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The Design of Kierkegaard's Aesthetic Works

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Authoritative Communication behind Indirect Communication

The Design of Kierkegaard's Aesthetic Works

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The School of Graduate Studies
of
The University of Ottawa

by

JOHN PATERSON

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Master's Thesis Abstract
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Title: *Authoritative Communication Behind Indirect Communication: The Design of Kierkegaard's Aesthetic Works*; University of Ottawa, December 2001.

- In this thesis I juxtapose two points about the ends and means of Kierkegaard's indirect communication: that Kierkegaard wrote with the intention of having some kind of effect on his readers; but that his writing style was so peculiar that it grossly jeopardized the possibility of such an effect. The suspicious and obscure nature of most of his books, particularly the "aesthetic" texts, fosters mistrust in the reader, breaking the contact between reader and writer. Without the writer overtly standing behind what he writes, it is unreasonable to expect someone to be influenced by what he reads or even to read it seriously. Yet, Kierkegaard hoped to find his reader developing a serious attitude and to be moved in a certain direction, namely towards religiousness. The question is how these two facts about his work come together, and my answer is that there is a third, hidden element at work in the relationship between Kierkegaard and his reader. Namely, he postulates the authoritative revelation of the religious spirit, and this is responsible for influencing the reader, not Kierkegaard himself. His own role as a writer is to release this stronger communication on his reader, by undermining the latter's capacity to ignore the spirit. Hence, the above problematic juxtaposition is mediated by an external and covert element being inserted into Kierkegaard overall project.

“We all know that art is not truth.

Art is a lie that makes us realise the truth,

at least the truth that is given to us to understand.”

— Picasso

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Abbreviations of Kierkegaard's Works

- AN *Armed Neutrality in Point of View*, 1998.* **
- AR *On Authority and Revelation: The Book on Adler*, trans. Walter Lowrie (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1966).
- CA *The Concept of Anxiety*, ed. and trans. Reidar Thompste (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).[†]
- CI *The Concept of Irony with continual reference to Socrates*, 1989.*[†]
- CUP *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments*, 1992.*[†]
- DGA *On the Difference between a Genius and an Apostle in The Present Age*, trans. Alexander Dru (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).
- E/O *Either Or (vols. I and II)* 1987.*[†]
- EUD *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 1978.*[†]
- FSE *For Self-Examination*, 1990.*[†]
- FT *Fear and Trembling*, 1983.*[†]
- I *The Individual in The Point of View for My Work as an Author: A Report to History*, trans. Walter Lowrie, ed. Benjamin Nelson (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1962).
- JFY *Judge for Yourself!*, 1990.*[†]
- JP *Journals and Papers*.[‡]
- JP^D *The Journals of Kierkegaard*, ed. and trans. Alexander Dru (New York: Harper & Row, 1959).
- M *The Moment*, 1998.*[†]
- MWA *On My Work as an Author in Point of View*, 1998.*[†]
- PF *Philosophical Fragments*, 1985.*[†]
- PH *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing*, trans. Douglas Steere (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1948).
- PV *The Point of View for My Work as an Author: A Report to History in Point of View*, 1998.*[†]
- R *Repetition*, 1983.*[†]
- SLW *Stages on Life's Way*, 1988.*[†]
- SUD *The Sickness Unto Death*, 1980.*[†]
- TA *Two Ages: The Age of Reflection and the Present Age: A Literary Review*, 1978.*[†]
- WL *Works of Love*, 1995.*[†]

* Edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press).

** Citations indicate volume, serial, page number of *Søren Kierkegaards Papirer*, I-XI³, ed. P.A. Heiberg, V. Kuhr, and E. Torsting (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1909-48).

[†] Citations indicate volume, page number of *Søren Kierkegaards Samlede Værker*, I-XIV, ed. A.B. Drachmann, J.L. Heiberg, and H.O. Lange (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1901-06).

[‡] Citations indicate either volume, serial number of *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, assist. Gregor Malantschuk (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967-78), or volume, serial number of the corresponding Danish edition, *Søren Kierkegaards Papirer*. The two are distinguished by the fact that references to the latter always contain 'A', 'B' or 'C'.

INTRODUCTION

Effective writing usually makes demands on the nature of that writing. However, Kierkegaard wrote his “aesthetic”¹ works in defiance of those demands, yet with the intent of having specific effects on his reader. Without a full understanding of why Kierkegaard spurns conventional writing standards, readers may either try to force the works into an ill-fitting structure, or miss any benefit that their distinctive nature affords. This essay attempts to make sense of this facet of his aesthetic project by giving an account of the project’s underlying design, and I intend my findings to be appreciable prior to any serious reading of the texts and to assist such a reading.

One of the main purposes for writing is to affect someone in some way, whether to inform, persuade, frighten, and so on. However, a writer cannot simply force any given effect on another, especially given that he cannot force another to read his books in the first place. In order to expect his work to be at all effective, there are usually various conditions that the writer must meet. In particular, “the first condition for winning people is that the communication reaches them (*JP* VI 6770). To do this a writer is typically required to be candid about exactly what effect he intends his writing to have on its reader, so that one can decide whether to *be* such a reader. Otherwise one has good reason to regard the writing with distrust and suspicion; if one reads it at all, one may not participate in the experience fully—tasting but not swallowing what the writer has produced—on the grounds that one cannot be sure what a more serious reading would

1. Today we have access only to his aesthetic writing, but he considered his daily conversations with fellow townspeople to be just as much a part of his aesthetic project. He speaks of the speaker/listener

bring. In short, one wants to know what one is reading (cf. *R* III 199), and the writer being straightforward is typically a necessary condition to *effectively* communicating with someone.² I take this to be evident even without a rigorous understanding of communication as such or making any normative claims about it.

The seven books comprising Kierkegaard's aesthetic authorship are: *Either/Or* (February 1843); *Fear and Trembling* and *Repetition* (October 1843); *Philosophical Fragments*, *The Concept of Anxiety* and *Prefaces* (June 1844); and *Stages on Life's Way* (April 1845). Kierkegaard intends them to be exceptions to the above-stated norm, by hoping to have a certain effect on his reader while not being candid about what effect he has in mind. A brief overview of these two points shows how they together create a tension in the texts' design that is difficult to resolve.

Firstly, he takes no responsibility for what is written in the aesthetic texts. This is evidenced by the fact that they are written pseudonymously, attributed to over a dozen characters of Kierkegaard's invention. In "A First and Last Explanation", appended to *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* under Kierkegaard's own name (February 1846), Kierkegaard severs all connection to the aesthetic works. Emphatically, he calls attention to the pseudonyms (that is, the fictional characters bearing the pseudonyms) and away from himself. He asserts that "in the pseudonymous books there is not a single word by me" (*CUP* VII 546) and that who he is and what he thinks is "absolutely irrelevant" to them (*CUP* VII 546).³ He tears the books away from any tangible origin, leaving only

relationship just as much as, if not more than, the writer/reader relationship, and when I refer to one I mean both.

2. Writing often entails secrecy and obscurity, such as in mystery novels, but such cases are not exceptions. The writer is *not* secretive about what kind of book he offers, so that a reader's expectations include surprises.

3. Unfortunately, this detachment is very often taken to mean that Kierkegaard must not agree with the texts' content on a propositional level. Hartshorne's *Kierkegaard: Godly Deceiver* is an otherwise fine

“poetically actual” authors to account for them.

Kierkegaard knew that this is of course impossible to take literally, but his own involvement is a “constraint” (*CUP* VII 547) (or “embarrassment” in Swenson’s translation⁴) that he can only ask his reader to ignore. He asks his reader, then, to relieve him of any responsibility for what is contained in the texts, and to treat him as no more than a fellow reader. In other words, he makes no claim as an author about what the reader has in his hands. Since the true author differs from the given author, the writing’s true meaning may also differ from its given meaning. This is not implied of necessity, and for instance C. Stephen Evans argues that at least the pseudonym Johannes Climacus is a legitimate author whose texts can be read at face value⁵; but the alternative consequence, that there is a difference between what the texts say and what they truly mean, is certainly a possibility. The reader may be in the unwelcome position of getting a misleading idea of what he would be getting into by reading the books.

The second point about the aesthetic authorship is made in *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, written in 1848 but published posthumously. Here Kierkegaard draws the authorship back towards himself, and also suggests a similarity to other, more typical forms of communication. Namely, he still intends the aesthetic works to have an effect on their reader. In particular, the aesthetic works are part of a larger religious

interpretation that is hobbled by this misstep: conversely, others feel free to ignore the pseudonymity after arguing that Kierkegaard shared the view given in whatever passages are under question. I do not understand why propositional content deserves such exclusive focus, as I have not found one passage in Kierkegaard’s writing that has to do with the truth or falsity of what the pseudonyms say, or his opinion thereof. Consider a Nazi scientist reporting his findings on his tests on Jews: if put to the question I may have to admit that his findings are sound, but it should come as no surprise if I want nothing to do with him or what he says. In this essay I permit myself to associate some of the pseudonyms’ ideas with Kierkegaard’s own thought—carefully—though I also take care to point out the limits of that association.

4. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments*, trans. by David Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), p. 552.

5. C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard’s Fragments and Postscript: The Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus* (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1983), pp. 15-16, cf. p. 8.

effort, and as author of them Kierkegaard was a religious author (*PV* XIII 525). He wants to spark in his reader the beginning of spiritual life, though later we will see more precisely what that means. In short, he has a specific position that he wants readers to adopt, as is the case for many ordinary books. *Point of View* affirms what was said in the earlier “Explanation”, yet claims that the works are still constructed to affect the reader’s life with a view towards the truth (*PV* XIII 541).

The normal type of communication to which the aesthetic works contrast falls under Kierkegaard’s category of “direct communication”. Here, the communicator seeks to establish an immediate link with his audience. That is, he wishes to bring to the surface what is in his mind—making external what is internal—so that another person can immediately bear witness to the content of his thoughts (cf. *CUP* VII 56). Direct communication aims for transparency and lucidity. The writer stands by what he writes and wants to project it as forthrightly and honestly as possible. These standards are demanded of all conventional scientific and philosophic writing (at least in Kierkegaard’s day), and most artistic fields. The aesthetic works, on the other hand, are examples of “indirect communication”, meaning that they lack these qualities. The reader must work to discover the writer’s meaning, as the latter is evasive, seemingly intent on frustrating the reader’s efforts. Some essential aspect of the book’s meaning remains concealed.⁶

Kierkegaard’s indirect communication compares with direct communication as two species of the same genus: they are both kinds of communication, and in that regard

6. It is debatable how much of Kierkegaard’s whole authorship is indirect. He wrote other pseudonymous works outside the aesthetic corpus, and suspicion can be cast even on his non-pseudonymous writing, for different reasons. (Because Kierkegaard requested that commentators bear in mind whether the text they are discussing is pseudonymous (*CUP* VII 547). I should note that three pseudonymous but non-aesthetic books used in this essay are *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, *The Sickness Unto Death* and *On the Difference between a Genius and an Apostle*.) It is generally agreed upon that at least the aesthetic works are indirect, and so I will confine my study to them.

one of the main goals for employing them is to affect someone; but they differ in the manner of attempting to reach that goal. Indirect communication does not respect the guidelines that are conducive to effectiveness, yet it is meant to be effective all the same. We can abbreviate this by saying that there is an apparent discrepancy between the means and ends of Kierkegaard's aesthetic project. The specific problem that this essay is engaged in is how the aesthetic works can have both of these qualities at the same time. My question based on this is what Kierkegaard intends the reader's experience to be as he receives the indirect communication in the aesthetic works.

This question has certainly been asked by many commentators, but not always with a sensitivity to the problem that I have specified. If one reads the texts without due courtesy to Kierkegaard's secretive methods, one will push him into a tradition in which he does not belong. Mark C. Taylor's *Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship* reads like a commentary on any other philosopher, trying to discover and elucidate Kierkegaardian concepts, arguments, and so on. Although he acknowledges the authorship's indirect nature, one of his theses is that the pseudonymous works constitute a coherent expression of Kierkegaard's main ideas.⁷ As a result, he can hardly explain the peculiarities in the texts, but must explain them away. Hartshorne charges that for Taylor Kierkegaard's *own* stance towards his works is a "complicating factor"⁸. Clearly, Taylor sees such features as annoying burdens to work past, not clues to heed.⁹

Alternatively, if one is overly sensitive to his indirect means and forgets the end towards which he worked, one risks allowing the conclusion that Kierkegaard is scarcely

7. Mark C. Taylor, *Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship: A Study in Time and the Self* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 19.

8. Hartshorne, *Kierkegaard: Godly Deceiver: The Nature and Meaning of his Pseudonymous Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), p. 89.

communicating at all. Roger Poole, in *Kierkegaard: The Indirect Communication*, assaults the reigning tendency to work around instead of with the enigmatic character of the writing. However, he spends far more time clarifying the form of this writing method than its function. In fact, his argument is that detecting Kierkegaard's own understanding of the writing is an unsolvable problem: "the mystery is impenetrable to the end."¹⁰ This must mean, however, that Kierkegaard has less control over any effect on his reader, and so Poole's interpretation does not clearly capture the religious end that Kierkegaard had in all of his writing.¹¹ Indeed, Poole does not make it clear what personal value there is in reading Kierkegaard. At most, reading the aesthetic works would have a halting or disrupting effect, but one is not actually led anywhere in particular. Interpretations like this may nurture a pluralistic reading that Kierkegaard wants only to provoke his reader into some kind of change or action, but that he is not concerned with what kind.

Both Taylor and Poole give strong and interesting interpretations of Kierkegaard, but their job is made easier by side-stepping the tension between Kierkegaard's having something to say and going to great effort not to say it. Neither does justice to the issue of what is entailed in reading the aesthetic works, making the issue either uninteresting or diffuse. Interpretations like Taylor's make the issue uninteresting in that reading Kierkegaard becomes hardly more unusual than reading another thinker. The pseudonymous nature of the works may still be considered an important part of their content, so that their ideas may be unusual, but this is not deemed to be especially disruptive to the reading itself. Interpretations like Poole's make the issue diffuse by

9. See Taylor, *Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship*, p. 15-16.

10. Roger Poole, *Indirect Communication* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993), p. 1.

11. Poole basically removes the indirect corpus from any religious project; Poole, *Indirect Communication*, p. 4.

providing little criteria by which to discern acceptable and unacceptable readings of the texts. They allow for many answers to the question of what reading the texts is like, such that Kierkegaard is not asking anything definite of the reader. Poole certainly rules out many results, especially the typical scenario of the reader receiving an idea, but beyond that Kierkegaard does not have a stake in his effect on the reader. But a project's ends and means cannot be separated. A more acute appreciation of Kierkegaard's project requires, as a priority, that one respects the above-described tension in his indirect communication.

My response is that by establishing first the underlying design of the aesthetic works, one may be better equipped for finding the right interpretation when reading them. By 'design' I mean a blueprint that can be developed prior to the project's actualisation, without worrying about how the authorship is concretely brought about.¹² This leaves open the particulars of how Kierkegaard went about implementing his project, and even whether he was successful.

Focusing on the design of his project favours a broad understanding of it more than a deep one; this is preferable because it helps to maintain the difficult balance between the different elements of his project, for one does not become overly developed before the other is encountered. Hence, I will stress the relations between the various themes in the aesthetic project more than the themes by themselves. One could conduct separate investigations of Kierkegaard's various ideas, and from these deep but partial accounts try to gather an experience of the whole of his thought. But what is more fitting

12. I do not presume that Kierkegaard's plan was well developed as he wrote. He admits that his own understanding of his project is due largely to hindsight (*PI* XIII 561-62). However, when this design crystallised in his head is inconsequential, for I ask for what stands logically prior to the production, not historically.

here is to begin with a global experience, stopping at each point only long enough to place it into a broad conception. To give an example, a thorough understanding of the ideas that Kierkegaard promotes and those that he disputes is less important to my argument than to see how they compare. I depict them using concepts centred on life and death, but Kierkegaard's ideas here are significantly broader, and for instance he also uses concepts centred on innocence and guilt, and with the same pattern of comparison. Then, on a subsequent visit to Kierkegaard's writing, this broad grasp better equips one to go deeper into the individual components. Rather than conducting a focused study of any of the points that constitute my account, I am instead providing a framework within which such a focused study can be better articulated.

The key to my interpretation is that the tension between the ends and means of the aesthetic authorship can validly be resolved, without one having to exclude the other. I argue that Kierkegaard's indirect means and his religious end do not immediately correspond to each other, and in this way they can co-exist without conflicting; instead, his end is achieved by means quite outside his writing, and his means are directed towards a different, though related, end. There is something implicit in the middle.

The effective ingredient is not Kierkegaard's writing at all, but a third player in the reader/writer relationship, who is responsible for winning the reader over to Kierkegaard's ideal of spiritual life. Kierkegaard's plan is founded on a postulate, namely that any truth behind his view forces *itself* upon those who do not hold it. The spirit, the crux of his religious end, reveals itself of its own accord. This part of Kierkegaard's thought has received plentiful attention in theological studies of him, but I rarely see it applied to questions on communication as such or the aesthetic works. But

my view is that his indirect communication is structured with a view towards this other form of communication and its source, though this connection is hidden. The spirit is another communicator to Kierkegaard's reader, and is more essential than Kierkegaard himself in bringing about his religious ideal. Kierkegaard's writing is meant to serve a secondary end that assists the spirit.

As a corollary to my account of Kierkegaard's design, something can be said about his own account, and I will do so towards the end of my argument. I do not oppose his understanding of his project, but the analogy he uses to express it. He describes his activity according to midwifery or maieutics, following Socrates, but I find his use of this image uninformative and trite. Moreover it does not reflect the ambivalence he felt towards Socrates: declaring that he "calmly stick[s]" to his methods (*PV* XIII 541), his thinking nevertheless diverges from Socratic thought in key places.¹³ The following passage foreshadows my overall explanation of his methods, but what it has to do with maieutics is very unclear:

The maieutic lies in the relation between the aesthetic writing as the beginning and the religious as the telos.... [T]he religious is introduced so quickly that those who, moved by the aesthetic, decide to follow along are suddenly standing right in the middle of the decisive qualifications of the essentially Christian, are at least prompted to become *aware* (*MHA* XIII 496).

In the following pages, two streams of thought will be developed concurrently: Kierkegaard's understanding of his reader and the different strategies for communicating with him, especially the spirit's revelation that is the pivot of my interpretation. My attempt is to show that Kierkegaard's own communication is directed continually towards

that of the spirit, both in understanding his reader and in the immediate goal of his activity. In fashioning his own contribution, he understands that his reader is already contending with the spirit and that the reader's view is thus modified in reaction to it. For the same reason Kierkegaard understands his own role as secondary to the spirit's role.

We have then the tension that exists in the aesthetic works when seen in isolation: Kierkegaard intends them to work towards a religious change in his reader, but he avoids the forms of writing that such an intention calls for. This essay argues, then, that they should not be seen in isolation. Rather, both aspects of their nature can be accounted for by seeing them in the context of a second communicator-recipient relationship. Particularly, the fact that Kierkegaard does not want to communicate anything does not imply that he does not want anything to be communicated. It is the source and method of that second communication that is more important for Kierkegaard than anything he does himself.

13. See *PF passim*, *SUD* XI 156, 199-207 for important examples. Probably the most fundamental charge is that Socrates "actually gives no explanation at all of the distinction: not *being able* to understand and not *willing* to understand" (*SUD* XI 206).

Chapter I

Kierkegaard's Goal of the Leap

The goal of Kierkegaard's aesthetic works can only be understood in the context of his wider project. As a Christian writer, he is interested in the distinction between religious and non-religious personalities, or what one might call spiritual and natural life. His central question is on how to become a Christian, and he ultimately wants a non-religious reader to become religious.

However, the steps between where his reader begins and where he would have him finish do not constitute a straight progression. Instead, Kierkegaard insists that "every qualification of the essentially Christian is first of all its opposite" (*JFY* XII 381). There is an intermediate stage that does not sit easily with the stages between which it belongs. This spawns Kierkegaard's famous distinction between three "stages of existence": aesthetic, ethical and religious. The path from an aesthetic beginning to the religious ideal, from natural to spiritual life, involves crossing the arid domain of the ethical. The aesthetic works concern the initial movement into the ethical.

What is of greater interest here is not the stages in themselves, but the distance between them and hence what is entailed in the transition from one to the next. The required movement is captured in Kierkegaard's notion of the "leap". However, he thinks that direct communication is inadequate to advance the kind of change that constitutes leaping. Even if Kierkegaard's religious standpoint is greater than the aesthetic one with which the reader begins, the reader must first adopt a lesser standpoint—the step towards the ethical is one of descent. The difficulty that this makes

for a direct speaker is that it is impossible to advocate such a movement without distorting it. Direct communication can never make a case for the ethical. In this chapter I will detail why Kierkegaard thinks the accomplishment of his goal requires more drastic means.

A: The Context of the Aesthetic Project

The purpose of the aesthetic works is to facilitate the transition of someone from an “aesthetic” view to an “ethical” view. It is the transition from an aesthetic view to a “religious” view, however, that occupies Kierkegaard’s overall vision. After seeing what these views are, the question arises of how the goal of the aesthetic works fits into the context of his larger vision. Here I give Kierkegaard’s reasons for seeing the ethical stage as a necessary first step towards the religious.

(1) Self-Love and Selfhood

Time and again Kierkegaard asserts that he is a religious writer, and we should begin by recognising his task as a religious one. That task is the elucidation of how to become a Christian. Not taking for granted that we all automatically value becoming a Christian (*JP* IV 4339), Kierkegaard orients his thought towards what he does think we all value. To be specific, Christianity claims to provide a true grounding for life, and this claim would appeal to an interest in life. Hence, to make a beginning, Kierkegaard postulates that interest as a fact of human nature:

When it is said: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself,' this contains what is presupposed, that every person loves himself. Thus Christianity, which by no means begins... without presuppositions, presupposes this (WL IX 21).¹⁴

Kierkegaard's proceedings are based on the fulfilment or satisfaction of a psychological love for oneself. Self-love is not inherently bad (and should not be equated with selfishness or egoism); rather the issue is to "*love yourself in the right way*" (WL IX 26). It is beyond our scope to see why, for Kierkegaard, Christianity is the only way to reach that end, but self-love determines Christian doctrine's relevance to humanity before deciding on this doctrine's truth or falsity.

We shall see next what problematises the question of how to become a Christian, but I must here make a point on what does *not* problematise it. I must distance myself from a prevalent trend in scholarly literature that insinuates that Kierkegaard's understanding of the self is special, requiring that we clarify his meaning before making headway on self-love. For Taylor the Kierkegaardian self constitutes "one of the most difficult problems in all of Kierkegaard interpretation,"¹⁵ but this either forces us to find another, unwritten beginning, or buries Kierkegaard under a mountain of subtle interpretation. This is not an essay about the self, and I am convinced that my own issue does not require a preliminary digression on that subject. It would be uncharacteristic for Kierkegaard's ideas to rely on weighty philosophical analysis, and I would like to treat selfhood in an everyday manner.

This might be met with objection. It appears to many that Kierkegaard's use of the term implies that the meaning he attaches to it is different from its common meaning. He makes many semantically confusing remarks about the self, which I will contend with, but I would resist the temptation to surrender familiar uses of language.¹⁶ If

14. Also: "Self-love is the ground or goes to the ground in all love, which is why any religion of love we might conceive would presuppose... one condition only and assume it as given: to love oneself in order to command loving the neighbour as oneself" (PF IV 206).

15. Taylor, *Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship*, p. 86.

16. For instance: "Rather than referring to overall personality, 'self' designates one component of the personality" (Taylor, *Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship*, p. 88); or: "La phrase: 'je ne suis pas ni ne

Kierkegaard was not ultimately referring to what is normally called the self, then he would have instantly uprooted his ideas into a vacuous and irrelevant domain. He wants us to ask what it means to exist, but that becomes a strange request if he harbours a novel concept of existence in the first place. A chemical understanding of water is very different from a common understanding of it, but if in explaining the former I lose sight of the latter, then I also lose my point. The essential notion must be the same, even if it is developed on a different level. I encourage attempts to elucidate the intricacies of Kierkegaard's ideas and to develop his philosophy of the self, but a plain grasp of his terms should be accessible in the meantime.

