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Subjective and Objective Reasons in Ethics
Kierkegaardian Perspective: Becoming Ethical as a Subjective Task

(Subjektivní a objektivní důvody v etice
Kierkegaardova perspektiva: Stávání se etickým jako subjektivní úkol)

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Prohlášení

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Abstract

This text explores the question of reasons for morality and the related issues, particularly the nature and the source of moral motivation. First, I elaborate the metaphysical distinction between subjective and objective, which concerns the status of moral reasons and the extent to which a human agent in involved in their genesis. Next, I raise some questions about moral motivation and I introduce briefly some contemporary views on these issues. Major part of the work is dedicated to the exposition of Kierkegaard's position, which combines subjective motivation for ethics (avoidance of personally perceived symptoms of despair) and objectively grounded reasons for morality (sin). Philosophers interested in moral motivation typically look for fundamental moral principles and compelling arguments in favour of being moral, but Kierkegaard turns the attention of his readers to the task of their own selves. His pseudonyms do not look for an objective moral principle, they show why the ethical life-view is essential for attainment of true selfhood. In this work, I compare some contemporary accounts of moral motivation to Kierkegaard's, I comment critically on some interpretations of Kierkegaard and differentiate between different aspects of reason for choosing the ethical life, implied in his pseudonymous work.

Key words: subjectivity, objectivity, reason, ethics, choice, moral motivation, despair, the self

Abstrakt

Tento text se zabývá otázkou důvodů pro morálku a souvisejícími tématy, zejména povahou a původem morální motivace. Nejprve objasním metafyzickou distinkci mezi subjektivním a objektivním, která se týká morálních důvodů a míru, do které se člověk podílí na jejich vzniku. Dále pokládám několik otázek k morální motivaci a krátce uvádím několik současných pohledů na tuto problematiku. Největší část práce je věnována rozboru Kierkegaardovy pozice, která spojuje subjektivní motivaci (útěk před subjektivně vnímanými projevy zoufalství) a objektivně založené důvody pro morálku (hřích). Filozofové, kteří se zajímají o morální motivaci, obvykle hledají základní morální principy a přesvědčivé důvody pro morální jednání, ale Kierkegaard obrací pozornost svých čtenářů k úkolu spočívajícího v jejich vlastním já. Jeho pseudonymy nehledají objektivní morální princip, ale ukazují, proč je etický životní postoj nezbytný k získání pravého já. V této práci porovnávám některé současné pohledy na morální motivaci s Kierkegaardem a odlišuji různé aspekty motivace pro etický život, které jsou naznačeny v jeho pseudonymních dílech.

Klíčová slova: subjektivita, objektivita, důvod, etika, volba, morální motivace, zoufalství, já

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Contents:

> This is why one feels helped in an entirely different way by the Christian view than by all the wisdom of the philosophers. The Christian view attributes everything to sin, something the philosopher is too esthetic to have the ethical courage to do. And yet this courage is the only thing that can rescue life and humankind, unless one according to whim interrupts one's skepticism and joins some others who are likeminded about what truth is.
>
> (Kierkegaard 1843, B 240)

1. Introduction

Philosophers interested in motivational problems of ethics typically seek a justification for being moral; a consideration which can persuade everyone or nearly everyone to adhere to certain moral principles. The status of morality and its principles has been a widely discussed theme which raised a number of troubling questions concerning the tension between the objective and the subjective. Are the reasons for accepting moral precepts grounded in the objective status of moral demands, or our own identity and unique self? To effectively tackle these questions, this work takes a narrower focus on the works of Søren Kierkegaard. It is particularly his pseudonymous autorship which explores the project of 'becoming a self', aimed at redirecting his reader's attention from abstract theoretical inquiry to the subjective task of conscious identification with what is being theorized about. Unlike many philosophers before him, Kierkegaard does not attempt to offer the readers absolute, universal and objective truths, but he tries to turn each reader to *his own life.*

Ethics, though not end in itself, emerges as a necessary connecting link between non-moral existence and deeper, subjective truth. The reason to follow ethics is present insofar as the agent is motivated to reach the deeper truth. It is intensely subjective, in the sense that it serves an agent's own concern, but it can be said to have objective grounding at the same time.

The first section is dedicated to the distinction of the objective and subjective. Following sections elaborate some motivational issues and suggest a solution to them using Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works and some modern conceptual tools.

1.1. On the Objective and the Subjective

As implied, there is an on-going discussion in moral philosophy concerning "moral facts", principles, reasons, values, or properties (for the sake of brevity I will only use one of those entities). The two conventional views at hand attribute to moral facts either an *objective status*, or *subjective*. Either moral facts are objective in the mind-independent sense; or they are a mere construct and all our moral judgments express nothing but subjective preferences, attitudes and emotions, though they are seemingly susceptible of being true or false.[1] Accordingly, our moral reasons either have an objective grounding (there objectively exists a reason not to kill), or subjective (I have a reason not to kill).

The origin of the distinction can be traced back to the Enlightenment. Until then, traditional theistic understanding of morality secured the objectivity of moral demands by rooting them firmly in the will of God. This view (*voluntarism*) was inspired by the notion of God who is almighty and who, by willing, makes the ethical commands exist. This approach, however, was abandoned during the Enlightenment project[2], and philosophers since then have been faced with a new daring quest: finding a new (secular) foundation for ethics. The Enlightenment and its emergent moral structures (emotivism, naturalism, contractualism, etc.) generated diverse explanations of our moral practice, the origins of the *good* and its status (both subjectivist and objectivist). A deep worry one might feel in relation to these efforts is the actual degree of dependence of all our ethical concepts on mental activity or human mind as such. Here are some questions we need to ask. Is 'ethics' the product of our society, similar to dining etiquette, or does it have a deeper ground?

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[1] The answer to this question has split the world of moral philosophers into realists and anti-realists, with numerous sub-categories and their cognitivist and non-cognitivist alternations. But I will not run deeper into this issue here.

[2] The ethical theory in the Enlightenment abandoned the hitherto widespread and endorsed position that the highest good of humanity is defined in religious terms and always in reference to divine will (see for example William of Ockham). After the abandonment of this traditional framework, questions arise concerning the understanding human good and the ground of moral duties within purely secular, naturalistic context. Some prominent views from this period include Thomas Hobbes, Samuel Clarke, Rousseau, Shaftesbury, David Hume, and Kant. For more detailed exposition of these views, see Stanford Encylopedia of Philosophy (entry "Enlightenment" section 2.2. and related entries)

See also: MACINTYRE, Alasdair C. *After virtue: a study in moral theory*. 3rd ed. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007, xix, 286 p. ISBN 02-680-3504-0. (chapter 6: Some Consequences of the Failure of the Enlightenment Project, pp. 62-78)

By violating ethical standards, do we jeopardize our personal integrity, break a mere social convention, or violate the objective order of things?

The way in which philosophers answer these questions splits the field of enquiry in two major approaches: on the one hand, an 'objective' morality posits the ground of moral demands *outside* an individual and his will, while a 'subjective' moral system seeks to link the moral ground with individual's will, attitudes or feelings.[3]

Within the latest history of moral thought, the objectivist and subjectivist views on morality have recurrently been described through certain distinctive features. Objective and subjective are understood as expressing a metaphysical status. In general, the objectivist views contend that reality exists independently of being perceived, of consciousness, custom or opinion. In science, the world is an objective realm of natural facts which are capable of being supported by scientific evidence, and metaphysically objective data would decide the truth-value of statements about it. In ethics, we are to understand that moral values, reasons, properties, truths (more generally, 'moral entities') are not created by either an individual or a group, they are simply 'there' for us to discover. Moral objectivism can involve the strong metaphysical claim (robust moral realism)[4], but there are 'milder' forms of objectivism which do not rely on it. 'Milder' objectivists propose a certain ethical system can be universally valid and 'objective', without making any factual assertions (minimal realism). On this view, we can arrive at non-arbitrary standards of correctness, some right and wrong which is universally binding at all times; certain objective standards (duties, principles, rules, rights), accessible to all human agents, and these standards should be the main considerations in our moral decision-making. The question

[3] Of course, the criterion of mind-independence is not the only one that we can use for the delineation. The 'objective' can also be conceived as something depending, in one way or another, on our mental activity, yet still sufficiently non-arbitrary and necessary to merit the objective status. It is agreed, for example, that the principles of arithmetic apply outside human mind and cannot be otherwise. For as long as there are human minds to think numbers, they discover the rules are 'there' and cannot be changed at will. Compared to the laws governing the play of chess, for example, it is evident that the invented rules could have been thoroughly different. A view that these rules represent the only ways in which the chess pieces can move and capture the way they look in some kind of man-independent reality, would be preposterous.

[4] The substantial claim that there is a mind-independent realm of normative entities (moral facts, properties,...) similar to Plato's world of ideas, which makes moral propositions true or false (i.e. G. E. Moore). The truth-makers of moral propositions do not have to be non-natural, but also natural: they can be some objective features of the world (naturalism). In either case, moral propositions are either true or false in virtue of objective moral entities independently of our subjective or cultural viewpoints.

whether moral entities *actually* do exist independently of our perception or what is *actually* their nature, is not relevant here.[5]

Immanuel Kant is undeniably one of the most prominent thinkers of the objectivist tradition. Like Thomas Scanlon, he is an objectivist without being a realist. His idea that "practical reason" makes objective demands on us, and that moral action is defined by adherence to the moral law which is it our duty as rational beings to obey, inspired a wide range of 'Kantian' outlooks. Bernard Williams[6] conveniently defined some of their features:

> 1. 'Moral point of view is specially characterized by its impartiality and its indifference to any particular relations to particular persons.' In other words, moral point of view requires strict abstraction from all that is exclusively ours.
>
> 2. Further, motivation of a moral agent will necessarily "involve rational application of impartial principle," rather than personal (subjectively-relevant) considerations.
>
> 3. Finally, Kantian laws abstract from the identity of persons, from their separateness and their concreteness and reason alone can determine what ought to be done, irrespective of our specific identity, experience, knowledge or opinion.

On the other hand, the subjectivist views on ethics take individual character, a unique identity, to be the very basis of any kind of "ethical life". Any such subject-relative (culture-relative) ethics cannot defensibly proclaim its demands universally right and valid.

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[5] Therefore, moral objectivism need not be coupled with moral realism. It is possible to be objectivist about ethics without being an ethical realist. See SCANLON, Thomas. *What we owe to each*. 4th print. Cambridge: The Pelknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000, 420 s. ISBN 06-740-0423-X. (pp. 57-64)

[6] WILLIAMS, Bernard. *Persons, character and morality* in *Moral luck: philosophical papers* [online]. Repr. Cambridge [u.a.]: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993, Persons, character and morality [cit. 2013-05-05]. ISBN 0521286913. (pp. 2-3)

Cf.

WILLIAMS, Bernard. *Ethics and the limits of philosophy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985, ix, 230 s. ISBN 06-742-6857-1. (chapter *Morality, the Peculiar Institution*).

Bernard Williams, an advocate of subjectivism, argues that an individual's set of desires, concerns, or simply "projects" help to constitute a character and give a man reasons for living at all.[7] The unique set of individual concerns give content to our 'oughts', not the concerns of 'just someone' or 'humanity' in general. As in the case of the objective views, the term 'subjective' does not signify metaphysical inferiority, it does not refer to a mere semblance, the Platonic *doxa,* about how things are *in fact*. The belief that I have a reason to φ can be justified, or unjustified (I have no rational basis for having this subjective reason), but the fact that my reasons can be unjustified does not allow the reduction of *all* subjective reasons into irrational and erroneous beliefs. Neither does it have to lead to subjective preference ethics, where any statement about values or duties is "private", relative to the individual, arbitrary and not liable to falsification. 'Subjective' refers to that which *concerns*, respects and highlights the individual, and those reasons, values etc. to which the individual has some kind of epistemic access (not necessarily available for other people). "Kantian" outlooks are dismissed on the ground that they lead to rigid ethics and dissolution of the self, because they reject all which concerns the individual and no one else.

When I say 'subjective' I mean by it all which contains an indelible reference to a concrete person, to use Nagel's terminology, an "agent-variable". It is "private" in the sense that nobody else has access to it: all my subjective reasons relate to, or express, exclusively my point of view, my personal perspective, attitude or belief. For example, "a reason to study theology" is one of many conceivable subjective reasons. It cannot be objective, because not everyone has a reason to study theology, as many people do not even have access to, or ambition for, academic education at all (and those who have it are interested in a vast range of disciplines). The reason is contingent on my particular circumstances and can be essentially private, not based on any shared value.[8]

By 'objective' I refer to the principles, reasons and values that we arrive at independently of individual perspectives and commitments and that are based on the

[7] Williams, PCM, II, p. 5.

