

SØREN KIERKEGAARD'S SELF-AFFIRMING MORAL PHILOSOPHY
AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO
CHARLES TAYLOR'S NOTIONS OF RELATIVISM AND AUTHENTICITY

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DEDICATION

To my wife and children whom I love very much.

ABSTRACT

This essay seeks to deny Alasdair MacIntyre's charge that Kierkegaard's ethical theory, as laid out in *Either/Or*, lies at the heart of contemporary moral problems similar to what Charles Taylor himself sees plaguing western liberal society in the form of "soft relativism" and "authenticity." Through examining concepts of "radical choice" and "narrative," this essay will uncover a sufficiently rational basis for Kierkegaard's notion of an existential self-affirming moral identity. In order to defend Kierkegaard's post-Romantic self-affirming moral theory against MacIntyre's criticisms, a historical-philosophical context that allows for the emergence of Kierkegaard's thought will be established. This essay will also address MacIntyre's criticisms of the ethical theory in *Either/Or*, and through a defense attempt to establish a rational and justifiable basis for that same theory rooted in what will be termed the "narrative of choice." Establishing a rational and justifiable basis for Kierkegaard's ethical theory serves two purposes. First, it denies the charge made by MacIntyre that the ethical theory set out by Kierkegaard in *Either/Or* is the outcome of the Enlightenment's failure to provide a rational basis for public moral discourse. Second, it prevents Kierkegaard's theory from being seen as the forefather of the sort of soft relativism and authenticity that Taylor claims haunts contemporary western liberal moral identity. It will be the conclusion of this essay that in cultivating a reliable narrative of committed ethical choices, as is advocated in the latter portions of *Either/Or*, the moral agent insulates her self-affirming moral identity from both soft relativism and authenticity. While the rejection of transcendent values and the defining of relationships exclusively in terms of personal self-fulfillment may be a feature of contemporary western liberal society, it is not a feature or outcome of the moral philosophy found in the pages of Kierkegaard's first major aesthetic work, *Either/Or*.

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) was a prolific writer during Denmark's artistic and intellectual "golden age" (Garff 2005: 302). Commenting on the intellectual genius of Kierkegaard, Patrick Gardiner writes,

Like Marx and Nietzsche, he emerges as one of the outstanding iconoclasts and rebels of 19th-century thought, writers whose works were composed in conscious opposition to the prevailing assumptions and conventions of their age and whose crucial contentions only achieved widespread recognition after they were dead.

Working across the boundaries of philosophy, theology, literary criticism, and fiction, Kierkegaard's philosophically insightful and penetrating writings focus primarily upon social critique of 19th century culture and Christian faith within the state church, and both in the context of his contemporary Copenhagen, Denmark (Pattison 2002: 50-54).

Referred to as the "father of existentialism," Kierkegaard's writings wrestle creatively with themes of anxiety, despair, moral free agency, and radical choice, (Wyschogrod 1954: vii). These themes surface repeatedly in his critiques of the German Romantics and of the dominant philosophical system of his day, Hegelianism. Attacking what he felt to be both the excessive aestheticism of Romanticism and the Hegelian over-systematizing of reality, Kierkegaard's writings deal strongly with the spheres or "stages" of life namely, the "aesthetic," the "ethical," and the "religious." Kierkegaard's aesthetic works, which also doubled as his ethical works by virtue of their engagement with themes of ethical choice and commitment, include *Either/Or* (1843), *Philosophical Fragments* (1844), *Stages on Life's Way* (1845), and *The Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846).

All of the above works were published under pseudonyms and offer a particular perception of human existence, attributed to the philosophical personality and character of the pseudonymous author himself. Kierkegaard's first major work, *Either/Or*, the first of his works to be written pseudonymously, employed five pseudonyms: "Victor Eremita" the compiler and editor of the book's combined essays and letters; "A" the author of the first collection of papers dealing with the aesthetic stage; "Johannes" the author of the "Seducer's Diary" (included in A's paper's); and "B" and/or "Judge Wilhelm" (a detail which Eremita seems unsure about) the author of the second collection of papers dealing with the ethical stage. Avoiding a personal recommendation of the aesthetic over the ethical or vice versa, Kierkegaard offers readers distinct points of view attached to fictional pseudonymous lives expressed in the essays, letters, and diary that comprise the two sections of *Either/Or*. In presenting a dialogue between the aesthetic and the ethical, *Either/Or* highlights the existential idea of radical choice and self-affirming moral agency. This essay considers the question of how to interpret Kierkegaard's legacy in the modern world in terms of the aesthetic and ethical theory articulated in his first major work *Either/Or*. This essay also examines the views of two contemporary scholars, Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor, and seeks to rebut MacIntyre's charge that Kierkegaard's ethical theory (as laid out in *Either/Or*) lies at the heart of contemporary moral problems not unlike what Taylor himself sees plaguing western liberal society in the form of "soft relativism" and "authenticity" (MacIntyre 1984: 6-11, 39-50; Taylor 1991: 13-69).

