses to make himself great in the eyes of others, and is bored with them soon enough. “[F]or nothing finite, even the whole world, can satisfy the soul of one who feels a need for the eternal.” (506) Still, he will not take the next step. He remains in despair; “[Y]ou are through with the whole of finitude. And yet you cannot give it up. You are content compared with those who chase after contentment, but what you have become content with is absolute discontent.” (506)

¹¹Soren Kierkegaard, *A Sickness Unto Death*.

C. Giving Birth to Oneself

“Take note then, my young friend, this life is despair; hide it from others if you will, from yourself you cannot hide it, it is despair. And yet in another sense this life is not despair. You are too frivolous to despair, and you are too melancholy not to come in contact with despair.” (509)

Kierkegaard tells the Aesthete that he is living a life of despair and yet he is not living a life of despair. To protect himself from the claims that this is a contradiction, he implies that there are two different senses of despair. In the first sense, the Aesthete is separated from God and living without an acknowledgment of that relationship. He is living a life of immediacy, discontent with the worthlessness of finite things, but seeing no other alternative. Kierkegaard claims that his spirit longs to find its concreteness in the infinite and his self in its eternal validity. In this way, the aesthete despairs. He is conscious of the rumblings in his soul, but not their origin.

The aesthete also does not despair. Several times, Kierkegaard commands the aesthete to “Despair!” This does not mean that he wishes the aesthete to be separated from God, but he wants him to recognize this despair, to acknowledge that this separation exists. “Any person who has not tasted the bitterness of despair has missed the meaning of life, however beautiful and joy-filled his life has been.” (511) According to Kierkegaard, once the aesthete recognizes his despair for what it is, it will cease to exist and he will find himself in his eternal relationship with God. “[W]hen one truly wills despair one is truly beyond it; when one has truly chosen despair one has truly chosen what despair chooses, namely oneself in one’s eternal validity.” (515)

Kierkegaard compares this process with that of a woman giving birth. Although

she may be in immense pain, the fear of giving birth to something horrific may cause her to delay. It is the same for a person in despair, fearing that once he makes this choice he will become someone other than the person he is. He fears that the choice will transform him, and the person that he was will cease to exist. Kierkegaard attempts to dispel this fear by saying, "what a person gives birth to in a spiritual sense is a creative urge of the will." (509) What is born then is the self in its eternal validity; not a different individual, but one and the same, only concrete instead of lost in multiplicity, infinite instead of finite, transparent and not masked. "This self contains a rich concretion, a multitude of determinate qualities, of characteristics; it is, in short, the whole aesthetic self which is chosen ethically." (523) In recognizing this despair, and thus in choosing, the aesthete becomes "conscious of [himself] in [his] eternal validity." (509) He thus gains "a solemnity, a quiet dignity, that is never lost." (490) Chuck Alderman remains a wealthy stockbroker even after he chooses to be an ethical self. He does not stop being witty, charming, and refined, only he now uses these qualities with solemnity and dignity. Furthermore, he acknowledges his relationship to God.

According to Kierkegaard, this analogy only goes so far. That the woman and the aesthete are both afraid of what they may give birth to is true. However, when the time comes, the aesthete must *choose* to give birth to himself, the woman has no such choice. This is the dis-analogy. The woman cannot delay the birthing process, because the child will not remain inside her forever, but the individual's self is not so demanding. When the aesthete stands at the crossroads, he can either choose, or turn away; it is his decision. Whereas the child cannot be ignored, the self can be continually pushed aside. The freedom to choose implies the freedom not to choose.

“It is a grave and significant moment when one binds oneself for an eternity to an eternal power, when one receives oneself as the one whose memory no time shall efface, when in an eternal and unfailing sense one becomes aware of oneself as the person one is. And yet, one can still let it be! Look: here, then, is an either/or.” (509) This, then, is the choice. To despair, *and recognize that despair*, thus establishing oneself in one’s own eternal validity, or to remain in despair, floundering in the finite, transparent neither to oneself nor others.

Despair cannot be suppressed. Finite distractions will not keep it away. Thus the only answer is “Despair!” Kierkegaard, however, warns against the wrong kind of despair. The proper despair lies within. If the individual were to seek some source of despair outside him, a particular despair such as despair over a lost love or fortune, “it will lead him to hate the world and not to love it . . . ” (511)

V. The Absolute

Now that the individual has despaired, he must choose, but the choice is not a simple one. What is chosen is the self: the absolute self, the self in its eternal validity, the self in its relation to God. This self is also posited or created. The result is not a completely different self, but the same aesthetic self, only chosen ethically, or absolutely.

A. A Contradiction

“In choosing absolutely, then, I choose despair, and in despair I choose the absolute, for I myself am the absolute, I posit the absolute and am myself the absolute. But as amounts to exactly the same, I must say: I choose the absolute which chooses me, I posit the absolute which posits me.” (515)

This particular passage is perhaps one of the most difficult in the *Either/Or* text, and yet it all culminates here. The aesthete has reached the crossroads and despaired. He has made the choice to live ethically. Now, we might ask, what does all this lead up to? This passage answers that question.

I would consider this a particularly difficult passage for several reasons. First, Kierkegaard utilizes extremely vague terminology. It is quite clear that the terms despair, choose, posit, and absolute do not convey their traditional meanings; but as to the sense in which they are expressed here, Kierkegaard leaves the reader looking through swamp water trying to catch a glimpse of the catfish lying on the bottom.

Second, even without a focused understanding of Kierkegaard’s phrasing, it seems evident that the reader is facing a flat contradiction without any hint of explanation on the author’s part. Kierkegaard claims to both choose and posit the absolute, and then very distinctly states, “What I choose I do not posit . . .” (516) If Kierkegaard is to be held to both of these claims, then the absolute is both posited and not posited, a contradictory claim. Furthermore, he later writes, “What is chosen does not exist and comes into existence through the choice, and what is chosen exists, otherwise it would not be a choice.” (517) Therefore, what is chosen, namely the absolute self, exists and does not exist, again a contradictory claim. Perhaps in his

fight to establish freedom as the basis of truth, he is simply giving the master a taste of his own medicine.¹²

These are the problems that I struggle with now. An obvious start is to flesh out a more lucid picture of Kierkegaard's terminology. This is vitally important to understanding the contradiction. First, "I choose **despair**. . ." Kierkegaard clearly does not mean that 'I choose to lose hope.' Drawing from earlier conclusions, one might define despair first as a separation from God, and second as an enlightenment of that separation. In the case at hand, it is safe to assume that Kierkegaard intends the latter; 'I choose to recognize that I have been living separated from God.'

The word '**choose**' remains closely linked to its original connotation. It is what choosing implies that creates obstacles for the reader in deciphering the contradiction. In order for something, anything, to be chosen, it must already exist. If it does not exist, then it cannot be chosen; it must be created. "For if the thing I choose did not exist but became absolute through the choice itself, I would not have chosen, I would have created." (517)

At Bob's snack counter an individual may choose either an orange or an apple. He is able to choose either because they exist on the menu. He is not able to choose a banana because bananas do not exist on the menu. Bob does not have any bananas. In order to get a banana at the snack counter, the individual would have to bring it into existence or create it. In this case, he does not choose the banana, but creates it. In the same way, if the individual is to choose the absolute ("I choose the absolute . . ."), it must exist prior to his choosing it, otherwise the absolute would be his created entity

¹²See footnote 9 on page 15.

and not his chosen entity. One must keep in mind that without this crucial element of choice, the element of freedom so central to Kierkegaard's argument against philosophers like Hegel, ceases to exist.

Choosing is only the first step to the absolute. The author also writes, "I **posit** the absolute . . ." This is the murkiest of Kierkegaard's terms. A word that is not commonly used, it poses even greater difficulties when used in a Kierkegaardian sense. A basic definition of posit reads, "to assume or affirm the existence of."¹³ This would lead the reader to conclude that positing the absolute assumes or affirms the existence of the absolute. Making educated conjectures from the text, I find myself with a closely related, yet different meaning.

Kierkegaard writes, "if [the absolute] were not posited I could not choose it." (516) Recalling that something must exist in order for it to be chosen, one can infer that positing places something into existence, or creates it. The sentence would then read, 'if [the absolute] were not already created I could not choose it.' Furthermore, Kierkegaard states, "This [absolute] self did not exist previously, for it *came into existence through the choice*, . . ." (517, Emphasis mine) I would venture to say that this solidifies my interpretation of posit as the act of creating, but further confuses its relation to the choice.

The "**absolute**" is both chosen and posited. What, then, is this absolute that it merits so much attention? He writes, "It is myself in my eternal validity." (516) One might also claim that it is myself in my relationship to God, but this requires some explanation.

¹³*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary.*

The individual exists in an objective relationship with God. This is an *ontological* relationship. An ontological relationship exists as a matter of fact. It has always existed and will always exist, independent of any knowledge of it. In my ontological relationship with God, he is my creator and I am his created being, his product. This relationship cannot change whether it is apparent to me or not. For example, an individual may have cancer and be unaware of it, but the fact remains that the individual has a very serious illness. The bastard son may have no knowledge of his relationship to the milkman, but the biological father/son relationship exists regardless. In either case, the relationship exists independently of any knowledge of it. It is an objective, ontological relationship. In that this relationship exists, myself in my eternal validity also exists as an objective reality. It is, however, dependent upon a relationship to God. Without a relationship to God, there is no eternal validity. One can conclude that they are both objective absolutes, myself in my eternal validity, and myself in my relationship to God.

Accepting the absolute as myself in my relationship to God, it takes on a dual nature. My relationship to God exists in two parts. First, as discussed, the individual shares an ontological relationship with God. Second, the recognition of this relationship leads to an *epistemic* relationship; one in which God not only exists as my creator, but I have a clear understanding of that fact. Whereas an ontological relationship exists *despite* any knowledge of it, an epistemic relationship exists *through* knowledge of it. The illegitimate son essentially does not know who his father is until the milkman reveals himself. Once this is acknowledged, a *personal* relationship exists. The epistemic relationship is a personal relationship with God. One might add, that it is subjective as opposed to objective.

With a clearer picture of its components, we can now proceed to the contradiction. To rehash: the absolute is posited and not posited; the absolute exists and does not exist. Kierkegaard wants to make both claims, but a contradiction is not only false, it is *necessarily* false.

For example, if X is true, then not X is false and the two combined are also false, necessarily false. If X is false, then not X is true, and, once again, the two combined are necessarily false. For example, “I am in the library,” and “I am not in the library” are contradictory statements. Physically speaking, I cannot be both in the library and not in the library at the same time. I can be in one place or the other, but not both. Thus, to say that “I am in the library **and** I am not in the library” is a necessary falsehood. This statement can never be true under any circumstances; a contradictory statement, such as X and not X, is false in every situation. It is this sort of contradictory claim that Kierkegaard appears to make. However, Kierkegaard’s contradiction is only apparent. With careful construction, we find that it is not a blatant contradiction, but simply a matter of semantic ambiguity. Kierkegaard is not claiming X and not X, but X and Y. In that they are two separate claims, there is no contradiction.