[8] On some kinds of agent-relative reasons, see, for example, NAGEL, Thomas. *The View from Nowhere*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989. (p.165). Nagel mentions reasons which "seem to be independent of impersonal values". These are reasons of autonomy (desires, personal projects), deontology (constraints), and reasons of obligation (personal ties).

principles of impartiality, agent-neutrality, reasonableness, universalizability or interpersonality. For example, the rule "not to murder other people for pleasure" is considered objective not necessarily because it can track its origin in purportedly "objective" facts about human nature or needs or because an act of murder has the property of objective badness (this would commit us robust moral realism), but because there is an objective (universally comprehensible and acceptable) reason for anyone not to murder other people for personal enjoyment.[9] The rule "not to murder other people for pleasure" can be subjective and objective at the same time, if I take it to be *my* reason as well as *anyone else's*.

As far as the status of moral facts is concerned, I am not going to make any substantive claim in favour of one of the contending views. My concern lies predominantly in moral epistemology than in metaphysics. I am going to talk about morality on both subjective and objective levels, without clarifying whether one of the two might be metaphysically inferior to the other and without defending the legitimacy of the distinction. My question is how, if at all, reasons to act morally (call them "moral reasons") acquire their normative standing *for an individual.* Is it a rational, practical or other necessity to accept ethics as one's normative framework?

1.2. Kierkegaard's meaning of subjective and objective

Let us see now how Kierkegaard uses the terms 'subjective' and 'objective'. He attacks the kind of abstraction, detachment and objective certainty that Kantian thinkers put forward as a way to moral identity and truth. In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* (by Johannes Climacus), Kierkegaard openly mocks the quest after "objective truth" which demands the thinker "to become disinterested in order to obtain something to know" about himself. Climacus asserts that "the requirement of the ethical is to be infinitely interested in existing" (CUP 316), suggesting to his readers that essential truth cannot be grasped by impersonal reason, but only through personal passion. The personal problem of life, the truth about what it means to be human (CUP 303), is to be approached not through

[9] Whether these universal (objective) rules "represent" a real moral world, a set of useful human constructions, or a set of biologically / sociologically / culturally or otherwise determined preferences, is a question that I deliberately put aside.

systematic thought, but through "an objective uncertainty held fast in an appropriation-process of the most passionate inwardness" (*CUP,* 182).

Climacus highlights that subjectivity, wherein the truth lies, consists in a commitment. That is not to say that subjectivity is an absolute absence of thought, but rather, as Merold Westphal notes, it is the consciously created link between the thought and individual existence.[10] It is the truth "taken up into my life"[11], the assimilated truth which the individual himself accepts and lives by. Ethical standards will have no significance at all unless the individual chooses to live by them, only then he finds truth in them. The objective quest for the absolute and for the universal (instantiated by Hegelian philosophy) has incited Kierkegaard's rebellion against objectivity, and led him to defend the view that nothing 'objectively matters' unless we make a subjective, individual commitment to it. His famous dictum "subjectivity is the truth"[12] resounds throughout his pseudonymous works. Especially in the matters of ethics, the only truth which is subjectively 'appropriated' is truth that makes a difference. "The only truth which edifies is truth for you" (*E/O 2*, 356). Truth is always a truth for a concrete "I". Instead reaching out for the absolute and universal truth, contemplated from the maximum possible 'objective distance', one should be infinitely concerned for one's own existence. This also means that a moral commitment does not result from viewing oneself *sub specie aeternitatis,* i.e. from constructing oneself as impersonally as possible, but from making a personal 'contract' with ethics whereby moral reasons become *my reasons,* absolutely and without the requirement of philosophical justifications.

But Kierkegaard also maintains that there is objective truth, to which the individual commitment relates, though this truth cannot be objectively approached. If the individual commits to the objective, it is without (and therefore *not because*) having the understanding of it and insight into it. Kierkegaard invites the readers to

[10] WESTPHAL, Merold. Becoming a self: a reading of Kierkergaard's Concluding unscientific postscript. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1996, xiii, 261 s. Purdue University Series in the History of Philosophy. ISBN 15-575-3090-4. (p. 134).

[11] Westphal (1996, p. 135)

[12] KIERKEGAARD, Søren Aabye. *Concluding unscientific postscript to Philosophical fragments*. Editor Howard Vincent Hong, Edna Hatlestad Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992, xix, 345 s. Kierkegaard's writings. ISBN 06-910-2081-7. (p. 187)

make a leap from objectivity to subjectivity, a “leap of faith” in which we commit to something that cannot be objectively grasped.[13] This means “becoming subjective” (which is significantly related to becoming moral). Ethical viewpoint, similarly, is not acquired through detached contemplation of the universal and grasping the objective demands. The individual strikes a personal relationship with the idea because he is driven to it by unreflected guilt and despair, the “thorn in the flesh” that cannot be removed by any other means. Thus he does not choose the ethical because he thinks of himself as “one among others”, and has sufficient rational justification for its demands, but because he are non-cognitively motivated to do so. Morality comes into force (becomes normative) through the act of subjective appropriation, made by choice. This will be the topic of the following chapters.

1.3. Kierkegaard and the Concept of Choice

The choice[14] is the central theme of Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous work *Either/Or* (1943), and I consider this concept to be a “bridge” between the objective sphere and the subjective. In *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard posits through his pseudonyms two compelling ways of life, the aesthetic and the ethical, between which every person must choose. First volume by author “A” (“Either”) contains aesthetic treatises, ending with *The Seducer’s Diary* by seducer Johannes. Second volume (“Or”) contains letters written by the defender of the ethical, Judge William, to the aesthete. I will later investigate in more detail the two options, the ‘either’ and the ‘or’.

Many contemporary authors have fruitfully and in length discussed the questions concerning the objective and subjective dimension of ethics and I will, regrettably, remain in dept to most of them. However, I am going to repeatedly refer to the work of Christine Korsgaard, not only because I consider her account very illuminating and useful for interpretation of Kierkegaard, but also because she represents a line of thought (attempting to justify ethics from rationality) in contrast to

[13] Necessarily, though, truth assimilated into individual life is a paradox. Because the truth is eternal, its relation to a temporal existence makes it paradoxical. That is why the truth cannot be grasped by reason, because truth appears as a paradox to all human reasoning. The rational ways of bring this truth forth must necessarily fail, and the only appropriate relation of the individual to the truth is not cognitive but existential. This also makes the relationship to the truth an “objective uncertainty” and requires faith in the absurd and risk (while the products of reason are objectively certain and reliable). Ultimately, the truth to which Kierkegaard sought to relate his readers it the Christian truth: eternal God incarnated into temporality.

[14] The chapter called *Equilibrium Between the Aesthetical and the Ethical in the Composition of Personality* is dedicated to constitution of personality (the self) through the absolute choice

which I will be able to highlight the uniqueness of Kierkegaard's approach. Korsgaard puts emphasis on the human ability to stand back from our desires and rationally assess them. On reflection, it becomes clear to an agent what desires need to be given preference on pain of being inconsistent and irrational. The reason to choose ethics as normative arises as a rational necessity, but for Kierkegaard, the choice is an exercise of will, an inner movement motivated by a concern for one's existence and by the pressing urgency of guilt. According to Korsgaard, an adequate amount of reflection would always bring the conclusion that one's identity entails a moral requirement, and all immoral characters, in consequence, fall short of *rationality*.[15] In other words, becoming an ethical self is a matter of fully employing one's reflective capacity. This way allows to reflectively arrive at 'the objective' standards and integrate them into one's own motivational structure. An immoral character would imply rationally inconsistency. One thing I would like to achieve in this work is to show that Kierkegaard provides a wholly different path to morality. An individual, insofar as he is an individual, must live in the ethical framework, and it is not possible that the individual can live outside ethics, on pain of *not being individual* at all.

On the matter of *how* the individual arrives at ethical character, Korsgaard and Kierkegaard differ greatly. In Korsgaard, acquiring a moral identity is conditioned by reflection on the nature of one's agency, or deliberation. Ultimately, Korsgaard (1996, p. 130) asserts that all particular identities that are incompatible with our moral identity must be abandoned.[16] Kierkegaard, on the other hand, highlights the importance of choice in the process. The choice is not motivated by the desire to be rational, or recognition of its necessity, but the effort to be someone, to be oneself

[15] Below, I offer a short summary of her argument from KORSGAARD, Christine M. *The sources of normativity*. Editor Onora O'Neill. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996, xv, 273 p.:

I] we (human agents) have an ability to resist our immediate impulses. (3.2.1., p. 93).

II] We need reasons to be able to choose and to act. (3.2.3.. p. 97).

III] We need to have guiding principles or laws. (3.3.3., p. 103-104)

IV] Principles arise from our practical identity. (3.4.7., p. 120)

V] We need to have a practical identity. (3.4.7., p. 121)

VI] All my practical identities are embedded in my identity as a human being (my human identity), which I also must value. (3.4.6.)

VII] In valuing my humanity, I must also value humanity of others.

[16] Korsgaard (1996, p. 130) says that "identities which are fundamentally inconsistent with the value of humanity must be given up", because those identities are "in conflict with more fundamental parts of our identity." (1996, p. 102)

(even though this project does not culminate in entrance into the ethical). A person can live, deliberate in excess, and act, even before he enters the ethical. But it seems that, according to Kierkegaard, such a person *does not have* an identity *at all* (not that he has a wrong one). This is the premise for which I will attempt to find some grounding.

One difficulty with this account becomes immediately apparent. On the assumption that one does not have a reason-providing identity before the choice of the ethical identity, how can one make a (rational) choice for the ethical identity in the first place? How can he choose or have a reason to choose (if one does not have an identity as a source of reasons)?

I am convinced that the comparison of Kierkegaard and the mentioned (and some yet unmentioned) approaches can be very fruitful for the living discussion on how an individual is related to objective thought, and morality. To make his contribution possible, I am going to use contemporary conceptual frameworks to expose his view. At the same time, I will strive to preserve his thoughts as undistorted as the task allows.

I am convinced that Kierkegaard provides an alternative to both the subjective and the objective approach. His position cleverly combines elements of each: the ethical life includes both the universal, abstract level and first-personal, concrete perspective. The way in which he tries to bridge the gap is, however, very different from some of the modern attempts. In very broad strokes, ethical demands (whatever their metaphysical status) must be subjectively adopted as our personal normative framework not because we (or the others) are rational beings, not because we are human beings or because we have to act. The reason for the choice lies rather in the fact that we need to avoid despair, an unavoidable and initial state of every human being, whether they are aware of this condition or not. The problem of despair concerns every human individual more directly, painfully and eminently than any general consideration in favour of ethics, and it also has a greater motivational impact. Despair is inherent to all non-ethical modes of existence and announces itself through undesirable emotional states. Kierkegaard deals with the concept of despair and its different forms (arising from varying levels of self-consciousness) in *Sickness unto Death* (1849), quite extensively, and he pronounces a following verdict over any person living the immediate (that is, aesthetic) life:

> ... every such existence, whatever it achieves, be it most amazing, whatever it explains, be it the whole existence, however intensely it enjoys life aesthetically—every such existence is nevertheless despair.[17]

Further, it is very important to emphasize that despair is a manifestation of sin.[18] It follows that any non-ethical existence is a state of sin and despair, and since despair is basically resisting being a self[19], any non-ethical (aesthetic) person is not a true self. Despair is an objective state of any human being (at least initially) and is wholly independent of our awareness of it. Kierkegaard makes despair (or rather, the possibility of escaping despair) the reason for embracing ethics on a personal level. Kierkegaard's pseudonyms attempt nothing more and nothing less than to bring individuals to awareness of their sinfulness and to abandonment of aesthetic mode of life altogether. I will proceed to investigate the reasons for this choice.

Kierkegaard introduces the concept of choice, within which ethics becomes normative because the agent *chooses* it to be so, not because he rationally concludes he must. But if the reason cannot be reached in a rational way, the question arises *why* everyone should choose ethics, and whether anything *chosen* in such a way can be ascribed objective importance or universal authority.

The work which I am going to use as a main source of Kierkegaard's claims is *Either/Or* (1843), a pseudonymous work compiled by Victor Eremita (Latin for 'the victorious hermit'). The book has a seemingly complicated authorship, indicative of Kierkegaard's peculiar sense for irony and humour. The pseudonym Eremita claims to have found the papers, to have compiled them in two volumes and named their authors respectively "A" and "B" (we know the latter to be Judge William). Confusing as it might seem, the work is an illuminating instance of Kierkegaard's more general task to shift the attention from the 'objective' to the 'subjective'.

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[17] KIERKEGAARD, Søren Aabye. *The sickness unto death*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946. (p. 46)

[18] In *SUD*, Part Two: A: *Despair Is Sin,* Kierkegaard asserts that sin and despair are identical.

[19] SUD, p. 2: "The self does not actually 'exist', but is only that which it is to become. In so far as the self does not become itself, it is not its own self, and not to be one's own self is despair".

I will now attempt to show in more detail *how* reasons to act morally (call them "moral reasons") acquire their normative standing for an individual: what gives us reason to treat moral reasons as *our* reasons (to accept a moral identity), even if this reason is not provided by our prior identities, or if it cannot be found in reflection. I am going to use Kierkegaard's thoughts, but view them through the contemporary conceptual frameworks. After explaining what I mean by the terms subjective and objective, I will present Kierkegaard's view and draw the comparisons which I think conducive to showing his potential contribution.