We can understand Kierkegaard's problem without seeing a problem in his terminology. To illustrate through the opposite presumption, Alastair Hannay compares Kierkegaard's ideas with what he takes to be a more common notion of selfhood: "If one starts with a very modest concept of selfhood, say one where being a self requires nothing more than being able to answer to one's own name, then Kierkegaard's concept is at least an extraordinarily immodest one."¹⁷ But this is a blunder. Looking in the Bible, we see many occasions where someone receives a new name and sheds the old one, as the result of some event. Add the custom of receiving a new name at baptism, and this only means that, in a religious context, being able to answer to one's own name is hardly modest at all.

Kierkegaard's own vocabulary links human selfhood with what we normally associate with it—life, being, existing—and I will use these terms more or less interchangeably. As in our common conception, to have a human life is extensionally, if not intensionally, equivalent to having a human self. The textual verification for this is abundant. In *The Sickness Unto Death*, the opposite of selfhood is considered in terms of

deviens un moi' aurait du sens parce que sans être un 'moi', le 'je' néanmoins serait" (Maurice Carignan, *Essai sur L'Intermède de Kierkegaard* (Ottawa: Les Presses de l'Université d'Ottawa, 1995) p. 81).

17. Alastair Hannay, "Introduction" *The Sickness Unto Death*, by Kierkegaard, trans. by Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin, 1989), p. 7.

death, as is also suggested by the “Symparanekromenoi” (Fellowship of the Dead) in *Either/Or* and a motto in *Stages*: “Periissem nisi periissem” (I would have perished had I not perished) (*SLW* VI 184). Also, Kierkegaard often speaks directly in terms of life, e.g.: for the Christian “his death-day is his birth-day” (*JP* I 723). Finally, it must be said that *every* formal delineation that Kierkegaard gives of the self as such is pseudonymous and cryptic (see *SUD* XI 127 and *CA* IV 347).

A learned intellect and thorough study are not prerequisites for becoming a Christian (cf. *JP* I 482), and neither should they be for Kierkegaard’s clarification of that path. Thus, we can understand Kierkegaard’s postulate that we love ourselves or life, and its consequences, without navigating any brier patch about the psychology or philosophy of the self.

(2) Natural and Spiritual Life

The different lives we lead are indicative of the different ways in which one can attempt to satisfy one’s love for life. Kierkegaard describes many lifestyles, but they all fall into basic categories: “There are only two views of life which correspond to the duality that is man: animal and spirit” (*JP* I 1005). In the quest to determine the “requirement” of Christianity (*MWA* XIII 506), he needs to find a way to unmistakably isolate religious from non-religious forms of life, so that one knows exactly what Christianity demands and offers. Anticipating the discussion to come, call religious life ‘spiritual’ and non-religious life ‘natural’. As Kierkegaard locates the differences between these, there must be, however, a common element if they are to appeal to the same psychological drive. They do not refer to different concepts of life, rather two different bases on which life is founded. They constitute two conceptions of how best to fulfil one’s love for oneself.

The distinction between natural and spiritual life stems from a general distinction.

This is between having acquired a certain thing and having it as a matter of course. In both cases the object of interest is the same, but the difference lies in how that object came to be in one's presence. There is a difference, for instance, in finding something that was lost and its never having been lost in the first place, or in solving a problem and there never having been a problem to solve. Contentment can be found either in having met one's needs or in not having been in need. This distinction is elaborated on in the essay "The Immediate Erotic Stages" in *Either/Or*. The commonality between the two states is the presence of the object of interest, but the difference is the natural (i.e. original) position of having or not having this object.

For just about any object of love, one can understand the difference between these two ways of satisfying that love, but a love for oneself seems to be the exception. It hardly makes sense—except in a trite or figurative way—to lose or be removed from oneself. It seems to be necessarily true that I am in a direct relation to myself, and that not being myself at any point would be tantamount to not being at all. Yet Kierkegaard's contention is that one *can* be separated from oneself, that one can lack life, in more than a superficial or figurative sense. For him one should ask not only whether one has a good life, but also whether one has life at all, even if, as Sontag remarks, this takes the issue of life to an unusually deep level¹⁸. Though alive, one may still not have life. Kierkegaard's vocabulary repeatedly implies this unusual claim: "'Give me life, life! This is worse than the death that puts an end to life, but I am as if dead and yet not dead!'" (FSE XII 363). This may be one reason why it is so tempting to reinterpret his terms. Later I will clarify what is meant by lacking a self this way, but first let us take its coherence for granted so as to see the problem that Kierkegaard derives from it.

The above distinction can be used to distinguish Kierkegaard's three spheres or stages of existence: "There are three existence-spheres: the aesthetic, the ethical, the

18. Frederick Sontag, "Kierkegaard and the Search for a Self" *Essays on Kierkegaard*, ed. Jerry H. Gill (Minneapolis: Burgess Publishing Co., 1969), p. 154; cf. SUD XI 139: "The condition of man is always critical."

religious” (*CUP* VII 436). These are important for pinpointing who Kierkegaard’s reader is and what change he would have him make in his life. Natural life is one that is taken to be naturally given—one thinks that one’s natural condition affords the grounds for life; this describes the aesthetic view. On the other hand, spiritual life is acquired, in an original position of an absence of life, and it is the overcoming of that absence (cf. *CUP* VII 370-71). The spirit is an external element that is brought in to constitute oneself (*CA* IV 314; *SUD* XI 127). The religious individual lives according to this understanding of his life.

Kierkegaard’s ethical sphere in between is the valley that defines two mountains on either side. Strictly speaking, the ethicist has neither natural nor spiritual life, but has ties to both. He is conscious of a natural state of lacking life, and so shares the religious ideal that life must be acquired (cf. *E/O* II 207). Thus, he understands his life as spiritual. However, he differs with the religious person on *how* that life is to be acquired: “Such... a self... must either have established itself or been established by something else” (*SUD* XI 127). In other words, he sees a problem and what the solution must look like, but he has too simple a notion of what that solution requires. Hence, while having some understanding of spiritual life, he is unable to take possession of it; accordingly while knowing that his natural condition does not afford life, he has not transcended it. The ethical is the state where the object of one’s interest is lacking and one is engaged in a “continued striving” (*CUP* VII 100) to acquire it.

To explain Kierkegaard’s three spheres in a slightly different way, consider Christianity’s claim to be the key to conquering death, i.e. having but overcoming death, so that the opposite, life, is the victor. Before this, the ethicist encounters death, and, out of self-love, is struggling to overcome it and attain life. The aesthete’s claim to life, finally, is in the non-presence of death. For him, even if death is something to be faced in the future, his present situation is characterised by life.

From an ethical or religious point of view, the aesthetic claim to life on natural

terms is an error. Following from their perceived need to acquire life, they say that one's natural condition carries only death, and only by a relationship to spirit can one find grounds for life. In *Point of View* Kierkegaard identifies as an illusion the notion "that religion and Christianity are something to which one turns only when one grows older" (*PV* XIII 535). The aesthete "always overrates youth" (*PV* XIII 535), taking life for granted, and only turns to the seriousness of religion when he approaches the end of his life, if at all. The religious point of view finds the ethical aspiration to acquire life to be misguided as well, having a mistaken impression of how to establish a relationship to spirit; however, we need not look at this point in any detail, except to bear in mind that the ethicist fails to have such a relationship.

To summarise my characterisation of Kierkegaard's three spheres of existence, they constitute three outlooks on life, differentiated according to whether we have life naturally or not, and, if not, how life may be acquired. The aesthetic and ethical views differ on the first matter: "The aesthetic in a person is that by which he spontaneously and immediately is what he is; the ethical is that by which he becomes what he becomes" (*E/O* II 161). The ethical and religious differ on the subsequent question of how life may be acquired from a state of its absence: "A truly great ethical individuality would consummate his life... [by] develop[ing] himself to the utmost of his capability; ... but [the external] would not occupy him at all" (*CUP* VII 121), as it does for the religious (*SUD* XI 128).

(3) Kierkegaard's Aesthetic Project

Taking the religious perspective, Kierkegaard's aim is naturally to help correct the illusions allegedly entailed in the aesthetic and ethical views. The aesthetic works specifically are aimed at aesthetic readers. However, they have the ethical view as their goal, not the religious. His attempt to bring the aesthete to religiousness starts with an

attempt to bring him to the ethical. In other words, rather than trying to bring his reader directly into what he feels to be the best form of living, Kierkegaard feels the need for the ethical to act as a transitional stage, despite its limits. Ethical self-knowledge “is provisional—know yourself—and look at yourself in the mirror of the Word in order to know yourself properly” (*JP* IV 3902). In this way, Kierkegaard speaks of stages of life that mark one’s progression towards the religious. What must be shown here is why Kierkegaard finds this progression necessary, why “there is no immediate health of the spirit” (*SUD* XI 139). This is important because in the ethical one finds neither natural nor spiritual satisfaction, and so it has little to recommend it in terms of self-love.

It should be evident from the above accounts of aestheticism and religiousness that logically there is an intermediate category between them: the aesthete claims his natural state to be one that affords life, and the religious individual claims not only that that is false but also to have found the true key to life. As religiousness is removed from the aesthetic on two counts, we should be able to describe a view that shares the first claim but not the second, and this is the ethical. In the religious stage one is aware of both the problem of life and its solution, but the former can be grasped independently of the latter. However, what is more pertinent is why for Kierkegaard the ethical must actually be actually lived out and traversed en route to the religious—why one cannot simply learn both the problem and the solution at once.

First of all, for Kierkegaard’s reasoning to make sense it is imperative that Christianity is not identified solely by its general tenets. Kierkegaard is not interested in the beliefs that one confesses verbally, but in the beliefs by which one lives, whenever there is a difference. The different ways of understanding life that characterise the three stages are not merely intellectual conceptions, but are views on which one bases one’s daily lifestyle. In a purely cognitive way, an aesthete can appreciate the religious without first adopting the ethical, but what is asked of him is to live out an understanding of a crisis in his natural situation, and then an understanding of its resolution: “Christianity

still exists and in its truth, but as a *teaching*, as *doctrine*. What has been abolished and forgotten... is *being a Christian*, what it means to be a Christian” (AN X⁵ B 107 289). Finding one’s way on a map of a forest, in the comfort of one’s study, is different from finding one’s way while walking through the forest. Kierkegaard insists on going about the questions of life qua living things—as being situated within existence, not from an external vantage point: “This is what I am never sufficiently able to emphasise—that to have faith, before there can be any question about having faith, there must be.... an existential step on the part of the individual” (JP II 1142).

With that qualification in mind, in *Judge for Yourself!* Kierkegaard compares the natural man and the Christian, arguing that there is no point of contact between them, where someone in one view can empathise with the other view. For there to be a possible dialogue, the difference between them must be as though “one has one view and the other another,” but “no, the difference is always that they have the very opposite views” (JFY XII 380). An immediate transition from one to another would be like an immediate transition from ‘Drive’ to ‘Reverse’ while driving a car. An intermediate state must be reached first. Consider in this sense Socrates’ observation that he had to rid his interlocutor of his false opinions before the truth could be sought in its clarity. One must learn that one does not know before coming to know:

This life-giving in the Spirit is not a *direct* heightening of the natural life in a person in *immediate* continuation from and connection with it—what blasphemy! how horrible to take Christianity in vain this way!.... It is a new life, literally a new life—because, mark this well, death goes in between (FSE XII 360).

In another sense, there can be no direct link between the aesthetic and religious because of an important resemblance between them, namely that they both boast of having life. Besides being essentially very different, they are experientially easy to confuse. Because the apparent absence of death is common to these two states, it may be quite difficult to discern whether one has conquered death or is merely avoiding it, just as

it is hard to discern one's location in a forest because even very different places look the same. The phenomenological experience of death not being present is similar to that of death having been conquered: "There is a complete, qualitative difference between being spirit-man and merely animal-man. But physically there is nothing to see in this distinction" (*JP* I 81).¹⁹ However, any confusion between the aesthetic and religious would be fatal, for natural and spiritual life are antithetical: having life naturally makes its acquisition superfluous, and the acquisition of life implies its natural non-presence.

The ethical for Kierkegaard is the necessary intermediate state that allows the religious to be discerned and makes its adoption possible. The differentiating factor between aestheticism and religiousness lies in the state of absence of life, and this is how the religious is clearly recognised:

There is nothing against which Christianity has protected itself with greater vigilance and zeal than being taken in vain. There is not one, not one Christian qualification into which Christianity does not first of all introduce as the middle term: death, dying to—in order to protect the essentially Christian from being taken in vain (*FSE* XII 359-60).

The state of *having conquered death* is similar to that of never facing it, but the process of *conquering* it is not. It is the way in which one enters the religious stage that lets one discern it from the aesthetic (cf. *JP* I 390). Two spots in the forest may look the same, but I can discern my location by noting the route and direction I took to get there in the first place—after all, this is how a navigational compass works. So, even if the religious is the ideal orientation for spiritual life, the ethical properly fixes that orientation, in which one "die[s] to the world in order to see God" (*JP* I 1006). Having acquired life can be discerned from having it naturally by the previous stage of encountering death, which is a necessary condition for the former, but which necessarily arrests the latter. One must first face and feel the presence of death before the process of

19. See also David Cain, "Death Comes in Between: Reflections on Kierkegaard's *For Self-Examination*" in *Kierkegaardiana*, Vol. 15, ed. Joakim Garff, Eberhard Harbmeier, Helge Hultberg, Poul Lübcke (Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzels Forlag, 1991), p. 75.

conquering it emerges with any clarity. The total road is J-shaped, where the ethical is a descent from blissful ignorance into the lucid awareness of a crisis, in a sense a trough, before coming again to a happy fullness of life. To the Christian “elevation is... first of all humiliation” (*JFY* XII 381).

So a necessary part of the actualisation of Kierkegaard’s religious ideal is that an aesthete must become an ethicist before there is any possibility of becoming religious. This means, however, that he must endure a period of hardship where he has no sure grasp on life: “A life-giving Spirit—that is the invitation; who would not willingly take hold of it! But die first—that is the halt!” (*FSE* XII 360). Even if Christianity itself rises above death, “becoming a Christian is a life-and-death battle” (*JP* VI 6682). The aesthetic works are designed to facilitate this first step, helping an aesthetic reader become ethical.

Kierkegaard deems the ethical stage to be an essential station on the road from aesthetic to religious life, and this means that for him the true ground of life entails an encounter and acceptance of death. As he tries with the aesthetic works to facilitate that encounter, he must contend with what he himself postulates, that we inherently love life.

B: The View to be Communicated

What the ethicist believes but the aesthete does not is that one’s natural condition does not supply a satisfactory basis for human life. What is detailed here are Kierkegaard’s conceptions of the aesthetic and ethical perspectives on this belief. However, these accounts must not be left in isolation, but must be juxtaposed with one’s love for life.

(1) The Ethico-Religious View of the Natural Human Condition

Kierkegaard's stance on humanity's natural condition involves a strong interpretation of our natural fallenness and wretchedness. For him natural human categories are far removed from the proper categories for human life, just as "the divine is the exact opposite of the human" (*JP* IV 4338). Under this view, a human being does not automatically have a human self (*SUD* XI 127), though the coherence of such a claim is hard to fathom. He disputes what he ascribes to Epicurus, that "when I am, death is not, and when death is, I am not" (*JP* I 726). In Kierkegaard's writing, he is evidently more interested in preserving the tension in juxtaposition of life and death, than resolving it with a clear exposition. Nevertheless here I try to render his view coherent while keeping the concepts used as familiar as possible.

Although for Kierkegaard there is something deeply invalid about claims of having life naturally, our natural condition is not simply null and void; we do not start with absolutely nothing.²⁰ Instead we start with something that may give an impression of life. Even if one's natural state does not truly provide life, it does provide something that has some bearing on life: "There are men of whom it cannot be denied that they are human beings... but who are more or less defective *casibus*" (*JP* I 30). I take Kierkegaard's idea to be that what we are naturally given as life is so poor as to be unacceptable as true life or selfhood. even without controversial demands or value statements about what human life should be. 'I am myself' may be self-evident, but 'I' is a pronoun, and one may ask what its possible referents are. Is this 'I' something with which I would dare identify myself? Even if on the surface we have life naturally, the inner nature of that state may conflict with this outer quality.²¹ Something that appears to be life on the outside may prove otherwise if its inner qualities do not match that

20. Consider: "The non-being preceding the rebirth [i.e. the beginning of spiritual life] has more being than the non-being that precedes birth [i.e. the beginning of natural life]" (*PF* IV 189). See also Carignan, *Essai sur l'Intermède*, p. 80.

21. One can detect that the theme of 'the inner and the outer' pervades much of Kierkegaard's thought, if only implicitly, as many readers note (e.g. Evans, *The Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus*, p. 281).

appearance. Below are three ways of clarifying this, using accounts of life and death that I take to be uncontroversial.

(1) Life pertains to something, death to nothing. But consider life as hollow: something on the outside, but nothing on the inside. In that event, that which constitutes the substance of one's life is itself insubstantial. The notion of something that is inwardly nothing gives a basic account of mirages or dreams, in that they are themselves something but there is nothing actual to which they point. If, however, one takes them to point to something substantial, we can speak of illusion, where what is merely an image or idea is taken to point to reality. With this we can conceive of life based on illusion, by which I mean not that one has illusions in one's life, but that one builds one's life around them—the substance of one's life requires illusory impressions of who and where one is. Such a person builds his life on that illusion itself, but there is nothing in the actual world that substantiates it. He may live a hollow, insubstantial life that houses absolutely nothing, “quite literally identif[ying] himself only by the clothes he wears” (*SUD* XI 165).

(2) Life pertains to composition, death to decomposition. Composition is the coming together of parts to make a whole, to let it stand out in relief against its background environment. Meanwhile, decomposition is the dispersal of parts into the environment, merging with it. A composed person is able to identify himself apart from, say, his parents or his breakfast (as dependent as he may be on those external elements); he is an individual, recognisable in a group. However, consider that while this may be so on the outside, it may not be the case internally. On that level, he may indiscriminately absorb values, beliefs and customs from the outside, so that one can no longer tell him apart from his environment. In works like *Two Ages* and *The Individual*, Kierkegaard drives home a polemic about the “nondifferentiation of self and other”²², where the

22. Mark C. Taylor, *Journeys to Selfhood: Hegel and Kierkegaard* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), p. 232.

distinction is lost between the public and private (*TA* VIII 93). Here one's personality and identity are indistinguishable from determining factors outside oneself, as told in the rebuke: "You are a non-entity and are something only in relation to others, and what you are you are only through this relation" (*E/O* II 145). In the crowd, "there are only specimens, not individuals" (*I* XIII 593).

(3) Life pertains to unity, death to disunity (as in discontinuity). A contradiction, to take a paradigmatic case, is the unifying of two things that cannot be unified. Its inner members intrinsically stand in mutual disunity. Pseudonymously, the human being is described as a synthesis, a reconciliation of opposites; but "a synthesis is a relation between two. Considered in this way, a human being is still not a self" (*SUD* XI 127). Joining these parts on their own accord yields a "negative unity" (*SUD* XI 127), disrupting the overall whole. But life like this is fragmented and disconnected, rendering it meaningless (*E O* II 176), even if there is an outward appearance of integrity.

All three of these depictions are complementary. In each account, the inner reality of one's life is at odds with what one needs life to be in order to be meaningful; or, conversely, "the substance of [one's] life [is] outside [one's] being, and is therefore never present to [one]self."²³ This is not a matter of degree, but of quality, where one's life is overrun by what cancels it. Life is infiltrated or marked by death. The opposition within creates a tension with its outer container, like hot air inside a balloon. This is life in the midst of civil war.

In these regards I think Kierkegaard is taking a strong theological position that there is *no* life outside (genuine) Christian life. The self-conscious aesthete laments: "An angel of death walks at my side" (*E/O* I 26). But this position is more theologically consistent than a Romantic tolerance towards dissension against Christianity. May the non-Christian be outraged by such a sweeping claim? By all means. May he expect

23. John E. Hare. "The Unhappiest One and the Structure of Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*" *International Kierkegaard Commentary, Vol. 3: Either Or I*, ed. Robert C. Perkin (Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1995), p. 97.

anything less from Christianity? By no means. Death for Kierkegaard is not a pending possibility but a present actuality. His message to the unbeliever is not that death will come, but that death is here.

(2) The Aesthetic and Ethical Stages

The above view about our natural human condition enables one to look more deeply at the relationship between the aesthetic and ethical stages, as they lie on either side of the above contention, where the aesthete denies and the ethicist affirms the death in his midst. I will hereby assume that this view is true, only in order to see Kierkegaard's aesthetic and ethical stages more fully, and because I am interested in how this view is communicated, not its factual status. The aesthete lives according to the belief that his being is composed and uniform, even in its natural state, whereas the ethicist lives according to the belief that such qualities cannot be possessed naturally. Again, I should emphasise that Kierkegaard is considering the beliefs according to which one lives, not simply views that one praises in words.

Aestheticism is a diverse field, but there are salient features that apply to the whole domain. If one truly does not have life naturally, then we can understand aestheticism as the absence of an encounter with this fact; it is a lack of consciousness: "We avoid as much as possible the thought of death; we do not want to be disturbed by it—and Christianity wants to bring us as close to it as possible" (*JP* I 725). According to the ethico-religious viewpoint, the aesthete is in error, misreading his inner reality. He has avoided experiencing who he really is, and, instead, has an impression of himself that is not at all accurate.

This avoidance does not require simply closing one's eyes to oneself and being unreflective, although that is one way in which aestheticism can be manifested. A more subtle type of aestheticism can even entail quite deep reflection into oneself and reality.

However, to reflect on reality does not imply that one touches on it in a way that influences one's actual life. Keeping what he sees at arm's length, the reflective aesthete imposes a barrier that keeps him from the direct experience of his inner nature, as inhospitable to life as it may be. He may purport to encounter the inner levels of reality, but really this is from behind a shield, and so is no true encounter at all. In this case the aesthete is at most an *observer*, and his "participation is always a lie" (*E/O* II 183). In a Parmenidean style, this may involve the insistence that life is not truly what it appears to be, and perhaps that death is merely apparent, and this may require peculiar interpretations of life, that "with one word can change everything" (*E O* II 11).

To illustrate, picture the inhospitable expanse of the sea, where the salient points are that the air on the surface supports life, but not the water below. An ocean diver will witness the life-taking elements below, but between him and the water will be scuba gear or a pipeline, importing life-supporting air into the hostile environment. As deep as he may go, he always remains dependent on the surface. However, the aesthete's folly in this sense is that he will say, 'Did you see me? I was swimming underwater and I could breathe; my inner being admits of life!'

Hence, all aesthetes live by the air on the surface of their being, "hover[ing] over [themselves]", "vaporising" into "the higher atmosphere" (*E O* II 179). The sum, then, is that "the aesthetic in a person is that with which he spontaneously and immediately is what he is" (*E O* II 182). The only contact that he has with reality is on the most superficial level, on which his natural condition is conducive to something resembling life. Each aesthete is unwilling to directly acknowledge anything absent, alien, or anarchic that challenges the substance, composure or consistency of his life: "I have, I believe, the courage to doubt everything; I have, I believe, the courage to fight against everything; but I have not the courage to know anything" (*E/O* I 17). Death is avoided by sheltering oneself in a confined area of life.

By contrast, the ethical view is simpler to comprehend (*E O* II 151). To continue

with the above metaphor, the ethicist explores his life without any artificial breathing apparatus, drawing in the water around him. He “chooses despair” (a slogan of the ethical author Judge William), willingly affirming his given situation. Striving for honesty over prudence, actuality over delusion, he does not add to or remove from a direct and simple relation to his environment. For Judge William, the principal manifestation of the ethical is marriage (e.g. *SLW* VI 91), and we can understand by this the notion of a committed and complete merging with another. This is not at all to say that the ethicist is uncritical or unreflective, but he is interested primarily in matters that bear on him and how he is going to live his life, instead of more abstract and intangible matters.²⁴ Whereas the aesthete maintains a distance from his object of thought, the ethicist draws himself towards his object of thought, living according to what he thinks and sees, incorporating it into his being.