Kierkegaard writes, “I choose despair . . .” In other words, he chooses to recognize that he is living separated from God. In light of this separation, “I choose the absolute . . .” If the individual is to choose the absolute, the absolute must exist prior to his choosing it, and it does. The absolute exists as myself in my ontological relationship to God. “[W]hat is chosen exists otherwise it would not be a choice.” So, I choose this ontological relationship, but I choose it in an epistemic sense. One cannot choose something in an ontological sense, because in order to choose it, the individual must

have knowledge of it, making it epistemical. Thus, when I choose the ontological relationship, an epistemic relationship is formed.

Next, "I posit the absolute . . ." In positing, something must come into existence, and it does. The epistemic relationship "comes into existence through the choice." The choice is the ontological relationship, which, as shown above, forms the epistemic relationship. The act of choosing and the act of positing are very closely linked. "What is chosen does not exist and comes into existence through the choice." So, I choose myself in my ontological relationship to God, which is the absolute, and I posit myself in my epistemic relationship to God, which is also the absolute. This explains how the absolute can exist and not exist. It also explains Kierkegaard's statement, "I myself am the absolute." It is myself in these relationships to God.

The absolute is both chosen and posited. This leaves the statement, "What I choose I do not posit . . ." Solving this is a matter of semantics, too. This phrase is not referring specifically to the quotes above, but uses posit in another way. I choose myself in an ontological relationship with God, but I do not posit this relationship; I posit an epistemic relationship. The ontological relationship exists without any action on the part of the individual; the individual chooses the relationship but takes no part in its creation. Just as the aesthete does not posit outward pleasures or inward talents, the individual does not create the ontological. It does not come into existence through the choice, but exists prior to it. There is no contradiction.

"But as amounts to exactly the same, I must say: I choose the absolute which chooses me, I posit the absolute which posits me. For unless I bear in mind that this second expression is just as absolute, my category of choice is false; for that category

is precisely the identity of both.” (516)

These two statements amount to exactly the same, in that they work hand in hand to form a working, personal relationship with God, an epistemic relationship. But, what is this category? The category of choice is freedom. Without freedom, “my choice would be illusory.” (516) Although the ontological relationship exists without any choice on the individual’s part, there must be an aspect of the relationship to God which the individual is free to choose, or there is no either/or. This aspect is the epistemic relationship. I freely choose to enter into a personal relationship with God.

B. Choosing Oneself

“He chooses himself, not in a finite sense, for then this ‘self’ would be something finite along with other finite things, but in an absolute sense. And still he chooses himself and not another. This self he thus chooses is infinitely concrete, for it is himself, and it is absolutely different from his former self, for he has chosen it absolutely.” (517)

If the individual chooses himself in a ‘finite sense,’ then he remains in immediacy. It is only when the individual chooses himself absolutely that he breaks free and becomes concrete in a relationship with God. For example, if the individual chooses himself as a powerful executive, then he chooses himself in his wealth, power, and fame. These are finite qualities and he remains a finite being along with his qualities. However, if the individual chooses himself in an absolute sense, then he is choosing himself in his eternal validity. His self no longer resides in the realm of immediacy, but has anchored itself in the absolute. When he chooses the ethical path,

he chooses himself in this way.

The result of the choice is a powerful one. The self that the individual chooses is the same self. He retains all of his aesthetic qualities, but they are chosen absolutely. The individual in the example above, should he make the ethical choice, will still be wealthy, powerful, and famous. Every quality that helped him get to this position in life is still in his possession, but he is a different being. His goals change, his attitude changes, his outlook on life changes, but most of all, his meaning and purpose in life changes. In his relationship to God, he finds new ways to utilize his aesthetic qualities. Perhaps with his position of power he starts new charities, with his wealth he builds new hospitals, with his fame he teaches others. The choice cuts to the very core of the self; “[I]n choice personality immerses itself in what is chosen. . . .” (482) The result of the choice is an absolute self, a self freely bound to God using its aesthetic qualities to live an ethical life in whatever situation it may be placed.

The most important aspect of this is the choice itself, or more precisely, the individual’s ability to choose. This ability is essential. In choice there is freedom and without freedom the ethical collapses. If an individual is forced to act morally, then one must question whether his actions can really be called moral. If I am forced to feed the hungry, clothe the poor, and visit the sick, then these actions do not fall under the category of morality, but under that of necessity. Morality comes through free will, not blind obedience. “Therefore while nature has been created out of nothing, while I myself qua my immediate personal existence have been created out of nothing, as free spirit I am born by virtue of the fact that I chose myself.” (517)

VI. Repentance

The next step is repentance. In making the choice, the individual discovers a link to all mankind. Mankind is linked through history, in an "infinite multiplicity." (518) The individual discovers that the self he chooses is a sinful self. Although this is a painful discovery, he soon realizes that he is not alone. All of mankind is linked through sin. These are the "roots though which he is linked to the whole." (518) It is the original sin which binds them together. He is trapped in sin and desires freedom. His fight for freedom is expressed in repentance. "He repents himself back into himself, back into the family, back into the race, until he finds himself in God." (518) His love of God is expressed through repentance. "Only if I choose myself as guilty [do] I choose myself absolutely." (518) Sin is an essential part of the individual, being human. In order to choose oneself absolutely, one must choose himself in his entirety. Because of the original sin, sin is as much a part of any individual as is the body. If I am to choose myself absolutely, I must choose myself in my entirety, thus I must choose myself with all my sins. I choose myself as a sinner. So, the individual repents of his sins and finds himself in God, the ultimate freedom.

Embellishing on the Chuck Alderman tale, I might add that he recognizes his prior aesthetic life as a sinful one: the drunkenness, the debauchery, the insincerity. Realizing his sins, he repents: "I have only one expression for what I suffer -- guilt; one expression for my pain -- repentance; one hope before my eyes -- forgiveness." (533) The concept of repentance assumes that one is responsible for his sins. If there is no repentance, then there is no real responsibility, and all that Alderman has gone through

-- the melancholy, the agony of decision, the despair -- has been for naught: "for I know only one sorrow which can bring me to despair and plunge everything down into it -- the sorrow that repentance was a delusion, a delusion not in respect of the forgiveness it seeks, but in the accountability it presupposes." (533) As he repents, Alderman feels closer to those around him, reestablishing relationships that were lost due to his wild lifestyle. He begins to feel especially close to God. So, in making the choice, he recognizes that he is a sinner, but is subsequently freed from his sins through repentance. He has found himself in God.

VII. The Absolute Difference

Here, I want to stop and recap the path of the aesthete up to this point, so that we might go further. The individual has stood at the crossroads; he has known immediacy, melancholy and despair. Finally, he made the fundamental choice, the choice of his true self, and he has repented. He now exists in the realm of the infinite as his whole aesthetic self, but chosen absolutely. In essence he is the same self he was before he made the choice, but he is an absolute self living an ethical life. He is eternally valid in his relationship with God. All of this comes with the choice.

But what of good and evil? Are they not also an essential part of the ethical life? If you will recall section I, 'The Crossroads', good and evil also come with the choice. "[O]nly when I have absolutely chosen myself have I posited an absolute difference, namely that between good and evil." (524) The aesthete, living a life of indifference,

does not have this absolute difference. Kierkegaard might argue that the aesthete certainly judges, but bases his judgement on what is beautiful and ugly, not on what is good and evil. Good and evil are strictly ethical categories.

According to Kierkegaard, good and evil do not exist unless the individual wills them. "The good is by virtue of my willing it, and otherwise it has no existence. This is the expression of freedom; similarly with evil, it is only by virtue of my willing it." (524) One might argue, then, that good and evil are subjective, attached to the will of the individual, but Kierkegaard claims that they are not "merely subjective determinations;" the will does not "belittle" them. (524) He writes that the purpose of the individual's willing the good and evil into existence "is to assert the absolute validity of these categories." (524) What remains to be seen is the objective nature of good and evil such that the will is able to affirm their absolute validity.

The good's objective nature is the same as that of the ontological relationship. It exists as a matter of fact, an absolute, requiring no affirmation for its being. The objective good, exists as a set of moral laws, it is what constitutes morality. If we are to believe in objective scientific principles, then what is to stop us from recognizing objective moral principles? Questioning objective scientific principles leads us to wonder whether the sun will really rise in the morning, whether tomorrow a penny will fall up instead of down, whether the world is really round. If we begin to systematically break down the objective scientific principles, then we will lose our sense of what is real. If we systematically break down the objective moral principles, will we not also lose our sense of what is ethical? (Although there are no objective laws of evil, one might conjecture that evil exists objectively as an opposition to those moral laws.)

Once the individual has made the choice, he is subjected to a moral obligation. Just as the choice of the objective ontological relationship posits the epistemic relationship, the choice also includes the objective good and evil which posits the absolute difference, the difference between good and evil. In choosing the ethical life, the individual gains an understanding of this difference. Like the epistemic relationship, good and evil come into existence through the choice; they come into existence "by virtue of my willing it." Thus, it is a free action.

"The good is the in-and-for-itself posited by the in-and-for-itself, and that is freedom." (524) The in-and-for-itself is, respectively, the objective and subjective aspects of the good. This dual natured good, is posited by the in-and-for-itself which is the self: the self's objective nature (the ontological relationship) and the self's subjective nature (the epistemic relationship). The good's objective nature, as previously discussed, exists as an independent reality. The good's subjective nature is the way in which the individual applies the objective moral code in his life. For example, it would be difficult to argue that helping others in need is not an objective moral behavior; such actions are obviously good. Once the individual has made the ethical choice, he may begin to notice, or simply begin to care about, people in his own town or neighborhood that are in need of a little assistance. Chuck Alderman certainly did. His actions at the soup kitchen are a testament to his application of the good. By aiding these individuals, he is applying the objective good in a subjective manner.

Kierkegaard also wants to claim that he does not "choose good and evil equally absolutely, and that both good and evil belonged to me equally essentially." (525) Although evil exists in the absolute, it cannot be chosen as equally essential as the

good because it exists as an opposition to the moral laws. Evil is more of an objective concept than an objective reality. The moral laws are concrete, whereas there is nothing in evil that can be called concrete other than its stance in relation to the good.