2. The Normative Question, Kierkegaard and the "Ultimate Choice"

I have already implied that Kierkegaard's task involves a theme which strikingly similar to a major project in moral philosophy: seeking vindication of moral demands. The question "What grounds the authority of morality for a concrete individual?" has become known through Korsgaard's works as "the normative question".[20] The problem is believed to have originated with the project of Enlightenment, the project to provide a rational vindication of morality independent of God's will. This project is believed by many (including Korsgaard, MacIntyre, and Williams) to have failed. The struggle for a plausible grounding tirelessly continues.

Thomas Nagel, for example, famously links practical principles to the agent's own conception of himself as merely one person among others.[21] Adherence to moral principles is a practical expression of the conception of "I" that becomes "someone", a "specimen of a more general scheme, in which the characters can be exchanged". (Nagel 1970, p. 83) The recognition of the possibility to put ourselves in the other's place has a practical consequence. If I were in the place of the other, I would not prefer certain behaviour. "My" desires and interests, which I perceive vividly, can with some imaginative effort become "someone's" desires and interests, and the attitude towards my own case becomes an objective concern for the needs and desires of persons in general (Nagel 1970, p. 84). At the end, conformity to moral

[20] KORSGAARD, Christine M. *The sources of normativity*. Editor Onora O'Neill. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996, xv, 273 s. ISBN 05-215-5059-9.

[21] BENSON, John a Thomas NAGEL. *The Possibility of Altruism*. ISBN http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2218611. (IV. Necessity and interpretation)

principles is a logical implication of the fact that I attach objective value to certain circumstances ("pain is bad") by accepting goals and reasons myself. The principle underlying altruism is rather objective than subjective (Nagel 1970, p. 88). At any rate, rational behaviour results in moral behaviour.

Christine Korsgaard chooses a very similar strategy. Adoption of moral reasons is a requirement of rational agency. The fact I am a human being who acts for reasons and values certain things ultimately obliges me to respect the reasons of others (our first-person agency implies a moral requirement). In other words, my own identity, determining the things I value, respect, and live for; is the source of normativity for moral reasons, i.e. reasons of other people to which they have the same right as we have to ours.

The shared feature of these accounts is that moral standards are not imposed by an external authority, but are somehow constitutive of who we essentially are. In this respect they follow in Kant's footsteps, and that is why Kierkegaard's non-Kantian focus can well serve as their amender. These approaches also need to face up to (perhaps the major) challenge: the problem of moral skeptic. Moral sceptic is a person who nevertheless questions the validity of these purportedly objective demands, who remains unconvinced by the above argumentation. Even here, I believe Kierkegaard offers a plausible way out, but more on that later.

Alasdair MacIntyre believes that Kierkegaard is another person to accept the challenge which the Enlightenment has left, the challenge to find ground for morality. He suspects that Kierkegaard brought in the notion of *ultimate choice* to do the work that Kant's practical reason could not do,[22] and to replace practical reason by *a choice* in its role to ground the authority of moral demands for the individual. Ethics is normative because we choose it to be so, not because we rationally conclude we must. Now, the question is why everyone should choose the ethical (including the skeptic), and why anything which is *chosen* can be ascribed any objective authority. I will proceed by unfolding Kierkegaard's conception of the choice.

I have mentioned that *Either/Or* posits two qualitatively different ways of life, the aesthetic (Volume A) and the ethical (Volume B). These two options will not be explored.

[22] MACINTYRE, Alasdair C. *After virtue: a study in moral theory*. 3rd ed. London: Duckworth, 2007, xvii, 286 p. ISBN 07-156-3640-5. p. 47

2.1. Aesthetic viewpoint

An “aesthete” is introduced as someone who is fully immersed in the pursuit of pleasure. He strives for maximization of enjoyment, driven by the fear of getting stuck in the rut of boredom.[23] He puts all his skill and ingenuity into inventing ways to find new and exciting experience, to plunge himself into the sea of joy.

There is also a difficulty with this kind of life. No matter how hard the aesthete tries to find joy, it cannot sustain himself and tragically evades him. Because he lacks adherence to principles and convention, his motives for actions are contradictory, unorganised and mutually disparate. The aesthete is himself confused about his own situation, left with no unifying link between his actions, thoughts or choices. In the aesthete own words: he often has „so many and most often such mutually contradictory reasons” that it becomes impossible for him to state reasons. It also seems to him that “with cause and effect the relation does not hold together properly” (*Either/Or*, A 25)[24] The aesthete forgets the reasons that moved him to this or that, “with regard not only to trivialities but also to the most crucial steps”. (A 32)

Whatever distractions he finds, he only lives “for the moment”, and when the moment passes, the aesthete is left with the feelings of emptiness, restlessness, melancholy and sorrow. Ethics seems to him unattractive, hard a rigorous (B 149) because in his limited view he cannot see ethics as anything else than restriction of freedom and joy. He is convinced that morally-loaded contracts (marriage or friendship) remove the excitement and beauty from life.

2.2. Ethical viewpoint

A defender of the ethical viewpoint, Judge William[25] produces a series of letters in his response to the aesthete (second volume) that offer a deeply insightful

[23] “The aesthetic perspective transforms quotidian dullness into a richly poetic world by whatever means it can. Sometimes the reflective aesthete will inject interest into a book by reading only the last third, or into a conversation by provoking a bore into an apoplectic fit so that he can see a bead of sweat form between the bore's eyes and run down his nose. That is, the aesthete uses artifice, arbitrariness, irony, and wilful imagination to recreate the world in his own image. The prime motivation for the aesthete is the transformation of the boring into the interesting.” (SEP)

[24] KIERKEGAARD, Søren Aabye. *Either/or*. Editor Howard Vincent Hong, Edna Hatlestad Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987, 528 s. Kierkegaard's writings. ISBN 06-910-2042-6.

[25] I will refer to the defender of the ethical viewpoint. The author of the second volume as “the Judge”, “William” or simply “the ethicist”.

analysis of the aesthetic stage. William's diagnosis of the aesthetic condition ascribes the aesthete's despair to the limits of the aesthetic life. He reveals the sorrow and pain accompanying aesthete's life to be nothing else than ethical guilt, resulting from preoccupation with transient pleasure. The guilt is, however, not reflected subjectively because the aesthete, who does not understand the ethical viewpoint, cannot interpret his experience in distinctively ethical terms. And yet, William understands that his life of arbitrariness (rejection of the ethical) leads to nothing but perplexity and sorrow. The aesthete can keep running away from all bonds of convention and ethics, but he cannot run away from himself, from his troubled conscience, he "soon perceives that he is a circle from which he cannot find an exit". (A, 308) He unavoidably finds himself in the state of anxiety and restlessness (which is the manifestation of ethical conscience). The sorrow can "conceal itself, so it can elude our attention for a long time, but must disclose itself at last". (A 175) The aesthete is troubled by oppressed conscience, which will at last set the soul in motion, and the aesthete will recognize his predicament of disrupted integrity and will be brought on the verge of the choice:

> Where shall I find peace and rest? Thoughts rise up in my soul; the one rises against the other; the one confuses the other. (A 213)

That is why, according to the Judge, the choice concerning one's inner continuity is unavoidable. The ethical can be unreflected, ignored and denied, yet it finds entrance into one's life through the powerful mechanisms of conscience and guilt (which, aesthetically, take the form of sorrow, melancholy and restlessness).

> There is a restlessness in you over which consciousness nevertheless hovers, bright and clear (B 11)

The ethical is defined by conscience, guilt, responsibility, and a relation to evil and good, which is made *explicit*. By being ethical, I do not choose good but I choose "to make good and evil the primary categories by which I define my existence".[26] It is a lasting commitment. By making a choice for good and evil, one makes an absolute

[26] Westphal (1996, pp. 23-24)

choice, a choice of the self in its eternal validity. (B 166-69, 178, 188-90, 214-19, 223-24).

2.3. The choice

The troubled individual, pushed forward not by abstract reflection, but the feelings of guilt, must face the ultimate choice, which William describes as 'absolute', an unavoidable "either / or" where *tertium non datur.* The judge knows that bringing the aesthete on the verge of the choice where he must commit to one of the two options already wins the battle, because making a conscious choice is itself a defining aspect of the ethical life.

2.3.1. What does the aesthete gain by the choice?

It seems that everything turns on this important crossroads: "either a person has to live esthetically or he has to live ethically" (B 168) . The choice between the two seems to have great existential import, because *choosing* creates the link between personality and some kind of eternal power which, in William's words, "pervades all existence" and consolidates personality (B 167). Choosing means defining oneself by one category or another, it means binding oneself with a lasting principle or idea which outlives every momentary sensuous satisfaction and elevates the personality in a higher unity. In a way, *choosing* means defining one's essence in clearer terms:

> The choice itself is crucial for the content of the personality, through the choice the personality submerges itself in that which is being chosen, and when it does not choose, it withers away in atrophy. (B 163)

William warns the aesthete against "having it all end with the disintegration of your essence into a multiplicity" (B 160). He explains that the aesthete would "become several, just as the unhappy demoniac became a legion"[27], and thus he would lose something which is "the most inward and holy in a human being, the binding power of the personality" (B 160). That seems to be the significance of the choice, and the danger of avoiding the choice. One "can win what is the main concern in life" by

[27] See Mark 5:9, Luke 8:30

having and willing the energy for something one feels is missing. By doing so, William says, “you can win yourself, gain yourself”. (B 163)

2.3.2. What exactly is separated in *either/or*?

It is important to realize that the “choice of the ethical” is a choice to choose in the first place. It does not refer to a choice *between* good and evil, but to a kind of *primordial* choice hereby the individual becomes a participant in the world defined by principles that stands beyond his aesthetic agenda.

> My either/or does not in the first instance denote the choice between good and evil; it denoted the choice whereby one chooses good *and* evil/or excludes them. Here the question is under what determinants one would contemplate the whole of existence and would himself live... It is, therefore, not so much a question of choosing between willing the good *or* the evil, as of choosing to will, but by this in turn the good and evil are posited. (B 169)

The choice of the ethical is not a choice of *the good*, but rather a choice of an identity which makes one a participant in the world defined by good and evil. An individual can *either* live a life unrelated to ethical standards (aesthetic), *or* a life in which he makes the ethical distinction directly relevant to him and his choices (ethical). Either/or is therefore the crossroads between the *life of choice*, and the *life of non-choice*. The choice is a self-determining step where one explicitly chooses himself absolutely, i.e. permanently. “If one does not choose absolutely,” the Judge adds, “one chooses only for a moment and for that reason can choose something else the next moment.” (B, 167)

The difference between the absolute choice and the non-choice lies in its eternal validity: one must choose with the consciousness that the choice he is making is going to be determining in the absolute sense. He must understand this at the moment of his choice. That is why the ethical has a relation to the eternal, and the individual comes in touch with the eternal through the choice of ethical life. Because at aesthetic choice is no choice at all, *the either-or dilemma* ultimately turns out to be a dilemma between the life of non-choice, and the life of choice (B 166).

2.3.3. Problems with the choice

This account generates a number of difficulties.

2.3.3.1. "The choice" seems to have a single option

The problem with the choice seems to be that a person cannot earnestly *choose* a life of *non-choice*, because the act of choice itself makes one a *chooser* (a person whose acts can be described by ethical categories). It seems that the crossroads, in facts, consists of a single way forward, because when the person has made a truly earnest choice (with all the inwardness of his personality) between one of the two options, then "even though a person chose the wrong thing, he nevertheless, by virtue of the energy with which he chose, will discover that he chose the wrong thing" (E/O, B p. 167). The choice is thoroughly different from a choice between two options, i.e. between, say, the professional career of a teacher and of a journalist. In the choice the person's identity undergoes an irreversible transformation and acquires an aspect of duration, an element of stability around which everything else revolves. Perhaps that is why William ascribes to the ethical a *character indelebilis.* Although the ethical "modestly places itself on the same level as the esthetic" (B 168), it is the very qualification that makes a choice *a choice.* The aesthetic is, in fact, life of lostness and sheer arbitrariness – lacking any categories thereby a personality defines itself. But "as soon as a person can be brought to stand at the crossroads in such a way that there is no way out for him except to choose, he will choose the right thing" (B 168) where by the "right thing" he means the life of choice, the ethical.

Why does he choose the ethical? Because person who lives aesthetically has made no choice at all (living aesthetically means living without choosing in deeper sense). Therefore, if one is brought before an either/or, when he perceives this choice as a choice between the ethical (life of choice) and the aesthetic (life of non-choice), he cannot coherently make a deeper choice for the non-choice. That would be a contradiction. And, if one chooses the ethical, but after it he nevertheless chooses the aesthetic, he will not abolish the eternal validity of the choice he made – and he will recognize he is sinning against what he has chosen (B 168). Once one has chosen the ethical, ethical qualifications apply to him no matter what he does. This seems to be the inner logic of the argument.

2.3.3.2. People who never choose

William assumes that the aesthete will (perhaps after reading his letters) come to realization that he needs to make the choice. But suppose that the aesthete does not get to the brink of the choice? Being used and reconciled to the recurrent periods of sorrow, and having given up a hope for improvement, what reason should move him to radically altering his life view?