The ethical affirmation of death and the aesthetic denial of it are reasonably plain to understand in themselves, though if the ethicist is right then aestheticism becomes all the more contrived. Both do not have life naturally, but the aesthete manages to avoid that fact, in one way or another, while the ethicist has a lucid awareness of it.

(3) Aesthetic and Ethical Life

The introduction of Kierkegaard’s postulate of one’s love for life will allow us to compare the aesthetic and ethical stages in terms of their propensity to ground life. From the Christian point of view, the ethical is the route that ultimately leads to life. However, while we saw the ethical stage to be “quite consistently always very easy to understand”, we are going to see that “it is very difficult to accomplish—just the same for the sagacious as for the simple” (*CUP* VII 339). Ethical life is fathomable only by a

24. “Kierkegaard is anxious to draw a sharp distinction between pure and existential thought” (Elrod, *Being and Existence*, p. 22).

radically different view of where life is to be found, which makes it “infinitely more difficult” than aestheticism (*EO* II 151). It is going to require the overcoming of the death that the ethicist brings upon himself.

The question of falsehood aside, by denying death the aesthete can assert that he has life and a self. Love of life would not take the form of trying to build or attain life, but it would take the form of enjoying what he has—living. Beyond the task of preserving life, he can take for granted that he has it, and so that concern is relativised down to the same level as those concerns that deal with living life out: aesthetic life is “essentially enjoyment” (*CUP* VII 246)—reaping, even if it is reaping what one has not sown.

Considering, however, this to be based on an illusion, the aesthete may be constantly occupied with maintaining this basis for his life. Various contortions and rationalisations would be needed to avoid those aspects of reality that are at odds with one’s conviction. At bottom, then, the aesthete is anti-social and reclusive; his “occupation consists in preserving [his] hiding place” (*EO* II 145). Sustaining his illusion takes its toll and limits his enjoyment of his so-called life.

At the ethical stage one elucidates one’s problem and the requirements for its resolution, and one’s life is going to be based on the task of conquering this problem. This need not restrict the particular character of one’s life, only the criteria by which one can hope to attain it. The ethicist has a goal that the aesthete does not—acquiring life—and this is absolutely prior to any goal that pertains to getting the most out of life. The latter concern, which is the aesthete’s, is relativised below the ethical task, since of course life cannot be shaped before it is acquired. The focus of attention shifts, such that “truth lies in the acquired, not in the given” (*EO* II 36).

The ethicist’s affirmation of death is not a cry of defeat or concession, because, for him, he has found a key that raises him to an even stronger sense of life’s fulfilment: “According to [the view of life as animal] the task is to live, to enjoy life, and to put

everything into this. The view [of life as spirit] is: the meaning of life is to die" (*JP* I 1005). However bountiful aesthetic life may appear to be, the ethicist purports to find deeper meaning in ethical life (*EO* II 187). The ethicist acknowledges and accepts death as part of life, even as what must be overcome, so that "ethical existence is essentially struggle and victory" (*CUP* VII 246). Life will have to be sought *amidst* or *over* death. The turbulence of the natural, temporal world dashes away the self, but the ethicist looks for himself in the eternal and universal, as a level of being that triumphs over the disunity or emptiness to which natural life is vulnerable. Note that this is not life *after* death, construing the matter in temporal terms. This could mean aesthetically dodging the entire problem of facing death and what it requires of us now, for "the Eternal will not have its time, but will fashion time to its own desire" (*PH* 37).

Now, in Kierkegaard's writing the aesthetic, ethical and religious are often called three *stages*, as we have been treating them so far, but they are just as often called three *spheres*.²⁵ Judge William makes clear that his admonition is to choose the ethical *in such a way that* the aesthetic returns, albeit in a different form (*EO* II 161). The ethicist, holding onto the statement 'I do not have life', nevertheless tries to retain the aesthetic statement 'I do have life' alongside and in equilibrium with the former. As spheres, the ethicist holds the aesthetic and ethical together as concentric (*EO* II 44), upholding them simultaneously. In that way, the ethicist's embracing of death does not mean abandoning any intention of having life, but is part of an attempt to have life. The experience of the aesthetic is to be 'repeated' after one has transcended it, referring to Kierkegaard's ideal of 'repetition', as given in the book *Repetition* (*R* III 174). Life is to return to the ethicist, but the difference is that what the aesthete took for granted the ethicist must produce, "bring[ing] ideality into reality."²⁶

It sounds as if the ethicist is holding onto a clear contradiction. He dare not

25. So that, for instance, ethics "refers both to the process of self-understanding and to the ethical stage of existence" (Elrod, *Being and Existence*, p. 114).

26. Elrod, *Being and Existence*, p. 114.

abstract away from his nature the way the aesthete does, but he cannot live with that nature either, and so must “produce an evenness in the soul, a harmony” (*E/O* II 235). His attempt to bring back aesthetic enjoyment is no matter of course and can only be done at great pain (cf. *E/O* II 30). Aside from our decrepit human nature, ethical life depends on the positing of a second anthropological statement: “A human being is spirit.... Spirit is the self” (*SUD* XI 127). The spirit is basically a factor that permits this life that triumphs over death, an “Archimedean point”²⁷ by which one *supernaturally* overcomes one’s natural condition. In this essay we do not need to understand what Kierkegaard means by the spirit other than to say that it is the cornerstone of ethical and religious life, the expression for the freedom to conquer death. The ethicist’s consciousness of death leads to an ideal of acquiring life, towards which he struggles, but “it is the Spirit who gives life” (*FSE* XII 359). The ethicist’s goal then is to ‘become spirit’. In contrast with the religious, in the ethical stage one is limited in the achievement of this goal, but one at least understands what needs to be done: “Ethics points to ideality as a task and assumes that man possesses the requisite conditions. Thus ethics develops a contradiction, inasmuch as it makes clear both the difficulty and the impossibility [of this task]” (*CA* IV 288).

The salient points to take from this comparison of aestheticism and ethicism are that after facing death, the only way for the ethicist to speak of life is to posit another, higher source of life: spirit. This purports to supply the basis for true life. To claim that we do not have life naturally is tantamount to claiming that the only life that is available to us is one grounded in the spirit.

The ethical view, that natural human life is impossible, is not in itself problematic. What is problematic is that the ethicist *still* claims that human life is still possible, albeit on spiritual terms. The spirit is naturally incomprehensible, making ethical life different

27. Hare. “The Unhappiest One”. p. 99.

to realise or see. Aestheticism can require a rather convoluted understanding of the world in which one lives, but aesthetic life itself is relatively easy to appreciate. Accordingly, ethicism takes a simpler view of one's place in the world, but entails a far less straightforward basis for life.

C: The Inappropriateness of Direct Communication

We have just seen the difficult interplay between the ethical view and self-love, i.e. that ethical duty is “as perilous to self-love as possible” (*WL IX 24*). Kierkegaard wants an aesthete to become an ethicist, despite the ethical's implications for the fulfilment of self-love, because it is a necessary step towards a kind of self that is more fulfilling. What follows is a reconstruction of Kierkegaard's reasoning as to why direct communication is an inappropriate way to facilitate this change in an aesthete.

(1) Qualitative Gap

The aesthete does not affirm the alleged fact of his death or have faith in the spirit. The task presented to a speaker is to facilitate the aesthete's movement of *coming to have* such faith. For Kierkegaard, however, this is impossible by another human speaker, and to employ direct communication here only conveys a misunderstanding of what one is doing. One can directly espouse Kierkegaard's position, “rationally defending the problem of human existence,”²⁸ but in his eyes this will be ineffective in the essential task of bringing about a reciprocal response by the aesthete. Two standards supervise a speaker's task: (1) he cannot misrepresent the end point to which he wants the aesthete to advance and the required change involved; (2) and he cannot misrepresent the aesthete to whom he is communicating—that is, the beginning point from which one

28. Elrod. *Being and Existence*, p. 27.

is to move. One must understand the aesthete's affliction and the distance between it and its cure; if one assumes that the listener's illusion is smaller or less potent than it may be, so that he does not begin in a full-fledged aesthetic state, then one would be begging the question.

It must also be recalled that Kierkegaard is looking for a change in the aesthete's being, not his understanding. It is important for Kierkegaard that one can understand Christianity (and hence the ethical) while being an aesthete (*CUP* VII 320), but "whether one can know what it is to be a Christian without being one is something else, and it must be answered in the negative" (*CUP* VII 322). With respect to this, Vigilius Haufniensis argues in the introduction to *The Concept of Anxiety* that the category of change does not belong to logic, only to being (*CA* IV 285f). We saw before that the ethical outlook is very simple to understand, but what makes it so remote from the aesthetic is the difficulty of *living in* the ethical—finding life there. To be sympathetic to the ethical intellectually does not make one closer to being an ethicist, unless one is committed to act on what one thinks. With this distinction in mind, which heightens the requirements for a true adoption of the ethical, Kierkegaard argues that there is a "qualitative gap" between the aesthetic from which one begins and the ethical where one is to end up. And for him spanning this gap is enough to dash the hopes of a direct communicator: "In possibility Christianity is easy; and merely expounded, that is, kept in possibility, it pleases people. In actuality it is so difficult, and expressed in actuality, that is, as action, it incites people against you" (*JFY* XII 397).

To understand what Kierkegaard means by a qualitative gap, one may compare it with its cousin, a quantitative gap. The latter can be traversed by gradual motion, with a view to the term's Latin root *gradus*, a step. With a step, one foot or the other is kept firmly in place throughout the movement. The motion is coupled with a static rootedness. But a qualitative gap is discontinuous and can only be spanned by a leap, where both feet leave one's original situation. Climacus calls the leap a "letting go" (*PF*

IV 210). The ethicist's spiritual self is of a qualitatively different character than the aesthete's natural self, and this implies that there is a severance in one's life as one crosses from one stage to the next. The aesthete cannot enter the ethical while carrying his old self on his back, but must offload it before entering. This calls to mind an anecdote about St. Augustine who once ran into a girl that he used to know from his pagan days: the girl came up to him and said excitedly, "It's you!" To which Augustine replied, "No, it is not me." The act of leaping that the aesthete must perform is nothing less than the act of dying: "Faith is on the other side of death" (*FSE* XII 361).

The invitation to die, just like Judge William's call to "choose despair" (*E O* II 211), should naturally repel us on the grounds of self-love, that same love for which ethicism is supposed to provide. Sontag remarks that genuine selfhood is "sometimes unpleasant" and "dangerous"²⁹, but this is too tame. Kierkegaard speaks of nothing less than death, directly outraging our desire for life. In Kierkegaard's thought, the spirit is not easy to evaluate, for death and life seem to come in one package, though with death appearing first: "In just a human view, a spirit that gives life is a life-giving spirit and nothing more; Christianly, it is first of all the Spirit who kills" (*JFY* XII 381). But how can the aesthete consent to this—"what does one crave more strongly and violently than really to feel life in oneself, from what does one shrink more than to die!" (*FSE* XII 360).

This upsets the direct speaker's attempts to demonstrate the possibility of ethical life because it is so foreign to the aesthete's premises. A demonstration is concerned with establishing a connection between what is given at the beginning and what is found at the end, even such that "I demonstrate nothing... but I develop the definition of a concept" (*PF* IV 207).³⁰ But if there is a qualitative gap between aesthetic and ethical life, then there is no such connection to be made between them. There are no premises that the

29. Sontag, "The Search for a Self", p. 157-8.

30. "The premises we accept in order to begin... must already be infused with the ideas with which we conclude" (M. Jamie Ferreira, "Faith and the Kierkegaardian Leap" *Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 209).

aesthete will accept but which support an ethical conception of life. The aesthete can conceive of the ethical, but not the spirit that the ethicist needs for life; he can see the death that characterises the ethical, but not the life that the spirit brings afterwards. Hence the leap cannot be conducted with the intellect's permission, but only by an insubordinate will. In such a case the intellect becomes more like a leash than a safety harness. However, Kierkegaard is not an irrationalist³¹; rather "faith *must not be satisfied* with incomprehensibility" (*CUP* VII 532).

The problem with direct communication in this case is ultimately that psychology gets in the way of epistemology. Psychological interests influence the intellect, hampering one's disposition to lend a rational ear to a speaker. Sometimes people pronounce the principle of the 'force of the better argument', as though an argument was a cattle prod. Rather, it requires my co-operation and voluntary acceptance; I must not be coerced by force (*JP* II 1195).

The direct speaker may try to fight these results. Recall that what characterises a direct speaker is that he expresses openly what his intentions are and what effect he wants to have on his listener. He can take two approaches, which correspond to the above two standards that his task must meet: (1) he can treat the ethical ending point, trying to illuminate the virtues of it even while his listener rests in aestheticism, as though the gulf is not so wide as Kierkegaard makes it out to be; (2) he can treat the aesthetic beginning point, trying to reduce his listener's illusion so that it is not so formidable. Judge William certainly tries both methods in *Either Or*.³² However, Kierkegaard's contention against direct communication is that one can validly make headway on neither front (even together, for one force frustrates both in the same way).

31. As Alastair McKinnon argues by a statistical analysis of Kierkegaard's use of pertinent terms (Alastair McKinnon, "Kierkegaard: 'Paradox' and Irrationalism" in *Essays on Kierkegaard*, p. 102).

32. Consider: "The ethical view of marriage, then, has several advantages over every aesthetic concept of love" (*EO* II 273); "It is manifest that every aesthetic view of life is in despair, whether he knows it or not. But when one knows this, and you certainly do know it, then a higher form of existence is an imperative requirement" (*EO* II 173-4).

(2) Contrariety

If we can present the ethical case to the aesthete, then ethical life will stand as a possibility for the aesthete to consider, even while being entrenched in aesthetic convictions. Then, the aesthete can take a step back and compare the two views as two distinct possibilities. He would be lucidly presented with a choice to make. This is precisely the style in which *Either Or* is written, on the surface, and it is easy to suppose that this is ultimately what Kierkegaard was trying to achieve. *Either/Or* is divided into two volumes, the first written by an aesthete and the second by his ethical friend, seemingly presenting us with a side-by-side comparison of their perspectives. That is perhaps why early translators of *Either Or* into English took the liberty of subtitling the two volumes “The Either” and “The Or” respectively.

However, the best translator is a dumb one, and this addition is inappropriate. The argument here is that it is impossible to hold up both the aesthetic and ethical perspectives at once. One cannot see the ethical without the aesthetic view collapsing; conversely, to see the former while upholding the latter signifies a skewed view of the former. The crux of the matter is whether ethical duty towards reality excludes aesthetic enjoyment of life (*E O* II 27), and the ethicist in *Either Or* spends all his effort trying to argue that the aesthetic can still find a place in the ethical. But he does comprehend the paradox entailed in his view. From Kierkegaard’s thought, I detect the following reasoning. Firstly, the aesthetic and ethical lives are contraries. This means that a proper consideration of the ethical would require a (temporary) suspension of the aesthetic, to view both alternatives from a neutral, unbiased standpoint. However, due to psychological considerations, such a vantage point does not exist.

The first point should already be clear. Aesthetic and ethical life lie on opposite sides of a divide, based on contrary statements of our natural condition. But so long as I

am committed to P I cannot even fathom the possibility of not-P. In order for an aesthete to truly view the ethical as an option, he must loosen his grip on his convictions about his natural state, even if only to entertain the contrary hypothetically; he must temporarily empty himself in order to eliminate his bias. Now, this is easy to do if one leaves aside the self-love wrapped up in this discussion. Many commentaries, this essay included, stand Kierkegaard's stages of existence side by side for one to see in turn. Without the psychological import that grounds them, these stages can be seen as different theories of life just like those on any other subject, and they can be compared as such.

So the ideas *pertinent to* aestheticism and ethicism do not themselves present a problem, but aesthetic and ethical selfhood does. It is the spirit at the bottom of ethical life that is so unfathomable, especially to one faced with having to commit one's life to it. We must not look at these ideas from a third-person point of view as though that yields the same impression as from a first-person point of view. The aesthetic and ethical are not only bodies of propositions, but are modes of existing. Given this qualification, a suspension of judgement in terms of the basis of one's life is intrinsically abhorrent, and by itself this would constitute a breakdown of that basis. After suspending one's aesthetic life itself, there would be no deeper or more basic position to occupy.

So we cannot fathom a legitimately unbiased standpoint from which the aesthete can fairly entertain the ethical point of view. This brings us to a more subtle, and perhaps more dangerous application of this problem, whereby the ethical is communicated to the aesthete on the presumption that he *can* justly appreciate it. One cannot view the ethical before leaving the aesthetic, and so for the aesthete to receive the ethical message means that the latter has been changed.³³ J.L. Heiberg, a contemporary, wrote a review of *Either/Or* in which he found the aesthetic portion disgusting but the ethical half quite appealing. This Walter Lowrie found very strange, for Heiberg was very much an

33. Cf. *PF* IV 211: "Anyone who wants to demonstrate the existence of God... proves something else instead."

aesthete (and a constant target of Kierkegaard's ridicule).³⁴ But it is not strange at all, for Judge William is a poor spokesman for the ethical, binding it to long-winded exhortation and hardly exhibiting the tormented personality that really defines ethical life. One may find the ethical quite intriguing, or at least plausible, when it is misrepresented.

Kierkegaard's overall difficulty with this line of attack, asking one's listener to find an unbiased point from which to listen, is that there is no such point. One either goes too far and is asked to leave aestheticism behind, or one does not go far enough, where one still cannot see the ethical. Such an attempt can only be made by side-stepping the need to live by the categories in question, and the qualitative gap that that requirement creates. Due to self-love, there are no unbiased ears to hear ethicism in its true colour. We meet the ethical at the abyss, not on a menu (cf. *CA* IV 331).

(3) Tenability

Direct speech *is* in place where one's listener is not clinging to an illusion contrary to one's message (*MWA* XIII 497). Even before offering an alternative, if one can weaken the aesthete's hold on his own view, then he will not be clinging to so much dead weight. This would launch him into the pit between the aesthetic and ethical where he is taken in by the problem, even if he does not yet accept the ethicist's way out of it. Climacus identifies a borderline zone between the aesthetic and ethical, the state of "irony" (*CUP* VII 436). For the ironist, "the given actuality has lost its validity entirely.... But, on the other hand, he does not possess the new" (*CI* XIII 334). The ironist has no answers at all about satisfying self-love, so although the aesthetic runs contrary to the ethical, irony does not. As this is "a purely and unconditionally negative

34. Walter Lowrie, "Introduction" in *Either Or II*, by Kierkegaard, trans. Walter Lowrie (New York: Anchor Books, 1943), p. xix.

orientation toward all human existence”³⁵, this state is volatile in terms of self-love, making for weak opposition. Hence, compelling the aesthete into this position would mean making some progress in the direction towards the ethical. In that regard, irony is a transitional phase en route to the ethical just as the ethical is that en route to the religious. Irony is where human life begins (*CI* XIII 100).

The direct speaker’s intention would in this case be to undermine, at least to some extent, the aesthete’s illusory self-image. This requires that even from within one’s illusion, one can eventually detect its instability. However, aestheticism is a disease that attacks the immune system: “there is a danger that is called delusion. It is unable to check itself” (*PH* 39). The aesthetic life-view is ill-equipped to test its own viability.

The strength of the aesthete’s illusion is not intellectual, for we have already seen that ethical principles are simpler than aesthetic ones. For the preservation of aestheticism, self-love is again the culprit. The fountain for the illusion is the will, the will to believe that one has life. This accords with Kierkegaard’s oft-made remark that doubt is a matter of the will, not the intellect. No matter how dubious something may be intrinsically, that is different from a person doubting it. Hence, the speaker must stop not when he thinks he has shown cause for doubt, but when his listener thinks he has, remaining sensitive to his listener’s perspective (*PV* XIII 533). The question then becomes whether an aesthetic illusion must be so contrived that one can compel an aesthete to abandon it.

For most subjects, say in the natural sciences, we test our theories according to

35. Andrew Cross. “Neither Either Nor Or: The Perils of Reflexive Irony” *Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, p. 140. Cross then argues that Kierkegaard tries to rectify this in *Postscript*, but he needs to be more sensitive to the pseudonymous author’s humorist character (where humour has a similar function as irony (*CUP* VII 436).

both internal and external criteria. By the former we look for consistency and conformity within the idea itself, so that, e.g., Berkeley could argue that to say that matter exists leads to many embarrassing contradictions. By the latter we ask that an idea conform to external experience, so that the heliocentric view of the solar system had trouble at first because Saturn's orbit did not match its predictions. In short, different interpretations of something are controlled according to internal coherence and external adherence. A direct fight against aesthetic ideas would also follow these same guidelines.

In the first place, a speaker may try to expose inconsistencies within an aesthete's view. But the aesthete implicitly constructs his illusion with the very purpose of making it coherent and orderly. There is no reason to think that this can be done only when corresponding to the actual truth. Dramatists are always in the business of inventing characters, as are drunkards who like to become someone else for a while. If a speaker tried to address failures and shortcomings in an aesthete's self-conception, he would if anything push the aesthete to refine his view, not to discard it. Human beings are too "cunning and inventive" (*CUP* VII 367) to be so easily frustrated.

Secondly, one might ask an aesthete if his interpretation of life properly adheres to his external experiences in the world. For instance, one might draw attention to the unpredictability of the world and our dependence on uncontrollable factors, and try to undermine claims to natural life on that account. However, this would convey a misunderstanding of Kierkegaard's aesthetic stage. It describes the categories by which experiences are interpreted, not an interpretation based on experience. Otherwise, it would have to be admitted that there is some primordial level of an aesthete's being where he has no aesthetic bias—but that is precisely the state that the direct speaker is

trying to produce, not one that he can take as already given. Even if he *was* open to non-aesthetic interpretations of himself, at some point in the past before his aesthetic outlook was formed, one must not assume that such a vantage point is still available (*PF* IV 186).

Aestheticism covers a wide field of lifestyles with varying degrees of happiness, but discontentment in life, brought on by various circumstances, does not mean the end of that life (*FSE* XII 362). In *Repetition*, Constantius mentions two ideals that compete with Kierkegaard's ideal of repetition—hope and recollection (*R* III 174).³⁶ They are two ways of living outside the present reality, looking either to the future or the past. Just as with the metaphor of the scuba diver, they afford ways of not participating in, and thus not being affected by, one's present situation. Hence, the aesthetic foundation of these lives is *invulnerable* to the experiences that the world offers. Misfortune may limit how one sees oneself *within* the aesthetic realm, but one can still find fuel for confidence in one's life, either by superstitiously awaiting future emancipation (hope) or romanticising one's past (recollection). Whatever a direct speaker can point out about one's life, there are appeals (however unsound) that a speaker cannot dispute (cf. *E O* II 11).

The deeper problem with trying to make aestheticism untenable is that the aesthete would prefer a convoluted outlook that promises life than a simpler one that promises only death. Self-love influences the aesthete's choices, and as long as there are other options to cling to, he does not need to accept the death to which the correct paradigm points. It seems enduringly possible to adopt a coherent yet distorted view of oneself. While the aesthete is susceptible to misfortunes that his experiences may give him, that does not affect a direct speaker's target, the category itself of aestheticism and its claim to natural life. Direct communication neglects the fact that "an illusion is not so

easy to remove" (*PV* XIII 531). As it stands, the truth has not yet found a satisfactory way to combat the power of constructing one's own life in disregard of one's place.

Changing from an aesthetic to an ethical view on the intellectual level is not essentially different from changing one's mind on any other issue. However, when it comes to changing one's concrete lifestyle accordingly, a problem arises in that there is a gap between those two lifestyles that is repulsive to one's self-love. Because the ethical is meaningless without its concrete appropriation in life, Kierkegaard concludes that he cannot communicate the ethical directly.