“[R]epentance is the expression of the fact that evil is an essential part of me, and at the same time the expression of the fact that it is not essentially a part of me. If evil were not an essential part of me I could not choose it, but if there were something in me that I could not choose absolutely, then there would be no question of my choosing myself absolutely; I would not be the absolute myself, but only a product.”
(525)

Again, Kierkegaard offers the reader a contradiction; evil is an essential part of me *and* evil is not an essential part of me. As fallible beings, each individual is subject to sin. As sons and daughters of Adam and Eve we all suffer the consequences of the original sin. Sin is a part of us, it is posited within us at birth, and emerges in our lives despite our best intentions. It is something that is within each of us when we are faced with the choice. Kierkegaard claims that something must be an essential part of the individual in order for him to choose it. So, if the individual is to choose himself absolutely, which includes every part of him, then evil must be an essential part of him as the original sin.

Evil is not an essential part of the individual. This is the second claim that Kierkegaard makes and it is quite contradictory to the first. We could claim that evil is an essential part of us through the original sin, but it is not an essential part of us because we are able to repent. In repenting, we gain freedom from our particular sins and they are no longer a part of us. The original sin is an essential part of each

individual, but our particular sins are not. Therefore, evil is an essential part of us, and evil is not an essential part of us.

Chapter 2

The Critics

CHAPTER 2

THE CRITICS

I. A Paradox

In Chapter 1, pages 28 through 34, I provided my own interpretation of what appears to be a contradiction in the *Either/Or*. If you will recall, the contradiction mentioned stated that, preceding the choice, the absolute exists and does not exist. The solution, I determined, was that the absolute, or the self in its eternal validity, exists in an ontological relationship to God, but comes into existence, and therefore did not exist previously, in an epistemic relationship to God. Conclusion: The absolute exists and does not exist prior to the choice. In *Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship*, by Mark C. Taylor, the author gives a similar account of the same passage. The paradox¹, as he states it, is that "the self is and is not prior to the choice."² Taylor claims that there are two levels to becoming an ethical person. He defines level one as "the choice of oneself" and level two as "the deliberate resolution to strive to achieve a goal."³ Here, we are only concerned with the first level to which the paradox belongs.

¹While I use the term "contradiction", Taylor uses the term "paradox." They refer to the same thing.

²Mark C. Taylor, *Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship*, p.191. Hereafter referred to as *KPA*.

³*KPA*, p.186

Drawing from Kierkegaard's own words, Taylor writes, "The first level of decision is, therefore, designated as: 'to choose oneself in his eternal validity.'"⁴ According to the paradox, as we have just seen, the self that one chooses both exists and does not exist prior to the choice. Taylor first takes pains to show how the self exists.

In Taylor's view, the decision to "choose oneself in his eternal validity" is an equilibrium point between the Socratic notion of "know thyself" and the creation of one's own self. "Neither of these alternatives is correct: the former is too little, and the latter is too much."⁵ The individual does not create himself because he already exists. Furthermore, to say that this individual has created himself destroys the possibility of choice. As we found in Chapter 1, in order to choose something it must already exist; if we create it then we do not choose it. Thus, to say that the individual creates himself goes beyond what Kierkegaard intends to say. However, to simply know oneself as the true self that one is -- however essential it may be -- is not enough. Such information is only productive if it is put to use. If you know how to bake cherry pie, but never do, then this information is useless to you. Kierkegaard surely intends something more than this. Therefore, the act of choosing oneself in one's eternal validity does not go so far as to create one's self, but is a more substantive accomplishment than merely knowing oneself.

According to Taylor, the self is a combination of possibility and actuality. In order for the individual to choose himself, he must be aware of himself both as a possibility

⁴*KPA*, p.187

⁵*KPA*, p.188

and as an actuality. The self has the potential to become a 'true' or 'ideal' self concrete in its eternal validity. This is the self as a possibility. The self's actuality has two components. First, the self exists as a product of all the influences in his environment, including those of social and physical natures. Taylor gives the example of a child's relationship to his parents and the influences they have on his compound self. Second, the self exists as God's creation. This is the ontological relationship that the individual has with God. "Both the self's ontological dependence upon God, and the impact of the environment upon the self are formative of the self's being."⁶ Thus, Taylor concludes, the self does not create itself, but exists in its actuality prior to the choice.

Taylor continues by stating that although the creation of one's own self is an overstatement, simply to know oneself is an understatement. "The knowledge of oneself is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the emergence of mature selfhood."⁷ Knowledge of one's "concrete actuality" is a necessary step, but it is only the first step to a fully acquired self. Without a true self-awareness -- a complete understanding of the self, including all of its qualities as they evolved under the circumstances in which the self was placed -- one cannot proceed to the second step, the choosing of one's self. It is necessary for the individual to come to know not a self-created self, but the self that he is.

Once the individual is fully aware of his self, he can take the second step, and choose himself in his eternal validity. Since the creation of one's self goes beyond the

⁶KPA, p.188

⁷KPA, p.189

actuality of the self, and the knowledge of oneself takes the individual no farther than the edge of the aesthetic realm, the choice of oneself in his eternal validity provides a carefully constructed middle ground. Taylor defines “eternal validity” as “the given dimension of selfhood that is part of the self’s constitution, but that has not resulted from the action of one’s own self.”⁸ It is an integral part of the self as the self is; the self that is to be known and then chosen by the individual. According to Taylor, to move beyond simply knowing oneself and to choose oneself in one’s eternal validity is “to accept responsibility for oneself. It means acknowledging that the actuality of oneself has resulted from forces beyond the control of the self, but not, for this reason, refusing to be the self that one is.”⁹ The individual understands his self as a product of outside influences and chooses to be this self. This is the choice of the self as an existing entity.

There is still a second aspect to choosing oneself in one’s eternal validity. Taylor has fully established that the self exists prior to the choice. However, according to the paradox, the self not only *is*, but *is not* prior to the choice. Taylor agrees, “a significant change must come about as the result of this choice of oneself, or else it is difficult to see the importance of such a choice.”¹⁰ He notes that in one sense, the self that the individual chooses remains the same self before and after he chooses because it is “himself” that he chooses. However, “one becomes a different self than one had been

⁸KPA, p.189

⁹KPA, p.190

¹⁰KPA, p.191

prior to the choice, for with the choice of oneself, the self emerges as a self-conscious, responsible individual.”¹¹ The self becomes an ethical individual with concrete goals and moral attributes as opposed to the previous aesthetic individual lost in immediacy. He remains the same individual, but with a new focus on life, taking responsibility for his actions based on what is good and evil. In this way, the self, the ethical self, *is not* prior to the choice.

The following long quotation is Taylor’s final solution to the paradox: “As a concrete self with given qualities and with the potential for purposeful decision, the self is. As clearly self-conscious and fully responsible for oneself, though one has not actively formed his entire self, the self is not. The choice of oneself in his eternal validity is the movement from the former to the latter.”¹²

II. Radical Choice

By now, the reader is well aware of the content of Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*. It is, of course, a sort of debate between Judge Wilhelm, the ethicist, and an unnamed aesthete whom Kierkegaard deems ‘A’. Arguments are presented by both in an attempt to persuade the other of a ‘better way of life.’ Although Kierkegaard, through his pseudonymous authorship, presents the either/or, he does not provide a

¹¹KPA, p.191

¹²KPA, p.191

final solution or agreement. He leaves it to the readers to decide for themselves.

There have been many debates about the arguments that the ethicist and the aesthete use. In order for an individual to be persuaded to one side or another based on reason and not intuition, there must be some independent criteria on which the individual bases his choice. Many critics have questioned the criteria used in the *Either/Or*, even so far as to question whether any independent criteria exists. Thus, Kierkegaard's either/or, is often referred to as a 'radical choice.'

Alastair Hannay, in the introduction to his translation of *Either/Or*, notes that this typically implies a 'criterionless choice.' He writes, "The radical nature of the choice lies in the fact that in choosing one of the stages you are also choosing the kinds of reasons available to you for defending the choice."¹³ This is more of a 'picking' than a 'choosing' Hannay explains. The individual makes an arbitrary choice, one not based on reasons or criteria, but mere intuition or preference. Once the choice is made, the individual then finds reasons to back up his choice within the choice itself.

For the sake of illustration, suppose that we find choosing Christianity involves radical choice. When an individual decides to become baptized as a Christian, he makes a leap of faith. The decision is not based on hard core facts and independent criteria, but passion and faith. Once he has made this choice, he gains at least one reason for doing so: This is what Christ commanded. However, without first making the choice -- the leap of faith -- Christ's commands have no bearing on a non-Christian. The new Christian has made a radical choice and finds reasons for that choice only in

¹³*Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*, p.11. Hereafter referred to as *Either/Or*.

the decision itself.

According to Hannay, this is the argument given by philosophers such as Alasdair MacIntyre. The reasons the ethicist and aesthete give for living their perspective lifestyles are found within those ways of life. They offer no independent criteria to persuade the other. "But there can be no way of settling basic disputes, no shared basis of considerations to which, say, an ethicist can appeal to try to win over an aesthete."¹⁴

In this line of reasoning, in order to "win over" the aesthete, the ethical individual would have to convince him in one of two ways. He could attempt to persuade him using "ethical criteria," but this would only work, without it being a radical choice, if the aesthete already agreed to this criteria. However, this would make the ethical individual's argument implausible, unacceptable, or meaningless to an aesthete who expressed no interest in the criteria presented. The first type of aesthete, one who accepts certain behavior as moral and good -- for example that there should be equal justice for all -- would be more likely to move towards an ethical existence based on ethical criteria than the second type of aesthete, one who judges behavior solely on the basis of the aesthetic rewards it brings.

The ethical individual's second option would be to use criteria found in the aesthetic realm, but this "would place him in the aesthetic world alongside his friend."¹⁵ The ethicist would be unable to produce an ethical argument using such criteria. For

¹⁴*Either/Or*, p.12

¹⁵*Either/Or*, p.13

example, if an ethical person, such as Judge Wilhelm, said to the aesthete, "You should strive for an ethical existence because others will have greater trust in you and you will advance far quicker in business, friendships, fame, wealth, etc.," he is providing an aesthetic argument for an ethical way of life. An aesthetic argument buried in the finite and the immediacy of this world can never lead to the eternal in the ethical realm. I have no doubts that Kierkegaard would agree.