As we have said, an aesthete not a person who *has chosen* the aesthetic, but a person who has not yet chosen at all. His life contains a threat that one will "win the whole world but lose oneself" (B 168) and rules out good and evil (B 169) because it is *indifferent* to the distinction altogether. Judge Williams says that such people live, as it were, "away from themselves and vanish like shadows". They strike no relationship to the eternal through the ethical choice. They never rejected the ethical because it never became fully manifest to them. This threat is addressed not only to seducers but also abstract philosophers who think about everybody but remain unconvinced by what present to others. (B 169) William clearly believes that the aesthetic kind of life is not sustainable, because a certain moment comes when "immediacy is ripe", when the spirit requires a higher form and "wants to lay hold of itself as spirit". The person living in the immediate mode is bound up with all the earthly life, which is essentially dispersion. The spirit "wants to gather itself together out of this dispersion, so to speak, and to transfigure itself in itself; the personality wants to become conscious of its eternal validity" (B 189). If this movement does not occur, the Judge adds, "then depression sets in. One can try a great many things to consign it to oblivion; ... but the depression continues." (B 189)

Nero is mentioned by the Judge as an example of person who struggled to remain aesthetic but could not quench the thirst of his spirit. As Nero refused to face his anxiety, depression *(Tungsind)* set in which Nero sought to overcome by enjoyment. This depression (the aesthetic manifestation of sin) could not be canceled by momentary pleasures and Nero was driven to increasingly morbid and extravagant distractions, while his agony persisted.[28] The constituent of depression is immediacy (the inessential), while the movement of essential choice cancels it. That is also the reason why "every aesthetic life is despair" (B 193), because something in

[28] "Now he snatches at pleasure; all the ingenuity of the world must devise new pleasures for him, because only in the moment of pleasure does he find rest, and when that is over, he yawns in sluggishness. The spirit continually wants to break through, but it cannot achieve a breakthrough; it is continually being swindled, and he wants to offer it the satiation of pleasure." (B 186)

the individual requires higher expression which cannot be provided by the aesthetic enjoyment of the world. When one despairs “all the treasures and glory of the world” can scarcely be adequate to amuse him (B 188). When one knows this “then a higher form of existence is an imperative requirement” (B 192).

Even for the Judge, “a person who never chooses” (a lifelong aesthete) is a conceivable concept. A person can avoid his conscience and waste his life away in attempts to silence the inner calling of his spirit for unity. A choice of the ethical offers a remedy for the aesthetic despair, and requires only that a person takes personal stance towards good and evil, whatever it is. No wonder that the Judge is optimistic, after the intimations of horrors entailed in the aesthetic form of life, about his capacity to convince his aesthetic reader about the necessity of the choice.

2.3.3.3. The choice of “the ethical” does not yet mean the choice of “the good”

Let us allow that the Judge plausibly established the necessity (or at least the desirability) of the primordial choice: a choice for *good and evil*. This, however, only brings us at the threshold of the moral discussion I have sketched out in the opening chapters. The question is not why a person needs to acknowledge the normative categories of good and evil, but why should he prefer a good life to an evil life. Can one make the absolute choice for the evil while yielding all the existential benefits of the choice?

I have already explained why the ethical choice is an act of “higher dedication” with a direct import on the formation of personality. But, at the same time, we are told that the important aspect of the choice is not *what* one chooses, but the *how,* the “pathos with which one chooses”.[29] Does is imply that the Judge could as well have (with all earnestness) chosen an immoral principle as effective means of consolidating his personality? The Judge (once surely an aesthete like his addressee) is now a staunch defender of marriage. But could he as well be its attacker while keeping his “ethical” edge?

The Judge gives some arguments to dismiss this worry he seems to presuppose a general inclination towards good. Even in a person “finds more of evil

[29] B 167: “what is important is choosing is not so much to choose the right thing as the energy, the earnestness, and the pathos with which one chooses. In the choosing the personality declares its inner infinity and in turn the personality is thereby consolidated.”

in him than of good, this still does not mean that it is the evil that is to advance, but it means that it is the evil that is to recede and the good that is to advance". (B 226) Because "so much of the good" remains in every person, they sense that "to be a good person is the highest". (B 226) The Judge offers some arguments in support of his assertion that people incline towards good rather than evil: good imposes universal categories on people's lives and is therefore unattractive to many. Yet people nevertheless feel that good is the highest. I take it to mean that it is easy to conceive of what the "ethical life" consists in, as everyone is expected to follow the same ethical standard, but dwelling on our individual differences might complicate things. Perhaps that is why the Judge says that "everyone who wills it can be a good person, but to be bad always takes talent" (B 227).

2.3.3.4. Not the *what*, but the *how*

We should now turn to question what *the ethical* is. In Kierkegaard, the term has more than one meaning. First, it can denote a stage of life which needs to be suspended in favour of the religious stage (and which represents prevailing social norms, or Hegelian *Sittlichkeit*), or an aspect of the ethical life which is retained within the religious. In this second sense, "ethical" represents a higher dedication, a commitment to serious and inward decisions about one's own life. Kierkegaard is not so much interested in *what* one chooses (the *object* of the choice) as much as in the *how* one chooses (the *subject* of the choice) and the *earnestness of spirit*, the pathos with which the choice is made.[30] That certainly does not mean that the content does not matter at all: one can surely direct his passion in a wrong thing. Passion is good, but it cannot be directed at "nonsense", then the content of passion is "phantom", nothing, and such passion is "essentially madness" and frivolity that revolves around a fantasy. (A 253)

Let me summarize what we have gained after the short excursion into the Judge's account of choice. Coming back to our normative problem, the concept of

[30] "In making a choice it is not so much a question of choosing the right as of the energy, the earnestness, the pathos with which one chooses. Thereby the personality announces its inner infinity, and thereby, in turn, the personality is consolidated. Therefore, even if a man were to choose the wrong, he will nevertheless discover, precisely by reason of the energy with which he chose, that he has chosen the wrong. For the chose being made with the whole inwardness of his personality, his nature is purified." (B 171)

essential (*either-or)* choice seems to offer an answer to the "normative question": the force of the ethical standards is justified and confirmed in the individual's own self-choice. Moral reasons are motivating and justified because an individual has chosen them to be "the principles he lives by",[31] and he has chosen them to escape the disarray of aesthetic moods. The above analysis has outlined several key questions that should be explored if Judge William is to play a role in modern context. First, what criteria might play a role in the either/or choice if the ethical categories are not yet available for the individual? Second, if the either/or were not guided by any criteria, must the choice be thoroughly arbitrary? Third, is it true that the aesthetic individual cannot choose in the full sense of the word? I will deal with these questions in the following chapter.

3. MacIntyre and Davenport on the Ultimate choice

The Judge desires (for the reasons implied) to bring the aesthete on the verge of the choice. But suppose he achieves that, there is a question that needs dealing with. What are the criteria according to which he makes the choice when the ethical itself cannot be the motivation?

MacIntyre believes to have detected this incoherence in Judge William's account. He notes that, if ethical standards are not (normatively) available to the individual *prior to* the choice itself (since it is the choice that 'gives authority to moral ends'), the choice cannot possibly be motivated by moral goodness or any ethical distinction. And, in *After Virtue,* he also concludes that the choice is *reasonless* (p. 42)[32] as there is no criterion according to which the individual should give preference to one life over another. When faced with the decision between the aesthetic and the ethical, the individual's reason for choosing the ethical cannot be a desire to meet the demands of duty, or a struggle for moral perfection. In short, no morally-loaded concept can serve as a motivation for choosing the ethical because it would imply that the individual had already been within the ethical when he made his choice. Moral values simply cannot be of motivational import for a person *before* this choice (AV 40). How can this choice nevertheless be non-arbitrary, and how can the choice

[31] B 169: "a choice by which one chooses good and evil or rules them out. Here the question is under what qualifications one will view all existence and personally live." The person does not accept any qualifications that objectively apply to him, but simply chooses his qualifications to live by.

[32] MACINTYRE, Alasdair C. *After virtue: a study in moral theory*. 3rd ed. London: Duckworth, 2007, xvii, 286 p. ISBN 07-156-3640-5

ground the authority of moral reasons? (AV 43, 42) Indeed, objectivity of ethics cannot rest in an arbitrary preference.

MacIntyre suspects the choice to be irrational[33], since it must be "*arbitrary* over time, and hence irreconcilable with motivation by any rational judgment of objective value".[34] It seems clear to him that any reason there might be for choosing the ethical as one's project *cannot itself be* the motive for choosing it, but it would also mean that the choice (to regard the ethical as normative) is made for no particular reason.

> 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. (AV 42)

The incoherence is supposed to consist in the fact that the choice concerns *what will count as a reason for us*, and, at the same time, the ethical is and "unquestioning conception" to have authority over us (it should inspire respect). The accusation is that moral authority of ethics is, for Kierkegaard, based on reasonless (radical) choice. What MacIntyre asserts, in other words, is that the ultimate choice is a choice of our normative principles, which is itself motivated by no rational consideration. The authority derived from it therefore weak and groundless, as it cannot be plausibly argued to possess any significant force apart from that which

[33] A note needs to be made to MacIntyre's conception of "rationality". MacIntyre holds that there are no absolute, neutral standards through which any rational agent might determine superiority of one tradition or moral standpoint over another, rival position. (see for example *After Virtue,* Prologue, xiii) Nevertheless, he affirms that it is possible to find "a rationally and morally defensible standpoint from which to judge and to act" and in terms of which to evaluate heterogenous moral schemes (AV Preface xviii). On the one hand, today's moral practice involves an appeal to impersonal, objective standards (duty, justice, generosity) which are assumed to give reasons to act in a certain way independently of our or other people's personal wishes, but we also employ a range of conflicting values/concepts which originated in different stages of our history and which we have inherited. *Either-or* presents, in MacIntyre's view, an instance of a criterionless choice (i.e. a choice made without rational justification), which abandoned the Enlightenment efforts to find a cohesive set of criteria according to which morality could be assessed and evaluated. The aesthetic and the ethical points of view are rival, incompatible standpoints between which the agent must choose without an appeal to an objective value or reason, because choosing one or another *for a reason* would indicate that the individual had already made the choice, which he had not done. (AV chapt. 4, p. 40) This is the sense in which he understands the choice as "ultimate" (but, at the same time, irrational).

[34] Ki*erkegaard After MacIntyre: Essays on Freedom, Narrative, and Virtue*. Edited by John J. Davenport, Anthony Rudd, Alasdair C. MacIntyre, Philip L. Quinn. John J. Davenport. Open Court Publishing, 2001. Chapter 4: The Meaning of Kierkegaard's Choice between the Aesthetic and the Ethical: A Response to MacIntyre, by John. J. Davenport., p. 77

pertains to decisions made on a whim. Thus the ultimate choice is an instance of "authority excluding reason" (AV, ch. 4, p. 42), which is a peculiarly modern concept. This, Macintyre believes, inspired modern plurality of contending ethical views and left us with an array of mutually exclusive concepts.

Yet, despite the charge alleging incoherence made against Kierkegaard's account, I will argue that the Judge can refute it, and that MacIntyre's understanding of the choice is inadequate. As John Davenport sums up, MacIntyre's misinterpretation consists in the following points. First, he wrongly assumes that radical choice is "a choice to regard the moral distinction between good and evil as having authority of normative force". Davenport argues that Kierkegaard (The Judge) introduces the choice for a thoroughly different reason, completely independent of the Enlightenment efforts. He is not trying to find a substitute for Kant's practical rationality in order to posit a more plausible ground for moral obligation (which would, in this case, be thoroughly arbitrary). The aesthete and the ethical chooser both act deliberately (non-arbitrarily) and quite intelligibly: they both act on purposes, intentions, motives, etc. (Davenport 83). I am convinced that there is enough evidence in the Judge's papers to prove that the aesthete does not act thoroughly arbitrarily[35] in the sense that he has not yet chosen his normative ground, and that he is different from the ethical chooser not in the extent of rationality involved in his motives and reasons, but in lacking a *volitional commitment*, or the identification with the motives upon which he acts. A helpful analogy with Frankfurt's higher-order volitional account of motivation, which Davenport applies to Judge's account, will help to clarify the volitional dimension of the *the radical choice* and its significance as (above else) an act of *identification* with the inward principles that guide one's actions, not as an act of vindicating or establishing the authority of moral demands.