* * *

Kierkegaard's concern is based on the prospect that what needs to be changed is not certain qualities of his reader's life, but his reader's life itself. The aesthetic and ethical stages of life differ on a fundamental level, meaning that the aesthete cannot adopt the ethical without leaving behind the very roots of his original form of life. The movement required is to leap over a qualitatively large gap, so that between the two points there is a break in continuity. The aesthete cannot foresee what such an action would bring, except for the immediate death.

A simple analysis of this shows the inappropriateness of direct means of advocating the leap, for "to endeavour or to work *directly* is to work or to endeavour directly in immediate connection with a factually given state of things" (*MWA* XIII 498). But there is no premise that is both acceptable to the aesthete and supportive of the

36. Also *SUD* XI 170: "Illusion essentially has two forms: ... hope and... recollection."

ethical: “Christianity... must to the highest degree be an offence to the natural man” (*JFY* XII 416). A direct speaker cannot contend with this because he needs the support of his listener. He needs a forum whereby what is at issue rests upon something that is not at issue—some level of agreement. The only alternative would be to breed a certain recklessness of thought whereby one is encouraged to adopt something for no reason. Kierkegaard has been charged with doing just this, but such irrationalism would actually be an easy way out. His problem is precisely that before leaping one “can understand [the leap] only as lunacy” (*CUP* VII 367). He values clear and sober thought, but as it stands no such thought can illuminate either aestheticism’s falsity or ethicism’s truth. From the Lutheran tradition that was formative to his thought: “It is a profound and blind error to teach that the will is by nature free and can, without grace, turn to the spirit, seek grace, and desire it.”³⁷

All of this assumes that aesthetic life is *in fact* based on illusion. If not then there is no value in the leap and this discussion is over—and throughout this thesis no pretensions are made against that possibility. Granting Kierkegaard’s view, however, one still needs to account for the victory of truth over illusion.

37. Martin Luther. *Defence and Explanation of All the Articles*. trans. Charles M. Jacobs, in *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 32. ed. George W. Forell and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press. 1958). p. 93.

Chapter II

Kierkegaard's Implicit Solution

Chapter I presented us with two positions, the aesthetic and the ethical, and put forward the question of how to make the transition from the first to the second. From the above considerations Kierkegaard concludes that the leap is beyond unaided human capacity—whether one is on one's own or in the company of a human speaker. The solution, if any, must come from elsewhere: “If the God does not provide the condition to understand this [the eternal, higher life], how will it ever occur to the learner?” (*PF* IV 224).

I call Kierkegaard's solution implicit because there is nothing to be gained by espousing it, even though he wrote of it and had it in mind while creating the aesthetic authorship. The answer is beyond his control, and he must rely on something outside his power. He postulates that the spirit, the ground for ethical life, itself takes on the burden of addressing the aesthete. It personally reveals itself, exposing the possibility of ethical life in a way that cannot be done by a second-hand account. It makes the ethical leap possible and destabilises one's ignorance of the spirit, making aestheticism less and less tenable. This means that Kierkegaard with his indirect communication is not the efficacious element in the aesthete's turning. The primary speaker is the spirit itself, using a mode of communication that is characterised by authority. The culmination of this chapter is in seeing what this authority is.

However, Kierkegaard must take this approach with extreme caution. He must make sure not to alter the very problem he is trying to solve, changing the essential

relationship between the aesthete and the spirit. Like a parent helping a child in school, it does no good for the parent to do all the work. Kierkegaard's solution to the aesthete's condition must not defeat the very purpose of the leap. This will result in an interplay between being passively affected by the spirit's activity and retaining an active role to play.

A: The Authoritative Revelation of the Spirit

The transition between the aesthetic and ethical stages of life is hampered by a qualitative gap that lies between them. Whereas direct communication attempts to bridge that gap, Kierkegaard's solution to this problem is that the aesthete must come to an immediate encounter with what lies on the opposite side of the gap (i.e. the spirit) even before leaping to that side. This requires that the spirit itself cross the gap first in order to establish contact with the aesthete. We will see here the elemental features of this theory.

(1) Immediate Encounter with the Spirit

We can capture in one principle why Kierkegaard rejects direct communication regarding the leap. Direct communication constitutes an attempt to bridge the gap between aestheticism and ethicism, which means inserting an external structure through which the aesthete is to reach the ethical. Recognising that no such bridge can be constructed, the main thrust of Kierkegaard's own solution is to remove the need for any such assistance. Despite the qualitative gap that lies between aesthetic and ethical life, the aesthete is to personally encounter what lies behind ethical life—the spirit.

If a given truth is not self-evident, but only evident on another, external basis, then its verification may become tenuous: not only must the evidence itself be evident,

but so must its relation to the original matter. Kierkegaard recognises that the further one is from an immediate acquaintance with something, the more one must rely on mediating representations, such as language, which cannot carry the object's vividness or potency (cf. *PF* IV 255).³⁸ However, as it stands the aesthete can remain confident about his life because its true emptiness remains obscure. As already mentioned, Kierkegaard describes the aesthetic illusion in *Point of View* in terms of believing that death and religion demand serious consideration only when the vigour of youth has left, as though "difference in age is the determining factor in regard to the nearness of the eleventh hour" (*PH* 41).

In other words, the weight of death on one's conscience tends to depend on one's proximity to physical death, so that "most men... will be able to get a real impression of Christianity only in the moment of their death, because death actually takes away from them what must be surrendered" (*JP* I 491). Generally speaking, one's awareness of something, such as a contingent event, is conditioned by one's proximity to it in space and time (*PF* IV 243), and without that proximity it would seem that one must rely on the accounts of others. But in *Fragments* Climacus compares the "contemporary follower" with the "follower at second hand", only to say that there is no such thing as the latter (*PF* IV 264). However, communication from one person to another can do no better than to give such a second-hand copy, and to depend on this is to concede a serious deficiency. On the other hand, to depend on the "situation privilégiée"³⁹ of the contemporary person is no solution at all.

Kierkegaard's effort in this regard is to render superfluous the epistemic advantage of one's nearness to the object in question (*PF* IV 267; *AR* 60). His hope is that the aesthete can look immediately at the spirit no matter how limited his vantage

38. Said about Lessing's thought on the same problem, which influenced Kierkegaard: "la démonstration de l'Esprit et de la puissance n'a plus ni esprit ni puissance, mais est devenue pur témoignage humain portant sur l'Esprit et la puissance" (Carignan, *Essai sur L'Intermède*, p. 23).

39. Carignan, *Essai sur L'Intermède*, p. 50.

point is. A direct communicator can then only get in the way, or is at least extraneous (cf. *AR* 26), for there is to be a direct engagement between the aesthete and the spirit, such that “the condition of faith” comes “directly from God.”⁴⁰ One is to stand alone with the truth about oneself. This levels the advantage of someone found naturally closer to his day of reckoning.

At once this prospect should sound alarming, for we have just discussed the qualitative gap between aesthetic and true life. Kierkegaard is trying to describe an immediate encounter with something that sits at a distance—the sight of something transcendental. It is difficult to balance the required meeting of and the essential separation between the aesthete and the object upon which he must decide. His theory attempts to describe, at once, both an activity performed by the spirit whereby it comes into contact with the aesthete, and the spirit’s firm stance at a qualitatively large distance from him. To briefly state his idea: the spirit becomes its own advocate, communicating by itself the possibility for spiritual life, while, however, remaining essentially unchanged in the process.

There are two noteworthy pitfalls to which Kierkegaard’s thought is sensitive—note-worthy because of their closeness to his theory. One is to overstate the effectiveness of the spirit’s communication, so that one alters the spirit’s nature, and thus the point that the aesthete must reach; the other is to overstate the aesthete’s ability to apprehend the spirit, altering the nature of the illusion that he is under. Both cases are instances of re-interpreting Kierkegaard’s problem instead of solving it, changing the relative distance between aesthetic illusion and truth.

To elaborate on the first, were the spirit to make itself known in such a way that the aesthete’s role is wholly passive, this would defeat the whole purpose of the ethical stage. The spirit would feed the right understanding to the aesthete, revealing not only itself but also its truthfulness. No significant decision would be left to the aesthete—his

40. Evans. *The Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus*, p. 215.

natural life would be closed and the spiritual begun in a deterministic, relatively non-problematic fashion. But while “his selfishness [i.e. natural manifestation of self-love] would certainly be very deeply wounded by being deprived of the object [of love], ... his selfishness would be even more deeply wounded if the requirement was that he himself must deprive himself of the object” (*FSE* XII 362). If the truth comes to be known by necessity, then the gap between knowledge and illusion is collapsed, not traversed. This would neglect the resistance that the contrariety between knowledge and illusion would invoke: “What seems so easy—namely, that the God must be able to make himself understood—is not so easy if he is not to destroy that which is different” (*PF* IV 194). Kierkegaard charges Hegelian philosophy with such an erroneous understanding of the spirit’s communication (*AR* 100).

The second hazard is to overestimate the aesthete’s capacity to recognise the spirit as it communicates to him. Here, no matter what illusion one is under, the truth is still accessible, as though one’s adoption of the former is not binding (cf. *PF* IV 186). This may not collapse the distance between aesthetic falsehood and ethical truth, but it implies that the aesthete is not fully enveloped by that falsehood and still has one foot outside it. Kierkegaard attributes this error to Socratic thought, in which it appears “that basically every human being possesses the truth” (*PF* IV 183).

Earlier it was shown that direct communication cannot contend with an error that is at once tenable and contrary to what one wants to communicate. The above fallacious approaches circumvent these difficulties by seeking solace in their *non-occurrence*, by underestimating, respectively, the alienness of the spirit to the aesthetic view, or the hold that the individual has on that view in the first place. Interestingly, traces of both of them are to be found in Kierkegaard’s own thought, but he tries to preserve the problem that he has set out for himself. He adds additional structure to the aesthete’s situation in order to remedy it, but this must not distort his original problem—crossing a qualitative gap.

(2) Revelation

There are two principal aspects to Kierkegaard's solution, the first corresponding to the endeavour to bring out the possibility of the ethical leap, by building up in the aesthete a capacity that permits this movement. Instead of relying on the capacities found intrinsically in the aesthete, the principal role goes to the spirit itself. The spirit reveals itself, communicating to the aesthete on its own. Without waiting for the individual to come to it (which he cannot do), it finds him, "attract[ing] the attention of the wanderer" (*PH* 39). In crossing the gulf from aestheticism to ethicism, the ethical spirit initiates movement. This relieves the individual of the task of advancing towards the truth by his own capacities, for, to Kierkegaard "man's highest achievement is to let God be able to help him" (*JP* I 54). Hence the leap should not be seen as first and foremost a human activity rooted in human faculties. Instead, actually taking the leap is just as humanly incomprehensible as the spirit itself (*PF* IV 230). The occasion for belief in the spirit comes from the spirit itself (*PF* IV 185) and so is "a gift of divine grace, a miracle."⁴¹

The effect of revelation is that the question put to the aesthete takes on a different character.⁴² Instead of asking 'Is there spirit?', the question becomes 'Is *this* spirit?'. That is, one has to decide upon the essence of something given its presence, not to decide upon its presence given its essence (*PF* IV 207). This is an improvement because even without answering such a question the aesthete still has something in his hands from the beginning. As opposed to a mental concept, one must contend with a perceptible, concrete object. Adopting the ethical then does not lie in adopting a general proposition as much as it in acknowledgement of the source of a perception.⁴³ Accordingly, this

41. Steven M. Emmanuel, *Kierkegaard and the Concept of Revelation* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), p. 77.

42. My reading of the following point is inspired by Bertrand Russell's distinction between 'knowledge by acquaintance' and 'knowledge by description': Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1912), pp. 44ff.

43. Cf. *AR* 42: "The profound and elegant thing in relation to spirit is the fact that the *mode of acquisition* and the *possession* are one."

acknowledgement is due not to understanding the message brought by the messenger but to recognising the messenger itself: “the object of faith becomes not the *teaching* but the *teacher*” (PF IV 227).⁴⁴

However, the self-revealing spirit does nothing to actually close the qualitative gap, it only empowers the aesthete to do what he could not do on his own power. One must not misconstrue the concept of revelation so that it leads too easily to the aesthetic subject identifying himself with the revealed object (AR 170), for identifying oneself with the spirit is precisely the ethical. Kierkegaard must take care to maintain the fact that the spirit is unrecognisable and alien to the aesthete. For him one must receive knowledge about the spirit from the spirit itself, but even then one cannot hold what one is being given (PF IV 214). Like a hand stretched out or a mother calling to her child to take his first steps towards her, the spirit remains in a firm position even as it establishes contact: “God is the constant who remains the same, whereas everything else changes” (EUD III 45).⁴⁵ The spirit’s nature is not conveyed by the revelation, only its presence.

This leads to a problem, which revelation alone cannot solve: even though determining the source of the revelation is the very purpose of the revelation, this source is still transcendent. The spirit has no intention of making itself understood or familiar any more than a teacher will help a student cheat. An instructive example, taken up in *Fear and Trembling*, is the revealed command to Abraham to sacrifice his son. Is the thought of this sacrifice of divine origin, or of human madness and invention? According to Kierkegaard’s concept of revelation, no amount of contemplation can decide. The spirit demands obedience, not understanding (WL IX 24; cf. DGA 100). However, it is predictable that one will resist obeying what one cannot understand.

Kierkegaard’s thought is acutely sensitive to this matter, evidenced throughout

44. “The Gospel saves not because of what it says but because of who it is who has said it” (Stanley Cavell, “Kierkegaard’s *On Authority and Revelation*” in *Kierkegaard: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Josiah Thompson (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1972), p. 387).

45. See also PF IV 193 and Carignan, *Essai sur L’Intermède*, p. 95.

works like *Anxiety*, one of his most influential texts. One must decide how to respond to this intervention without assistance from any degree of understanding. There are more options open to the aesthete than he has the capacity to process. Acceptance of the spirit is now possible, but there are as yet no means of weighing this against other reactions to the spirit. Revelation takes the aesthete part-way to the leap, but it requires additional qualification yet. To supplement revelation Kierkegaard must now find a basis for comparing the leap against alternatives.

(3) Authority

In *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing*, Kierkegaard actually identifies two guides, “one [that] beckons forward to the Good, the other call[ing] man back from Evil” (PH 39). Authority, the second aspect of Kierkegaard’s theory, addresses the need not only to illuminate the ethical but also to undermine the aesthetic. Authority is critical for complementing revelation and going past the problem pointed out above. However, it should not be seen as a second effect from a second source. The main points behind revelation and authority are deeply related, as suggested by the title of *On Authority and Revelation*, a piece that Kierkegaard never finished to his satisfaction. Hence, the ideas presented in this chapter work interdependently.

So long as the revelation’s source is obscure, it is susceptible to being treated as something to be resisted, such as a mad whim or temptation from the recesses of one’s own heart (referring again to a principal theme in *Fear and Trembling*). Not to see it as from a life-giving spirit is to maintain one’s aesthetic position. To complement revelation, Kierkegaard needs a key by which such disobedience is challenged. Hence he renders the aesthete’s unconsciousness of the spirit in a way that allows for a relationship to the spirit all the same. This will keep the aesthete away from inappropriate responses to the spirit’s call, making aesthetic delusion harder to maintain. Kierkegaard relies on

authority for this, and as such relies on Christianity being “essentially authoritarian.”⁴⁶

Just as one can discern the fact or fantasy of an hallucination by virtue of its impact on things, authority supplements Kierkegaard’s concept of revelation as an efficacious quality that gives one some grounds for discernment.⁴⁷ The spirit is not indifferent to what comes of it; it does not *merely* reveal itself, but does so authoritatively. This means that it not only legislates a command to follow but also enforces it, producing consequences for any disobedience. The aesthete does not stand as judge over the matter, but as defendant, with the spirit dominating the proceedings. Simply: while it is up to the aesthete to choose whether to obey or disobey the spirit’s call, the end to which disobedience aims is futile. Only “in vain”⁴⁸ does one construct the life that one wants if it is founded in defiance of the spirit—moreover this defiance is a manifestation of despair over one inability to control one’s life (*SUD* XI 177). The truth is “*index and judex sui et falsi*” (*PF* IV 217), enforcing itself and dominating falsehood. For Kierkegaard, disobedience of the spirit, given its authoritative revelation, results in despair. The aesthete is free to reject the truth, but not free to release himself from its influence.

The positive effect of this is that although the aesthete still cannot tell what to expect as a result of the leap, he can become conscious of what will happen if he does *not* leap. Like securing a monopoly, the spirit eliminates alternative forms of selfhood until the defiant self “feels itself nailed to this servitude” (*SUD* XI 181). By feeling the spirit’s power he can discover that what confronts him is no fanciful or empty foe. To resist the spirit is to seek to sever contact with it, but the aesthete can learn that whatever resistance he may offer is not enough to successfully rid himself of the spirit. Authority keeps him from straying too far from the true course, in that he retains “the consciousness of the self

46. Walter Kaufmann, “Introduction” in *The Present Age*, p. 27.

47. “You may say to yourself, ‘How can we recognise a word that the Lord has spoken?’ If a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the Lord has not spoken” (Deut. 18:21-22).

48. Alastair Hannay, “Introduction” in *The Sickness Unto Death*, p. 13.

he does not want to be" (*SUD* XI 177). If the spirit's revelation is like stretching out a hand, its authority lies in one being unable to leave the range of its grasp. However, the futility of the aesthete's attempts to disobey the spirit testifies to the truth behind spiritual life (*PF* IV 217), and can in this sense teach the aesthete that life at odds with the spirit is impossible.

So although one may not have an appropriate relationship to the truth, one is kept from a relationship to falsehood. The two are not equivalent—coming to terms with the futility of aesthetic life does not necessarily imply finally turning towards the ethical. As long as the disillusioned individual does not appreciate the leap as a possibility for life, he will suffer in a lifeless, meaningless trough, but this is still possible. The aesthete in *Either Or* is on the brink of this state, and his "Diapsalmata" thrash back and forth restlessly: "Marry, and you will regret it; do not marry, and you will also regret it" (*E O* I 22). Though "realising that his project must fail," *Either Or*'s aesthete "regards this not as evidence that he has erred in devoting himself to this project but as evidence that the necessary conditions of a worthwhile and meaningful life cannot be met."⁴⁹

The spirit's authority forces consequences to the aesthete's actions beyond his intentions, but it does not force those actions themselves; conversely, as free as the aesthete is to determine his own response to the spirit's revelation, he is not free to determine what those responses entail. The defiant individual tries to sever himself from the spirit, "stealing from God the thought... that God pays attention to one," but in the attempt to forge a self this way, the self "really becomes no self" (*SUD* XI 180). If the spirit does in fact have authority, then its revelation will have these effects. Authority is the efficacious component that makes one's encounter with the spirit more than an occasional disturbance with no lasting influence. What is left to be seen is the basis on which the spirit may have this essential quality.

49. Cross, "Neither Either Nor Or", p. 145.

The principal aspect of Kierkegaard's facilitating the ethical leap is to rely on another facilitator. The spirit communicates to the aesthete itself, but stands in a significantly different relationship to him than a merely human communicator. In human-to-human communication, where communicator and recipient stand as equals, the communicator can only ask for understanding and agreement. But in spirit-to-human communication the recipient's response is based on obedience. The leap, then, has nothing to do with understanding the spirit, but with recognising its authority.

B: Spirit as Nothing

This section enlarges on the effects of Kierkegaardian revelation, though without yet considering the spirit's authority. When it came to advocating the ethical (spiritual) life to the aesthete, the direct speaker's hurdle was in the contrariety between this view and his listener's. But the spirit pierces into the aesthete's field of view regardless of the fact that it does not fit there. This makes the ethical possible even to the aesthete, though it means having contrary forces pulling on the individual simultaneously.

(1) Liberation of the Will

We saw in Chapter I that so long as the aesthete is engrossed in aesthetic ideas, he cannot see ethicism as a possibility for life, but only as "letting go of hope"⁵⁰. His perspective does not afford the intellectual capacity to appreciate spiritual life. However, as long as his intellect is limited this way, so too is his will, so long as it adheres to its rightful place under the intellect's rule. To rectify this problem, Kierkegaard sees the spirit's revelation as effectively liberating the aesthete's will from this subordinate post,

50. Edward F. Mooney, *Selves in Discord and Resolve: Kierkegaard's Moral-Religious Psychology from Either/Or to Sickness Unto Death* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 26.

relieving it of dead weight. However, intellectual criteria are valuable in making decisions. There is a cost, then, for widening the will's domain. Simply, while the aesthete is given a new decision to make, he is left, as yet, with no criteria with which to make it.

As the aesthete cannot comprehend the spirit, the spirit's revelation contributes possibilities for life that the aesthete could not conceive of on his own. This throws him into a wider arena where a door appears that was previously hidden. Even without knowing what would be entailed in going in that direction, a path becomes available to him. He perceives "something that is nothing" (*CA* IV 314), that is, something that exceeds his perceptive capacity. The intended effect is that one is forced to deal with the possibility that there are more ways to develop one's life than one could heretofore have dreamt of. The spirit provides "the anxious possibility of *being able*," though, "he has no conception of what he is able to do" (*CA* IV 315).

The strategy for effecting this liberation involves, fundamentally, instilling a crisis whose nature transcends the aesthete's intellectual categories, perhaps like forcing a child to judge a law case. The spirit intrudes in a way that demands a response one way or the other, but as it does so the intellect is utterly confounded and is of no help. The intellect is overwhelmed and the will must strike out on its own and take charge, like a lieutenant who must take over when the commander is wounded. This is different from probabilistic risk-taking, where the intellect, however limited, is still able to contribute, and the decision, however weakly grounded, can be condoned by a sound mind. By contrast, the spirit simply does not allow intellectual scrutiny to begin; "the understanding stands still" (*PF* IV 206). An important metaphor used here is that of dizziness (*CA* IV 331; *SUD* XI 128; *JP* I 749). The spirit stops us in our tracks, yet does not let us stay still, forcing a response.

The psychological expression for this is anxiety (also translated as dread):

“L’angoisse m’arrête, mais elle me montre les moyens de continuer, de poursuivre.”⁵¹ Anxiety is the “pivot” that changes the aesthete’s world (*CA* IV 315). Kierkegaard’s account of this malaise is immensely complicated, but only a rudimentary grasp is required here, in order to capture in one concept the discordant effect of the perception of an object that is, intrinsically, humanly imperceptible. The spirit makes contact with the aesthete, sparking the question of what it is, and his imagination begins to formulate possibilities. However, the spirit was not perceived through an aesthetic filter, but rather broke through that filter: “The understanding has not discovered this; on the contrary, it was the paradox that ushered the understanding to the wonder stool” (*PF* IV 219). Hence his imagination begins to run ahead of him, undisciplined, conceiving possibilities that he cannot intellectually appreciate. He is unable to contain this, finding himself reacting to a degree beyond what the perception sensibly call for. What was once implausible begins to receive consideration: “To be aware of himself and of God, [a person’s] imagination must raise him higher than the miasma of probability, ... rendering possible that which surpasses the sufficient standard of any experience” (*SUD* XI 153-54).

This is a disturbance of the aesthete’s frame of reference, not a development within it, and as such no acuteness of mind or level of genius will shed light on the meaning of this anxiety (i.e. whether it is incidental or psychosomatic, or whether one is being pointed to something significant). The leap is equally accessible to all, and no talent or vocation will be of use with eventually apprehending the revelation (*DGA* 92). Anxiety is subjective, non-linguistic, and points to something too large to process, too large for one’s mental capacity. The theme of spirit as nothing indicates an invasion of something ghostly; it “dreamingly... projects its own actuality, but this actuality is nothing” (*CA* IV 313).

This liberation, then, comes at a cost. The intellect, rightly so, is not apt to grant

51. Jacques Caron, *Angoisse et Communication chez Kierkegaard* (Odense, Denmark: Odense University Press, 1992), p. 9.

the will generous berth over what it cannot grasp. It bears repeating, since misconception is easy here, that Kierkegaard is not pushing for an irrationalism where we freely allow ourselves to follow emotional impulses—when trying to advocate something actually right but seemingly mad, one should not change one’s problem by compromising one’s standards of rightness or madness. The spirit’s endeavour to liberate the will is violent: “No Grand Inquisitor has such dreadful torments in readiness as anxiety has” (*CA IV* 422). In sum, the liberation of the will involves two main things: (1) as the will is liberated it is also provoked—the spirit sparks a crisis that must be resolved, such that even with one’s new-found capacity one cannot stand idle; (2) although provoked, he finds himself unable to apply normal means and faculties for properly making decisions or processing what is going on. The spirit is “not a nothing with which the individual has nothing to do, but a nothing that communicates vigorously with the ignorance of innocence [which signifies the natural (*CA IV* 313)]” (*CA IV* 332).