Hannay's argument is that the either/or is not simply full of empty statements, meaningful only to those who subscribe to that position, but a persuasive dialogue. The Aesthete argues against the ethical way of life, claiming a 'better way of life,' and Judge Wilhelm counters those arguments, offering as well a comprehensive argument for the ethical existence. "So 'either' there is a great deal of indirect persuasion and subterfuge, hardly a good advertisement at least for a supposedly *ethical* life-view, 'or' the radical-choice reading is mistaken."¹⁶

Hannay writes that the act of choosing oneself requires three things. "It requires, first, that one acknowledge a peculiarly human ability, indeed a need, to ask what it is essentially to be a human being. Second, it requires that one take this ability at its face

¹⁶One might take note here of Kierkegaard's doctrine of indirect communication. Indirect communication is a subtle way of making someone see your point of view without pointedly arguing in a way that is ineffective. The individual is meant to come to the conclusion that you subscribe to on his own. For example, if an individual claims to be a Christian and yet his lifestyle does not show a real devotion, you might praise him for his Christian attributes making sure to mention the qualities of a good Christian. The individual will come to see what is really missing in his life and, perhaps, change his ways. Hannay clearly feels that such underhanded techniques would be hypocritical in trying to persuade someone to become ethical. If this was Kierkegaard's intention in the *Either/Or*, then Hannay would regard it as a 'radical choice,' if not, then "the radical choice reading is mistaken." *Either/Or*, p.13

value, as a genuine freedom to stake out one's own future according to a 'view of life'; and, third, it requires that the view of life one adopts be one in which one is 'revealed' in a context of familial and social responsibilities."¹⁷ Even though the ethical choice means that the individual now lives under the categories of good and evil, "this choice is still a radical one. And its radicalness still lies in the total redefining of the values of a human life."¹⁸ The choice to become an ethical member of society, means that one's goals and tasks are rewritten; life has new meaning. However, the redefinition of one's values only comes about *after* the individual has made the radical choice.

The solution that Hannay offers is quite surprising. He does not suggest an answer to the 'either/or,' but proposes a 'neither/nor.' It is possible that Kierkegaard does not conclude his work with a definite resolution because he finds neither position satisfactory. Perhaps, Hannay writes, the final goal of the *Either/Or* is to point out the shortcomings and strengths of each life-view so that the reader can build on them, creating a third life-style that is more satisfactory.

Alasdair MacIntyre, in his book, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, also voices great concerns. He states that the idea of a radical choice, or ultimate choice, is one that "destroys the whole tradition of a rational moral culture."¹⁹ He also claims that Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* is inconsistent if it is to contain both the ethical and the radical choice.

¹⁷*Either/Or*, p.14

¹⁸*Either/Or*, p.15

¹⁹Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, p. 41. Hereafter referred to as *After Virtue*.

According to MacIntyre, the ethical realm contains authoritative principles that guide our lives. The authority of these principles does not depend on how we feel or act. MacIntyre questions how ethical principles get their authority and resolves that that authority rises from the reasons the individual uses in making the choice. It is, of course, possible to choose principles without reasons, but then what hold do they have? These principles have no authority and can be adopted or abandoned to suit one's needs. "Such a principle -- and it may even be stretching language to call it a principle -- would seem clearly to belong to Kierkegaard's aesthetic realm."²⁰ For example, one could decide as a principle to guide one's life that people should be kind to animals. The decision is made based on no reasons, but simply because animals are cute and cuddly. When the individual gets a job as a postman, his resolve to be kind to animals dissipates when he encounters his first dog. His principle was quite obviously an immediate one. MacIntyre concludes, "It would follow that a principle for the choice of which no reasons could be given would be a principle devoid of authority."²¹

Taking this logic and applying it to Kierkegaard's either/or, MacIntyre states, ". . . the doctrine of Enten-Eller [Either-Or] is plainly to the effect that the principles which depict the ethical way of life are to be adopted *for no reason*, but for a choice that lies beyond reasons, just because it is the choice of what is to count for us as a reason.

²⁰*After Virtue*, p.42

²¹*After Virtue*, p.42

Yet the ethical is to have authority over us.”²² MacIntyre notes that this leads Kierkegaard straight into a contradiction. Only choices made for reasons have authority, but according to MacIntyre, Kierkegaard wants the reader to believe that the ethical is to be chosen for no reason and ethical principles are to have authority.

MacIntyre recognizes that some might attempt to push a more modern concept of authority where “the notion of authority is alien and repugnant, so that appeals to authority appear irrational.”²³ This would eliminate the need for authoritarian principles. However, this is certainly not the kind of authority of which Kierkegaard speaks. The ethical has a more traditional authority in Kierkegaard’s view, one that is not arbitrary or irrational, so the above argument cannot hold. MacIntyre writes, “. . . it was Kierkegaard who first discovered the concept of radical choice, so it is Kierkegaard’s writings that the links between reason and authority are broken too.”²⁴ He concludes, “. . . if the ethical has some basis it cannot be provided by the notion of radical choice.”²⁵

There is yet one other problem that MacIntyre finds. In modern times the individual is presented with many ethical principles; each with its own criteria. For example, the right to life is no longer guided by a single principle. The individual faces it in many different forms: death row, abortion, self-defense. There is not one

²²*After Virtue*, p.42

²³*After Virtue*, p.42

²⁴*After Virtue*, p.43

²⁵*After Virtue*, p.43

overarching standard for the application of the principle; individuals can maintain a different view on each subject. An individual may claim that death row is reasonable in some cases, abortion in none, and self-defense in all. Kierkegaard, however, is not taken in by such multiplicities; this belongs to the aesthetic realm. The ethical is not defined by a multitude of ethical options, it is a single, overarching choice. The radical choice that Kierkegaard advocates is the option to choose one all encompassing ethical way of life. MacIntyre suggests that in current society, the radical choice is not viewed as *the* ethical principle, but *which* ethical principles to choose. Obviously, MacIntyre states, Kierkegaard would not share this view.

Kierkegaard was certainly not the first to attempt a justification of morality. MacIntyre writes that Hume with his passion, Kant with his reason, and finally Kierkegaard with his radical choice, all failed to justify morality. "The project of providing a rational vindication of morality had decisively failed; and from henceforward the morality of our predecessor culture - and subsequently of our own - lacked any public, shared rationale or justification."²⁶

Anthony Rudd does not share the same views as MacIntyre and many others who subscribe to MacIntyre's interpretation. In his book *Kierkegaard and the Limits of the Ethical*, Rudd writes, "But is this all that *Either/Or* offers us? Is it just a contrast of two radically opposed and incompatible views of life, which demands that we choose between them, but which provides no criteria for making such a choice?"²⁷ Rudd

²⁶*After Virtue*, p.50

²⁷*Kierkegaard and the Limits of the Ethical*, p.78. Hereafter referred to as *Kierkegaard*.

openly disagrees with the theory of radical choice, criticizing MacIntyre for neglecting the persuasive intent of Judge Wilhelm's deliberation. The Judge's letters to the Aesthete, according to Rudd, are not meant as a mere description of the ethical way of life, but as a set of reasons why the Aesthete should make the fundamental choice. For example, over and over, Judge Wilhelm tells the Aesthete to "Despair!"; to leave the immediacy of the aesthetic life and find continuity in the eternal.

The Aesthete finds little meaning in his life. Even a life of aesthetic seriousness -- a life in which the individual continually focuses on one particular finite quality -- is empty. In Chapter 1, pages 19 through 21, the reader will recall the discussion on outward and inward pleasures that the Aesthete uses to "Enjoy Life". Neither outward nor inward pleasures are posited by the individual. The Aesthete has no control over pleasures which lie outside him -- wealth, fame, etc. -- so they could disappear at any time providing no continuity. His talents are accidental qualities. Although his talents belong to him, they cannot give the same sense of self-possession as the choice of the self, because they have not been posited by the individual. So, even a life focused on one finite thing still has an aspect of immediacy.

In place of this fragmented way of life, Judge Wilhelm offers the Aesthete a life of coherence and meaning. His message to the Aesthete is not just a soap box from which he can look down on the Aesthete and proclaim his superiority, but a guide to a better, more fulfilling, existence. So, Judge Wilhelm tries to persuade the Aesthete to "come to freedom and self-possession by choosing the ethical."²⁸

²⁸*Kierkegaard*, p.80

Rudd agrees that Kierkegaard does not offer any conclusion to the debate, but simply states that the ultimate decision is meant for the reader. As Rudd points out, there is no arbitrator to give solutions in the real world either. Kierkegaard presents the argument, now it is up to the reader.

III. From the Ethical to the Religious

Many critics, including myself, question the religious connection to the ethical. Does the ethical life necessarily include the religious? Kierkegaard does not separate the two. There is no doubt that Kierkegaard felt that the ethical and the religious belonged together, making no hints as to the possibility of an ethical life without religious principles. This is not a point that he works up to, but a beginning point. At the outset, the ethical is assumed to include the religious. Judge Wilhelm is a religious man and his arguments are meant to lead the aesthete to his eternally valid self in connection with God. Both Rudd and Taylor find the religious connection a proper, if not necessary one.

Rudd's opinion is clearly stated: "a conception of morality can only be vindicated on religious premises."²⁹ His claim is that an ethical existence that does not include the religious is still lost in multiplicity. The direction that the ethical person's life is to follow

²⁹*Kierkegaard*, p.116

remains ambiguous. According to Rudd, when we pursue a non-religious ethical existence, “we are left with a plurality of goods, of goals that we pursue, and no agreed way of ordering them, or of finding more than a rather limited degree of agreement as to which of these goods which people pursue really are goods.”³⁰

According to Rudd, one of Kierkegaard’s most notorious ideals is his “passionate call for individual responsibility.”³¹ Rudd’s complaint, however, is that the religious side of the individual although clearly evident in Kierkegaard’s writings has been somewhat ignored. Rudd questions the grounds on which an individual claims obligations that take precedence over those due to his society, whether contrary to them or not. However, if the individual is to claim that he objects to the workings of society based on ethical reasons, then he must have a foundation for these reasons. Rudd’s response is that the individual must feel that the society in which he lives is not one which will produce an ethical existence. It is quite possible that this individual is correct in saying that his society is not a good one, “but if he has no alternative conception of the good to which he can give allegiance, once he has rejected that which is embodied in the social practices of his community, then, again, he lapses back into aestheticism, with all its attendant disadvantages.”³² Rudd acknowledges that one does not have to have religious reasons to find society’s version of the good life unacceptable, but the ideals that define the good life “simply by using the methods of naturalistic psychology and

³⁰*Kierkegaard*, p.115

³¹*Kierkegaard*, p.117

³²*Kierkegaard*, p.118

anthropology, tend to look pretty implausible.”³³

Rudd writes, and rightly so, that the individual's ability to think for himself, his individualism, is extremely important to Kierkegaard's philosophy. “But unless this is to be a return to aestheticism, with all the weaknesses that we have diagnosed in that position, it seems that this individualism must be able to appeal to higher standards of behavior than those of society. And the most obvious candidates for such standards are religious ones.”³⁴ Rudd's claim, then, is that the ethical remains merely a higher form of aestheticism unless it attaches itself to concrete principles. According to Rudd, religious principles are the best qualified to provide that concrete foundation.

Taylor also argues for an ethical/religious combination. However, Taylor writes that the religious stage is not so much in connection with the ethical stage, but is a step beyond it. This step is a crucial one and is not to be taken lightly. According to Taylor, without this small step, the ethical collapses.