In his paper *Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person* (1971) Frankfurt states that the differentiating feature of persons is the ability to have mental attitudes towards their mental attitudes. A person (unlike an animal) can not only *want a thing*, but also, simply said, *want to want the thing he wants* (a person can endorse his

[35] See for example the Seducer's own reflection in E/O A p. 437 that clearly indicates the Seducer struggles towards *something* which gives sense to his endeavours: "In my relation to Cordelia, have I been continually faithful to my pact? That is, my pact with the esthetic, for it is that which makes me strong – that I continually have the idea on my side (...) the fact that the idea is present in motion, that I am acting in its service, that I dedicate myself to its service – this gives me rigorousness toward myself".

wanting, so to speak). His hierarchical account differentiates between first-order volitions (desires determining our actions) and second-order volitions, i.e. volitions about our volitions (more complex volitional attitude towards what kind of desires we want to act on). Where a first-order desire is to smoke a cigarette, a second-order desire would be, for instance, *not to desire to smoke.* The agent desires to stop wanting cigarettes, even though his desire is to smoke at the moment (that is a negative evaluation of his actual desire which is indicative of a deeper volitional identity). The first-order desires which result in action are *effective* (operative) desires (these are strong enough to motivate for action) and they constitute our will. The second-order desires represent the person we want to be and the desires which we want to move us to action (and which are sometimes quite independent of our actual first-order desires). The second-order desires are, according to Frankfurt, essential for being a person.

Now, if we apply the volitional account to the either/or dilemma, we might see whether it plays the role of the transition from a wanton to a person. The ethical choice can surely be described as an instance of second-order volition. The ethical chooser does not merely choose moral standards to have normative authority for him subjectively (as MacIntyre thinks), he chooses to "engage in the kind of volitional identification that ethical principles of moral character can guide" (Davenport 85). That is, he makes preferences for a certain way of life over another and identifies with them. The Judge affirms this thesis: "Here the question is under what qualifications one will view all existence and personally live." (B 169) The word 'qualifications' appears to be essential at this point: through the choice the individual qualifies to be a (certain kind of) person. At this point, the agent ceases to be indifferent to his volitions and seeks to define himself in certain manner, he is willing to change his way of life and view his existence through a new set of criteria. A person desires to think and to live ethically, approves of his volition *and begins to view ethical principles as essentially his own.*

Davenport sees the choice as an intrapersonal volitional relation: the key difference between the aesthete and ethical chooser is a higher-order identification which is expressive of individual's effort to relate certain principles to one's actions and to be the type of person who views ethics as his personal normative framework.

I consider the application of Frankfurt's higher-order volitional framework to be highly convenient at this point. The ethical chooser "immerses in the thing chosen"[36] (whatever "the chosen" is in terms of the ethical is) with the aim to form a stable character, and define his task as good or evil. An aesthete, on the other hand, lacks inner integrity and in that he resembles a "wanton", controlled by disorderly alteration of his first-order impulses to act (Davenport, p. 87). The aesthete "acts on whatever motive happens to gain the upper hand" without identifying with his volitions. And because it is the ability to alienate or to identify with one's first-order states of will which makes one morally responsible, the aesthete would not even be responsible (unless he identifies and endorses his first-order desires he acts on).[37] This is why the Judge says that an "aesthetical man is immediately what he is" (B 182) where the "immediate" means roughly the same as determined by first-order preferences and dispositions in Frankfurt's sense (Davenport, p. 85). Davenport suggests that the primordial choice marks transition from a "wanton" to actual personhood, and therefore, that the aesthete does not meet the Frankfurtian criteria of a person. That is because he simply does not care about which first-order desires will become effective, he does not devote himself to values which are worth caring about.

The aesthete might seem to be a promising candidate for the "wanton addict" category: he cannot help following his desires to conquer and seduce women, but he does not really have a second-order desire not to desire them (at least in the way he does). He is indifferent to his first-order will and although he feels trapped by it he forms no resolutions about changing his way of life. His deliberation is restricted to reasoning about how to do what he wants to do, i.e. how to achieve the objects of his desires, without rejecting the desires as they stand.

However, it might be premature to let ourselves be tempted into identifying the aesthete with a Frankfurtian wanton. For although the aesthete might live on first-order desires without making a concrete choice, he is not addicted to the objects of

[36] "The choice itself is decisive for the content of personality, through the choice the personality immerses itself in the thing chosen, and when it does not choose it withers away in consumption"(B 102)

[37] Frankfurt distinguishes between three types of addicts (wantons), first is the unwilling addict, who is unable to refrain from taking the drug even though he would like not to, second, the willing addict, who wants his first-order desire to take the drug to be effective, and third, the wanton addict, who has no higher-order volitions (he has no identity apart from his first-order volitions). However, only the willing addict would be morally responsible, for he *identifies* with his desire, whether it is this second-order desire which causes the first-order desire effective or not.

his desire in the same way as Frankfurt's drug addicts are. It seems to be perfectly sufficient for an aesthete to make the choice in order to conquer his "addictions" (while such a decision in drug addict's case would only transform him into an unwilling addict, another type of wanton). Unlike the addict, the aesthete does possess the power to extricate himself from his aesthetic bonds, otherwise the appeal to make the choice would be vain. Secondly, while Frankfurt allows that adherence to certain values, devotion to certain people or the formation of ideals provides the meaning of personal life, an essence, or authenticity[38] which disqualifies one as a wanton, the aesthete can easily meet these criteria without making the ethical choice (consider his devotion to womanhood, a contract with the "aesthetic", alienation from the ethical[39]). The Judge devotes a whole passage of the book to stress that not just *passion* is important, but also *content* of that passion needs to be meaningful (real). While passion itself is the thing which matters, it cannot be put just into anything, as I have mentioned before. Judge rejects the possibility of devoting oneself wholeheartedly to a fantastic world.

In other words, an aesthete might be a Frankfurtian "person" without being a person in the ethical, or in Kierkegaard's sense. The higher-order identification which differentiates the aesthete from the ethical chooser is an innermost subjective movement in which the individual takes an inward stance towards the chosen, where "the chosen" stands in a concrete relation to the actuality and the norms of the outside world. The chooser "immerses in the thing chosen" through which he also acquires a relation to the social world around him, and to his own (actual) past.

But we are still looking for the reason to take a personal stance towards the ethical at all. For, as we have seen, the aesthete *can* act without being internally committed to normative principles, and it is perfectly possible for him to be in an external relation to communal convention and to ethics for as long as he pleases (the emperor Nero is the Judge's example of a person who lived and died as a devotee to

[38] Harry Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love* (Princeton University Press, 2004), p.23, pp.51-52, p.58.

[39] For instance, the seducer explicitly rejects certain ethical values: aesthete in Rotation of Crops on marriage: never become involved in marriage. "Married people pledge love for each other throughout eternity" (296, I 268). One must guard against "contracting a life relationship" (297) – consequence: friendship is dangerous and marriage even more. Through marriage one falls into a very deadly continuity with custom... he goes on to advice against taking an official post, through which one becomes "a tiny little cog in the machine of the body politic" (298). He advices to live in freedom, understood as a manouvering in accordance with social prudence

his aesthetic existence). The aesthete, although he is familiar with the ethical code of his society, does not ascribe them any personal importance for as long as he is preoccupied with the production aesthetic experience. At least in his case, we can put aside the idea of intrinsic to-be pursuedness of certain moral values, or intrinsic normativity of certain moral facts. For the aesthete, none of these can be normative, as personal identification with something he wants to be part of himself is a *sine qua non* for anything being normative at all. This "subjective step" as we might call it, signifies a *volitional identification* to be guided by ethical principles (Davenport 85). The choice is not a cognitive as much as it is a volitional act – it is the assertion of the character of the chooser. The individual actively associates himself with a type of life (or will) to which moral principles become relevant, for other reasons than the importance of moral reasons themselves. And our question is why he would need to make such a step. Of course, the individual makes the choice in order to constitute an authentic inward self. It is not the case that the individual in the 'absolute choice' gains awareness of the objective rightness of these moral principles (Davenport, p. 81), because at the point of the choice the individual has no notion of "objective rightness" of moral values, reasons, communal virtues etc. The choice is a self-conscious identification with something he intends to be his first-order will (i.e. development of a specific higher-order volition to will ethically, to recognize his actions as good and evil and make preferences about which desires to follow). The second-order volitions determine the kind of personality (i.e. a person living by the ethical standards) but the absolute, "primordial" choice can be looked at as at manifested volition to become one type of person or another, to form a life plan, a "stable pattern", the inner basis of personhood. It is not simply a choice to cease being a "wanton" and become a "person", but a choice to become a "person" with the right relationship to actual self as well as the actual[40] world around him. This shows the importance of both the quality of passion itself (identification with or appropriation of certain values) as well as its content (the relation of the desired to the actual reality, social and personal).

The essential content to which the individual relates himself might be determined by "objectivity" or actuality of moral demands, but this objectivity would not be a reason why the individual chooses to endorse them. The choice, although it

[40] A devotion to "fantastic" realm, or ideal, would not fulfill the purpose.

surely *brings* their objective authority *to the attention* of the subject, does not establish their authority or alter their metaphysical status. Davenport uses a helpful analogy to illustrate the point. Imagine a person who knows the rules of the road, but never drives. “When that someone nervously decides to take the driver’s seat for the first time, of course they do not think of this decision as creating whatever authority they recognize in the traffic laws.” The aesthete would be “someone who knows the rules of the road, but never drives” (Davenport, p. 88). Notice that mere awareness of ethical rules does not motivate the individual to act accordingly (hence I infer that the Judge is probably somewhat skeptical about the instrinsic *to-be-pursuedness* of moral reasons). A person who does not intend to drive will hardly feel obliged to concern himself with traffic rules, let alone give them subjective application *here and now.*

I find this example helpful in one more way, for it helps to show that the concept of choice does not aim at giving vindication of objective moral laws, but something thoroughly different. One does not choose to be a driver *because* he recognizes the necessity to obey traffic laws; one chooses to be a driver and certain rules therefore begin to apply to him, *because* he simply desires to be the kind of person to whom these rules essentially apply (driver). Any driver realizes that he must respect traffic laws in order to safely drive at all. Similarly, an individual chooses the ethical not *because* of the ethical, but because there is a different end towards which he struggles and the ethical begins to apply to him as he tries to approach this end. There is every indication that this “ultimate aim” lies in becoming oneself, a quest to which Kierkegaard ascribes ultimate importance. This skirts the issue that the ethical cannot be chosen for the ethical itself, and must therefore be arbitrary. I am strongly inclined to agree with Davenport that it does not signify anything of the kind. Yet it remains to find the reason why one should choose to drive at the point when traffic rules seem to be a pointless restriction of personal freedom, i.e. why the individual would choose form (an ethical) character. The question, I believe, is better answered with reference to the consequences of aesthetic living, in terms of what one loses by refusing the ethical existence. It would seem logical to conclude from my previous analyses that this reasons rests with the loss of identity. Certain similarities between Frakfurtian “wanton” and the aesthete would suggest that the ethical choice is a necessary condition for acquiring a stable identity, but I have attempted to show that an aesthete might possess an identity (including some higher-

order desires) which fulfils Frankfurt's condition of personhood. Christine Korsgaard offers an argument which excludes the possibility of aesthetic persons, showing that a non-ethical character is incompatible with one's humanity. If her charge of incompatibility can be applied to Kierkegaard's aesthetic existence, then the reason to advance to the ethical stage would consist in a rational necessity to have practical identities compatible with moral identity and with valuing others.

4. Korsgaard and Kierkegaard on identity

We have seen that Korsgaard's problem posed by the "normative question" is helpful to illuminate the role of the primordial choice in subjective acceptance of ethical rules. The choice makes one essentially related to what ethics demands, commands, and obliges one to do. The normative dimension of ethics is vindicated by the individual's decision, and the need of the individual to acquire an authentic and actual relationship to the social world around him (without which he cannot successfully constitute himself as an individual). In this chapter, I would like to look whether another piece of Korsgaard's work can help to find the reasons for adoption of moral identity. Can we interpret the ultimate choice in terms of Korsgaard's rational necessity? I will look at whether rationality, reflective capacity, can be applied to the aesthete's case. Is rational consistency the reason we are looking for?

There are salient similarities connecting Kierkegaard and Korsgaard. Looking at *Either/Or* in the light of Korsgaard's conceptions will have benefits for assessing the importance of reflection in the transition between the aesthetic and the ethical stages. By reflection I mean the general ability to stand back from our desires or attitudes, to consider and evaluate them. While they both emphasize reflective endorsement of one's life view, Kierkegaard understands the choice of the ethical as an exercise of will, a movement of inner passion, while Korsgaard sees the adoption of the ethical as an exercise of reason.

Korsgaard thinks that our ability to stand back from our desires forces a rational individual to have some kind of normative identity (essential identity), which entails a moral requirement in it (and renders all non-moral characters rationally inconsistent). For a human being, rationality is not optional, and so is not morality, which is inherent to it.

However, there is one more notion which, in my opinion, deserves extra attention: the notion of identity, the self. Korsgaard's conception in *The Sources of*

Normativity seems in many ways close to Kierkegaard's. The ethical norms and the "self" are two interlocked notions that cannot be strictly separated. For Korsgaard, any reasons there might be come ultimately from our identity, our sense of who we are, which carries with it a set of normative standards. A human agent confers value on things depending on his view of himself, and this provides him with a set of reasons. For example, *a mother* will have reasons to nurture and care for her children, etc. and these reasons will not be *external,* but *internal* to herself. A link between one's identity and one's reasons is rather evident in the mother's case, but Korsgaard tries to show that the same principle applies to the identity of a human being and the reason to be moral. The inherence of that reason within a human identity comes to light in reflection.