(2) Possibility

How does the manoeuvre described above make the leap possible? For Kierkegaard, the key is that, as a result of one’s inability to assess the spirit, self-love is drawn to it under the possibility that it indicates a new form of selfhood. Not understanding something is not a solid basis for fearing it, and, based on that premise, the spirit—though it is completely other to the aesthete—invokes positive interest, even by the dictates of self-love: “A person lives undisturbed in himself, and then awakens the paradox of self-love as love for another, for one missing” (*PF IV* 206). Love of self is unchanged, but that to which it is directed changes, as I encounter different possibilities of who I really am and what domain my life really encompasses. The leap is made possible to the extent that love for oneself can include wanting to regard something foreign as a crucial part of oneself. (This is fitting since the ethical self is characterised

by trying to relate to something beyond one's lifeless natural state—the spirit is an Other that is to be incorporated into one's being.)

Ambiguity is a key quality of the spirit's revelation (CA IV 314), as a way to suggest different possible selves. Due to its elusive transcendence, the spirit's presence can potentially mean one of several things. One response is obvious, i.e. to see this thing is something alien with which I shall not identify myself. The felt anxiety may simply be over something ordinary, and then there would be no reason to yield to it. The second possible response comes on the wings of self-doubt whereby I am no longer clear where the borders defining my person lie. I experience an affinity towards the unknown, and the urge to plunge into the deeper abyss. I may experience the opportunity to be “educated” by anxiety, as in the exhortation that concludes Haufniensis' *Anxiety* (CA IV 422ff).

Earlier I spoke of life and death in terms of composition and decomposition. The intrusion of the spirit upsets the aesthete's composure, in that something external purports to influence his identity; so, given an aesthetic understanding of life, this constitutes a threat against life. From this angle, the spirit is seen as like a germ threatening to find its way inside. However, by imagining the possibility that he has been missing something in his life, the spirit that brings this thing would in fact be a welcome *composing* factor, bringing two severed halves into a whole:

Inasmuch as it is now present, [spirit] is in a sense a hostile power, for it constantly disturbs the relation between soul and body, a relation that indeed has persistence and yet does not have endurance, inasmuch as it first receives the latter by the spirit. On the other hand, spirit is a friendly power, since it is precisely that which constitutes the relation (CA IV 315).

This perfect ambiguity is necessary in order to account for a free leap into a wholly new frontier. Anxiety is “*a sympathetic antipathy and an antipathetic sympathy*” (CA IV 313). The aesthete has no grounds for evaluating the spirit—it is poisonous to

life as he knows it, but may it be food for a life that he does not yet know? Psychologically, Kierkegaard identifies two primitive emotions that are relevant to this matter: fear and desire. These are always directed towards objects that one can clearly grasp (CA IV 313), “*devant ou par rapport à quelque chose de défini et de précis.*”⁵² Anxiety is an ambiguous mixture of these two reactions, due to the lack of any clear object. One fears the spirit because it seems to press on the self from outside; however, due to the vagueness of what is in one’s midst, one also desires it because of the possibilities for selfhood that it insinuates. Anxiety is the desire for what one fears (CA IV 313), provoking one to long for it, while “simultaneously flee[ing] and avoid[ing] it.”⁵³

So anxiety to Kierkegaard is different from fear, and it is this difference that accounts for how the individual will not automatically recoil from the spirit when it reveals itself. Compare this with Johannes de Silentio’s account of Abraham’s response to the call to sacrifice Isaac, in *Fear and Trembling*. De Silentio attributes Abraham’s resolution to courage in the face of fear⁵⁴, but, from that starting point, he makes no headway in his attempt to understand Abraham. However, we can question whether the author’s appraisal tells the whole story, as Caron does: “Qu’est-ce que la crainte de Abraham? et dans quelle mesure la crainte de *Crainte et Tremblement* pose-t-elle une situation ‘angoissante’?”⁵⁵ Does de Silentio mis-identify Abraham’s condition as one of fear? Consequently, he attributes to Abraham an unfathomable degree of courage and sees the issue in terms of heroism (FT III 68), failing to see that “faith is a matter of grace, not spiritual heroics.”⁵⁶ It comes as no surprise that the author is overwhelmed by Abraham’s example: “I do not have faith; this courage I lack” (FT III 85).

52. Caron, *Angoisse et Communication*, p. 89.

53. Arnold B. Come, *Kierkegaard as Humanist: Discovering My Self* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1995), p. 52.

54. Making only incidental and undeveloped references to anxiety (dread), e.g. FT III 82: “Abraham is not what he is without his dread.”

55. Caron, *Angoisse et Communication*, p. 87.

56. Hartshorne, *Godly Deceiver*, p. 11.

All this time Kierkegaard has been fighting for the sheer possibility of the aesthete's leaping, not the likelihood of it, and he can hardly ask for anything stronger. The spirit does not make the ethical *more* appealing or plausible than the aesthetic, as though one can compare things that sit a thousand miles from each other. If the spirit's impact was not strictly ambiguous then that would entail some point of contact whereby the aesthete can shed even a little light on the ethical spirit. By revealing itself, the spirit adds an element that does not register on aesthetic scales. Instead, two opposing drives—to stay or to go—simultaneously pull at the anxious individual.

(3) *Either/Or?*

Given the above discussion on Kierkegaardian revelation, we can pause here and take stock of what it brings to his account of the leap. However, we will see that its contribution is insufficient to meet the needs of his problem. As Haufniensis describes these matters in *Anxiety*, he frequently acknowledges that his account is inadequate and that it only points to further questions that he, as psychologist, cannot answer (e.g. *CA IV* 331, 428). Therefore, my summary below of what has so far been gained gives only an incomplete and one-sided view of Kierkegaard's overall theory.

In one way, one could say that the situation reached establishes a real choice between the aesthetic and ethical stages of existence. The perfectly ambiguous split between fear and desire evokes the will in two directions, either acceptance or rejection of the spirit's call. If I perform the former action, one can speak of the sought-after transition into the ethical, whereas following the second of course means remaining in the aesthetic and trying to keep my aesthetic self. In this way I am presented with a decision to make between two alternatives where my choice is not hampered by biases, perspectives, or other inappropriate weights. Notwithstanding the authority that we have yet to incorporate, the ambiguity of the spirit inclines one equally to the aesthetic and

ethical, such that one can identify with either (cf. *CA* IV 345).

But in another way, it could just as well be said that one is presented with no choice at all, for while revelation breaks down the *inappropriate* criteria by which the aesthete faced the choice of the ethical (which is tantamount to not facing it at all), he does not yet have any *appropriate* criteria for making this choice. The result so far seems to be reduced to the notion of choosing with no understanding of what one's choices entail. The liberation that the spirit brings does not include any kind of direction. Kierkegaard does not highly regard a self-determining kind of freedom⁵⁷, and so anxiety only brings "an entangled freedom" (*CA* IV 320). The freedom achieved so far is characterised by arbitrariness.

The first point above captures the gains that Kierkegaard has made so far, and the second indicates what is so far missing in his theory. Alasdair MacIntyre, in *After Virtue*, picks up on these two points.⁵⁸ Because the aesthetic and ethical differ on the level of "first principles", "there are no rational grounds for choice between either position."⁵⁹ However, he takes Kierkegaard's point to be that "the principles which depict the ethical way of life are to be adopted *for no reason*."⁶⁰ After attributing this view to Kierkegaard, MacIntyre goes on to argue that it undermines the commitment that ethicism requires—the commitment to the task of becoming oneself over a long period of time, indeed one's whole life. If the event that marks the entrance into the ethical is arbitrary and criterionless, then it would seem easy enough to revoke such a discipline whenever it becomes trying, as it always does.

MacIntyre's critique helps to summarise this section, making two points: that the

57. "*Liberum arbitrium*, which can equally well choose the good or the evil, is basically an abrogation of the concept of freedom" (*JP* II 1249).

58. He does not, be it noted, arrive here the same way as we have, but feels that the book *Either/Or* itself manages to present such an ultimate choice to the reader. He erroneously supposes, however, that a reader can approach the book without already being drawn to either the aesthetic or the ethical (Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. 40).

59. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 41.

60. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 42.

spirit's revelation provides one with a choice to make; but that it leaves this choice in a crippled state. For the first point, we saw in the last chapter that the aesthete cannot fairly appreciate the ethical because his current position constitutes a bias that affects his appraisal of the ethical—the aesthete's conception of life excludes the ethical conception of life. Kierkegaard's idea is that the spirit barges into the aesthete's habitat all the same, intruding where it does not belong. The spirit does not directly overturn aesthetic concepts, but, like hearing a strange sound in a quiet house, one gets the inkling of there being something besides what one can see.

The problematic second point, however, is that while circumventing the distorted perspective that the aesthete views life from, *any* coherent perspective seems now to be excluded. Rather than constituting true liberation, “freedom succumbs in this dizziness” (CA IV 331). The chaos of anxiety does not permit any rubric for measuring what is going on in one's head. As when dizzy or light-headed, one is sure to fall in one direction, but it seems foolish to find meaning in what direction that happens to be. When someone's intellect is numb, what is the difference between him choosing and dice choosing it for him, for he is no more in control in the former case?

Between these two matters—“radical choice” and the seriousness of the ethical—MacIntyre feels that Kierkegaard is locked into a “deep incoherence” that destroys his position.⁶¹ Other readers think that the latter concern is not important, as though Kierkegaard champions the “possibility for inventing new rules, together with a celebration of the plurality of heterogeneous claims to knowledge.”⁶² The latter reading leaves no respect for ethics⁶³, but we have not yet seen how the two prongs of the aesthete's decision can be meaningfully compared. As we shall see next, Kierkegaard

61. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 43.

62. Anita Craig, “The Possibilities for Personhood in a Context of (Hitherto Unknown) Possibilities” in *Kierkegaard: The Self in Society*, ed. George Pattison and Steven Shakespeare (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), p. 57.

63. Consider *EO* II 229: “The ethical is the universal and.... is always interdictory.” Impressions like Craig's of Kierkegaard are possibly due to seeing his religious ideal as excluding the ethical, which is unfounded.

anticipates this problem.

In Kierkegaard's vision, the manner of illuminating ethical life is violent. So long as leaping is assessed in intellectual terms, it will never be performed, but Kierkegaard theorises a collision with the spirit such that the intellect is no longer in control over the matter. The spirit's revelation thrusts the decision to leap out of the intellectual arena, though one can then ask how else the decision should be made.

C: Spirit as the Self

Kierkegaard finds authority to be the necessary qualification to substantiate the spirit's revelation, and we see here how he employs it to offset the balance between the aesthetic and ethical. Direct communication could not render aestheticism untenable because, no matter how far aestheticism is from the truth, the speaker lacked the ability to make the truth bear forcefully on his listener. The spirit, being *itself* the truth, does have this ability in that its very revelation persistently introduces the proper object of belief to the aesthete, no matter how strong his disbelief. Aestheticism proves itself harder and harder to sustain, making it a less viable picture of life.

(1) Impotence of the Will

The revelation of the spirit opens up an unusual problem. The will is, so to speak, running loose, and needs to be restrained under a new structure. There must be criteria by which one's commitments become meaningfully binding. Consciousness of *something* pertinent must be restored. Kierkegaard cannot say that the aesthete can become conscious of the truth of ethicism, but he tries to devise a way in which one can become conscious of the falseness of aestheticism. This will undermine and gradually

rule out that alternative to the leap.

In the first paragraph of *Sickness*, Anti-Climacus declares that “spirit is the self” (*SUD XI 127*), which follows from the ethico-religious view. Frequently throughout his text, he draws attention to the mistake of attributing something (such as anxiety) to an external source when it is really caused by oneself, “somewhat as one suffering from dizziness speaks in nervous delusion of a weight on his head” the weight being “nevertheless... not something external but a reverse reflection of the internal” (*SUD XI 128*). The contribution that this makes to the discussion is that the collision between the aesthete and the spirit is no incidental collision between two independent things, but is between two things that share a pre-established kinship. In the former case, the effect that the spirit could have on the aesthete would be merely external and contingent, but in the latter case it can affect the aesthete internally and essentially. It is *I myself* who am calling me. Although anxious dizziness feels like it is due to outside circumstances, as though something is happening to me and knocking me off balance, it is really due to an internal imbalance (*SUD XI 179; JP I 749*).

What this claim means is that all and only selves are spirit, and that even while the spirit is alien to aestheticism, it nevertheless plays a fundamental role in one’s personality, like an absentee landlord collecting taxes. Whatever one’s conscious or semi-conscious image of oneself, one is from the beginning essentially spirit. This entails a reinterpretation of aestheticism: we understood aestheticism to be the false belief in having life in one’s natural state, without the spirit, but we are going to have to look again into what, in Kierkegaard’s eyes, lies within natural life.

If all human life is unavoidably spiritual, then how can non-spiritual aestheticism even occur, given that aestheticism is an interpretation of human life? In other words, if spirit is the self then what is the non-spiritual aesthetic ‘self’? This section is basically concerned with articulating Kierkegaard’s answer to this question. Non-spiritual existence is existing in death, as with “a mortally ill person when he is struggling with

death and yet cannot die" (*SUD* XI 132). This idea conjures up Dante-like images of "impotent self-consuming" (*SUD* XI 132).

The state described is what Kierkegaard understands as despair, where one attempts to somehow form a non-spiritual self. The main point is that being non-spiritual is to have an inappropriate relationship to spirit, but it does not mean having *no* relationship to it. The spirit never goes away and it always has some part to play in one's life (*SUD* XI 132). To express this Kierkegaard associates despair with "double-mindedness". By despair as double-mindedness, he means that no matter how much someone may try to choose an aesthetic way of life, he cannot rid himself of the desire for the contrary. He cannot reside whole-heartedly and intently in this erroneous conviction:

Is not despair simply double-mindedness? For what is despairing other than to have two wills? For whether the weakling despairs over not being able to wrench himself away from the bad, or whether the brazen one despairs over not being able to tear himself completely away from the Good: they are both double-minded, they both have two wills. Neither of them honestly wills one thing, however desperately they may seem to will it. ... In this fashion has God, better than any king, insured himself against every rebellion. ... Despair is the limit. ... Here they are met in equal impotence (*PH* 61).

'Despair is the limit' in that, if spirit is truly the self and if that truth reveals itself, there is no such thing as healthy, content, or stable aesthetic life. Aestheticism can only persist at the cost of internal dismemberment, for one is constantly pulled towards one's true self no matter how tirelessly one may try to run in the opposite direction. However, Kierkegaard links life with unity and death with disunity; ergo this double-mindedness is fatal. As long as one is torn like this one cannot call what one has "life", the way two children might break a toy in the process of fighting over total possession of it. The attempt to build a life in falsehood results in death. Given the postulate of the spirit's authoritative revelation, there is no such thing as a purely and uniformly aesthetic self: "Whenever that which triggers his despair occurs, it is immediately apparent that he has

been in despair his whole life" (*SUD XI 138*).

This effect can only occur if the spirit reveals itself—"despair presupposes anxiety"⁶⁴—but the spirit's authority is felt in terms of one's irresistible affinity to it. Like pulling a rubber band with one end anchored, one can stray from the truth only with great effort and much internal strain, and, indeed, such stress only increases as one strays further. For Kierkegaard the aesthete is powerless in that the spirit will tolerate no structures of selfhood that compete with it. There are set limits on what form of life we can lead, and the spirit reveals itself not only to usher in true life but to enforce its judgement against false life.

(2) Necessity

Why then is aestheticism a problem? Above I described Kierkegaard's views on the aesthete's essential condition of despair, but Kierkegaard does not assume that the aesthete is conscious of this condition (or that he understands what despair is (*SUD XI 164*)). He may not fully see the futility of his rebellion, for from the bewilderment of anxiety he does not automatically regain a conscious grasp of his situation. However, necessity, that which can be defied only in vain, will be his teacher, as he develops "*despair over his weakness*" (*SUD XI 173*), i.e. over his lack of sovereignty over his life.

We do not need to review the process itself of becoming conscious of despair, but what is important here is that one can understand despair not only as a result of a lack of self-consciousness, but also as the efficacious force that helps to build self-consciousness. A teacher penalises a student not only *because* he does not work but also *in order that* he will learn to work, and in the same way not only does the aesthete despair as a result of rejecting the spirit, but through such corrective measures he may gradually learn that he

64. Howard V. Hong, in *The Essential Kierkegaard*, by Kierkegaard, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 350.

cannot win in his conquest.⁶⁵

Kierkegaard's equation of spirit and selfhood must not be taken for granted. For instance, Taylor says that Kierkegaard uses 'spirit' and 'self' interchangeably, equating them on the level of meaning.⁶⁶ In the first place this is false, for careful deliberation in his use of terms can be clearly seen: *Anxiety* is about the spirit but has scarcely any mention of the self; *Sickness* is about the self with infrequent mention of the spirit; while in other cases (e.g. the works of Climacus) similar topics are discussed using neither term. In the second place Taylor's equation interferes with comparing the different attempts at selfhood that characterise the stages; for the aesthete certainly does not define the self in spiritual terms (*SUD* XI 159). Thirdly and most importantly, an individual may lack consciousness of the equation of spirit and selfhood, as true as it may be. It is on this basis that aestheticism continues, and a large component of *Sickness* deals with the development of self-consciousness. That the aesthete runs into despair as he fights the spirit need not indicate to him that he is on a failing path, just as losing a wrestling match does not imply that one cannot win and should not try again. Far to the contrary, to explain the phenomenon of despair the connection between spirit and self should be taken as a claim that one may not share: "To be unaware of being defined as spirit is precisely what despair is" (*SUD* XI 139).

Gradually, however, as the individual runs from the spirit he "discovers his untruth" (*PF* IV 184). The aesthetic option is undermined due to the inability to produce the effect to which that option is intended to lead. That is, one is aesthetic out of a desire to have life, but in the end it is impossible for aestheticism to satisfy that self-love. Being essentially spirit, one would be trying to run away from oneself, but, of course, the single thing that one is absolutely unable to expel from oneself is one's own self (*SUD* XI 130).

65. Hence instead of seeing his views on despair as "sombre and depressing". Anti-Climacus regards them as "shed[ding] light on what generally is left somewhat obscure" (*SUD* XI 136).

66. Taylor, *Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship*, pp. 88, 109, 129. Taylor is not alone in this tendency, e.g. in *Kierkegaard as Humanist* and *Kierkegaard as Theologian* Arthur B. Come misleadingly interpolates "[self]" in any quotes containing the word 'spirit'.

However, there is no gain in desiring what one cannot have; aestheticism, whatever its promises with regard to life, cannot deliver. For example, maintaining aesthetic life may need to be fuelled by forgetting something, but if I must incessantly forget, if a memory persistently returns after every time that I dislodge it, then it is accurate to say that I had really never forgotten it in the first place. Because the spirit never leaves the aesthete alone even as he rejects it, so that his will is always pulled towards it, he must continually reject it over and over again. Incessantly, “at any moment that he does not have it [despair], he must have thrown it or is throwing it away—but it comes again” (*SUD* XI 130).

In terms of the necessary shape that one’s life must have, how should we understand the aesthetic attempt to contradict this? Anti-Climacus states his case: “To despair over oneself, in despair to will to be rid of oneself—this is the formula for all despair” (*SUD* XI 134). Construed this way, the aesthete’s love for life gets manifested as the attempt to die—for what else does it mean to be rid of oneself?⁶⁷ Lacking the consciousness of who he really is, the aesthete acts the way he does with the intention of supporting life, but from the perspective of truth he is trying to suffocate and silence himself. Understanding Anti-Climacus’ terms this way, one of the most important points to be taken from *Sickness* is that “the torment of despair is precisely this inability to die” (*SUD* XI 131).

Given this part of Kierkegaard’s thought, it is *not* accurate to say that the individual must choose between different views of the self: “The very truth of freedom of choice is: there must be no *choice*, even though there is a choice” (*JP* II 1261). One is left with only one view of the self, as yet untested, and the choice is merely to take it or leave it. Judge William claims to “choose the absolute that chooses me” (*E/O* II 191).

67. One must guard against confusion and equivocation here, for there are different ‘lives’ being referred to in tandem. What the aesthete considers to be life the spirit would call death, and vice versa. The death involved in leaping is the death of the false, aesthetic self, and is the means to true life, but the death that Anti-Climacus accuses the aesthete of plotting is the death of true life, the spirit.

The task is not to form myself, but to accept myself as reality dictates. With this in mind Edward F. Mooney rightly asks to what degree the leap is a matter of self-reception and not just self-choice: “The relevant volition seems more akin to willingness or readiness for embrace than to selective choice.”⁶⁸ One is not asked to *prefer* the spirit⁶⁹ but to obey it, and Kierkegaard believes that “for a human being there is satisfaction and joy only in obeying” (*JP* II 1255). The individual is still free not to leap, but that does not imply that there is another alternative that he can choose *instead*. A modern illustration is that on a treadmill one can run in two directions but only move in one. In this way Kierkegaard speaks of freedom even in the context of necessity, where there is, “in some meaningful sense, ‘no choice’.”⁷⁰

The individual still needs to become who he is, but “the self he is is a very definite something” (*SUD* XI 149). This point grounds Hannay’s warning that Kierkegaard should not be seen, as he often is, “as originating the existentialist idea that man is a freely self-interpreting animal.”⁷¹ Despite the path that later existentialism has taken, Kierkegaard, as we have seen, is quite at home in talking about essence and human nature.⁷² Possibility allows movement, but necessity brings the ‘where’ to which one can move, excluding other destinations (*SUD* XI 149).

(3) *Dilemma*

So far in this section there has been little room for the element of liberation that was the subject of the last section. Taken simply, Kierkegaardian anxiety results from an opening of different ways of satisfying self-love, while Kierkegaardian despair results

68. Mooney, *Selves in Discord and Resolve*, p. 19.

69. “There is not one of those called who has not preferred to be exempted” (*FSE* XII 310).

70. Ferreira, “Faith and the Kierkegaardian Leap”, p. 219.

71. Hannay, “Introduction” *The Sickness Unto Death*, p. 25-26.

72. “Kierkegaard assumes and repeatedly asserts that the major fact of human existence is that the human being is composed and structured in such a way that a self is one’s destiny” (Come, *Kierkegaard as Humanist*, p. 51).

from a closing of different ways of doing so. Here I hope to link my reading of Kierkegaard's thoughts on volitional liberation and impotence in a complementary way, and to capture the culminating effect of the spirit's authoritative revelation. It is critical for Kierkegaard that this is possible, in order to respect the purpose that was laid out at the beginning of this chapter, namely that aestheticism must be overcome but not by means that undermine the purpose of overcoming it.

I capture my reading of Kierkegaard's theory by the word 'dilemma', by which I mean the state of having alternatives to choose from but where each alternative is undesired (as long as one remains loyal to aestheticism). This is a situation in which one is both free and bound. One is free to choose, but not free concerning what his choices are. Plus, blissful ignorance is not one such choice, for the spirit authoritatively forbids it.

The leap must be made freely, but in Kierkegaard's account it relies on provided conditions; hence it may be difficult to juxtapose actively choosing oneself and passively suffering from the heavy hand of the truth. Regarding freedom and determination, Ferreira considers Kierkegaard a compatibilist while Timothy P. Jackson says that he is not.⁷³ For Jackson, "*we can make no move whatsoever toward God,*" as we saw in the last chapter, so "God must turn and draw us;" at the end, however, "we can say 'Yes' or 'No'."⁷⁴ At some fundamental, even if minuscule, level, the gift-bearer must stand aside and allow the recipient to decide whether or not he wants this gift. On the other hand, for Ferreira the freedom involved in obeying or disobeying the spirit's grace must be "an interested, contextualized freedom,"⁷⁵ which it cannot be if the choice to obey or disobey lies prior to determining that context. To recall MacIntyre's rebuttal of what he takes to be Kierkegaard's notion of choice, the individual's choice should not be arbitrary.