Taylor's argument is separated into two parts. His first aim is to define what role religion plays at the ethical stage. Second, he shows how the ethical, in the form it takes on in the first step, collapses.

According to Taylor, Kierkegaard states the most important aim of the ethical individual is the self. Moral law, then, which lies outside the self, appears to be in conflict with the aim of the ethical person. It is difficult to imagine an ethical individual that does not adhere to a moral code. Morality being an essential part of the ethical life.

³³*Kierkegaard*, p.119

³⁴*Kierkegaard*, p.120

What takes precedence then? Does the individual continue to seek a self-realization, or does he focus on his obligation to a higher law that is not a part of his self? This is the dilemma that the individual faces, the self and moral law both demanding full attention. Kierkegaard, however, does not see this as a conflict. Moral obligation is not in opposition with the realization of the self, but actually helps the individual with this ultimate goal. "For Kierkegaard's ethicist, moral devotion always has as its fundamental aim the self-realization of the individual . . . One seeks to fulfill the universal principles of morality in order to achieve a more concrete self-definition."³⁵

Extremely important in the search for the self, is the search for continuity, which one will find in the adherence to set goals. According to Taylor, "a person's pledge to continue to strive for the goals that he envisions throughout the changing circumstances of his life gives the self a unity or a continuity that cannot otherwise be achieved."³⁶ The individual turns to God in order to maintain such a pledge. In God, the individual finds a solid foundation where he is able to focus on his goals.

Although the self remains the primary goal, the individual is able to vindicate his moral obligations through his relationship to God. To further this statement, Taylor writes, "another way of making this point is to say that one's relationship to God grows *directly* out of one's perception of one's moral obligation. Insofar as the ethical man is concerned with religious matters, he is *immediately* related to God."³⁷ The result of this

³⁵KPA, p.224, p.225

³⁶KPA, p.226

³⁷KPA, p.228

kind of relationship to God is that there is no conflict. The aim of the individual to fully realize his self, and his obligation to morality find common ground in a relationship to God. As seen in Chapter 1, page 25, when the individual makes the choice to live ethically he chooses the whole of his aesthetic self. So, the ethical is not in conflict with the aesthetic stage either. "Ethical existence conceives the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious dimensions of life to be harmoniously related, and to create no tensions among themselves."³⁸

At the ethical stage of existence, self-realization and moral obligations coincide. It is expected, then, that the individual not only knows what his moral obligations are, but that he is able to fulfill them. Taylor is not quite so sure. "As a matter of fact, in striving to accomplish ideals, the ethical form of existence begins to break down, and the way is opened for the movement to the religious stage."³⁹

There are two reasons why the ethical stage collapses. First, if the ethical stage is to survive, the individual must find a balance between the self's components. The self as a freely chosen actuality has to be in equilibrium with the self as God's creation. "Therefore, if the self is to establish an appropriate equilibrium, it must not only relate the components of possibility and actuality through freedom, but the whole self must relate itself, in dependence, to its constituting power."⁴⁰ However, Taylor argues that the ethical existence, as it stands, is a life of *self-assertion*; the sole purpose being the

³⁸KPA, p.229

³⁹KPA, p.232

⁴⁰KPA, p.232

realization of the self. God, as the self's creator, is not in balance with this aim.

"Because the ethical life is fundamentally an exercise of self-assertion in which dependence on God is not adequately acknowledged, the self remains in a state of disequilibrium."⁴¹ It is this disequilibrium that leads the ethical stage to break down.

The second reason for the collapse of the ethical stage is the ethical demand for certain ideals. According to Taylor, the ethical individual, at least at first, believes that it is possible to achieve these ideals. The ideals that the ethical life demands of the individual cannot be realized because they do not exist in reality; they remain as a goal towards which the ethical individual constantly strives. However, Taylor writes, the ethical existence still requires that the individual reach these ideals.

Taylor argues that the ideals the ethical person determines as necessary to achieve a "unified selfhood" are too lofty. The individual will not succeed. Once the individual comes to the realization that he cannot achieve the goals he has set for himself, "he assumes responsibility for his failure."⁴² At this point, the ethical person recognizes his guilt, which, upon further examination, leads him to recognize himself as a sinner. "With the category of sin, one moves beyond the ethical stage of existence to the religious stage. Sin makes the ideality for which those at the ethical stage strive, and upon which all depends for the ethicist, impossible to accomplish."⁴³ It is in this way that the ethical individual takes on the religious aspect and moves to the religious

⁴¹KPA, p.233

⁴²KPA, p.234

⁴³KPA, p.235

stage.

Husain Sarkar, also makes a distinction between the ethical and religious stages. However, he does not see the step to the religious as necessary for the ethical.⁴⁴ An individual has the capacity to live an ethical life without this link.

Kierkegaard's writings blatantly presuppose the ethical connection to the religious; an assumption that is fundamental to his philosophical argument. Sarkar claims that "Kierkegaard has woven so tight a conceptual net that given his premises it follows that no one who does not believe in God can be ethical." If the religious is removed, Sarkar questions, what remains of the ethical argument? For example, an ethical person must live under the categories of good and evil, but these categories only come into existence when the individual has chosen himself. However, in choosing himself, according to Kierkegaard, the individual must "bind [himself] for an eternity to an eternal power." (486) Therefore, an individual cannot ever claim to live an ethical life without being religious. Unless he is attached to God, the categories of good and evil simply do not exist for him.

According to Sarkar, there is a secular view of life which runs parallel to the religious view of life promoted by Kierkegaard; a secular view of life that can just as well lead to the ethical. To illustrate this point, he provides the following example:

Sarah Wylcott, a prominent business woman who is well versed in aestheticism, returns to visit the poverty stricken and under-educated city from whence she came,

⁴⁴In his lectures on the *Either/Or* text. For the remainder of the chapter, all quotes refer to these lectures.

Northern Louisiana. At first, she is disgusted with what she sees and hears. She made it out and was able to better her self, why can't they? After a short time, she experiences a change of heart and returns home to help those she left behind. Sarah Wylcott does immeasurable good for the community: "She starts a school, several medical clinics, and a few simple trade schools for the older women." But Sarkar adds one more detail, Sarah Wylcott is an atheist.

Although Sarah Wylcott's life does not include the religious, it would be difficult to argue that she does not live a life with ethical values. Her life has paralleled that of those individuals who do eventually accept God. As a socialite, her life was one of immediacy; she existed in a finite realm. When she took her trip to Northern Louisiana and saw the state of things, she returned home only to recognize the emptiness of her way of life and drift into melancholy. "She loses the innocence of evil; she slowly perceives the falseness of her situation; she feels a misfit in her environment." Sarah Wylcott goes back to Northern Louisiana a changed woman. Her actions are not based on greed, or the promise of recognition for herself, but on a new found sense of moral obligation. "With no other prospect than just the good she might accomplish in this world, she acts in the full consciousness of her finitude." Thus Sarkar claims, she has also made the leap of faith, not a religious faith, but a faith in the good that she can do for mankind. Sarkar quotes David Hume's view of the secular faith: "Act morally for here and now, and improve the plight of man; and man so raised will need no God for comfort or support; man so raised will only need fellow man; and man so raised will rise

to his height as only a man can rise.”⁴⁵

Sarah Wylcott has chosen herself by singling herself out from the world, as Sarkar so nicely phrases it. According to Sarkar, she too knows the freedom of inward works, only she has come to herself through the “inwardness of humanity” and not the “inwardness of religion.” What in Sarah Wylcott’s life, he asks, is different from any other ethical individual, discounting the tie to religion? If an outsider were to look at her life without knowing anything about her faith, would he not call her ethical? Would he not call her actions good? Sarkar states that what follows from Kierkegaard’s argument is “that no one, neither Sarah Wylcott nor anyone else, who has not bound himself to God for an eternity has available to him the categories of good and evil (in their absolute difference).” The Sarah Wylcott case attempts to prove this argument to be not true.

Sarkar further illustrates this point by asking a very interesting question: “Can there be a secular Mother Theresa?” Unlikely, but it is certainly a possibility. Take for instance, as Sarkar does, the life of the late Princess Diana. There is no doubt that the life of the Princess certainly had its aesthetic qualities: the parties, the clothes, the high-life. However, the vast amount of good that she did for others proves that she had at least one foot “firmly planted in the realm of the ethical.” How many people would dare say that the Princess was not an ethical individual?

If one is to accept the notion of an objective moral good, then one has to accept

⁴⁵David Hume, ‘Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth,’ *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, pp. 528-529.

the possibility that an individual can live an ethical life focused on that objective good, without accepting the religious. Is Sarah Wylcott's life complete without the religious? Perhaps not -- that is not the argument here -- but in Sarkar's view, Sarah Wylcott, even as an atheist, can live an ethical life. Her goal is to fight the ignorance and repression in her home town. This goal brings continuity and purpose to her life; the same kind of continuity and purpose as any other ethical individual.

Chapter 3

Discovering the Potholes

CHAPTER 3

DISCOVERING THE POTHOLES

I. Proof From Within

A 'rational choice' is one in which the individual makes his decision based on some criteria, independent of the options placed before him. The *Either/Or* offers no such criteria, and is therefore a 'radical choice.' However, Kierkegaard would no more deny the radical nature of the choice than he would the individual's freedom to choose. In his letter to the Aesthete, Judge Wilhelm emphatically writes, "What I have said to you so often I say once more, or rather I shout it to you: either/or; aut/aut." (477)

The ethical and the aesthetic are incommensurable systems, according to Kierkegaard, so there is no possible overlap, it is either one or the other. Each system is aligned with separate and distinct basic principles which support the values they hold. Judge Wilhelm states, "*There is an absolute opposition between us that can never be abolished.* I cannot live in aesthetic categories, I feel what I hold most sacred is destroyed; I need a higher expression and the ethical gives me that." (532, Emphasis mine) There is no common ground between the two systems, no basic understanding or agreement on which to base a choice of reason¹, and so, according to Kierkegaard,

¹Socrates in Plato's *Gorgia*: "My dear Callicles, if the feelings of every human were particular to himself and different from those of every other human being, instead of our possessing, for all the diversity of our experience, something in common, it would not be easy for one man to make his own situation clear to another." Plato, *Gorgia*, p. 75.

to move beyond the aesthetic to the ethical takes a leap of faith, a 'radical choice.'

The biggest difficulty with a 'radical choice,' is that one option ends up being just as good as another. If there are no reasons to support a particular view, then to claim its superiority over another is a statement of preference. The choice becomes subjective and intuitive. The argument that leads the individual to make this choice makes more of an appeal to his sensibilities than to his reason. Although this is surely not what Kierkegaard intends, it is the end result of the *Either/Or*.