If the argument from human identity holds then, in Kierkegaard's scheme, the aesthete would have a reason to advance into the ethical stage (that is, to make the choice in favour of the ethical), and he could find that reason whenever he reflects on what his identity as a seducer, and as a human being entail. I will now look at her argument in order to decide whether we can apply it to the aesthete's case.

Korsgaard defined "practical identity" as "a description under which you value yourself, a description under which you find your life to be worth living and your actions worth undertaking" (SN 101). We need to have an identity in order to have reasons for actions at all (desires alone are not sufficient to give a reason because our reflective nature allows us to stand back from them). Once she has established this, she proceeds to showing how "moral reasons" come from the same source. Although most of our identities are contingent, we all have a fundamental practical identity underlying them all, our identity as human beings. This identity provides reason to value our humanity as well as humanity of others (because in valuing humanity, i.e. the ability to have identities and act for reasons, we implicitly value the same capacity in everyone else). The identity which gives one a reason to moral commitment is unavoidable for any human being[41] and every human being can arrive at his moral identity (providing normativity for moral reasons) after completing the process of deliberation on the nature of one's agency. In other words, Korsgaard believes that we are obliged (we have a reason to) be moral in virtue of who we

[41] Ultimately the necessity of such identity is derived from practical rationality.

essentially (and unavoidably are), and that is, human being with the capacity of reflective distance (from our own desires).[42]

And thus moral principles become binding through reflective endorsement. In this respect as well as in many others, Korsgaard is agreeing with Kant in that normativity comes through the process of self-legislation, and the necessity of connection between the self and moral laws is rational. The Judge would perhaps condescend to agree with the role of self-legislation, but the motivation would be very different.

It is very tempting to apply the notion of "practical identity" to Kierkegaard's existential stages. The ethical stage could then be looked at as reflective endorsement stretched to our general human identity, and there would be a rational necessity of arriving at this stage. The aesthete, becoming increasingly aware of what his own existence entails, would come to see the necessity of ethical life.

But this application would be wrong. First, we cannot treat aesthetic as a practical identity at all, because it is precisely the *lack* of identity (which Korsgaard does not seem to believe practically possible). Second, the ethical stage is not an identity revised from a detached perspective: it is precisely an acquisition of an identity which then can be revised and reflected upon.

Here I think that Judge William unknowingly challenges Korsgaard's assumption that we need to have some kind of normative identity (for instance, a seducer, a student) in order to choose and act and live at all. The aesthete in E/O does not evince any signs of substantial identity, or an underlying set of principles on which he acts and lives. The aesthete does not have an identity in Korsgaard's sense (he does not possess a set of endorsed principles) and yet he succeeds at leading a kind of life which he does not find rationally deficient. Moreover, the Judge clearly rejects the possibility that deliberation is enough to achieve such moral transformation at the individual level. "It does not depend so much upon deliberation as on the baptism of the will," he explains, "which assimilates this into the ethical." (B 169)

For the Judge, the acquisition of a definite inward identity does not result from reflection on rational agency, but from a volitional qualification coming from the agent. However, the necessity of choice is *existential* rather than *rational* or *practical.* The

[42] This is a Kantian conception. Objectivity and authority of moral rules rests in the exercise of reason. All human agents are committed to the rules of morality in virtue of their rationality

first volume of *Either/Or*, as if in anticipation of this approach, gives an example of a person who lives both, reflectively and aesthetically – the figure of seducer Johannes As a *reflective aesthete*, Johannes does not lack in rational agency, yet he only deploys his reason to manipulate people and generate interesting seduction plans. Even a brief look into his own diary shows that it seems perfectly possible for the aesthete to remain rational, even though he lacks essential identity. The difference between him and the ethical person is that his deliberate activities and detailed plans behind do not belong *essentially* to himself.[43] His projects are external to him in some way. From the ethical point of view, his life is criticized for lacking in *commitment*, responsibility, a higher-order personality, rather than correct reflection or rationality as such. The ethical person, although he *may* use his rationality in less sophisticated ways, will nevertheless be *identified* with some of his designs.

In a way, the judge and Korsgaard agree that the aesthete is not able to choose, but the Judge does not mean a choice between individual desires but rather a choice in the deeper sense, because such a choice requires a unified personality. The aesthetic choice is no choice at all (B 105). The Judge says that the aesthetic choice is either too immediate to count as a real choice, or not sufficiently grounded for the choice to take hold of the person (B 105). An individual must be "in touch with" himself, he must possess some self-knowledge in order to be able to relate the action to himself in a way that will make his choice relevant to the formation of his personality. Acting on an immediate desire in a wanton-like way is to act without reflection, but choice requires reflection. The Judge suggests in several places that one needs to make a commitment (B 104), in which the choice becomes *expressive of* himself. Therefore, one's reflective and deliberate identification with the choice is what differentiates a real choice from the aesthetic one. The choice must be made "with all the inwardness of his personality", then one is brought into "an immediate relationship with the eternal power that omnipresently pervades all existence" (B 167). The esthetic choice cannot bring one this transfigurations, because of its weak relationship (the rhythm of his soul is a *spiritus lenis* – weak aspiration) to the personality – it also has little import on it. Ethical choice is "higher dedication". Yet there is no reason to think that he is not able to make choice between his "first-order" desires.

[43] It would be for another discussion whether he has a *ground project* (in William's sense), which might be something like pursuit of sensation and pleasure

Korsgaard would probably be compelled to say about the aesthete that he lacks all measurable traces of rationality. A "wanton" would be a person who failed to define himself in one way or another through a practical identity. She would agree with the Judge that an aesthete does not make choices, but she would probably deny the possibility of the aesthetic life. As the beginning if *Self-constitution* she asserts that "human beings are *condemned* to choice and action",[44] where by "choice" she clearly means the ethical choice (a choice based on a principle, or reason). In SN, 120, she says that "it is necessary to have *some* conception of your practical identity, for without it you cannot have reasons to act".[45] Yet she overlooks the possibility to live on reasons that do not bear any explicit relation to the agent's inner self. The key difference between her and the Judge does not consist in whether the aesthete has reasons to act in one way or another, but to what extent he is identified with those reasons. The aesthete does no act for reasons *because* they relate to his identity, the main reason for him to seek the aesthetic distractions is *the avoidance* of negative moods accompanying aesthetic life.

The turning point seems to be choosing to be a certain kind of person (becoming *subjective)*, which is choosing certain reasons as essentially my own. His answer to the question of how objective moral obligations (or reasons) acquire their subjective motivational force for the individual cannot avoid the concept of a radical, passionate, self-interested act of self-choice. This choice of normative ethics is motivated in a noncognitive way (avoidance of despair, manifested as guilt or sorrow). An aesthete cannot have a relationship to objective moral values, because he has not engaged in authentic identification required to establish the objective authority of these norms. The ethical choice is not motivated by these norms or any other, or by an ability of reflective consciousness (the conflict of desires itself does not necessarily lead to realization that we need to live by principles readily provided by a practical identity), but by the individual's struggle to for continuity, for an escape from the grip of despair.[46] I am not sure if the reason is better defined as *avoidance*

[44] KORSGAARD, Christine M. *Self-constitution: agency, identity, and integrity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, xiv, 230 p. ISBN 01-995-5279-7.

[45] KORSGAARD, Christine M. *The sources of normativity*. Editor Onora O'Neill. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996, xv, 273 s. ISBN 05-215-5059-9.

[46] "Søren Kierkegaard" in SEP: section 4. *Kierkegaard's Ethics*:

"The Judge seeks to motivate the choice of his normative ethics through the avoidance of despair. Here despair (*Fortvivlelse*) is to let one's life depend on conditions outside one's control (and later,

or acquisition of something. But it seems that it is rather the avoidance, and yet at the same time "the choice itself is decisive for the content of the personality" (B 102) and a personality is consolidated through choice, so the ethical identity appears as a by-product of a deeper struggle behind which becomes gradually unveiled.

The Kierkegaard's answer to the normative question seems to be the individual's developing consciousness, the increasing awareness of one's guilt (which is again an indication of the personal problem of sin).

The judge says that the primary difference between the ethical and the aesthetic individuals is that "the ethical individual is transparent to himself and does not live *ins Blaue hinein*, as does the aesthetic individual" (B 258). The Judge means by transparency a kind of self-knowledge in which the individual "penetrates his whole concretion with his consciousness" (B 258), which is an action and he therefore uses the expression "to choose oneself" instead of "to know oneself". Nevertheless, the choice itself is furtherance of self-knowledge, a conscious self-relation and evaluation of one's life and actions.

6. Different Aspects of Reason for Ethics

The previous chapters were dedicated to a number of accounts of how an individual acquires reasons to act morally and, at the same time, recognize the necessity of acting morally. According to the approaches in rational ethics, examples of which I have mentioned earlier, an agent will act morally simply because it is the rational and rationality itself is (seems to be) normative.

The central strategy which defines rational ethics (and the main idea around which it is constructed) is that the ground of morality is found in reason rather than religion, metaphysics, subjective preferences or tradition and customs of people among which the agent is raised. Now, according to Kierkegaard, the agent does not *reason* towards ethics (there is no consideration in favour of ethics that makes him necessarily motivated in its favour, which is, arguably, in agreement with David Hume), but he *chooses* to regard it as personally normative. There are multifarious reasons for this choice which can be derived from Kierkegaard's pseudonymous writings, or various aspects of one reason.

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more radically, despair is the very possibility of despair in this first sense). For Judge Wilhelm, the choice of normative ethics is a noncognitive choice of cognitivism, and thereby an acceptance of the applicability of the conceptual distinction between good and evil."

The first aspect could be formulated as *infeasibility of aesthetic goals within the aesthetic stage***,** as one can better appreciate and attain the aesthetic in the ethical stage. The second significant aspect is undeniably the *personal problem of guilt*, underlying the feeling of boredom and profound unhappiness, which the agent must face on pain of losing everything. The third aspect to which I would like to give attention is a *need of stable basis for personhood (character)*, without which the person cannot make significant choices at all (because no aesthetic choice belongs essentially and genuinely to himself). All these aspects, I believe, must appear attractive from the aesthete's perspective and they should be strong enough in terms of motivation to inspire a change of life view.

6.1. Infeasibility of aesthetic pleasure

The chapter *Esthetic Validity of Marriage* is dedicated to a particular task "to show how the esthetic in [marriage] may be retained despite life's numerous hindrances" (B 8). An aesthete is devoted to infatuation, flirting, and at best, he undertakes "a venture in the imaginary erotic", while he rejects the concept of marriage as a bond which cancels the aesthetic enjoyment. The ethicist attempts to show to the aesthete that, in fact, marriage does not transform love into cold and unerotic routine, but makes it possible to continually rejuvenate the experience of first love. The aesthetic experience of love retains its validity within marriage. Moreover, the (originally fleeting) enjoyment acquires the quality of being eternal within marriage.

> The sensuous seeks momentary satisfaction (...) the true eternity of love, which is the true morality, actually rescues it first out of the sensuous. But to bring forth this true eternity requires a determination of will. (B 22)

Romantic love, a primary object of aesthete's endeavour, finds its deeper meaning and constancy within marital relation between a man and woman. The aesthete separates love and duty – the experience of "the first love" seems sufficient to him without the moral bonds. The ethicist accuses the aesthete of being guilty of contradiction, insisting that love and duty create a whole – like "b" and "e" in the

syllable “be” (B 149). It is precisely duty which gives boundaries and stability to the experience of love and a person who strives to separate those two concepts can never attain the whole.

An aesthetic life-view is best defined by the expression that one must simply “enjoy life” (B 179). But enjoyment, whichever form it takes, has a condition outside the individual (or within the individual in such a way that it is not there by virtue of the individual himself).[47] In consequence, his happiness depends on external factors, and therefore, aesthetic goals (beauty, wealth, honors, enjoyment or pleasure) admit of failure. This externality, despair, or multiplicity[48], unhappiness, instability, insecurity, hopelessness and lack of fulfillment in more ordinary sense of the word, are defining features of every aesthetic mode of life.

Pleasure in the aesthetic stage is unavoidably fleeting and unreliable, while it becomes constant and reliable within the ethical. The Judge is trying to convince the aesthete that he can gain more pleasure from consistent marriage than bachelor life. He does not deny the aesthetic, but simply explains why the aesthete’s ways of achieving true enjoyment are inadequate. The aesthete’s effort is invariably directed towards avoiding boredom and keeping himself entertained (such as by not opening a letter for three days just to maximize the pleasure he gets from it). As indicated above, pleasure and amusement are extremely difficult to achieve within the aesthetic sphere, because pleasure is immediate in nature and requires constant repetition, which dulls the enjoyment one gets from it. Also, the struggle for aesthetic fulfillment incorporates the risk of failure, which interferes with the aesthete’s project to “enjoy life”. The constant struggle for amusement ultimately fails to keep the aesthete entertained and leaves him in the state of boredom.