First published in 1981, Alasdair MacIntyre's book *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, provided a powerful critique of modern moral philosophy as well as serving to

renew widespread philosophical inquiry into virtue theory. *After Virtue* also revived and reinvigorated communitarian and liberal dialogue, and has initiated ongoing academic discussion on the history of moral philosophy. In *After Virtue* MacIntyre purposely uses Søren Kierkegaard to show how the Enlightenment failed to establish a rational justification for morality.¹ The efforts of Hume (1711-1776), Diderot (1713-1784), and Kant (1724-1804) had fallen short; neither passion nor reason could provide a rational basis for morality (MacIntyre 1984: 43-50). With the arrival of Kierkegaard's first major work, *Either/Or*, a "distinctively modern standpoint" toward morality becomes evident in mid-18th-century Europe (MacIntyre 1984: 39; emphasis added). According to MacIntyre, this "distinctively modern standpoint" understood moral discourse as "confrontation between incompatible and incommensurable moral premises," with committed moral choices as "the expression of a criterionless choice . . . for which no rational justification can be given" (1984: 39).² While MacIntyre identifies Kierkegaard as the herald of the "distinctively modern standpoint" and not its originator, this emerging arbitrary and incommensurable condition of moral dialogue of the mid-1800s nonetheless manifests itself as a "philosophical discovery" within the pages of Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* (1984: 39). For MacIntyre, *Either/Or* illustrates how the breakdown of the Enlightenment project's attempt to supply a rational justification or basis for morality ironically results in contemporary western liberal society's own perception of moral

¹ For MacIntyre's critical account of Kierkegaard's ethical theory (as laid out by Kierkegaard in *Either/Or*), see Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 39-43.

² When MacIntyre first describes Kierkegaard's notion of radical choice as criterionless choice he writes it as "criterionless fundamental choice" (1984: 49), and not simply "criterionless choice," which appears on page 39 in reference to new the "distinctively modern standpoint" towards moral debate without specific reference to Kierkegaard.

discourse as a conflict between relative, incompatible, and incommensurable positions (1984: 6-11).

While Charles Taylor may share some of MacIntyre's critical assessment of the contemporary condition of morality and moral discourse, he has no explicit agenda against the Enlightenment wherein Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* can be interpreted as an example of irrational or baseless modern ethical theory.³ Rather, in *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Taylor insightfully situates Kierkegaard in a post-Romantic and self-affirming context, and he argues that an explicitly rational and authoritative basis for moral self-identity is not required. What is required, in Kierkegaardian terms, is that the individual choose, and choose absolutely, despite the absence of an inherently "good" world (Taylor 1989: 449-450). This essay will contrast Kierkegaard's post-Romantic self-affirming moral philosophy, as revealed in the pages of *Either/Or*, with contemporary aspects of the modern moral selfhood, namely "authenticity" and "soft relativism," as examined and critiqued in Taylor's later work, *Malaise of Modernity* (Taylor 1991: 13-69). Earlier, in *Sources of the Self*, Kierkegaard's aesthetic and ethical theory of "choosing" to become a "self" provided a crucial part of the philosophical core of what Taylor identified as the post-Romantic self-affirming stance on what it meant to be a modern and free individual in a world that was not providentially, rationally, or intrinsically "good." On the surface it would appear that Kierkegaard's self-affirming moral philosophy is the precursor to the sort of soft