It is true that Kierkegaard offers no conclusion to the either/or, leaving the ultimate decision to the reader. However, Kierkegaard leaves no doubt what option he not only would choose, but what option is right: the ethical. Ultimately, Kierkegaard wants to 'have his cake and eat it too.' He wants the reader to accept the either/or as a radical choice, thus preserving the notion of a leap of faith, while at the same time, convince the reader to become ethical, thus preserving the notion of an objectively right choice. However, if the choice is a radical one, and no option is any better than another for any stated reason, then trying to persuade or convince an individual to lead an ethical life is, at best, an odd enterprise. If he wants to genuinely persuade or convince the individual to become ethical, Kierkegaard must offer a rational argument.

Judge Wilhelm does his best to convince the Aesthete of a 'better way of life.' The debate appears to become an intercomparison between the two systems, the ethical and the aesthetic, but the arguments that the Judge offers the Aesthete do not contain any *independent criteria* anymore than do the arguments the aesthete offers to anyone to become an aesthete. The Judge's arguments actually presuppose the truth of the ethical system, so that if one is to be moved, he must already acknowledge the

truth of certain basic ethical principles.

Suppose that a mathematician is giving a lecture on a complex proof; the proof follows from certain premises. Using the age-old rules of mathematics, he logically deduces some proposition. The other mathematicians attending the lecture all agree that the proof adheres to the proper method used to create such a proof. They find that the proof is flawless and the proposition that the lecturer has deduced is unquestionable. However, there is one very important point that is missing: What of the premises on which the entire proof is based? Unbeknownst to the members of the audience, the lecturer has presupposed the truth of those premises. The soundness of the entire proof rests on the truth of the premises. However, truth cannot be demonstrated from within the system; there must be an independent criteria for establishing the truth of the premises. What would follow from this example is that one can prove anything that is entailed by the premises with which one started. But, in order to provide a proof that is sound, it must begin with premises that are true; ones, that is, that are independently established to be true.²

Judge Wilhelm is very much like that lecturer, attempting to prove to his audience, the aesthete, the truth of a certain proposition, namely, the truth of the ethical life view. Based on a specific set of premises, Judge Wilhelm follows a line of

²To make the following discussion clear, I find it necessary to define some principle logical terms. An *argument* contains a series of declarative sentences, *premises*, meant to lead the reader to a certain *conclusion*, also declarative, which follows from those premises. Each of these declarative sentences expresses a *proposition*.

An argument is either *valid* or invalid. An argument is valid whenever it is not possible for the premises to be true and the conclusion false. An argument is *sound* when it is not only valid, but the premises are true and so, consequently, the conclusion is also true. John Nolt, *Logics*, pp. 3, 6, 12.

reasoning to its logical end and concludes that the ethical life is the correct life view. His argument is certainly valid. However the argument is sound, if, and only if, the Judge is able to prove to the Aesthete that his premises are objectively true. Now, let us look at the story from another angle. The Aesthete is also convinced of the truth of a certain proposition; namely the truth of the aesthetic life view. He provides a set of premises, offers as proof based on them, and concludes that the aesthetic life view holds the truth. Again, the soundness of the argument rests on the Aesthete's ability to prove to Judge Wilhelm the objective truth of the premises.

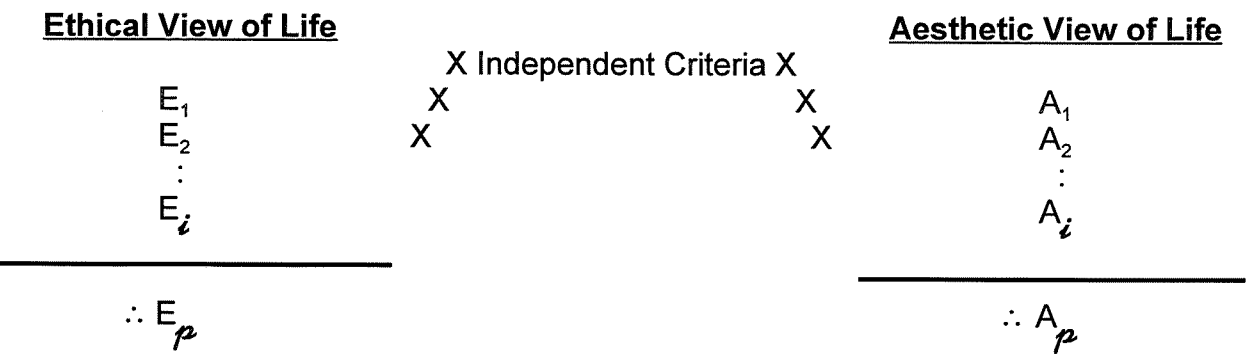
Let us assume that both Judge Wilhelm and the Aesthete provide logically accurate arguments. However, they are still unable to bridge the canyon between them: Why? They have both *presupposed* the truth of the premises they provide. Judge Wilhelm, for example, lives the life of an ethicist, and in doing so has accepted the basic principles of the ethical life which he uses as his premises. These principles, in turn, justify the life he leads. However, in accepting the principles as premises, Judge Wilhelm presupposes their truth. The same for the Aesthete and the aesthetic life view. They both accept the truth of the premises from within the system in order to justify their respective positions. Kierkegaard wants to prove the soundness of the ethical system without showing that his premises are true. Without this showing, his arguments are at best valid, but not necessarily sound.

Diagram A:



Diagram B:

The Bridge Across the Canyon



The ethicist accepts premises E_1 through E_e as true. These premises lead him to proposition E_p , the ethical life view, which he also believes to be true. However, premises E_1 through E_e are not independent of the ethical view of life. The ethicist accepts them because he believes in the truth of the ethical way of life. These premises then lead him back to the ethical life and the argument becomes circular. Conversely, the aesthete accepts premises A_1 through A_e as true. These premises lead him to proposition A_p , the aesthetic life view, which he also believes to be true. However, these premises are not independent of the aesthetic life view. Like the ethicist, the aesthete accepts these premises because he believes in the truth of the aesthetic life. Again, these premises lead back to the aesthetic life and we have a circular argument. (See Diagram A.) Both the ethical and the aesthetic systems, then, are self-contained.

Consider the dilemma of Diane Hanson and James Boudreaux, two seniors at a very prestigious university. In order for them to graduate with a bachelor of science, they must pass Dr. Oswald's physiology class, one known for its propensity to keep seniors around an extra semester. For some reason, a copy of Dr. Oswald's final exam has been made available to both of these students. Before them is a certain proposition, one that has been ground into them since elementary school, which tells them that it is wrong to cheat.

Diane Hanson asks her best friend to help her decide what to do. That friend uses valid reasoning to give her an ethical argument, referring to honesty, integrity, and loyalty, etc., in her premises, and finally concluding that cheating is wrong; i.e. $\sim P$: "It is

not permitted to cheat on an exam.” Hanson, being an ethicist, accepts these ethical premises as true and thus proclaims the truth of the proposition; she does not cheat on the exam. Hanson has justified her actions from within the ethical system.

James Boudreaux also goes to a close friend for advice. That friend listens to the situation and uses valid reasoning to provide him with an aesthetic argument. In his premises he refers to the individual’s need to get ahead in life, the reward that an “A” in a class such as this would bring, and the cost of an extra semester, etc., concluding that cheating is okay; i.e. P: “It is permitted to cheat on an exam.” Boudreaux, as an aesthete, accepts these aesthetic premises as true and thus proclaims the proposition false; he decides to cheat on the exam. Boudreaux has also justified his decision from within the system to which *he* subscribes.

Within their respective systems, Hanson and Boudreaux are able to prove the truth or falsity of a particular proposition and justify their actions. However, the same proposition is proven to be true in the one system and false in the other. A proposition that is both true and false is a contradiction. What remains to be shown, then, is which system is true. This can only be done by a third system, one that is independent of the first two.

To continue the story, consider David Smith, a friend and classmate to both Diane Hanson and James Boudreaux. Smith is approached by both Hanson and Boudreaux concerning the exam and they proceed to tell him the reasons (premises) for their respective actions. The dilemma that Smith faces is different than Hanson’s or Boudreaux’s. Before he can decide the truth of the particular proposition, he must decide whether he will subscribe to the ethical system that Hanson suggests, or the

aesthetic system that Boudreaux suggests. Although Hanson and Boudreaux are able to justify their decisions from within their respective systems, Smith must first be convinced of a system as a whole. Therefore, if Hanson or Boudreaux are to prove to Smith the truth of their actions, they cannot provide justification from within those systems. They both have to show him that the premises of the system they each subscribe to are true.

An even greater challenge would be for Hanson to convince Boudreaux of her position, or vice versa. Hanson cannot provide a sound argument for Boudreaux by simply stating the premises that convinced her, because Boudreaux does not hold these premises to be true. She would first have to prove the truth of those premises using criteria independent of her ethical life-style. Without such evidence, Boudreaux would have no reason to abandon his aesthetic existence. The same applies to Boudreaux's position.

In the section of the *Either/Or* that we are concerned with, Judge Wilhelm attempts to convince the Aesthete of the truth of the ethical system as a whole, not just a single proposition. However, he does not provide him with any other evidence for the system other than the ethical principles themselves. Without such evidence, the Aesthete has as little reason as Boudreaux to leave his aesthetic life-style for a more stringent ethical one. There is no bridge for the Aesthete to cross from his own self-contained view to that of the ethicist. Unless the Aesthete joins the Judge based on mere preference, he will remain in his own cycle, or within his own circle. But this is a shaky rope to cross on and the Aesthete can often turn back. If the Judge is to persuade the Aesthete across the canyon which lies between them, he must build a

solid structure that the Aesthete can cross with confidence and never look back. This bridge can only be built with independent criteria and objective reasons. (See Diagram B.)

Judge Wilhelm does not begin with an independent premise. In fact, he so blatantly presupposes that the ethical system is correct, that he writes: "Only when one can get a person to stand at the crossroads in such a way that he has no expedient but to choose, does he choose *what is right*." (486, Emphasis mine) Kierkegaard obviously means that the ethical system is "*what is right*," but he offers no reasons independent of the ethical. What follows are two examples of Judge Wilhelm's internal reasoning leading to the radical choice in the *Either/Or*.

First example. Kierkegaard states that once the individual has made the choice, he will find continuity in his life. (503) However, neither the fact that one's life is continuous does it make it ethically right; nor, conversely, that one's life is ethically right does it make it continuous. For example, Mark Jones works for the electric company and has done so for the last 45 years. He and his wife were married right out of high school and shortly after purchased a small house, the same small house that they live in now. Every August, the Joneses drive to the beach to stay for two weeks. Every holiday, they visit their relatives in Chicago. Jones's life has been nothing but continuous. However, his life is also anything but ethical. He has not once given money to a charity or even given a dime to a beggar on the street. For the last 40 years he has been shrewdly embezzling money from his employer. Furthermore, Jones has cheated on his wife twice. His life is most certainly continuous, but in no way ethical.