73. Ferreira. "Faith and the Kierkegaardian Leap", p. 220; Timothy P. Jackson. "Arminian Edification: Kierkegaard on Grace and Free Will" in *Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, p. 250.

74. Jackson. "Grace and Free Will", p. 237.

75. Ferreira. "Faith and the Kierkegaardian Leap", p. 219.

I cannot treat this debate on any deep level here, but there may be a happy medium between the above two views. I find Ferreira's position too strong, so that fundamentally there is a common ground beneath the qualitative gap between the stages.⁷⁶ That is, she reduces the distance between the stages. However, Jackson's interpretation requires a simplistic view of revelation, by insinuating that if one refuses the spirit that is the end of the matter. But the spirit acts not like a stationary vending machine but like a street vendor who hunts you down and will not take 'no' for an answer, requiring us to turn it down "at every moment" (*SUD* XI 129).

However, I find that there is a tendency to treat the Kierkegaardian leap as a simple event, so that we are forced to interpret it as a whole. But it is not: there is a take-off and a landing, the shedding of the aesthetic and the donning of the ethical. This point is not only logical but is suggested by Kierkegaard's describing intermediate points between the points to and from which one leaps (i.e. irony (*CUP* VII 436)). If leaving aestheticism does not necessarily imply reaching the ethical, there may be a way to resolve the tension between the passively suffered authority and the actively chosen acceptance of the spirit.

It is the spirit that brings life, but first it brings death (*FSE* XII 361); one must freely choose that life, but one is brought towards death whether one likes it or not. The ground is crumbling, and gradually one finds oneself sinking; no solid ground for life shall be found without the leap.⁷⁷ The spirit ensures that the alternative to leaping is a limbo state where one simply feels death and nothing else. Hence, although the aesthete still does not have any insight into what the leap might bring, he gradually comes to a

76. Emmanuel portrays Ferreira as rejecting "a radical discontinuity" in the Kierkegaardian leap (*Revelation*, p. 85). (However, Emmanuel is sympathetic to this reading.)

77. Note that this does not imply that leaping *does* entail life, for the aesthete only knows that not leaping does not entail life. Even more intense despair awaits after the leap, and from Kierkegaard's standpoint the ethicist must leap again, into the religious. Though the ethicist aims to relate to the spirit, a new level of despair awaits, that "is the result not of the lovers' being unable to have each other but of their being unable to understanding each other" (*PF* IV194). This is what the Christian but not the ethicist has learned to reconcile himself with.

more lucid understanding of the futility of his aesthetic view, and his aesthetic claim to life gradually becomes untenable: “I am as if dead and yet not dead!” (*FSE* XII 363).

The highest and most conscious state of despair according to Anti-Climacus is “in despair to will to be oneself”, also called defiance (*SUD* XI 178). The aesthete wants to find his old self again—a single-minded, cohesive unit that is, nevertheless, founded on aesthetic categories. Alas, that is simply not available. His only alternative to the leap is to suffer under a sickness that refuses to put him out of his misery. This death is “incessantly the end” (*SUD* XI 135), where one is not even put out of one’s misery, but dies repeatedly and without resolution (*SUD* XI 132).

There is little if any overlap between Climacus’ and Anti-Climacus’ vocabulary, but I find a close match between this description of despair and Climacus’ understanding of the state of irony. It will be recalled that for Climacus this is the borderline between the aesthetic and ethical (*CUP* VII 436), where one has let go of one’s aesthetic claim to life without yet affirming the ethical. Still spurning the leap, yet having his aesthetic homeland destroyed, the ironist “sees himself as neither one nor the other type of self.”⁷⁸ But this is no safe alternative: instead “irony is an abnormal development that ends... by killing the individual” (*JP* II 1717). This alludes to Socrates’ question, which Kierkegaard refers to more than once, about whether he was a creature like Typhon, or of a diviner, gentler nature.⁷⁹ The character Typhon, the multi-headed beast born from the torment of Tartarus, who attacked the gods, is a fitting personification of Anti-Climacus’ vision of despair.

So the spirit forcibly puts us into a dilemma and then it is up to us to get out of it. This sounds brutal, but “is it cruel to be, if you please, cruel when it is unconditionally the only thing that can save from ruin and help pull through” (*FSE* XII 364)? Part of Kierkegaard’s solution to effecting the leap involves the aesthete being thrown out of his

78. Cross. “The Perils of Reflexive Irony”, p. 151.

79. Plato. *Phaedrus*, trans. James H. Nichols Jr. (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1998), 230a.

desired habitat, challenging the “dichotomy between leaping and falling.”⁸⁰ The alleged truth, that there is only spiritual selfhood, asserts itself by killing its competition. Then, the aesthete does not have the choice between ethical and aesthetic life, but only between the ethical and the postponement of the ethical, “like a woman in labour... [who is] continually holding off the moment and continually remains in pain” (*E/O* II 185). He is tied to a relationship with the spirit, and his choice is only to see this positively or negatively; the option he lacks is to be freed altogether from this relationship. Hence, so long as he cannot imagine life after the leap, none of his alternatives will be appealing, and he slowly realises the emptiness of aestheticism. In this way, Kierkegaard’s theory grounds some level of consciousness that gives substance to the aesthete’s deliberation and decision regarding the leap.

In Kierkegaard’s theory, the spirit’s revelation overwhelmed intellectual categories for decision-making, but its authority establishes a new category—obedience. Its authority stems from a person’s inescapable relationship to it, and as one becomes conscious of this one is finally able to make a meaningful decision about the spirit. But the matter is no longer to believe or disbelieve the spirit, but to obey or disobey it.

* * *

The important difference between authoritative and unauthoritative communication is that the former can demand accordance without relying on a more basic agreement from which the recipient negotiates. The spirit does not wait for understanding or consent, and it asserts itself from a position above the individual’s position. The spirit’s authoritative revelation is a kind of communication where its force

80. Emmanuel, *Revelation*, p. 84.

lies not in what is said but in who has said it. By contrast, a human qua human can only (rightfully) stand on an equal footing with another, and so a speech's weight lies only in what is said, not who has said it; but we saw that nothing *can* be said that supports the ethical.

To summarise Kierkegaard's solution as to how the leap can take place: authoritative communication gets around the hurdle that obstructs ordinary attempts to facilitate the leap; so, Kierkegaard postulates that authoritative communication occurs. This postulate has two basic components: firstly that the spirit communicates (i.e. reveals itself), which means that it must exist; secondly it must stand in an authoritative relationship to humanity, which means that it must essentially bear on human life.

Kierkegaard's postulate is not easily integrated into the situation with which he starts. The challenge is to conceive a manner of bridging the gap between aestheticism and ethicism without fallaciously closing that gap. The aesthete's freedom to make the leap must be retained though he requires intervention to supplement that freedom. This makes the leap "something curiously active yet passive."⁸¹ With one hand the spirit's revelation gives greater possibilities for life, but with the other hand its authority tears away the life one originally had. What comes next is up to the aesthete, but first "the life-giving Spirit is the very one who slays you" (*FSE* XII 360).

81. Ferreira. "Faith and the Kierkegaardian Leap". p. 210.

Chapter III

Kierkegaard's Role as an Author

Even if Kierkegaard's implicit solution to his problem is consistent, it leads to two predicaments. For one, it looks obviously false, as it predicts penetrating experiences that, for many of us, simply do not occur. Secondly, it seems to exclude any practical purpose for a third party in curbing aestheticism, including Kierkegaard's own writing. Both of these challenges are addressed by looking more closely at one's role as a recipient of the spirit's communication. Kierkegaard perceives a way to cheat the spirit and suppress its revelation, through what he often calls "spiritlessness". This renders the spirit's activity ineffective, requiring Kierkegaard's aid.

Kierkegaard does not give a compact account of spiritlessness, but it is basically an illusion that elevates one's view to a status whereby it cannot be opposed, so that one spurns the spirit before it can make itself heard. However, as widespread as Kierkegaard thinks spiritlessness is, for him it is a pseudo-problem: it entails an easily perceived contradiction and only persists because it goes unchecked. It is a psychological defence against the spirit's assault—it is not a coherent position in its own right but a forgetfulness (*SUD* XI 168). In fighting it, then, Kierkegaard's writing takes a peculiar shape. Though he wants to oppose his reader's stance, the special nature of this illusion forbids him from doing so openly. His production must *truly* fight spiritlessness while deceptively *seeming* to do the opposite, finding favour with his spiritless reader. The danger is that if his execution of this plan is imprecise, he may feed the very problem he is trying to reduce.

In this chapter I will also argue against an analogy that Kierkegaard commonly used to describe himself: as a midwife, borrowing Socrates' self-description. I will need to mention Socrates in order to clarify the analogy, but this is not for the sake of an historical comparison. It will be emphasised that midwifery misses the deception at the heart of the aesthetic project.

A: Spiritlessness

The spirit's authoritative revelation is not the only necessary condition for instilling the dilemma with which Kierkegaard's theory culminates. Kierkegaard's role as an author is to identify this supplementary condition and to rectify whatever prevents it from being met. We will see here the complexities entailed in the situation in which the spirit is so frustrated.

(1) Complacency

From the discussion in Chapter II, we have but a story—and one that for many is more fiction than fact. The psychological effects of the spirit's revelation seem far too rare to lend credibility to Kierkegaard's theory. We see many people who could not be called ethical or religious, yet who seem to lead undisturbed lives. Of the authors who deal with the themes expressed in the previous chapter, each wrestles with this hurdle.⁸² Their answer is that any lack of the impact predicted by their theory is not evidence of its falsity, nor the falsity of the ethical. Instead, it indicates that even the spirit is not in complete control over the aesthete, but that a certain condition must first be met before

82. "What I am saying here probably strikes many as obscure and foolish talk, because they pride themselves on never having been in anxiety" (CA IV 423); "It makes no difference whether the person in despair is ignorant that his condition is despair—he is in despair just the same" (SUD XI 156).

authoritative revelation can take effect. This condition being unmet constitutes another problem besides that of aestheticism itself, called “spiritlessness”.

Spirit and spiritlessness are not directly related. Spiritlessness does not refer to the actual absence of spirit (*CA* IV 365), and so does not counter Kierkegaard’s postulate of the spirit’s authoritative revelation. Rather, it is something that resists the spirit’s imposition, enabling us not to acknowledge or be affected by it:

The most effective means of escaping spiritual trial is to become spiritless, and the sooner the better. If only taken care of in time, everything takes care of itself, and as for spiritual trial, it may be explained as nonexistent, or at most may be regarded as a piquant poetical fiction (*CA* IV 385).

What is it about spiritlessness that differentiates it from the aestheticism that we have been looking at? Instead of being a fourth form of life beside the three stages we have already seen⁸³, a more accurate reading sees it as a special case of aestheticism: “In what categories do they live? They live in aesthetic, or, at most, aesthetic-ethical categories” (*PV* XIII 531). However, to recall a point made in Chapter I, although the aesthete claims to find life in his natural condition, there may be some impressions of what his life is like that he cannot sustain. Due to various circumstances his life may to some degree be unhappy or his life’s ambitions unmet. An aesthete who suffers from misfortune is most susceptible to pangs from the spirit’s intervention, for his imagination is more apt to stray from his familiar surroundings, and his previous commitments are easily shaken. The leap still looks like a mad plunge into death, making things only worse, so he still offers resistance; but there is little strength in him to persist.

What is more dangerous is if this aesthetic life *is* satisfying. Spiritlessness is a state where one cannot imagine anything significantly better than what one has, and Kierkegaard found the prevalence of this state to be worsening as the modern world became more affluent and comfortable. Fortune fuels this illusion, and misfortune shuts

83. As Jerry H. Gill identifies it in *Essays on Kierkegaard*, p. 151.

it down (*CUP* VII 376). But so long as people are able to spend their lives protected from the tragedies that the natural world affords, they may become spiritless. Whether this is by having many riches in store or by a settled satisfaction with mediocrity, the more pleased the spiritless is with what he sees, the more secure becomes his illusion that this is what life is supposed to be like. Spiritless contentment gets in the way of the forward momentum that the spirit wants to fuel. This makes one more committed to the status quo, as though there is no room for improvement, leading to “stagnation rather than development.”⁸⁴ Although all and only selves are spiritual, spiritlessness seems to involve getting away with one’s spiritual neglect, so that “the philistine-bourgeois mentality spiritlessly triumphs” (*SUD* XI 154).

Consequently, spiritlessness is positive and negative in different senses, as Fenves observes: “It is so negative, and negative in such a way, that the ‘less’ of ‘spiritlessness’ constitutes and concomitantly institutes a peculiar mode of affirmation.”⁸⁵ It is very far from real life, but nevertheless is strong enough to be taken as real. Just as the spirit represents stable, true life, spiritlessness has a relationship to it of a sort—it “may therefore possess the whole content of spirit, but mark well, not as spirit but as the haunting of ghosts, as gibberish, as a slogan, etc.” (*CA* IV 364). The problem is that this relation is misguided and involves only a mock spirit, as in idolatry (cf. *CA* IV 365). Being spiritless can look similar to being spiritual, but it is even further behind the aestheticism considered so far. In order for one to progress towards a truly satisfying life, this complacent, false sense of satisfaction must be broken down.

‘Complacency’ is not Kierkegaard’s most commonly-used word to describe spiritlessness, but I use this term because it indicates on the one hand the proud feeling of secure life while at the same time connoting that that security is reproachable. Spiritlessness makes desirable promises but is internally invalid, purporting to allow one

84. Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 182.

85. Peter Fenves, *‘Chatter’: Language and History in Kierkegaard* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 99.

to reap the benefits of the leap without requiring any leap (cf. *PV* XIII 530). As I elaborate on spiritlessness I will first emphasise its strength, even as it rests on error, and next its weakness and how the individual must compensate. This final point will anticipate Kierkegaard's plan of attack.

(2) Aestheticism in Christendom

Spiritlessness frustrates the spirit by stifling one's imagination, which the spirit exploits when it reveals itself. This stifling is effected by undercutting the distinction between natural and spiritual life that was highlighted at the beginning of this study. We will look at both points here.

If one assumes that the spirit performs its role well, any failure to reach the anticipated result must be due to the aesthete not performing his role. If we retrace our steps, we will see that Kierkegaard's solution requires an active contribution from the aesthete at *two* points. One is the leap itself, and the spirit's revelation is directed towards facilitating this, but the other point, for which there are as yet no controls, comes at the beginning. It will be recalled that for Kierkegaard the initial effect of the spirit's revelation depends on the aesthete's imagination, with which he can articulate possibilities beyond what he currently affirms.⁸⁶ As soon as that begins to happen the aesthete is doomed, as was described.

However, if the aesthete can restrain his imagination, he will not even be led to respond to the spirit in any such way. In that sense, even if the spirit cannot be resisted *after* admitting it into one's domain, it may be resisted *before* admitting it; the reason for anxious dizziness "is just as much in his own eye as in the abyss, for suppose he had not looked down" (*CA* IV 331). Spiritlessness, then, is something that dulls the imagination,

86. "The imagination plays a crucial role in Kierkegaard's account of religious conversion" (Emmanuel. *Revelation*, p. 84).

closing one's mind to anything beyond the familiar and established. In order to preserve oneself, "the philistine-bourgeois mentality does not have imagination, does not want to have it, abhors it" (*SUD* XI 154). The spirit, whatever its authority, cannot pierce this hard shell, for, like the Trojan horse, its power becomes manifest only after it is let in.

To be specific, imagination leads one to desire the incomprehensible spirit, even as one fears it for being outside one's view of life; but the spiritless individual automatically objects to the unknown—as though deifying comprehensibility and probability as indubitable criteria for determining the truth (*JFY* XII 385). In so doing one loses the concepts of authority and obedience (*DGA* 104), for one dismisses the possibility of anything greater than the human. One excludes the transcendental, accordingly limiting the domain of interesting possibilities for the imagination. One's life becomes fossilised into a routine: one is serious and sober, knowing what one wants and not letting anything exotic get the better of one's sensibilities. One stifles one's anxieties instead of working through them, as though having no symptoms means having no disease.

This happens for a specific reason. Even as the aesthete claims to have life naturally, he should recognise this as a contingency, such that even if he is right, he has consciously rejected alternatives that could have been true instead. However the complacent person wants for nothing and has a feeling of completeness, taking his life as a matter of course and having no sense of potential misfortune. Self-love is appeased by recourse to a pretence of indestructibility. The problem is not the content of the spiritless person's beliefs but the modality he ascribes to it—it is less that an aesthete can find natural comforts, but that he takes such circumstances as though they stem essentially from one's being. The question of a loss of self for him "simply does not exist" (*SUD* XI 158). This is obviously an error, for what is contingent is treated as necessary, and "if an individual defrauds possibility, by which he is to be educated, he never arrives at faith" (*CA* IV 423). As one forbids real opposition, one creates for oneself a strange standpoint

that cannot be negated—anything that does oppose it (namely the spirit) is shunned as something ridiculous.

What does this mean in terms of the dichotomy between natural and spiritual life? In *Point of View* Kierkegaard identifies two illusions, not just one, and here we consider that “‘Christendom’ is an enormous illusion” (*PV* XIII 529). The spiritless aesthete thinks he has the rewards of the spirit already in hand, and will profess his spirituality. There is an intermingling between aesthetic and religious concepts, though “if the particular spheres are not kept decisively separate from one another, everything is confused” (*CUP* VII 280). This produces the ‘Christian of a sort’ or the Christian pagan.

In this illusion, Christianity is taken to be established even so that one is Christian by birth, without having to choose it consciously: “In brief, the confusion is this... : they enter into Christianity all wrong” (*JP* I 390). No struggle is perceived as regards one’s status as a Christian, nor any possibility of falling away from that status. The original distinction which Kierkegaard takes to be so important, between natural and spiritual life, is obscured, as one is taken to be *naturally spiritual*; there is a “*both-and*” (*CUP* VII 347-48) whereby one tries to equally uphold both aesthetic and religious pursuits.

Considering that the ethical is so critical for distinguishing the aesthetic and religious, it is utterly absent from spiritless considerations, and with it the death that it represents (cf. *CA* IV 366). Kierkegaard complains that Christendom is dominated by “people to whom it has never occurred that their lives should have some duty to God” (*PV* XIII 530).⁸⁷ This can only mean that Christian categories and terms have become confused, for non-Christians are led to believe that they are paradigmatic Christians. Just as aesthetic life is a fabrication, so is the spirit referred to by aesthetes in Christendom. For example, the notion of salvation makes little sense without an accompanying notion of that from which one is saved, but we hear about the former much more than the latter.

87. “There is always a secular mentality that no doubt wants to have the name of being Christian but wants to become Christian as cheaply as possible” (*FSE* XII 307).

Ethical principles of honesty and an uncompromised relationship to truth—all that make ethics unpalatable by obstructing self-love—are forgotten; yet religion, which for Kierkegaard does not make sense without ethics, is embraced all the same.

In sum, even if an aesthete cannot comprehend the spirit as it reveals itself, he should still be able to wonder about it; but he stamps out his imagination by arrogating an immunity to death, making the ethical acceptance of death nonsensical. An aesthete in Christendom, with a lukewarm and smug kind of religiousness, is *further* from true religiousness, and understands it less, than an openly non-religious aesthete: “The most dangerous, and thoroughly ordinary, kind of indifference is... to have a certain religion, but one that has been watered down and vulgarised to pure twaddle” (*M* XIV 223). As regards becoming a true Christian, this adds the extra burden of “introduc[ing] Christianity—into Christendom” (*PV* XIII 530). Before real Christianity is possible, one must learn that one is not a Christian.

(3) Distraction

The question here is to find the source of spiritlessness, in order to see where Kierkegaard aims his strike. With spiritlessness religious concepts lose their substance, and therein lies its power to repel the true spirit. The weakness of spiritlessness, however, is that it is internally invalid, in a way that can be seen by the spiritless individual. Rising out of the illusion of aestheticism requires intervention from the spirit, but the illusion of spiritlessness, or of Christendom, is something that one can recognise by one’s own power, and hence one is responsible for being deceived by it: “This state... is not the state of innocence; rather, viewed from the standpoint of spirit, it is precisely that of sinfulness” (*CA* IV 363). Kierkegaard wants to pin responsibility for spiritlessness on the spiritless themselves. Spiritlessness is perpetuated by one’s purposely turning a blind eye.

Spiritlessness is a widespread phenomenon that, according to Kierkegaard, holds the modern world in its clutches, but that does not imply that its root cause is at an interpersonal level. While having nothing good to say about Christendom, he did not direct his efforts against the Christian institution itself.⁸⁸ One cannot be absolved from responsibility for the leap on the basis of being born into a spiritless society; rather “spiritually... no one can corrupt him but the man himself” (*JP* I 59). Kierkegaard’s anger is towards not the modern world but modern persons, treating them independently of their formative environment. This is a bold move, but—whether it is sustainable or not—it is a necessary one for Kierkegaard to remain faithful to his original project: “Is [spiritlessness] something that happens to a person? No, it is his own fault. No one is born devoid of spirit, and no matter how many go to their death with this spiritlessness as the one and only outcome of their lives, it is not the fault of life” (*SUD* XI 212). If the case were otherwise, there would be many for whom the ethical leap is simply not possible, by circumstances beyond their control.

But if someone consciously tries to live a spiritless life, he finds that he cannot do so, as the folly entailed in spiritlessness becomes immediately apparent once he brings it to a conscious level. Hence, as much as the spiritless like to talk about spiritual matters, they cannot commit themselves to what their talk suggests. Nor can they admit their own spiritlessness. For example: “every once in a while a parson makes a little fuss in the pulpit, about there being something not quite right with all these many Christians—but... all those he is speaking *to* are Christians, and of course he is not speaking to those he is speaking *about*” (*PV* XIII 530). Despite the gravity that such speech should have, it becomes empty by its message not being drawn from the objective domain and into anyone’s actual life. One enjoys an exchange of ideas, so long as one does not have to talk about actuality (*JP* I 810). One does not personally, subjectively relate to what one

88. Only at the end of his life did he launch his “attack upon ‘Christendom’”, but this was due largely to having a different rapport with the townspeople than he had at the time of writing the aesthetic works.

says or hears. A spiritless person can know much that is true about the spirit, and “can say exactly the same thing that the richest spirit has said” (*CA* IV 365), but he pulls these concepts away from where they belong—in real, concrete life.⁸⁹ In spiritlessness there is an inconsistency between how one uses a word and the implications one draws from it.

The simplicity of this flaw is what makes spiritlessness intrinsically weak—it floats on thin air. Notice the contradiction in terms: “If one were to ask from where he has this life-view, this essential relation to good fortune, he might naively answer: I do not understand it myself” (*CUP* VII 376, emphasis added). Rather than being an elusive problem, “one can ascertain by the simplest observation” that so many people in Christendom are not Christians (*PI* XIII 530). The error in spiritless complacency is something that even the simplest of minds *should* be able to discover. One should know whether one is an aesthete or not, and that being a Christian is not a default state but one view among several. Sometimes Kierkegaard’s frustration at this comes out, as he “seems to rebuke us for being confused about a meaning which should be clear with a qualitatively decisive clarity.”⁹⁰

The fact that this contradiction persists, “the untruth of which is secretly known” (*JFY* XII 411), indicates that individuals are turning their attention from it. Spiritless self-consciousness is an oxymoron, for any awareness of what one is up to would reveal its lunacy. This produces the peculiar result that the spiritless aesthete cannot live out the very illusion that he created for himself: “he does not personally live in this huge, domed palace but in a shed alongside it” (*SUD* XI 156). One cannot live in the contradictory creation on which one’s spiritlessness depends. A spiritless person is hypocritical, and would know that he is if he ever took notice of what he was saying; but he does not follow the course of his thoughts to his own concrete life. If the weakness of spiritlessness is its incoherence, to compensate one must continually divert oneself from

89. Cf. Hannay, *Kierkegaard*, 182.

90. Cavell, “Kierkegaard’s *On Authority and Revelation*”, p. 384. For instance: “Be human beings, period. Obey, fear, love, and none of this nonsense” (*JP* I 814).

oneself.