³ In their introduction to *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre*, Davenport and Rudd write, "MacIntyre does portray Kierkegaard (or at least, the author of *Either/Or*) as ultimately an irrationalist and an advocate of 'criterionless choice' as a foundation for ethics" (John J. Davenport and Anthony Rudd, eds., *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre: Essays on Freedom, Narrative, and Virtue* [Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 2001], xviii). While MacIntyre does portray Kierkegaard as advocating "criterionless choice"—therefore failing to provide a rational basis for traditional universal moral and ethical principles—MacIntyre never concludes that Kierkegaard is therefore an irrationalist.

relativism or authenticity that justifies what Taylor views as liberal society's two moral "dangers," the first being the rejection of transcendent values and the second being the defining of relationships exclusively in terms of personal self-fulfillment (1991: 14-17). Yet, the reasonable and sympathetic assessment of Kierkegaard's ethical theory given in *Sources of the Self* would seem to separate it from what Taylor later identifies in *The malaise of Modernity* as contemporary western society as moral relativism and inauthentic authenticity. Furthermore, Taylor does not attempt to link Kierkegaard to this regrettable condition of contemporary moral identity or moral discourse. MacIntyre, on the other hand, is decisively critical of Kierkegaard and the ethical theory expounded in *Either/Or*. Therefore, this essay will make generous use of MacIntyre's critique of *Either/Or* as both a contrast to Taylor's earlier reasonable and sympathetic assessment of *Either/Or* (Taylor 1989: 449-450), as well as a bridge to Taylor's later identification of soft relativism and authenticity as moral problems inherent in contemporary western liberal society (Taylor 1991: 13-41).

To understand how Taylor's portrayal of Kierkegaard fits into his historical description of the development of the modern moral self, chapter two will establish the historical-philosophical context that allows for the emergence of Kierkegaard's thought. This context briefly describes the "Radical Enlightenment" and the critical responses it provokes in the philosophy of both Immanuel Kant and certain Romantic thinkers (Taylor 1989: chs. 18-19). After establishing this historical-philosophical context, chapter two will also consider Kierkegaard's critical response to Schlegel's aesthetic philosophy of erotic passion and its role in the fulfillment of human nature. Through this particular early

episode in Kierkegaard's literary philosophical career, we will begin to see Kierkegaard's own aesthetic and ethical theory of selfhood begin to emerge.

After considering the historical-philosophical context of Kierkegaard's philosophy of the self as set out in chapter two, chapter three will then examine his conceptions of "choice" and "narrative", and aim to uncover a sufficiently rational basis for his notion of a self-affirming moral identity. As already indicated, Kierkegaard's aesthetic and ethical theory of choosing to become a self, as set out primarily in *Either/Or*, provides a crucial part of what Taylor identifies as the post-Romantic self-affirming stance on what it means to be a modern and free individual in a world that is not providentially, rationally, or intrinsically good (1989: 447-455). Yet, unlike Taylor, who seems to grasp the intention behind Kierkegaard's self-actualising ethical theory, MacIntyre is troubled by the act of moral self-affirmation in the absence of an objective good or authoritative ethical criterion. MacIntyre understands the mechanics of Kierkegaard's ethical theory (such as the necessity for radical choice) but misunderstands the depth of its meaning, and objects to precisely what the theory is intended to address—the existential moral free-agency of an individual who must first choose her moral standards. In the third, fourth, and fifth sections I address MacIntyre's three criticisms of the ethical theory in *Either/Or*, and through my defense attempt to establish a rational and justifiable basis for that same theory rooted in the concept of narrative. In particular, the fifth section of chapter three will contend that the ethical individual's narrative reveals a conscious and patterned engagement with choice, and that this engagement itself provides a sufficiently rational and authoritative basis for that individual's moral self-identity. I will show how the act of choosing ensures that choices are neither "criterionless" nor

arbitrary.⁴ Such conscious choosing contributes to what I identify as an individual's "narrative of choice" or an individual's personal story of commitment encompassing past, present, and future courses of ethical action. It will be the conclusion of chapter three that the narrative of choice reveals a rational basis behind individual ethical lives.⁵

This "narrative of choice" or personal story of commitment not only counters MacIntyre's charge against Kierkegaard that his ethical theory is both criterionless and arbitrary, but it is a stark contrast to the character of "authenticity" and "soft relativism" that Taylor is convinced contributes to contemporary society's moral malaise. It will become evident through the course of this paper that Kierkegaard's emphasis on individual choice is grounded in the acceptance of transcendent values as well as loyal and committed regard for relationships which are, according to Taylor, the very things absent in the moral soft relativism of contemporary liberal society. The following section briefly discuss what Taylor identifies as the moral dangers of contemporary society namely, soft relativism and authenticity, and situates their relative historical origins in the Romantic period, which was itself responding to the modern disengaged reason of the 17th and 18th centuries that ultimately understood morality as a rationally calculable endeavour.

⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre's critique of the basis of Kierkegaard's ethical theory, as laid out in chapter four of *After Virtue*, has become a "natural starting point" for discourse between Kierkegaard scholars and MacIntyre (see Davenport and Rudd, eds. 2001: xvii). Kierkegaard scholars have responded to MacIntyre's portrayal of Kierkegaard as an irrationalist who promotes an ethical system governed by radical yet ultimately "criterionless . . . choice"—a choice for which no rational justification can be given. Through the clarification of certain themes in Kierkegaard's ethical theory such as freedom, choice, self, and narrative, Kierkegaardian scholars have sought to refute the charge of criterionless choice, and have gone on to claim a rational basis for his ethics (see Davenport 2001, and Mehl 2001, and other contributors to *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre* 2001).

⁵ For my examination of Kierkegaard's conceptions of choice and narrative I will only refer to his early work, *Either/Or*. I believe that dealing with the text of *Either/Or* is sufficient to counter MacIntyre's charge of criterionless choice. MacIntyre critiqued Kierkegaard's ethical theory solely within the context of *Either/Or*, and it is in this context that I must defend that same ethical theory as having rational basis.

1.1 Taylor's Notions of Contemporary "Soft Relativism" and "Authenticity"

After identifying the three malaises that afflict modern society, Taylor latches on to the first—"radical individualism"—and delves into its consequences as manifest in contemporary liberal society.⁶ Taylor then outlines the moral dangers that arise from radical individualism, namely "soft relativism" and "authenticity." Individuals who hold a position of soft relativism accept that "everybody has his or her own 'values' and about these it impossible to argue" (Taylor 1991: 13). Now, while MacIntyre makes similar claims in *After Virtue* about contemporary moral discourse, he suggests that the incommensurable nature of many moral and ethical positions simply forces individuals to concede to an unavoidable relativism (1984: vi, 6-10). Yet, for Taylor, soft relativism is not an epistemological position tied to the limits of rational discourse as it is for MacIntyre, but rather a moral one founded in part on mutual respect (Taylor 1991: 13, 14). Taylor writes,

One ought not to challenge another's values. That is their concern, their life choice, and it ought to be respected . . .

In other words, the relativism was itself an offshoot of a form of individualism, whose principle is something like this: everyone has a right to develop their own form of life, grounded on their own sense of what is really important or of value. (1991: 13, 14)

Soft relativism denies the claim that any one way of conducting oneself is higher or better than any other (Taylor 1991: 14-17). Under soft relativism, the "good life" for the contemporary modern individual is whatever that individual promotes and chooses to follow for the time being (1991: 15-18). The moral content, purpose, or justification for such a position finds its basis in the social subjective definition of morality (1991: 16-20).

⁶ The three malaises Taylor briefly outlines in the first chapter of *Malaise of Modernity* are: (1) individualism and the "loss of meaning, the fading of moral horizons" that ensue; (2) the "eclipse of ends,

According to Taylor, the soft relativism adopted by contemporary society “is a profound mistake” and it breeds and justifies two “dangers,” the first being the rejection of transcendent values (1991: 14-17). Soft relativism in this context is used to reject and deny anything that transcends the individual self. The list of things denied is long and pervasive, and it includes any number of ideological and personal stances as well as the ambiguous notion of the transcendental itself. Eventually our sense of personal historical continuity (our narrative), social-political responsibility, religious, spiritual, and interpersonal relationships all find their way to the chopping block of soft relativism.