Consider, now, the life of Maria Nunez. Her enjoyment of life is constantly

bringing something new, some new adventure to follow. She has never lived in one city more than five years at a time. When she graduated from college, she spent time in New Orleans as a street artist. Later, she joined the navy in order to see the world. After Nunez served her four years, she went back to school to get a nursing degree. With her new degree, she moved to South America to provide critically needed medical assistance. The rest of her life follows the same pattern. Nunez feels that a life that is too consistent is boring; life is full of adventures waiting to be tackled. However, Nunez has a heart the size of Texas. She has never been materialistic and so she needs very little to take care of herself, any extra goes to charities. Despite her hectic lifestyle, there is always enough time to visit nursing homes, or volunteer at a shelter. She is the kind of person that always pulls over to help a stranded driver, or even to remove a wayward turtle from the highway. Her actions are guided by a set of principles that she feels are just. Nunez is no doubt an ethical person, but nothing about her life exemplifies continuity.

Judge Wilhelm, thus, cannot use continuity as a premise to support his proposition. The Aesthete could easily argue against Judge Wilhelm, saying: "It is not independently necessary for me to live a life of continuity. It is your view of the ethical life that suggests its necessity and I do not subscribe to that view."

Second example. A passage from the *Either/Or* reads, "that any person who has not tasted the bitterness of despair has missed the meaning of life, however beautiful and joy-filled this life has been." (511) Despair, according to Kierkegaard, leads to the ethical. Once Judge Wilhelm despaired, he found what he believed to be the meaning of life, or at least what the ethical life says is the meaning of life. The above passage

suggests that the Aesthete, who has not despaired, has not found this meaning. However, Judge Wilhelm offers no independent evidence that the “meaning of life” he has found within the ethical is the true meaning of life. The Judge accepts it as fact because he is an ethical individual, but he must prove its truth to the Aesthete without reference to the ethical since the Aesthete does not subscribe to ethical principles. “He must prove to the Aesthete that: (a) there is a meaning of life; (b) that the ethical view fulfills the conditions that gives life that meaning; and (c) that no view other than the ethical can yield that meaning.”³ Judge Wilhelm does not do so and thus the Aesthete is given no independent or objective reason to abandon the aesthetic life. Again, Kierkegaard is arguing from within the ethical and not from independent criteria.

If Kierkegaard’s argument is to be rational, the ethical and the aesthetic cannot be incommensurable systems. There must be a third system which bridges the gap, specifying the criteria that the correct system must meet. In order for the *Either/Or* to be a rational proof for the superiority of the ethical life, Kierkegaard would have to argue as follows: There are two systems, the ethical and the aesthetic, which are characterized by certain properties. There is also a third system, containing no reference to the first two, that provides an objective, independent set of criteria which the individual can use to judge which of the two competing and commensurable systems to choose. Instead of this third system, Kierkegaard attempts to use the properties of the ethical system, which he presupposes to be correct, to convince the aesthete. He writes, “[the aesthetic life] could only be explained to [the aesthete] by someone who stands a step higher, or by someone who lives ethically.” (492)

³From discussion with Husain Sarkar on *Either/Or*.

Mimicking Kierkegaard: Could the ethical life only be explained to the ethicist by someone who stands a step higher, or by someone who lives aesthetically?

Kierkegaard, without giving the reader any reasons for it, has already assumed the superiority of the ethical.

One must conclude, then, that given the content of the *Either/Or*, it is a radical choice. This is not to say that one cannot prove the ethical to be a rational choice, only that Kierkegaard does not provide such a proof. If Kierkegaard were to prove to the aesthete that there are objective moral principles, this may provide the independent criteria that he needs. However, my purpose here is not to cull out this third system, but only to show that it is a necessity that Kierkegaard does not provide.

Hannay writes that the *Either/Or* is either "indirect persuasion and subterfuge" or it is not a radical choice. As we saw in the previous chapter, he does not subscribe to the notion of the text as a radical choice. However, the arguments in this chapter show that the *Either/Or* does in fact have a radical nature. According to Hannay, this would mean that Judge Wilhelm's arguments for the ethical contain "indirect persuasion and subterfuge."

Although they are internal to the ethical, making the *Either/Or* a radical choice, the Judge's statements are straightforward. There are no underhanded techniques or sophist arguments. He does compliment the intellectual gifts of the Aesthete -- "I have never denied your outstanding intellectual gifts, as you will see from the fact that I have often enough reproached you for using them," (493) -- but this is not meant as a form of indirect communication.⁴ Hannay suggests that this type of communication would be

⁴See footnote 16 in Chapter 2.

hypocritical to an ethical view. Attempting to convince someone to accept the ethical using unethical or backhanded arguments would certainly be a cause for concern. Even Hannay would agree that this is not the type of reasoning found in the *Either/Or*, but he is wrong to say that the *Either/Or* is not a radical choice.

Anthony Rudd also criticized the 'radical choice' notion. His claim is that Judge Wilhelm does offer comprehensive arguments in favor of the ethical, persuasion being the intent of his deliberation. The Judge's arguments are meant to appeal to an unhappy aesthete, so that he might choose the ethical life, a better, more fulfilling existence. Therefore, according to Rudd, the *Either/Or* is not a radical choice, but one based on the reasons given by Judge Wilhelm and, for that matter, the Aesthete.

There is no doubt that what Rudd says about the debate is true. Judge Wilhelm does give a strong argument in favor of the ethical, but it is based on ethical criteria. Is the ethical life a better, more fulfilling existence? According to the ethical it is, but the aesthete does not make decisions in terms of the ethical. As I have earlier argued, if the aesthete is to be persuaded by Judge Wilhelm with something more substantial than intuition and preference, Judge Wilhelm must provide some independent criteria. The answer to Rudd's question -- "Is [the *Either/Or*] just a contrast of two radically opposed and incompatible views of life, which demands that we choose between them, but which provides no criteria for making such a choice?"⁵ -- is "yes". Kierkegaard does provide criteria for making the choice, but it is not independent criteria. Without this type of evidence, no matter how much internal evidence Judge Wilhelm provides, the *Either/Or* will remain a radical choice.

⁵Kierkegaard and the Limits of the Ethical, p.78.

II. A Difficult Task

In writing this criticism of the *Either/Or*, I find myself facing a peculiar difficulty. I have condemned Kierkegaard for making the choice between the aesthetic and the ethical a radical one, allowing it to be reduced to simple preference or intuition. An individual chooses a way of life in which he feels secure and confident of its truth. To diminish the propositions in which he roots the guidelines for his life to subjectivity and speculation seems particularly distressing. However, the task that I, and many others, require of Kierkegaard is no simple feat. It is this task, proving objectively the truth of the ethical system, that has created a deep fissure between philosophers like Hannay and Rudd, and the few, including myself, who agree with philosophers like MacIntyre. The paths that these philosophers follow are miles apart. MacIntyre's route, *the road less traveled*, appears to lead to an arbitrary difference between the systems, rendering the choice insubstantive. However, the route of Hannay and Rudd, seems to lead to tangled arguments and counter-arguments. I do not pretend to know the solution.

Admittedly, the task that is set before Kierkegaard seems only reasonable. If proving the truth of a system from within leads to a radical choice, then supplying the individual with criteria for an objective truth will allow for a fair, neutral, outside, rational determination. This independent criteria will bridge the canyon between the ethical and aesthetic systems, so that the individual can cross on solid reasoning. However, building such a structure is not a simple endeavor.

Imagine a young girl and her father. The ornery child does not want to clean her

room as her father has asked her to do. She obstinately asks her father why she always has to do what he wants her to do. Her father replies that she must listen because he had to listen to his parents. Smartly, the girl fires back asking why he had to do to what *his* parents asked. Her father replies, with growing impatience, "Because they had to do what their parents asked." Knowing full well that this argument could continue into eternity, the father, frustrated and annoyed, sends her to her room to contemplate the concept of an infinite regress.

The frustration of the father is no less apparent in philosophical debates over the radical choice. Consider the following scenario. Judge Wilhelm attempts to convince the Aesthete of the truth of a certain proposition. This proposition states, "The ethical life is the correct life." The argument that he gives contains ethical premises and assumes the truth of these premises. The Aesthete, however, refuses to accept the truth of those premises. Similarly, the Aesthete attempts to convince Judge Wilhelm of the truth of a certain proposition. This proposition states, "The aesthetic life is the correct life." The argument that he gives contains aesthetical premises and assumes the truth of these premises. Judge Wilhelm, however, in turn, refuses to accept the truth of those premises.

So, the Judge tries another approach. Without using any ethical criteria, he provides an independent third system meant to show that the ethical system as a whole holds the truth. (As a side note, one must question, as moral philosophers have, the possibility of providing non-ethical reasons for an ethical view of life.) Herein lies the dilemma: The Aesthete, once again, asks what justifies the premises of this third system -- "I do not hold them to be true." So, Judge Wilhelm tries still another

approach. He provides a fourth system which will show the truth of the third, which in turn will show the truth of the ethical premises. The Aesthete does not accept the premises of the fourth system to be true, and again requires further justification. And so the argument goes, continuing into an infinite regress, as does the Aesthete's attempt in showing the judge that the aesthetical life is the correct life. The canyon grows wider.

The idea of one's way of life, to which one conforms one's actions, thoughts and desires, having no rational basis is appalling. It seems as if there must be some criteria, some objective reasoning, that would lead to the truth. However, to find such criteria and reasoning, so fundamental and rational that they can in no way be denied, is a task that has yet to be accomplished. Until such time as this occurs, the fundamental either/or, the choice between the ethical and the aesthetic, will remain a radical choice. It will remain a leap of faith.

Kierkegaard simply attempts to skip this difficulty. He does not try to independently prove the truth of the ethical system, but argues from within. Judge Wilhelm gives the Aesthete example after example of the benefits of the ethical system, and the poverty of the aesthete's life: for one, it will be continually seeking remedy against melancholy. However, he never shows that the ethical system as a whole contains the objective truth. Thus, my argument remains the same. The *Either/Or* is a radical choice, which renders the choice between the aesthetic and the ethical insubstantive, a mere matter of intuition and preference. However, in fairness to Kierkegaard, I recognize that the attempt to justify the system as a whole through independent criteria might lead to an infinite regress. It is now up to those who deny the radical choice -- Hannay, Rudd, etc. -- to provide a bridge.

To ease my own conscience, however, I feel compelled to add these last few remarks. Without this final piece, the picture would not be complete, although it remains as blurred as ever. It is possible, as shown by the following example, that an infinite regress is not a *necessary* phenomenon.