> Now he snatches at pleasure; all the ingenuity of the world must devise new pleasures for him, because only in the moment of pleasure does he find rest, and when that is over, he yawns in sluggishness. ... Then the spirit masses

[47] B 180

[48] Multiplicity arises as a consequence of the fact that the goal and the individual are not one. Things like desire, or refinement of one’s talents, rest within the individual but, at the same time, they are not *posited* by the individual himself. In both cases, the condition for satisfaction in life does not essentially belong to the agent. (B 184) Later, the ethicist claims that ”when an individual considers himself esthetically, he becomes conscious of his self as a complex concretion intrinsically qualified in many ways; but despite all the internal variety, all these together are nevertheless his nature (...) his self consists in multiplicity, and he has no self higher than this.” (B 225)

within him like a dark cloud; its wrath broods over his soul, and it becomes an anxiety that does not cease even in the moment of enjoyment. (B 186)

In Kierkegaard's terms, he despairs. The aesthete's ultimate aim (enjoyment) can be found only if the ethical (duty) and the aesthetic (pleasure) come together in a dialectical connection, and introduce an ethical-religious dimension to the aesthete's life. The Judge knows that the seducer can never escape the vicious circle of pleasure and boredom. An extensive part of *Either/Or* is devoted to the problem of boredom and its existential impact (see chapter *The Rotation Method: An Essay in the Theory of Social Prudence*).The reason why I will now talk about sorrow rather than boredom is that the whole aesthetic life incorporates an intense feeling of guilt which manifests itself as sorrow. Ultimately, sorrow is just an observable symptom of sin that the aesthete can vividly experience.

6.2. Personal Guilt or Aesthetic Sorrow

We have not said much about guilt yet, which is a distinctly ethical term and does not manifest itself as guilt within the aesthetic stage (and the theme is therefore not touched on in Volume A). However, as the ethical author is trying to show, the aesthete is already burdened by the intense emotional experience of guilt, though he experiences is a negative mood, boredom or sorrow (B 233).

The burden of sorrow necessarily accompanies everyone who lives aesthetically, being like a "causal friend one meets when traveling" (B 234) and a major issue which repetitively requires attention. It is not in the aesthete's power to stop being happy, and it is not in his power to stop being distressed. The two dispositions come and go, but again this life-view has a condition outside itself and therefore qualifies as despair. (B 234) Whether the aesthete seeks the distraction of sorrow, or happiness, both of these states can pass away. Though guilt itself is not perceived as guilt by the aesthete, but it largely affects his life as a kind of mood which comes and goes with no apparent cause. Living under the dictate of aesthetic moods is, however, despair. The Judge explains that one cannot live within the aesthetic categories, because then what is 'most sacred' in his life will perish. He feels that he "requires a higher expression" and the ethical provides that. Within the ethical, "sorrow first acquires its true and deep meaning." (B 237)

Clearly, sorrow has a “true and deep” meaning which becomes apparent to an ethical person. The difference between sorrow and guilt then consists in a simple shift of perspective, a higher level of self-awareness and consciousness of one’s own state. There is an objective problem of guilt (and ultimately grounded in the actuality of sin) which can be wrongly interpreted (as sorrow) or temporarily ignored, but which the individual must eventually face on pain of losing his own self.

Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms tackle the problem of sin from the aesthetic, ethical and religious perspective as sorrow, guilt and sin respectively. These three terms ultimately refer to the single issue.

As I have indicated, the aesthete’s is fully engrossed in the moods and fluctuates between two polar states: joy or “pleasure and merriment” and sorrow, while both aesthetic joy and sorrow, insofar as they are temporary states of mind and distractions, represent mere diversions from a deeper existential issue. The ethicist draws the aesthete’s attention to the fact that the actuality of sorrow is deeper and it therefore cannot be dealt with by any means available at the aesthetic stage (such as pleasure).

> Whether you are seeking the diversion of joy or of sorrow, you are firmly convinced that there is a sorrow that cannot be dispelled. (B 234)

It should become apparent to the aesthete, after little introspection, that there is an aspect of sorrow that it is impossible to evade, and that will constantly threaten his most inward quest for happiness and enjoyment. The strategy seems to be clear; once the aesthete becomes aware of his negative mood, its superiority and his inability to discard it in any long-lasting sense, he should start regarding the ethical life as preferable to the aesthetic life. For this reason, the Judge promotes the ethical stage primarily as means of dealing with negative *aesthetic experience,* such as unhappiness, boredom or simply *mood*, because only an ethical person is “above the mood” (mood is no longer “the highest” in his life) which implies that the ethical person gains control over his moods or, at least, he can give them a meaning.

Only in the ethical “sorrow first acquires its true and deep meaning” (B 237), and that is guilt and repentance. The transformation of sorrow into guilt itself is perhaps a desirable qualitative change, but it does not defeat the problem, only

opens the possibility of forgiveness. And only forgiveness provides a relief from the problem.

> I have only one word for what I am suffering – guilt, only one word for my pain – repentance, only one hope before my eyes – forgiveness. (B 237)

The ethical person, unlike the aesthete, enjoys the privilege of hoping to be forgiven. The aesthetic sorrow, on the other hand, is suffering without hope. It is the greatest misery, or despair, which the aesthete can attempt to run away from but never succeeds. The Judge, on the other hand, does not "chase sorrow away", he does not try to forget it, but he repents. (B 238)

It is now perhaps clearer why the choice is not reasonless while it, at the same time, the reason is not provided by practical rationality or not motivated by the recognition of an objective moral requirement, or objective moral rightness. The individual who chooses to live ethically simply tries to overcome a problem of sorrow (guilt) that became apparent with the aesthete's transition into a higher cognitive sphere. That is why I cannot agree with MacIntyre that the "ultimate choice" is reasonless because there is no criterion according to which the individual should give preference to one life over another. The choice is not guided by reflectively recognized criteria, but it is propelled by the urgency of the aesthete's "spiritual pain". Every aesthete is unavoidably distressed and unable to defeat sorrow, because any measures he can take to avoid sorrow will only temporarily divert his attention before sorrow claims it back again. Once the aesthete attains adequate self-knowledge (that is, perceives his sorrow as a personal burden) as well as his inability to overcome this problem, he does have, in my view, a fairly serious reason to make a step forward.

The crucial difference between Kierkegaard and the approaches I have mentioned earlier is that reflection should not be directed towards the general sphere of thought, but towards the most inward and personal problem of sin. In other words, *becoming ethical* does not involve general reflection but passionate self-involvement and coming to terms with one's personal guilt. As the Judge says, to feel one's guilt is something to cry about, but "there is an eternal benediction in the tears of repentance." (B 239)

6.3. Forming an individual character

Turning to the third aspect of the reason now, I hope to further support my claim that the ultimate choice does have a reason. The aesthete not only repeatedly fails to entertain himself and emotionally suffers from recurrent sorrow, but also lacks psychological continuity, or integrity, that he needs in order to be a defined individual. The aesthete is involved in reflective or unreflective pursuit of his goals (which are, paradigmatically, some kind of pleasure), but he is not committed to any principle or a set principles that bind his personality into a whole and which are, at the same time, in accord with reality. I have already mentioned the Judge's reasons for claiming that the aesthete's personality is intrinsically multiple and incoherent. "His soul is like soil out of which grow all sorts of herb, all with equal claim to flourish;" he says, "his self consists oh this multiplicity, and he has no self that is higher than this." (B 225) He seems to suggest that the aesthete does not have a personality in the sense of a higher, unifying principle (the universal). *He becomes that which he immediately is.* (B 225) In his immediacy, he becomes as a complex concretion, a multiplicity, defined by his immediate experience.

I have said earlier in chapter 2 that the aesthete meets Frankfurtian criteria of a person. He evinces some kind of adherence to principles (see the aesthete's suggestions never to go into business (A 31), to guard oneself against friendship (A 28) and never to enter marriage) as well as controlled devotion towards something ("one ought to devote oneself to pleasure with a certain suspicion, a certain wariness" A 27). The aesthete does have a higher-order will which defines him as a Frankfurtian person. The character of Don Juan, for example, has a kind of unity because his actions are predictable and fairly regular. Kierkegaard, however, adds another condition to being a person, a self, and that condition is overcoming despair, or coming to terms with one's actual (objective) state of sin, and being passionately concerned for the quality of one's life. While the "aesthetic earnestness" (a passionate devotion to something particular) can be beneficial, it cannot save or cure the individual. (B 226) All aesthetic standpoints, if lived to the full, are characterized by denial or ignorance of despair (Kierkegaard builds on the assumption that everyone does, at least initially live in despair, and that, most people have been unaware of the fact that they actually live in despair). But a person who despairs is not truly himself, because the self becomes a self only by willing to be a self and by

relating itself to the power which posited it (God). The Judge clearly builds on the premise that living *outside* the ethical framework means living in despair, and that any form of despair is inconsistent with being a person (being oneself). In conclusion, an aesthete is not an individual.

The choice we have dealt with earlier plays a crucial role in the process of becoming a self. According to the Judge, "the choice itself is crucial for the content of the personality" and when it does not choose "it withers away in atrophy" (B 163). If the aesthete does not *choose*, his essence "disintegrates" into a multiplicity and his personality loses its 'binding power', something which the Judge calls "the most inward and holy in human being" (B 160). An aesthetic person remains dispersed in the multifarious.

The Judge believes that only the ethical can guard sufficiently against this danger. Unlike the aesthetic existence, an ethical existence can experience fulfillment, be a character, with a goal *within* himself that promises inner stability.

Once again, one does not become ethical by using his reflective skills, by having goals or a purpose in life, but by choosing to be a self, that is by adopting the ethical framework as a basis for his character.

Kierkegaard returns to the issue of character in *Two Ages*. He describes character as sustained dispositional ethical enthusiasm or interest which can be translated into somewhat more modern vocabulary as a "commitment". It gives the self the needed concentration and intensity which consolidates its interests. The terms inner passion and inwardness refer to an inward commitment to something of ethical or lasting value that gives the agent a stable sense of the self that gives him intrinsic coherence. But a person without character is "an unstable emptiness" that stands only in "transitory relations" to other persons. From that we can conclude that character is a personality-integrating passion, or a unifying element. But not every passion is capable of consolidating the personality, the passion itself cannot be directed towards a fantasy or delusion but must be of "essential" kind (TA 54) If the essential passion is taken away, and everything becomes meaningless externality (TA 62, 61). Kierkegaard distinguishes existential *pathos* and aesthetic *pathos*, which is superficial, without depth. The aesthete dissociates himself by the distance of aesthetic contemplation.

Character presupposes centrality of the self which we must not interpret as selfishness but rather proper self-concern, or in Kierkegaard's terms, *inwardness.* Both religious life and moral character depend on the tension of inwardness, a concern for one's own existing, without which an individual character cannot be constituted. Only when the individual's absolute interest is his own existence, he has a relation to reality which is superior to a simply cognitive relationship between the knower and the known. Truth as inwardness is superior to truth as knowledge. The concern for one's own existing is the highest task assigned to human being.

6.4. Identity of the reasons

The reasons I have investigated above should clarify some of the questions raised at the beginning. The motivation for adopting ethics lies in deeper spiritual truth, which is not a part of the rationalist accounts.

One more point I would like to make about the outlined reasons is that they are, in fact, aspects of a single reason. The aesthete wants to attain aesthetic pleasure, he simultaneously identifies the necessity of extricating himself from the recurrent negative moods, and he finds that repentance is the only way to deal with them. Repentance places the aesthete in relation to himself. At the same time, it places him in a close connection to the outside world – i.e. objects of his repentance (which is the opposite to abstraction, choosing oneself altogether abstractly). The ethical life involves relating oneself to actuality, or reality, while the aesthetic or mystical life is related to delusion, imagination, fantasy and untruth. In *Purity of the Heart Is to Will One Thing* (chapter 2), Kierkegaard warns against the danger of delusion, which, being unable to check itself, leads to perdition. He points out that *remorse* is a 'concerned guide' who attracts the attention of "the wanderer" and calls out on him to take care. His emphasis is similar to that of the Judge in Either/Or, he brings to his reader's attention the anxious urgency of repentance, which awakens concern and brings about an inner transformation.

Above all, repentance places the aesthete in relation to his personal problem of guilt and the reality of his particular existence. The hope seems to be that, in the effort to resolve the problem of guilt, the aesthete will choose to commit himself to a secure set of criteria (ethics) and form a higher-order will as a basis for character. Perhaps, that is what the Judge means by the sentence "choosing oneself is identical with repenting oneself. (241)

Guilt is grounded in the objective reality of sin, but the objective reality of sin is manifested and grasped only individually. The motivation does not arise from universal thoughts or thought about the whole, thoughts about sin in general, but from the inner tension over one's own guilt. The Judge wants the aesthete to choose the ethical life over the aesthetic life, but instead of saying "Choose the ethical!" he says "Choose yourself!" (Chapter: *The Equilibrium Between Esthetic and Ethical*, the judge wants aesthete to choose himself absolutely and in eternal validity). Oneself is the task, not morality. From what I said above, it seems to be clear that Kierkegaard's individual engages in the world of objective moral values through the act of identification, based not on requirements of rationality, but a desire to give direction to one's existence on one side, and anxiety to avoid despair of the aesthetic life on another.