Relationships take us to the second “danger”: here relationships are defined in terms of personal self-fulfillment, otherwise a relationship has no other “practical” purpose (Taylor 1991: 17-19). Even those relationships that we do choose to engage in on a consistent basis come with limitations predicated on the soft relativism that governs our self-centered aesthetic approach to life. Duties toward others, just like transcendent values, can be suspended and traded in for the security of holding to our comfort level above all else. Ultimately for Taylor, soft relativism is “inauthentic” because it asserts itself as a valid form of authenticity although it perpetuates moral subjectivism and rejects personal narrative as well as community ties to the greater frameworks that have informed our past moral worldviews (1991: 25-38). In its most extreme form all moral horizons are removed and we are left with the option to reject anything that transcends the self, and anyone who cannot further our own dogmatic pursuit of self-fulfillment as a moral endeavor in and of itself. Taylor thus suggests that this moral soft relativism promotes an “individualism of self-fulfillment,” wherein people are urged to seek their

in face of rampant instrumental reason”; and (3) the political consequences such as “loss of freedom” (see Taylor 1991: 1-12).

own good consisting of values that only the individual herself can determine (1991: 14). This ethic of self-fulfillment based on individual relative values and goods, requires that the individual bracket out issues and concerns that threaten to transcend the self, whether they be moral, religious, historical or political. The result is the cultivation of a moral ideal based on the notion of personal authenticity wherein being “true to oneself” is the highest ideal one should strive for (1991: 15).

Referring to the ethic of authenticity as something “relatively new and peculiar to modern culture,” Taylor locates its origins near the end of the 18th-century—a later product of the earlier modern forays into hyper-rationalism initiated by Descartes and followed through with by the Radical Enlightenment thinker or “Aufklärer” (1989: 321-22; 1991: 25). At the same time, authenticity can be conceived as set against the “self-responsible reason” of the radical Enlightenment. In this polemical context early authenticity is none other than a “child of the Romantic period,” heavily critical of a disengaged reason and atomist deconstruction⁷ that refused to recognize the community and narrative ties that informed the individual’s inner moral disposition and self-identity (Taylor 1989: 322; Taylor 1991: 25). It is within this Romantic historical starting point, with its belief that humans had an inherent moral sensibility or an inner moral voice, that Taylor chooses to associate the development of contemporary authenticity. Taylor suggests that the contemporary notion of authenticity develops out of a “displacement of

⁷ MacIntyre suggests that one encounters at least two kinds of obstacles (social and philosophical) to envisaging human life as a unity shaped by the virtues within a community context and moved ultimately toward its *telos* or end. Social obstacles—taking their cue from modernity’s propensity to break up the human life into intelligible little pieces—divide the facets of life into discrete partitions with their own particular modes and rules of behaviour and action. The goal seems to be to set apart episodes and periods of human life over and above the idea of a harmonious and unified narrative or history of behaviours and actions by which we can witness and understand the individual’s narrative identity. Philosophical obstacles (a combination of the analytical and sociological) similarly regard human action “atomistically,” breaking

the moral accent” inherent in the Romantic ideal of authenticity (1991: 26). Where once the inner voice and moral feelings of our self-identity could be considered as a guide to right action, the inner voice now (in contemporary context) becomes a necessary feature of a radical individualism for which the moral frameworks and horizons themselves come to be located within the individual herself. The “inwardness” of the Romantic period that gave way to the intuitive moral guidance of the individual still acknowledged a prime source, absolute spirit, or God, while, in an effort to be “truly authentic”, contemporary inwardness chooses to reject transcendental as well as other exterior and transcendent sources of value and selfhood.

Although the Romantic period’s emphasis on inwardness provides the context that allows for contemporary forms of what Taylor identifies as inauthentic authenticity, it also gives way to Kierkegaard’s own post-Romantic self-affirming moral philosophy. The following chapter explores the historical development of Romantic notions of inner moral selfhood from which Kierkegaard’s own ethical theory emerges. Outlining this historical-philosophical narrative reveals the influences that shape Kierkegaard’s aesthetic and ethical theory of becoming a “self” by following the changes and developments in moral philosophy of the Radical Enlightenment, Kant, and his Romantic critics

it down through analysis, rendering “complex actions and transactions in terms of simple components” (MacIntyre 1984: 204).