In the field of Euclidean geometry, a mathematician claims certain truths about a geometric figure. He attempts to prove these truths to his colleagues based on the premises which led him to his conclusion, but they do not accept these premises as true. Not discouraged, the mathematician breaks these premises down into simpler fragments which he can then build on. His colleagues remain unpersuaded. The mathematician breaks the fragments down even further, but to no avail. However, the determined fellow does not stop until he has reached fragments that they can all agree upon. These last fragments are the axioms of Euclidean geometry. His colleagues can also reject these axioms, but, for the most part, this is a base on which they all agree. For the Euclidean geometrician, it does not seem possible to imagine a Euclidean world where these axioms are not true. Thus, having broken down his argument to the foundational level, he is now able to rebuild the proof for his claim.

Similarly, perhaps, it is at least possible for the Aesthete and Judge Wilhelm to also have some common foundation. One that they can both agree on, unable to imagine the world in which they live under any other circumstances. This is where the regress would halt. Should Judge Wilhelm find a way of breaking down the ethical argument to a fundamental axiom shared by the Aesthete, then it is from this axiom that he can reasonably rebuild the ethical argument. Although I can offer no such axiom, it is enough to entertain the possibility.

III. Breaking the Bond

The notion of a 'radical choice' is important to Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* in that it preserves the need for a leap of faith. In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard explores the faith of one of the most remarkable men in history, Father Abraham.⁶ His faith is nothing short of astounding, one might even add matchless, but it goes even deeper. What God asked Abraham to do went beyond what was understandable. Yet, he never questioned God even in the face of absolute absurdity and apparent impossibility. It was not reason or logic that led Abraham to follow God's command, but the most incredible expression of simple faith the world has ever known.

The 'radical choice' is an expression of the fact that it is not reason, logic, or even understanding that brings one to God, but one giant leap of faith. In other words, the individual must make this leap to reach a religious form of existence. According to Kierkegaard, the movement to an ethical existence is necessarily a movement to the religious, hence the need for a 'radical choice' (leap of faith) in the *Either/Or*.

For Kierkegaard, the ethical and the religious are inseparable. One cannot make the move to the ethical without including the religious, nor can one become religious without also accepting the ethical. But, what binds the two? What makes the connection between them necessary? Kierkegaard never answers these questions; he merely assumes their inseparable connection.

I have no qualms in assuming that a religious life necessarily includes the

⁶Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*.

ethical. This, I feel, needs no explanation. However, the reverse is not *necessarily* true. It is possible for an individual to live ethically without being religious. The religious is a step beyond the ethical, not equal to it. (Whether one's life is complete without the religious is not a question that we will concern ourselves with here.) Although this is a claim that Kierkegaard would vehemently disagree with, it is, none-the-less, one that I intend to try and argue.

Let us return to the tale of Chuck Alderman found in Chapter 1. His lifestyle is transformed from the aesthetic to the ethical. At the end of the story, Alderman recognizes that he has been separated from God and seeks to remedy that separation; he becomes religious. However, if we remove this aspect of his life, does he become any less ethical?

As a young child, and even as a mature adult, Alderman never put much stock in religion. The only times he ever went to church were with his grandmother, those few weeks out of every summer. Now, as he begins the search for his true self, unmasked, visible to himself and the world, it is not religion that he turns to but another concrete foundation, the objective good. Turning away from social conventions and the aesthetic pressure of the immediate community which surrounds him, he focuses on this good.

Once we erase religion from the story, Alderman's actions do not change. As an aesthete he lives a life of immediacy which leads him to a state of melancholy. He does not know who he really is and desires to unmask his true self. He recognizes the insignificance of the material things he held so essential to a 'happy' life. Finally, he stands at the crossroads and he chooses.

Alderman realizes that there are higher standards for living and that the life he

was living did not measure up. He accepts that there is an objective good to which he must adhere and this choice changes his entire way of life. He volunteers and gives to charities. He does not continue carousing in the local pubs or playing games in the singles' bars. Although Sunday mornings are not spent in church, he does take the same drive to his grandmother's town, just to take his place serving vegetables. Alderman's deeds are not grounded in greed or ulterior motives; it is not recognition or praise that he seeks. His actions are based in simple love and kindness. How can Alderman's life be considered anything but ethical and moral?

Anthony Rudd's claim, found in Chapter 2, is the following: "a conception of morality can only be vindicated on religious premises."⁷ Religion, according to Rudd, does three things that are essential for a true ethical life. First, it provides a singular, well-ordered conception of the good. Without religion, the so-called ethical individual is faced with a plurality of such goods and is unsure as to which is correct. Second, when the individual turns away from the impropriety of society, he must have something to turn towards, or he will continue spinning until he falls right back into the society he condemned. Religion provides an "alternative conception of the good to which he can give allegiance,"⁸ this allegiance stops the rotation. Finally, if the individual is to reject society, he must seek some "higher standards" for his life, anything else would leave him no better off than his current standing. Rudd writes, "the most obvious candidates for such standards are religious ones."⁹

⁷*Kierkegaard*, p.116

⁸*Kierkegaard*, p.118

⁹*Kierkegaard*, p.120

Given all of this, there is nothing in Rudd's argument that does not coincide with Alderman's new way of life. Instead of religion, however, it is Alderman's conception of the objective good that provides those three elements of a true ethical existence. First, Alderman does not subscribe to a multiplicity of goods as Rudd suggests. Even without religion, he has found a single conception of the good on which he focuses, the objective good. One might argue that the objective good is unknowable and incomprehensible, leaving each individual to figure out his own conception of what that good is. But, can we not say the same about religion? The Bible does lay down certain rules for the Christian faith, but there is much of it which is left to interpretation, hence the multiple denominations. The basic moral laws are the same for religion and the objective good: do not murder, do not steal, do not commit adultery, etc. While the religious call them the ten commandments, others, not connected to the religious, simply call them moral laws. Except for the commandments specifically concerning God, the rules are the same. Therefore, the objective good which Alderman follows is just as singular and concrete as religion.

Second, Alderman does not sink back into else to turn towards. Rudd assumes that religion is the only concrete alternative. However, as Alderman turns away from the waywardness of aestheticism, he finds himself concretely in the objective good. Religion is not the only stopping point. Rudd is certainly correct in stating that an individual who rejects society and yet has nothing else to focus on will more than likely return to the very society that he rejected. However, to say that religion is the only alternative is incorrect.

Finally, according to Rudd, unless the individual attaches himself to concrete

principles, he will slip back into the aesthetic life. The best qualified principles to provide a concrete foundation, he states, are religious ones. Rudd, however, gives no explanation as to the criteria that makes religious principles the most qualified. Why are they “the most obvious candidates?” The objective good upon which Alderman focuses is just as concrete as religious principles, hence the term objective. The objective never changes, existing in one solid form despite any knowledge of it. Over the centuries, from culture to culture, what has been considered “good” has undergone radical changes, but this is a subjective good. The objective good remains unchanged. Religious principles are certainly qualified as a concrete foundation for the ethical existence, but there is nothing in Rudd’s argument that shows that they are the best qualified, much less the only qualified. Alderman “appeals to higher standards” just as the religious person does, but his standards are formed by the objective good, not the religious.

Taylor argues, also discussed in Chapter 2, that “one’s relationship to God grows *directly* out of one’s perception of one’s moral obligation.” This relationship to God gives the individual a certain continuity in life so that he is able to concentrate on his goals, namely the realization of his self. However, Taylor has this exactly backwards. It is one’s moral obligation that grows directly out of one’s relationship to God. The relationship must be established first to ensure continuity. Without this relationship what is the source of one’s feeling of obligation? It is through this relationship that one recognizes that an obligation exists. However, the relationship to God is not the only one that brings continuity. If the individual relates himself to the objective good, he finds just as concrete a source of continuity. Once the individual realizes the existence

of the objective good, he then begins to feel a sense of obligation towards that good.

Furthermore, Taylor states that the ethical, the religious, and the aesthetic are in a state of equilibrium. The aesthetic is not in conflict with the ethical, once the individual has chosen, because the individual chooses his whole aesthetic self. This would imply that the self does not change other than his attachment to the good. However, the ethical individual, if he is to lead a truly ethical life, must make significant changes. He now has different goals, aspirations, and actions. There are aesthetic activities that he must abandon. For Alderman, he had to give up his weekly drinking binges with his friends. For others, like Mark Jones, he would have to stop embezzling money from work and cheating on his wife. If there is no change from the aesthetic to the ethical and the one form of life is perfectly in tune with the other, then why distinguish them? It is quite obvious that the aesthetic and ethical life-styles cannot be in equilibrium. If the individual is to choose, certainly he chooses himself with all the qualities of his personality, but these qualities are used for different, ethical purposes.

Taylor also claims that there are two reasons for the collapse of the ethical stage that is not bound to the religious. The first reason is that the self has two components that must be in equilibrium, the self in its actuality and the self as God's creation. If the self has its sole aim in its own realization, without any reference to its relation to God, then the ethical stage is unbalanced and will collapse. However, the fact that one recognizes one part of the self without recognizing the other does not make it unbalanced, but simply incomplete. The step to the religious is a step beyond the ethical. If the individual does not take this second step to the religious, it does not mean that he will, or must, fall back into the aesthetic, but that he will just remain

incomplete. It is his relation to the objective good that helps him to balance on that first step. The individual is able to realize himself, not through a religious attachment, but a connection to the objective good. It is his focus on this good which helps him to balance and not fall back.

Taylor's second reason for the collapse of the ethical is that the individual, striving for the good, will realize that it is an impossible goal. He will never be a perfect ethical being and so he recognizes his failure. This will, according to Taylor, lead him to the religious as a sinner. Taylor makes this out to be a necessary sequence, but that is not quite accurate. The individual will certainly realize that he is not a perfect being. Understanding that he is fallible, however, does not necessarily lead him to the realization that he is a 'sinner' and hence to the religious. Alderman knows that his previous way of life was not in harmony with the good; he made many mistakes. However, he realizes as a human he is not a perfect being. He feels justified in that he no longer lives such a life and that he does the best he can to adhere to the objective good. The fact that he cannot lead a perfect ethical life does not stop him from doing the best that he can. For some, the religious can help them adhere to the ethical, but it is not a necessary feature of the ethical life.

IV. In Conclusion

The *Either/Or* is a beautiful example of Kierkegaard's eloquent writing style. His words and phrases flow together to captivate his audience. However, the *Either/Or*, as

brilliant a work as it is, has its problems. Kierkegaard makes too many assumptions. He not only assumes that the ethical is a superior system to the aesthetic, but he also presupposes that the premises that justify the ethical system are true. Furthermore, he takes as given that there is a religious connection to the ethical.¹⁰ Kierkegaard takes much for granted. Proof, or at least an argument-sketch, is essential to complete any philosophical argument.

¹⁰As an argument that is more closely related to the content of the Either/Or, perhaps Kierkegaard should have stated then when the individual chooses, he must either choose the aesthetic or the religious, not the ethical. However, he still would have had to provide proof independent of the religious that the religious system is true.

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