Heiberg wrote to Kierkegaard in 1846 to commend him on “the excellent development of the concepts ‘to be silent’ and ‘to speak’.... Quite correctly, you have found that the present age has discovered the mean between the two, to wit, in chatter.”⁹¹ If the function of words is, at least typically, to signify something, chatter is the use of words with a “suspension of referential function.”⁹² With chatter, “the only ground and sole reason for speaking reside in speech itself,”⁹³ as if one is talking for its own sake: “To do it—that is an effort... but to give an exposition of Christianity—that is a pleasure” (*JFY* XII 396). Chatter is part-way between speech and silence in that the talking remains on the level of ideas, and is not applied to the reality that those ideas are intended to serve. Self-deception “perhaps never appears more clearly than in the misrelation between our understanding and our acting” (*JFY* XII 399). One may gladly discuss ethics and religion to no end, but here one is more concerned with sheer debate and conversation than deliberation that leads to ethical or religious activity (*PF* IV 256). One abstracts from reality, refusing to take one’s general, objective thoughts to an inward, particular level.

One may keep one’s attention fixed on abstract ideas or on other people, but one tries to lose oneself in the experience, retreating to a “perpetual ‘elsewhere’”⁹⁴. While aestheticism is an error, allegedly, it is at least a consistent interpretation of life; but spiritlessness avoids interpretation and life itself. After all, the quickest way to settle a debatable issue is to ensure that the debate never takes place. Spiritlessness is not a position, but is thoughtlessness and absence of mind, something that “explains everything within itself but not itself” (*CUP* VII 269). Kierkegaard scorns the world at large for letting these atrocities go unchecked, but external conditions have only a hand in this

91. J.L. Heiberg, letter to Kierkegaard in *Kierkegaard: Letters and Documents*, trans. Henrik Rosenmeier (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), no. 135.

92. Fenves, ‘Chatter’, p. 16.

93. Fenves, ‘Chatter’, p. 14.

94. Josiah Thompson, “The Master of Irony” in *Kierkegaard: A Collection of Critical Essays*, p. 122.

deterioration; in fact each spiritless individual is accountable. The spirit is never got rid of because at some suppressed level one knows that one's life is a sham: "Anxiety lies underneath; likewise, despair also lies underneath, and when the enchantment of illusion is over, when existence begins to totter, then despair, too, immediately appears as that which lay underneath" (*SUD* XI 156).

The effect of an irresponsible use of language should not be underestimated, for such neglect increases one's capacity for nullifying the impact of the spirit. To see the ability for life to be different is a pre-condition to seeing whether it *should* be different (cf. *PV* XIII 538). The spirit itself is concerned with the latter awareness, but it requires that the former awareness is in place. Hence, in order to preserve himself, the aesthete subverts this critical prior awareness, for "we suppress what does not suit us" (*JP* VI 6688).

B: Indirect Communication: Goals

Kierkegaard's objective is of course to undermine the aesthete's recourse to spiritlessness. However, spiritlessness is not a lack of consciousness, but a clouding of consciousness that one already has. Hence, it would be a mistake for Kierkegaard to think that he must supply any kind of information; instead, he must remove this smokescreen upon which his reader relies. Since the spiritless individual wants exactly what Kierkegaard wants to take away, Kierkegaard feels the need to deceive him.

(1) Speech and Speaker

If we revisit the issue of direct communication, we can see Kierkegaard's writing in contrast with it. This will also outline the kind of communication towards which a

spiritless reader would be inclined. Kierkegaard's concept of communication has four elements: "(1) the object, (2) the communicator, (3) the receiver, (4) the communication" (*JP* I 651). But there is no piece of information that a spiritless individual needs to learn, no object that he needs to receive to discover the fault of spiritlessness. Moreover, he does not need anybody around him (i.e. a communicator) to discover his spiritlessness, as though directing his attention to someone else is going to illuminate anything about himself. If Kierkegaard communicates to the spiritless aesthete in a way that is careless about those elements, he only shifts the reader's focus to either Kierkegaard himself or his topic, perpetuating spiritlessness' tendencies for distraction. The result would be gossip (*TA* VIII 91) and a distortion of what the reader needs to know (*JFY* XII 406)

Now, it was already argued for direct communication's ineffectiveness, but corresponding to this need to live in externals we can also recall ways in which it actually gets in the way of the leap (see Chapters I.C.2 and II.A.1 above). In the first place, if one talks about the ethical without paying heed to the contrariety between it and the aesthetic, one will only add to the confusion of what ethics really demands of us. More fundamentally though, the whole communication interferes with the immediate encounter the aesthete needs to have with the spirit, by presenting an opportunity for distraction. A direct communicator draws attention to himself (*PV* XIII 533; cf. *CUP* VII 443). Applying direct communication here, then, only *contributes* to spiritlessness. If one tries to correct spiritlessness with the external elements of 'object' and 'communicator' intact, one will only add to the problem.

Hence, as Kierkegaard writes, he must take care that his writing does not become the object of admiration or attention.⁹⁵ He hated the thought of creating "the most terrible of all untruths—an adherent" (*CUP* VII 221). The fundamental problem is that the spiritless audience is apt to use this opportunity for diversion, even if that is exactly the

95. "That a man who wanted to 'create difficulties everywhere' and be an offence should be praised and buried in academic appreciations without offending anybody is tragic" (Walter Kaufmann, *From Shakespeare to Existentialism* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1960), p. 175).

communicator's complaint. Ostensibly, readers and scholars dwell on a thinker himself in order to better grasp his ideas, so as to use them to enrich their lives, but such a pure depiction of reading is less than honest, as many never get past the thinker himself and onto the subject of their own lives (cf. *JP* IV 3863). They have external material that can forever occupy their interest, instead of illuminating their own selves. Kierkegaard does not want his reader to use his authorship as another source of frivolous pastime.

Communicating directly would neglect both the weakness of spiritlessness and the defensive measures that the spiritless like to take. It entails a need to inform or guide the listener, as though the listener's illusion is an ordinary misunderstanding, whereas deep down the spiritless person knows perfectly well what his crime is. The listener is able to discover his illusion autonomously, but direct communication treats him as though he cannot. Hence, to supply assistance from the outside just helps him to reinterpret the issue, for "expressing [inwardness] directly is externality (oriented outwardly, not inwardly)" (*CUP* VII 219); that is, the listener has the opportunity to take this message the wrong way, and make it serve his purposes. An object and a communicator, besides the spirit itself, just muddle things further.

If the speaker is even more direct and accosts the listener specifically, pointing an accusing finger, then he just sets off the listener's defences: "He shuts himself off from you... and then you merely preach to him" (*PV* XIII 534). Between peers, we respond to ideas and arguments, not allegation and threats, and so the listener could demand justification for why he should listen to the speaker. But this brings the speaker back to generalities and abstraction, back to the level of mere ideas. In other words, not only will the spiritless person not respond to force, but he will only respond to reason in order to abuse it and make it serve his own ends. He turns what can be straightforward into a diffuse and never-ending session. Spiritlessness lures the dialogue onto its own web, and then drains it of its blood. Language is naturally vulnerable this way, in that it is easily abused, for "direct communication presupposes that the recipient's ability to receive is

entirely in order" (*PV* XIII 541). After all, that a teacher teaches does not imply that his learner learns.

The bottom line is that to take spiritlessness as any ordinary confusion is not to understand what it is, and this mistake will only help the listener remove himself from the spotlight. It is inconsequential how the speaker understands himself and what he says, for both object and communicator are vulnerable to being treating in unintended ways. What is more relevant is that this is all external to the reader and so gains nothing in terms of his need to subjectively and personally respond. Kierkegaard must not add anything, for it is going to get misused; on the other hand, a spiritless audience *wants* these external elements, for these are what the illusion feeds on.

(2) Silence and Echo

From the previous discussion we can see what might be the boundaries of Kierkegaard's communication, the ditch that defines the road. He cannot say anything and cannot himself take a hand in the writing. Already his means of communication sound odd, and it is not inaccurate to say that this aspect of indirect communication challenges the very essence of communication itself (though the notion of communication will be rescued later). What Kierkegaard wants is silence, where there is no message for the reader to ensnare—there is nothing offered up for the reader's manipulative scrutiny. Secondly, he wants the reader to be totally alone, with no diversions available but only himself for company. Kierkegaard figured, as Pascal did⁹⁶, that spiritlessness thrives in crowds, and that one takes refuge in the company of others for that purpose: "‘Utterly superficial nonpersons and group-people’ have so little

96. "The sole cause of man's unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room.... Thus men who are naturally conscious of what they are shun nothing so much as rest: they would do anything to be disturbed" (Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A.J. Krailsheimer (Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1968), §139, p. 67-68).

longing for solitude that, like lovebirds, they promptly die the moment they have to be alone" (*SUD* XI 176).

With these goals, Kierkegaard aims to circumvent his reader's quest for diversion, and to exploit the reader's weakness of not being able to face himself. If the reader is given any external idea he could turn it to his favour, but the effect Kierkegaard wants to produce is like that of an echoing wall: any idea one gets is something supplied by oneself, and hence is not external. If a reader looks to such an idea for diversion, his attention will be turned to himself, its true source, instead of Kierkegaard's production itself.

Kierkegaard found no better image to describe his project than that of midwifery, after Socrates. I will start with that model, but in the next sub-section I will argue for the need to improve on it. The idea behind the midwife analogy is that the student or listener already contains the answer inside him, and the task is only to bring it out. The midwife performing this task is entirely inessential to what is being produced. This motif entails that the speaker has nothing to contribute to the listener, but that the latter already knows what he needs to know. What the speaker aims to do is only to draw out what presently lies concealed. In this way we avoid the problems with having an object or a communicator. The speaker demands no attention or praise, and the listener owes him nothing—he is merely an incidental player. It would be "treason" (*CUP* VII 57) to have the listener look up to him as opposed to the spirit within him. Here no information is being given, and so there is no concern about something remaining external where it should be internalised.

But Kierkegaard's goal is stronger than this: not only must he not add anything, he must subtract. When ideas are overused to the point of becoming trivial, "*communication* eventually becomes the art of being able to take away" (*CUP* VII 234). He must strike dumb the reader's chattering voice. Here the midwife metaphor is already strained, as it was for Socrates: "[Midwifery] still falls short of *my* business. For women

cannot produce offspring that are sometimes true, but sometimes illusory, with the difference hard to discern.”⁹⁷ After performing this extra task of discernment, “people have... been ready literally to bite me!”⁹⁸

Spiritlessness’ intrinsic weakness will determine the way to undermine the reader’s illusion. Rather than letting him listen to someone else, which is what he wants, Kierkegaard must force the reader to listen to himself. Kierkegaard wants the reader’s attention to eventually fall on the reader himself, awakening self-consciousness. Rather than providing a voice, Kierkegaard provides an echoing wall; or, to use a visual metaphor, “such works are mirrors: when an ape looks in, no apostle can look out” (*SLW* VI 14 (taken from Lichtenberg)). Then, as soon as the reader becomes cognisant of his complacent spiritlessness, he will be unable to sustain it.

Normally a reader can embark on a text expecting to find something in it, but in this case the reader is to discover himself, not some other idea. The reader’s role is turned around: “It is the examiners who are being examined.”⁹⁹ The only content available is what the reader himself supplies, so that one cannot be a mere spectator. This point is made allegorically in Constantius’ appreciation of farcical theatre in *Repetition*: whereas in comedy and tragedy one knows how one should react, in a farce the play does not indicate to spectators whether to laugh or cry, and so this has to be decided by them, who, as a result, are no longer mere spectators at all (*R* III 198-9). Subjectivity is awakened in that the scene is incomplete or unclear, and calls attention to the viewer’s need to take an active role in rounding out the content. Anything that the audience comes away with started from what it put in itself. Unfortunately, as Constantius points out, farcical theatre is not for a dignified crowd (*R* III 198).

Spiritlessness is strengthened by endless chatter that does not force one to take action and apply one’s ideas to oneself. Since Kierkegaard cannot contribute that living

97. Plato, *Theaetetus*, trans. Robin A.H. Waterfield (London: Penguin, 1987), 150a-b.

98. Plato, *Theaetetus*, 151c.

99. Poole, *Indirect Communication*, p. 85.

application himself, at least he can try to take away the absent-minded noise on which spiritlessness depends. To use an illustration that Kierkegaard gives somewhere, if someone is starving because he has too much food in his mouth to swallow, it does not help to feed him more, but one saves him from starvation by *removing* food. Kierkegaard's final goal, similarly, is to make his reader realise something, not by showing it to him but by removing everything that bogs down his inner mind.

(3) Deception

This final, and most decisive, part of Kierkegaard's vision imposes the most distance between his role and that of a midwife. What midwifery cannot convey is Kierkegaard's felt need to deceive his reader¹⁰⁰: "The aesthetic writing is a deception, and herein is the deeper significance of the *pseudonymity*.... One can deceive a person out of what is true, and—to recall old Socrates—one can deceive a person into what is true" (*PV* XIII 540). Kierkegaard must operate in secret, keeping both himself and his true motives out of the public forum. He deemed his pseudonyms essential to his attempt to remove himself as far as possible from the scene. Their discussions do not openly deal with the confusions in Christendom, but "tak[e] the other man's delusion at face value.... One begins this way: Let us talk about the aesthetic" (*PV* XIII 541). They all contain remarks that suggest Kierkegaard's true issue, but these are all off-hand and oblique, as in the Preface to *Fear and Trembling*¹⁰¹, and do not constitute a sustained investigation. They hardly even mention Christianity as such, even if Christian themes are often their subjects. *Postscript*, a pseudonymous but non-aesthetic work, is the first to give a sustained treatment of Christianity and Christendom.

In the same way that a spiritless person enjoys the distractions that direct

100. Whether this is also true of Socrates is another question altogether. It can be said at least that if deception was a part of Socrates' method as well, then the midwife analogy is misleading for him too.

101. "Not only in the business world but also in the world of ideas, our age stages a real sale" (*FT* III 57).

communication can provide, he will resist the isolating effects of indirect communication. The trouble that Kierkegaard detects and is sensitive to is that he and his reader want two different things. Kierkegaard wants his reader to ask himself whether or not he actually has life, but the spiritless does not want to ask anything about actuality, and satisfies self-love by avoiding or skewing such questions, taking pains “to obscure his knowledge (*SUD XI 200*). A presumption such as that all men want the good, and do bad only out of ignorance, would make Kierkegaard’s job considerably easier, for as much as his listener might resist him, he could remain confident that at bottom they are in the same boat interested in the same objective. But, drawing from his diagnosis of spiritlessness, “to be in error is, quite un-Socratically, what men fear least of all” (*SUD XI 156*). He cannot rely on his reader having a similar interest in a given question, or a similar respect for honest thinking; quite to the contrary, he must see his reader as “polemically poised against the truth.”¹⁰² He expects that a silencing and echoing production is going to strongly antagonise his reader.

However, on what basis will he get the readership that he wants? This will not happen if Kierkegaard is honest about his purpose or desired effect. He must start with a deep understanding of where his reader is coming from, and mould his authorship accordingly. As is surely true of all instruction, “instruction begins with this, that you, the teacher, learn from the learner” (*PV XIII 534*). Any effective writing must establish a basic contact with the reader, and Kierkegaard’s indirect communication is no exception. This has nothing to do with writing something *agreeable*—Kierkegaard is not worried about scaring his reader by being controversial. (The spiritless may even relish controversy in that it lets him put off concrete decisions.) The requirement is that he speaks the same language: sharing the same paradigm, approach, attitude towards the matter at hand, and so on (*PV XIII 541*), so that the reader thinks he knows what kind of

102. Lee Barrett, “The Paradox of Faith in Kierkegaard’s *Philosophical Fragments*: Gift of Task?” in *International Kierkegaard Commentary*, Vol. 7: *Philosophical Fragments and Johannes Climacus*, ed. Robert C. Perkins (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1994), p. 269.

book he is buying. The writer must (at least seemingly) respect his reader and maintain an honest discourse.

The writer and reader must start on the same footing, but here the writer does not want to end up where the reader wants to end up. The deceptive element about the aesthetic authorship is that the reader picks up the books with a certain expectation, something that he condones, but later finds that the appearance that gave him that expectation is only a misleading front, covering a plot to take him somewhere that he did not want to go. The reader wants to be affirmed in his spiritlessness, and Kierkegaard is going to have to start there, but there is a hook hidden beneath the bait. There is really no respect or honesty in Kierkegaard's indirect communication. He understands his reader in order to use that knowledge against him, for "if they will not listen to good then I will compel them through evil" (*JP^D* 118).¹⁰³ There are then two movements in Kierkegaard's indirect communication, which I will call 'seduction' and 'betrayal', occurring in sequence.

To be exact, Kierkegaard wants his authorship to be truly characterised by silence, but apparently characterised by speech. As in an idea that Climacus ascribes to Lessing, Kierkegaard must remain silent while performing "the more difficult task: *also* to speak" (*CUP* VII 49, emphasis added). The outer qualities of the texts must resemble what was discussed above, in which there is both speech and a speaker carrying significant roles; the inner qualities, accordingly, must have neither, matching Kierkegaard's real goals.

The effect of speaking while really being silent is not a *compromise* between speech and silence, for that is the very chatter that plagues modern discourse. We saw already that spiritless chatter is a kind of remaining silent while speaking, in that one talks about nothing. In that case, the two notions are blended into a murky greyness. With Kierkegaardian deception, speech and silence meet like a marble cake, where both

103. "When a person uses the indirect method, there is in one way or another something daimonic—but not necessarily in the bad sense" (*JP* II 1959).

colours remain distinct as they co-exist. Both speech and silence are maintained in their fullness, so that there is nothing less than a “contradiction between the external and internal.”¹⁰⁴ There is a total change of direction latent in reading the texts: one reads them as a distraction from the spirit, but then finds oneself being turned over to the spirit, like a fugitive who was too trusting of someone offering refuge.

Midwifery is too contractual. While capturing the inessential role that Kierkegaard sees for himself, it makes it more difficult to appreciate the back-stabbing nature of the aesthetic works. Indeed it is misleading, for it conveys, as in the example with the slave boy in *Meno*, an above-board effort where both partners are working together on a common problem. In fact, Kierkegaard cannot even make known what his problem is. He knows that his concern—trying to live by what one says—is one that the spiritless reader does not share. He is working to illuminate a question in his reader’s mind, not an answer, for it is the former that has been forgotten.

Knowledge about spiritlessness lies within the individual, not without, and so it must be brought out, not contributed. However, it is not that the individual wants to bring it out but needs the help of a midwife; rather he wants to abort this knowledge, or at least prevent it from coming to term. Kierkegaard feels the need to deceive his reader because, while his goal is contrary to his reader’s wishes, he cannot communicate effectively without attracting his reader’s interest and attention.

C: Indirect Communication: Means

Spiritlessness is intrinsically flawed, and so Kierkegaard’s exposure of that flaw can loosely be likened to a *reductio ad absurdum* argument: his writing is characterised by spiritlessness at the outset but by absurdity in the end, with a necessary connection

104. Cross. “The Perils of Reflexive Irony”. p. 127.

between the two. The important difference between Kierkegaard's approach and a *reductio ad absurdum* argument is that spiritlessness is not a position but an attitude. So to expose its folly Kierkegaard uses not a chain of reasoning but irony.

(1) Kierkegaardian Irony

A deception has two distinct facets: a front that lets the deception go undetected, and that which is hidden underneath. In Kierkegaard's production, the principal device for achieving the duality is irony. In his conception of this technique "the phenomenon is not the essence but the opposite of the essence" (*CI* XIII 322), that is, there is a disparity between what is said and what is meant. The ironist speaks in riddles, concealing his ideas and himself behind a smokescreen of wit and parody. Throwing out red herrings and purposely convoluted messages, he wants to make it difficult for his audience to capture the underlying meaning of what he says.

So with irony we can speak of two levels on which meaning may be sought. Of course the more apparent level of meaning is encountered first, and one must look deeper into the writing to find any deeper meaning. However, in Kierkegaard's employment of irony there is a radical shift between these two levels. One meaning does not lie hidden beneath another, rather meaninglessness lies beneath a shroud of meaningfulness: one "always comes back—empty-handed" (*CI* XIII 238). This is so in order for Kierkegaard to lay speech atop its absolute opposite, silence. The outer level, the first encountered, attracts the reader by having much to say, while the inner level represents an utter shift in direction where silence reigns, and the reader is brought to where he did not expect to go.

The reader can look to a book for two kinds of distraction from himself: getting to know what the texts say and getting to know the author who wrote it. In this manner Kierkegaard developed irony not only as a literary device but as a way of life. Both the pseudonymous author and what he says are rooted in irony: there is an outer shell of

substance, but when this is broken through the rest is hollow. A second layer of meaning does not emerge, and neither does a coherent vision of the author. One is left only in a limbo state where both the author and the text have dissipated into disorder. Kierkegaard had to play an ironic role in his public life too. It was never hard to figure out who was really behind the pseudonyms, as much as Kierkegaard tried to deny it (cf. *PV* XIII 548). He had to mask himself, creating—by bizarre means—the reputation of being unserious and bourgeois—“a street-corner loafer, an idler, a *flâneur*, a frivolous bird” (*PV* XIII 548).

The challenge for Kierkegaard is to pack these two levels of reading without them simply cancelling each other. There are a number of forms of communication that involve a contradiction between inner and outer layers of meaning. In a lie, for instance, there is a difference between what the messenger conveys and his thoughts and intentions. Sarcasm too contains a concealed meaning that is at odds with its apparent meaning. However, in these cases the opposition between inner and outer does not present logistic challenges. Ideally a lie conceals completely the fact that it is a lie. If its inner nature never comes out, so much the better for the liar. The sarcastic speaker wants the inner message to be only thinly veiled, and if the listener took the outer form seriously that would usually disappoint the speaker's wishes. In other words, either the inner or outer layer of meaning stands out at the expense of the other, and the total effect is uniform. With Kierkegaard's deception, both layers must operate at full capacity: “If one in any way causes the one ensnared to be antagonised, then all is lost” (*PV* XIII 532); but “do not forget one thing,... that it is the religious that you are to have come forward” (*PI'* XIII 534). One piece is to set up two movements, contrary ones no less.

Moreover, these effects must be carried together. Otherwise, we do not have one thing with an inner and outer nature, but two things each with a nature. Kierkegaard cannot win the reader in the first chapter and then turn on him in the next, for the reader will pull out the first chapter as good stuff and dismiss the rest as absence on the author's

part. While the seduction of the reader happens first, the elements responsible for this must not be separable from the elements that betray him to the spirit. The reader must not infer that the writer went through a change part-way through his writing activity. Instead each page must contain this tension. Kierkegaard's challenge is to "in one swoop begin with simultaneously being an aesthetic and a religious author" (*PV* XIII 536).

The pseudonymous nature of the works goes a long way to create this effect. What this produces essentially is a work that has two authors, or, more accurately, one author but an author of that author, a "*souffleur*" (*CUP* VII 546). Kierkegaard wanted to create a second personality and a second perspective to be the basis of the external nature of the texts, but then Kierkegaard is responsible for their underlying nature. As we discuss the seduction and betrayal of the reader, we can see the works, respectively, as written by the pseudonymous characters and as written by Kierkegaard himself.

(2) *Seduction*

In this half of Kierkegaard's design he tries to balance two qualities: the aesthetic works must be attractive to the reader's spiritlessness, but they must not be too immediately satisfying. The first is obvious from what has been said so far, but if the texts give of themselves too easily, if they supply something straightaway for the reader to hold onto, he could cling to that without having to see a necessary connection between this and the deeper qualities of the texts. He could "fill up the cryptic nothing", as Kierkegaard says Plato and Xenophon do of Socrates' life (*CI* XIII 237).