7. Conclusion

I believe that the previous chapters have given me sufficient ground for rejecting MacIntyre's claim that the reason for choosing the ethical life is reasonless, and shed some light on the problem of moral motivation. According to Kierkegaard, it is an existential necessity to choose to occupy the ethical perspective. We have seen that the comparison to Nagel, Korsgaard and Frankfurt has been useful in showing the uniqueness of his strategy. It is clear enough that he rejects the rationalist tradition.

From the standpoint of rational ethics, our capacity of reasoning embodies the essential part of being human; and morality emerges as a set of standards which any human agent, insofar as he is a human agent, would be willing and able to promote, respect and cultivate simply because that is the only right thing for him to do. This approach tries to secure the grounds of morality and the validity of its claims through linking moral behaviour together with being human, a rational being. Korsgaard served as an example of this kind of effort. All which seems to be required for any human agent to individually arrive at the necessity of moral behaviour is the use of reflective powers with which we are naturally endowed. Another aspect of her strategy, as we have seen, was linking morality with having an identity. Adopting moral reasons is not just a requirement of rational agency, but also a condition of being *someone.* Having an identity has a more general level with which we must be consistent. Similarly to Nagel, moral motivation is connected with a metaphysical,

depersonalized conception of the self. All moral principles can be derived from the requirements of practical rationality alone – and on that basis, all persons were thinking irrationally if they chose immoral actions. Immorality implies cognitive deficiency.

But the role of practical reason, so much relied upon in the Enlightenment era, is, according to MacIntyre, overrated. He suggests that Kierkegaard, having recognized the inability of practical reason to determine moral character, invents the concept of choice. If practical rationality cannot provide the needed impulse to be moral, then the choice could. But since the choice cannot itself be motivated by moral considerations, it must be reasonless. I have tried to show that the choice in *Either/Or* does have a rationally defensible ground. Even though any kind of universal and objectivist thinking is alien to the Judge's understanding of ethics and human identity, the reason can still be discovered in the agent's phenomenal experience and his gradually improving self-knowledge.

Emotions and passions undeniably play the key role in the aesthete's transition to ethics, but I do not think that the Judge's approach must, for that reason, collapse into moral sentimentalism. Sentimentalism is a comprehensive term for a number of approaches which emphasize centrality of emotions and sentiments in moral motivation. They all share a belief that morality can be somehow derived from human sentiments. The most prominent defender of this approach is, arguably, David Hume.[49] Hume's position can be characterized by the theses that reason alone cannot motivate the will, and that moral distinctions are derived from moral sentiments rather than reason. By moral sentiments he understands the feelings of praise and blame, emotional reactions of the agent to a certain action. But unlike Hume, Kierkegaard is not so much interested in the origin and the metaphysics of morality. His aesthetic character is driven forward by the feeling of sorrow, but he does not comply with moral requirements because he feels positively inclined towards the kind of actions they promote. In the aesthete's case, the choice of ethics is not a matter of preference. He does not choose ethical life because such and such actions elicit his approval, but rather because the growing consciousness of his own guilt does not give him a rest. It turns out that the aesthete chooses the ethical purely

[49] Hume discusses morality in Book 3 of *Treatise* (1739–40) but his most mature account of the moral sense can be found in *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751).

out of self-interest, he is not concerned for the good of mankind,[50] beneficial consequences for the whole, neither for his "near and the dear". But neither does he choose ethics because his emotional states favour ethical behaviour rather than non-ethical. That is also the answer which Kierkegaard might offer to a moral skeptic. Accepting the ethical life is the best the skeptic can do for himself, unless he is a kind of person who rejoices in despair and seeks pain or condemnation. He has a reason to live an ethical life for as long as he is concerned for his own good.

Kierkegaard is clearly opposed to rationalist accounts which find its best formulation in Kant and his idea that there are moral duties (rational duties) which we must obey regardless of our self-interest or personal concerns. His philosophy is intensely subjective and first-personal. All significant problems of life are not to be solved by any kind of "absolute standpoint" achieved by impersonal distance. He challenges the reader to examine himself and to become transparent to himself to the point that he is able to grasp the importance of improving 'the state of one's soul' and of construing himself as a task. He unrelentingly invites the reader to choose the ethical way and thus become subjective and particular, become what it really means to be a human being.

In the opening chapters, I have introduced the distinction between the objective and the subjective approaches to ethics. From what I have said above, it would seem that Kierkegaard is in agreement with subjectivism about reasons. Subjectivism is a view that an agent's particular concerns ground his practical reasons, and that one has a reason to X when X-ing serves these particular concerns. Objectivist views on ethics would be indifferent to particular concerns of the agent, as well as particular relations of the agent to particular persons. But for Kierkegaard it is the particular relation to his own self which ultimately matters. He is clearly not objectivist in the sense I have outlined in the first chapter, because he does not set the foundation of ethics outside the individual and his particularity.

At the same time, the reason for the choice of ethics is not subjective in the sense that it its generated by the individual himself, because it is grounded in an objective feature of himself, and merely acknowledged by the individual. The reason

[50] Hume: When any quality, or character, has a tendency to the good of mankind, we are pleased with it, and approve of it; because it presents the lively idea of pleasure; which idea affects us by sympathy, and is itself a kind of pleasure. (T 580)

comes to view when a concrete person understands the objective state of himself. By 'objective' I do not mean a kind of Nagel's objectivity; Nagel links the person's motivation to a metaphysical conception of himself (as one person among others who are equally real). In both Nagel and Korsgaard, our reflective capacity reveals an inescapable requirement, which is objective in the sense that it transcends all individual perspectives. Kierkegaard is referring to a different dimension of "objective" truth – personal sin, guilt, of which one becomes conscious after the shift of paradigm from the aesthetic to the ethical. The necessity of compliance to ethics is grounded in the fact that an aesthetically living person needs to deal with the reality of his own self.

Ethics is a necessary step simply because *every aesthetic life is despair* (whether the aesthete knows it or not). Every human individual a higher form of existence (B 192) and is driven to the movement by which the ethical appears (B 193). The commentators agree that Kierkegaard's individual must go through an orderly sequence of existential stages, and the ethical represents one of those steps and, as such, it is also a necessary prerequisite to the religious life, in which the individual wins his fully mature self. The ethical is defined by a profound commitment which Kierkegaard calls inwardness.

What makes the moral reason "appear" then, is a cognitive transformation, or transition to a new existence-sphere, thereby the person acquires a new way of seeing. Aesthetic (non-ethical) life is not irrationality, but its better defined as self-forgetfulness or self-deception. Kierkegaard's "subjective project" consists in activating the reader's ability to see this truth about himself, rather than instructing him in a truth which transcends his particular situation.

Kierkegaard talks of a change of perspective in other places as well. Another example which involves a different way of seeing one thing can be found in *Christian Discourses*, a relationship to one's own possessions is different for a Christian and a heathen, for a Christian it is a gift from the Heavenly Father, resources for doing good for others and serving God, while for a heathen the riches is simply "his" possessions. The very same applies to experiencing emotions. There can be aesthetic joy, the joy of romantic love; ethical joy, religiousness-A joy, and Christian joy. Each sphere or stage of existence has characteristic ways of thinking about the issues of life and own way of experiencing emotions. It is not the matter of what

emotions one experiences, but *how* one experiences them. A Christian can experience anxiety (as a heathen can), but unlike the heathen he is aware that this emotion does not belong to his real self and seeks to dissociate himself from it. Similarly, suffering from the aesthetic perspective seems to be a simple misfortune, while, from the religious perspective, suffering is viewed as an essential and continual constituent of our being in the world.

Each stage is a particular existential configuration which shapes one's attitude towards different issues. All pseudonymous characters only reveal that which can be discerned from their specific perspective. The "higher" existential perspective can very well understand the "lower" perspectives, but it does not quite work the other way. For this reason, Kierkegaard cannot talk to an aesthete about sin, because there is nothing that matches sin in the aesthete's experience or the conceptual framework he is familiar with. There is no way he could motivate the aesthete by the promise of divine forgiveness or deliverance, because the aesthete, from his somewhat limited perspective, cannot relate himself directly to the problem of sin. The Judge therefore uses concepts which are known to the aesthete and which he can adequately appreciate.

For Kierkegaard, the reason for the ethical choice is subjective in the subject-relative sense. The aesthete occasionally dives into enjoyment, but at the same time he is aware that it is vanity. He is "continually beyond himself – that is, in despair."(B 194) But coming to oneself, or becoming oneself, is a form of subjective truth which is deeper and more significant than any objective theoretical truth. The truth is objective, but it can only be seen subjectively. It is not subjective in the sense in which a reason to climb mount Kilimanjaro (based on a personal desire, a private ambition[51]) is, for surely one can abandon or dismiss any such desire without sustaining a heavy existential loss. But the reason to deal with one's guilt is not dependent on the agent's particular desires and ambitions. Kierkegaard believes that God is independent of the consciousness of the individual, and so is sin. This is why one feels helped in an entirely different way by the Christian view than by all the wisdom of the philosophers. The Christian view attributes everything to sin, something 'the philosopher is too esthetic to have the ethical courage to do'. "And yet," the Judge adds, "this courage is the only thing that can rescue life and

[51] The example taken from Thomas Nagel – *The View from Nowhere*, p. 167ff

humankind, unless one according to whim interrupts one's skepticism and joins some others who are likeminded about what truth is." (B 240)

In his view, Christianity is essentially subjective, and objectively does not exist (CUP 53), because the truth cannot be conceived objectively. There is no objective way to describe, or conceive, a purely individual relationship between an individual and God. The existence of an individual is a 'concrete actuality' which "cannot itself be made an object of thought"[52]. He rejects the Hegelian identity of thought and being by claiming that when being (existence) is thought, it is transformed into possibility and one abstracts from its actuality. Thinking fails to grasp being in its concrete actuality, because thinking is abstract. Existence is separation of thinking and being, not their unity. Despite his fierce defense of subjectivity, and identification of individual existence with the highest truth, Kierkegaard seems to be committed to a kind of metaphysical realism. He makes an objective ontological commitment with epistemological humility; he does not deny that there is objective reality of mind-independent character (God, sin), but he questions the human capacity to know it *objectively* and with certainty. Objective thinking has its rightful place, but its not appropriate when applied to Christianity and ethics.

Even the most exact human knowledge is subject to error, because existing objects have an illusiveness that is grounded in their independence of us and our concepts and methods of knowing. He admits the existence of objective reality which abstracts from everything subjective (formal and tautological mode of objectivity such as in mathematics and history) but he adds that we have no means of obtaining knowledge of that reality. We cannot know objectively with certainty. That is why we should turn our attention to our individual existence, our spatio-temporal actuality, rather than propositions and the world of ideal objects.

In ethics particularly, abstraction from the subjective, from the first-personal dimension of human life, would render the ethical thoroughly meaningless. Climacus denies the possibility to understand ourselves ethically and religiously in objective terms. There is no way of *sub specie aeterni*[53] in ethics, no "someone", no "everyone", that can help us make sense of our own ethical existence. Kierkegaard is not called a "subjective thinker" because he denies objective reality, but because

[52] Companion to Kierkegaard, p. 178

[53] A Platonic and Hegelian kind of thinking which requires a position outside life, and outside concrete existence.

he denies that objective knowledge should be our highest task and concern. the highest task for human beings would be the ethical task, one “sufficient for even the longest life” (CUP 158). And that is the task of working “the accidental and the universal together into a whole” (B 256), where the universal is represented by the ethical, and the accidental by the aesthetic. The ideal self and the actual (immediately present) self come together in the ethical stage, the ideal (paradigmatic or ethical) image of the self is a possibility that emerges before the the individual and he continually turns it into actuality as he strives towards it.

To sum up, Kierkegaard advocates the subjective way without advocating the arbitrary and the irrational. He rejects "subjective madness" that would embrace any "particular finite fixed idea" (CUP, 173-175). The individual cannot choose himself arbitrarily, but he must “posses himself as a task that has been assigned to him” (B 262). The objective of his activity is himself as a personal self and a social, civic self at the same time (B 262). If the ethical is understood in these terms, i.e. as an appearance of the “ideal self” towards which the concrete individual will struggle, and if this ideal self proves to be essential for constitution of identity, then the reason for the choice becomes even clearer. On the one hand, it will be the effort to deal with the problem of guilt which is, at first, only dimly present. On the other hand, it is an effort to gain something that the individual did not formerly have access to, and that is a necessary condition for his being *an individual* in the first place.

Guilt is the most significant drive. The individual must choose the ethical, and this movement is accompanied by consciousness of responsibility for himself and repentance. Without repentance, one cannot choose himself concretely, or “properly”, because choosing the ethical cannot occur in isolation from the actuality to which he belongs. A person needs to ‘collect himself in all his finite concretion’, that is to direct repentance towards the objects in the world to which he belongs. Ethical is not abstract. The ethical task, therefore, does not lie in considering oneself abstractly, but in considering oneself *concretely,* only from a new perspective. The person cannot create himself, but only *choose* himself. Finally, considering himself *concretely* from a religious perspective is the highest expression of truth that a human being can attain.

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