So if the outermost layer of meaning gives him some worthwhile diversion, the reader may be satisfied with that. In that case, if he reads deeper, and finds his first impression falling apart, he can retreat while still being able to hold onto that nugget, just as if one part of a machine works while another does not, one does not need to discard the former because of the latter. Hence the act of reading must not be readily fruitful; like

holding a carrot in front of a horse, the reader must be baited, not fed. The outer level has to lead the reader into its depths.

It is hard, on the one hand, to maintain another's interest, while on the other hand not being too easily won, and I think the seven aesthetic works strike this balance with varying degrees of success. Kierkegaard was certainly helped by the Hegelian atmosphere in academia that gravitated towards dense and difficult texts¹⁰⁵—the irony gives an air of “superiority deriving from its not wanting to be understood immediately” (*CI* XIII 323).¹⁰⁶ Besides that he must walk a fine line between making his reader's time worthwhile and losing his reader altogether. If any spiritless reader feels that he found the fundamental meaning of one of the aesthetic books, while still having enjoyed the book without feeling attacked by it, then that is an indication of failure on Kierkegaard's part.¹⁰⁷ He must serve the reader with one hand and steal from him with the other. This is hard to achieve. *Either/Or* was a success at the bookstore, but he was infuriated by the reviews of it, as though the inner emptiness of the texts never became apparent. But the reader must not become disgruntled by the annoying features of the books¹⁰⁸, and not throw himself into the experience.

The attractive elements of the texts are all based on the spiritless reader's desire to find diversion from himself, which means two things: drawing attention away from the reader and towards something else. The first is achieved by such means as flattery, where the reader is “approached from behind”, while the author has “sufficient resignation to be the one who is far behind him” (*PV* XIII 531). Scattered throughout the texts, especially in their prefaces, are self-referential comments where the authors appear

105. As Kaufmann complains is the case of German universities a century later: Kaufmann, *Shakespeare*, p. 374.

106. See Cross, “The Perils of Reflexive Irony”, p. 127.

107. “The scholars seem to say that Kierkegaard is a great author and full of truths and then adopt methodologies which are in large part compatible only with the falsity of Kierkegaard's argument” (Paul L. Holmer, “On Understanding Kierkegaard”, in *A Kierkegaard Critique*, p. 41).

108. For instance, two letters in *Either/Or II* are each over a hundred pages long with no explicit structure whatsoever, including chapter divisions, subheadings, or even periodic summaries or synopses.

aloof towards their reader.¹⁰⁹ Claiming as Climacus does that their “intellectual pursuits coincide happily with the interests of the public” (*PF* IV 176), they scrutinise neither the reader nor his ideas. In this way the books appear harmless.

Considering the matter of diversion, the works are bountiful in attractions: playful witticisms, serious profundity, as well as attempts at contributions in philosophy, psychology and theology. They satisfy appetites all the way from the brilliant *Philosophical Fragments* to the voyeuristic and lewd “Diary of a Seducer”, the most popular aesthetic piece. To speak more strictly, the texts advertise themselves as normal books with something worth reading. The spiritless reader is invited to read something leisurely without being pressured to do anything with it personally.¹¹⁰

However, to give the other side of the texts’ outer appearance: they are uncomfortably odd. The authors have obviously phoney names, making them “‘ghostly’ characters”¹¹¹. A common feature, for example, is for the status of some authors to be dubious: they are clearly part of a fanciful world, but their relationship to that world is not always clear—that is, whether they are taken to be real characters even in that setting. Many central characters go unnamed, such as “Quidam” in *Stages*, and others seem to be caricatures even to their fellows. In *Either Or* Victor Eremita claims to have come across the writings of an unnamed aesthete and the aesthete’s ethical friend Judge William, but his account is quite fantastic and makes the reader wonder if Eremita, in his hermetic solitude, is not merely the editor but also the creator of the book’s authors and their work.¹¹² Normally a reader is prepared for a real author to create a fictional setting, but here the real author is twice removed from the main story, creating a fictional setting *in which* the story and characters are *still* fictional. For instance there are speeches in

109. For example: “The present author.... writes because to him it is a luxury that is all the more pleasant and apparent the fewer there are who buy and read what he writes” (*FT* III 59).

110. “[I] wish everyone who shares my view and also everyone who does not, everyone who reads the book and also everyone who has had enough in reading the Preface, a well meant farewell” (*CA* IV 280).

111. Thompson, “Master of Irony”, p. 110.

112. As Thompson suggests is the case (Thompson, “Master of Irony”, p. 110-11).

Either/Or addressed to an imaginary audience, somewhat like a grown man talking to an imaginary friend, and an account in *Stages* of a banquet that is crazier than the Mad Hatter's tea party—though the reporter, William Afham, is suspiciously absent from the account.

In general, the books lie on the fringes of aesthetic taste. Many parts are unrefined, standards are bent and genres are crossed, and whim and hocus-pocus abound. Strange inconsistencies appear, and the reader must decide whether to look past them as anomalies or as a sign of deeper trouble. For instance, to an age of systems, the title "Philosophical Fragments" is an oxymoron; however, despite the title, the book itself seems to be quite systematic, where Climacus is apparently just following a chain of reasoning. Strange titles and other such aspects of the books' presentation detract from any seriousness to them. Yet, Kierkegaard's intended audience was mostly the cultured elite, especially those in philosophical or theological circles. These ploys are all irksome to a high-browed reader who, in his spiritlessness, has some disdain and distrust for what does not fit neatly into an ordered standard of philosophical conduct.¹¹³

Kierkegaard needs this friction, even as part of his seductive plot. It is clear that there is more to the texts than what is being admitted. The pseudonyms are masks and the content is allegorical. The fact that they are ironic is generally clear enough; the question that the reader must contend with is how deeply this irony runs. Kierkegaard hopes that his reader will assume that the true author is still saying *something*, and wants himself to be understood.

Putting these factors together, Kierkegaard seeks produce the very ambiguity that the spirit does as it reveals itself, though this is only within an aesthetic domain, not insinuating the ethical. Kierkegaard seeks to be mysterious and escape the reader's

113. The intellectual reader must frequently endure caricature and ridicule, e.g.: "People with experience maintain that proceeding from a basic principle is supposed to be very reasonable; I yield to them and proceed from the basic principle that all people are boring. Or is there anyone who would be boring enough to contradict me in this regard?" (*E/O* I 257).

grasp, his subjective character left as “an essential secret” (*CUP* VII 61). He cannot offer a tangible product for the reader to judge right away, for if he gives his reader what he wants he may have a hard time taking it back. Kierkegaard aims to instil a complexity of attraction and repulsion, giving “the distinct impression that the author is laughing at you, defying you to believe him,” though next “he may suddenly switch to some serious point.”¹¹⁴ Of Kierkegaard’s person, “there was at times something infinitely gentle and loving in his look, but also something goading and irritating.”¹¹⁵

However, he hopes to duck just under the bounds of the reader’s cultural snobbery. Whatever peculiarities the reader must tolerate, he is asked to trust that there is buried treasure within, that the irony conceals a legitimate and whole production. We tackle the convoluted texts on the assumption that the writer does want us to come away with something, and that in the end he intends a relatively normal writer/reader relationship. The external sets up a lure, but a lure that sends the reader towards the internal dimension of the texts, so that he may be affected by it.

(3) Betrayal

So the reader has taken the bait and has plunged himself into the text, in search of some object—a person or an idea—that can occupy his interest. He strives to uncover the secret meaning and worth of the texts. But he is in for a surprise, for not only does he search in vain, but the impossibility of his aspiration becomes more and more evident. Recalling the objective of cancelling the presence of a communicator or object of communication, both the author and what he is saying fail to come into focus, and dissipate like clouds in the sunshine. Substance gives way to an echoing emptiness, and the reader finds himself losing control of the situation. He is no longer able to rest in his

114. Frederick Sontag, “Introduction” in *On Authority and Revelation*, p. vii.

115. T. H. Croxall, *Glimpses and Impressions of Kierkegaard* (Digswell Place, Welwyn, Herts.: James Nisbet & Co., 1959), p. 12. Said by Kierkegaard’s friend Hans Brochner.

self-satisfaction, and while being forced to watch over his internal condition, he is forced to “become aware” of the disturbances of the spirit (*PV* XIII 541). This is the culmination of Kierkegaard’s aesthetic project, and as I outline the final situation that Kierkegaard envisions, I will look at two issues: how the seductive façade that the pseudonyms set up falls apart, and how this affects the reader.

On this level of meaning we can speak of the texts as composed by Kierkegaard’s hand, in that we are considering the real purpose of his writing them. The pseudonymous mask comes off and we get to see what was concealed by the ironic secrecy. However, in accordance with the goals of an absence of an object of communication or a communicator, the reader tries to unravel the irony to find what is behind it, but then finds that the texts are “saturated”¹¹⁶ with irony, containing *no* meaningful material underneath. The irony “continually cancels itself” (*CI* XIII 217), creating an absolute break between inner and outer.

The texts are plagued with equivocation, circularity and inconsistency, though this is subtle enough not to be easily seen. One is drawn to *Either Or* to be a spectator to a debate between two points of view, but the aesthete does not even acknowledge the ethicist in his writing, and the tedious style of the ethicist’s letters conveys no consideration of his aesthetic reader, so that all one really gets are two long monologues by self-absorbed writers. The very debate that one comes for is missing.

In accordance with the aim of remaining silent while speaking, Kierkegaard’s writing undoes itself, though “to write a book and to revoke it is not the same thing as refraining from writing it” (*CUP* VII 541). The reader is tantalised with a concept or position gradually emerging, only to find it continually vanishing over the horizon: “When we ask for a person we are given a *persona*, and when we enter the interior world of this *persona*, we find it in motion, spinning off through fantasy into yet another

116. Poole, *Indirect Communication*, p. 86.

persona. We search in vain for actuality, for substance.”¹¹⁷ Several writers include a section at the end of their piece addressed to ‘My dear reader’, where they retract what they had written, finally confessing that the people and their own writing (letters, diaries, speeches) contained within are fabrications (e.g. *R* III 262, *SLW* VI 371). William Afham even recants his *own* being: “I am pure being and thus almost less than nothing. I am the pure being which is everywhere present yet not noticeable, for I am continually being annulled” (*SLW* VI 83).¹¹⁸

One important requirement is that Kierkegaard himself has no hand in the aesthetic works: “A single word by me personally in my own name would be an arrogating self-forgetfulness that, regarded dialectically, would be guilty of having essentially annihilated the pseudonymous authors by this one word” (*CUP* VII 546). As author, he must achieve the effect of being completely “*absent*”.¹¹⁹ Whether that is possible is an interesting question, but he certainly tried. It is of utmost importance for him that there is not a trace of a flesh and blood author to be found. The pseudonyms may be puppets, but they are to be as autonomous as possible, so that “both the production and even their characters are entirely of their own making” (*CUP* VII 546). Unlike Pinocchio, however, who becomes human in the end, here the puppets are assumed to be human but degenerate into wood.

What effect does this have on the reader? By having sympathised with the author and the text, the reader now finds his own personality deflating as the author’s deflates. Kierkegaard parodies his reader with such subtlety that the reader may identify with the author’s outlook on life. However, the authors are aware of the fantasy in which they dwell, admitting it, whereas the reader cannot admit the dreaminess of his own spiritless life. The reader chases the object of his attention into its burrow until he finds himself

117. Thompson, “Master of Irony”, p. 122.

118. The pseudonyms “imaginatively propose to themselves an actuality of selfhood that is flawed by the very fact that it is imaginary” (Thompson, “Master of Irony”, p. 111).

119. Thompson, “Master of Irony”, p. 115.

removed from the familiar setting that he used to fuel his spiritlessness. Ultimately, it becomes apparent that Kierkegaard never wanted to communicate anything in the first place: “We become even more suspicious that the speaker is not really engaging in conversation with us at all but merely playing a kind of manipulative game at our expense.”¹²⁰ This pushes the reader into a “cloister”¹²¹, where he becomes aware of himself and can no longer maintain the complacent illusion that all is well. His imagination is revived, and with it the pangs of the spirit’s revelation.

The combined effect of both seduction and betrayal is that the texts self-destruct in the same manner that they build themselves. The same slab is both cornerstone and wrecking ball. The challenge for Kierkegaard is that there must be something substantial enough to be destroyed, yet it must be destroyed completely. If Kierkegaard is too lean on the first half of the design, then the books will just be passed over, but if at the end the reader can find some satisfying material, the books will just be one more thing that gets in the way of a direct encounter between the reader and the spirit. But if managed successfully, the reader will be inside the structure when it comes toppling down.

The ironist “destroys the given actuality by the given actuality itself” (*CI* XIII 336). Kierkegaard wants to expose the contradiction beneath the reader’s life, and this requires reflecting that life back into the reader’s eyes. Hence he needs the reader to put himself in the texts, so that the absurdities in them will bear on the reader’s stability. The pseudonyms pretend to be real authors and to write real books, and therein lies the seduction. However, they overreach themselves, “existing *beyond* their own standpoints,” just as the spiritless reader takes his life for granted. Then their fantastic nature comes out. The texts are tangled in a contradiction of having authors who “continually aimed at *existing*” (*CUP* VII 223) but only found their non-reality. An

120. Cross, “The Perils of Reflexive Irony”, p. 131.

121. Thompson, “Master of Irony”, p. 115.

author trying to be someone he is not—such as an existing being—cannot endure self-consciousness, and neither can a spiritless reader ensnared by him. The reader watches the pseudonyms fall apart, and then has his own life similarly exposed.

* * *

Given that the spirit acts outside any contractual nature of conventional communication, one may expect the aesthete to do the same in order to nullify its effect. That is, he abuses his position as listener, just as the spirit makes an exception of itself as speaker. However, while the spirit does so for the sake of the truth, the aesthete does so for the sake of illusion, forcing him to pervert his position from mere error to contradiction. Spiritlessness is but distraction and neglect.

Since spiritless rigidity is only a psychological defence against the truth, and not a real misunderstanding, Kierkegaard cannot oppose it in any ordinary way. For human communication is always external, and spiritlessness is due to a lack of self-consciousness. So, Kierkegaard must force this inward turn, making his reader look into a mirror against his will. His scheme for accomplishing this effect centres on deception, where his real motive is kept from his reader, while a façade is assumed that does not offend him. His writing entails two contrary steps, of seduction and betrayal, where he wins his reader's trust but then leads him to a barren situation where he can no longer divert himself from his contradictory state of mind.

With this plan Kierkegaard is sometimes credited with inventing a new literary genre. Not only that, but as far as I know the aesthetic works remain the only examples of that genre. Poole almost finds a comparable effort in Dadaism, viewing the aesthetic

works as “literary machines that, like those of the Dadaists, actually work but carry out no function at all.”¹²² Socratic midwifery is also close. However, both miss one side of the matter or the other, for the texts do serve a function, but not one that the reader would respect. Their function is to defy functionality, building themselves up only to self-destruct, and with them the aesthete’s only defences against the spirit.

122. Poole, *Indirect Communication*, p. 7.

Conclusion

As Kierkegaard notes in *Point of View*, any successful writer must have a keen understanding of his audience. What is important about Kierkegaard's reader is that he is already involved with another communicator before Kierkegaard comes on the scene. The spirit, he postulates, is responsible for advocating itself where no human speaker can effectively advocate it. Kierkegaard's own purpose is limited according to the facts that: there is *essentially* no need for anything beyond what the spirit provides itself in order to turn the aesthete's error; but that there is *nevertheless* need for further communication only indicates that the aesthete has broken with the demands of communication and clear thought. Instead of having something worth saying and someone willing to listen, he writes with no ordinary end and for no ordinary audience.

The function of the aesthetic works must be seen in the context of the function of the spirit revealing itself. This underscores the three ways that I have depicted the aesthete: in a state of error, in a state of despair, and in a state of spiritlessness. In a state of error, the aesthete fashions for himself a life devoid of the spirit, though the truth being supposed here is that non-spiritual or natural life is a delusion. Having the truth wholly outside of him and a contrary idea in its place, there is no ground for conventional means of correcting his view. The aesthete cannot recognise the truth without leaping—without letting go of what he knows. After the spirit's authoritative revelation, however, the only avenues left for the individual, besides leaping, are despair and spiritless pride; he can no longer remain in a sincere error. The state of simply and innocently being mistaken, and so not being responsible for the truth, is rendered impossible.

Before adopting the spirit by way of leaping, a state of despair is the ideal situation that the spirit aims to instil, whereby the individual is emptied of his delusions of having life in natural categories. At this point direct communication can become appropriate, as the individual is disillusioned and is “like the empty jar that is to be filled” (*MWA* XIII 497). The individual does not yet judge the spirit rightfully or see the possibilities that it carries, but he is receptive to the spirit’s power. If he cannot see life through the spirit, he at least cannot see life elsewhere.

However, in Kierkegaard’s eyes the far more common effect of the spirit’s revelation is spiritlessness. The aesthete retreats from his life, losing himself in external diversions while not acknowledging the spirit’s presence in the first place. This abhorrent turn of events is the only successful defence against the spirit, though it requires deceiving oneself and suffocating inside a shell. One cheats the spirit by cheating oneself, engrossing oneself in contradiction.

So, by the time Kierkegaard’s own part comes in, his reader’s situation will have been qualified according to the various effects of the spirit’s communication. From the basic state of error, the spirit forces the individual either to give up his stance or to save it only by disfiguring it and himself in the process. Kierkegaard aims for readers in the latter state and there makes his contribution. But unlike what the image of midwifery would suggest, rather than being ready to give birth to a greater understanding, Kierkegaard’s reader is trying to abort it. The reader needs to be stopped, not moved; his misrelation to the truth lies not in lacking it but in shunning it, and so the key to Kierkegaard’s solution is in frustrating his reader’s own devices for self-deception. But he must design his works around deception too, having a seductive appeal to his reader’s

spiritless ends, and then betraying him, collapsing the pillars on which he has come to lean. If successful, the only responses to the spirit that are left are despair and leaping.

Knowing the design behind the aesthetic works is not only helpful for a closer reading of them, but it also provides another level on which one can critique them. As in the difference between architecture and construction, Kierkegaard's writing itself and his plans for that writing are two different things, and each provides a field for testing what he was doing overall. Formulating the design of the authorship puts the whole in one compact picture, allowing questions to be asked even without a complete understanding of the production that resulted from that design.

One can take each part of Kierkegaard's ideas and enquire about it, but I will suggest some questions that pertain to his indirect means of communication, the final spoke that takes into account his theory of the leap and his diagnosis of spiritlessness. Granting the value of the leap and Kierkegaard's theological ideas around it, two questions naturally arise: is the role he finds for himself a good one, and, if not, are better ones available? There is evidence that Kierkegaard did not consider his production a complete success¹²³, but does this point only to flaws in the writing itself, or in the plan too? Lowrie claims that "Kierkegaard never ceased to debate with himself over the validity of his motives and the character of his mission,"¹²⁴ and we can briefly highlight here what may have prompted that debate.

We have been discussing the effects of the aesthetics works on the reader, but

123. He found it "too religious" (*PI* XIII 556), finding that "it does not fit into any moment of actuality" (*PI* XIII 569). That is, the works failed to make the necessary initial contact with the reader.

124. Walter Lowrie, in *The Point of View for my Work as an Author*, by Kierkegaard, trans. Walter Lowrie (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1962), p. 159. Consider: "Someone who has authority, which I do not have, would perhaps speak to you in a different way, to your horror would tell you that you are deluded, that your eternal blessedness was an extremely dubious matter. Ah, I am weak and do not dare to speak this way" (*JP* X⁶ B 2 8).

what effects are there on the writer? The answer is not hard to find: Kierkegaard had to “annihilate” himself (*PV* XIII 545). When the text turns the reader over to the spirit, the bond between it and the reader breaks. The reading activity is nullified, and just as the banquet in *Stages* could only take place if “everything was [then] demolished” (*SLW* VI 27, cf. VI 79), the verbose and vacuous books are forgotten just as any other piece of nonsense. In the streets, everybody liked Kierkegaard for his entertainingly empty conversation, but no one felt inclined or invited to become a real friend. Kierkegaard made himself a “poor lowly human being” (*PV* XIII 563). Withdrawing himself from an open relationship, he was ejected from his reader’s life.

This becomes important considering the small jump between communication and community, and the importance of community in both ethics and religion.¹²⁵ Simply, when it comes to the costs of communicating indirectly, human beings are not supposed to deprive themselves this way¹²⁶, and does Kierkegaard’s self-debasement conflict with his reader’s elevation? I have argued that his indirect means and his final ends do not immediately correspond, but do they conflict? It must be noted that it is the pseudonyms and texts themselves that fall away, so maybe this does not bear on the real person behind the front. A critical item in this part of Kierkegaard’s thought is that an author can detach himself from his writing and his masks. This is needed not only to allow the effect given by the pseudonymity but also for Kierkegaard to stand clear of the writing’s destructive finish. However, one might reject this separation as unrealistic, especially as Kierkegaard spent every waking moment occupied with his work.

125. Contrary to popular readings, Kierkegaard was not a radical individualist who found no value in community, but he retained a strong place for it in his ethico-religious ideal. My question is whether he successfully managed to secure this place for it.

Kierkegaard was constantly aware of an alternative to his choice of method. The spirit's revelation need not operate on its own; in Kierkegaard's conception of authority he acknowledges the ability of some persons to communicate with authority. It is not by virtue of who they are that they have this quality, and they certainly cannot lay claim to it in any despotic or self-righteous manner, but these individuals carry, as it were, the spirit on their tongue. In other words, the alternative way to fight the shunning of the spirit is to amplify its voice. These speakers, qua authorities, are not speaking *on behalf of* the spirit, as if using their own wits to compose a case, but they transmit the spirit itself as it were. Instead of adding a second voice, the original voice is strengthened.

Kierkegaard reserves this for prophets, apostles, ordained clergy, etc. He also debated throughout his life over whether to stop his writing career and become a pastor (*PV* XIII 570). In fact, Gregor Malantschuk argues with reason that this is the debate that underscores his writing career.¹²⁷ After diagnosing the malaise of the age, he struggled over which treatment to administer.¹²⁸ Between indirect communication and striving to possess the spirit's authority, one can ask which is better, and whether Kierkegaard's choice was really the result of sober deliberation, or a lack of religious solidarity on his part. There are various damning confessions in his journals, e.g. his coming to see his writing as "virtually a splendid distraction" (*JP* VI 6840). Malantschuk tries to explain that as he was unable to adhere to the demands of his understanding of Christianity, he was led to become an "'an unhappy lover' in relation to Christianity and thereby a

126. As Kierkegaard acknowledges: "We human beings need each other, and in that there is already directness" (*JP* II 1959).

127. Gregor Malantschuk, "Søren Kierkegaard—Poet or Pastor?" in *Armed Neutrality and An Open Letter*, by Kierkegaard, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1968), p. 3.

128. According to Malantschuk he sought ways to appease this call to the clergy, and his later writing formed something of a hybrid between his two options (Malantschuk, "Poet or Pastor?", pp. 14, 22).

religious poet.”¹²⁹ What may be asked, however, is whether he became a poet because he could not reach his religious goals or whether he could not reach his religious goals because he was drawn too much to poetry.

This essay was based on the question of what Kierkegaard intends to be entailed in reading the aesthetic works. To investigate the above concerns, a complementary study would ask what was entailed in writing them. This would include the biographical effects of writing self-destructing works, and a philosophical/theological evaluation of his main alternative.

All of this goes to show the dominance of the concept of authority in Kierkegaard's mind, and its application in communication. The picture that I have portrayed in this essay indicates that indirect communication, although the most visible form of communication in the aesthetic project, is not the focal form on which the project is centred. The texts themselves are not the focal scene of activity in the reader's experience, but they are designed to trigger a greater experience from a wholly different source. The recipient of indirect communication is taken to be foremost the recipient of the spirit's authoritative communication. Kierkegaard intended his indirect communication to redirect his reader towards this more fundamental communicator.

“Witnessing is still the form of communication which strikes the truest mean between direct and indirect communication” (*JP* I 670).

129. Malantschuk. “Poet or Pastor?”, p. 16.

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