CHAPTER TWO

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In order to better defend what Taylor identifies as Kierkegaard's post-Romantic self-affirming moral theory against MacIntyre's criticisms, chapter two will first place Kierkegaard's theory within the development of the modern moral self as set out by Charles Taylor in his work *Sources of the Self*. Second, chapter two will serve to establish the historical-philosophical context that allows for the emergence of Kierkegaard's thought. Outlining this historical-philosophical narrative reveals the influences that shaped Kierkegaard's aesthetic and ethical theory of becoming a "self." Third, chapter two also provides a detailed account of Kierkegaard's early engagement with the aesthetic theory of the Romantic philosopher Friedrich Schlegel, thus revealing Kierkegaard's own account of moral selfhood. These three objectives provide the essential background to Kierkegaard's theory of moral selfhood. Once we acknowledge the intellectual forces that formed Kierkegaard's notion of moral selfhood, it becomes difficult to decisively accuse him of being the "outcome and epitaph" of the Enlightenment project to justify morality, or to simply view him as an example of one who stared objectively at reality and was able to "see that it is good" (MacIntyre 1984: 39; Taylor 1989: 448). Those intellectual forces most influential on Kierkegaard are the Radical Enlightenment and the critical responses it provokes in the philosophy of both Immanuel Kant and certain Romantic thinkers (see Taylor 1989: chs. 18-19). After briefly examining the thought of the Radical Enlightenment, Kant, and Romanticism, the final section of this chapter will consider Kierkegaard's critical response to Schlegel's aesthetic philosophy of erotic passion and its role in the fulfilment of human nature. It is

through this particular early episode in Kierkegaard's literary philosophical career, his own aesthetic and ethical theory of selfhood begins to emerge.

Before embarking on the intellectual history that leads up to Kierkegaard's ethical theory of selfhood, it is important to choose a starting point within the vast history of moral philosophy. For this purpose, I turn to Charles Taylor's quest to map out the development of the modern identity. In the "Preface" to *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Taylor outlines the philosophical and historical objectives of his book.⁸ His intention was to provide a historical description of the development of modern self-identity that offered a more complex and rich account than had been provided by other scholars whose interpretive agenda often rendered modernity as single faceted and the intellectual source of contemporary philosophical, religious, political, and social problems.⁹ Convinced that the contemporary modern individual will not be able to grasp the "richness and complexity" of modern identity without first investigating the gradual historical development of that same identity, Taylor delves into the major facets of the development of modern sense of "self." First Taylor probes "modern inwardness" and the human intuition that we are indeed selves, and that this sense of self is intrinsic to our moral identity. Second, Taylor describes the "affirmation of ordinary life" that manifested through changes in popular culture as the 18th-century ordinary individual began to grasp practical import of philosophical modern self-identity. Third, Taylor

⁸ See pages ix-xi of Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, 1989.

⁹ Taylor does not explicitly associate one-sided and shallow accounts of modernity with certain major contemporary thinkers mentioned in his preface such as Foucault, Habermas, and MacIntyre. Yet readers who may be familiar with the habitual critical angle of each of the three scholars, will recognize their tendency to repeatedly render modernity in the same limited manner. For this paper, Alasdair MacIntyre's critical account of the Enlightenment's failed efforts to ground morality in a particular definition of human nature (passion, desire, reason, choice) are very relevant since a portion of his criticisms are focused at Kierkegaard. Therefore, I will consider MacIntyre's account of Kierkegaard's ethical theory as a means of

considers the 18th-19th century “expressivist turn” toward nature, and the philosophical treatment of nature as the inner wellspring of our moral being. It is from within this third facet of the modern identity that this paper begins its historical outline of the intellectual influences on Kierkegaard’s post-Romantic self-affirming moral philosophy, beginning with the Radical Enlightenment.

2.1 Radical Enlightenment’s Self-Responsible Reason

The radical Enlightenment held firmly to the ideal of “self-responsible reason” (Taylor 1989: 322). Rational understanding was essential for achieving freedom from burdensome moral precepts, folk superstitions, and church dogma, all of which stood in the way of rationally perceiving the universal and impartial benevolence of creation. The radical “Aufklärer” or “thinker” had no use for providential order; she based her ethics solely upon utility, reasoning that what one truly desires is the abundance of pleasure and the absence of pain.¹⁰ As Taylor emphasizes, for the radical enlightenment Aufklärer, the issue was not why or which actions are moral, but “how to maximize happiness” (1989: 321). Hence, judgments of “right” and “wrong” could not be based on any particular “conception of the order of things, either the ancient hierarchical one of reason or the modern one of providential design” (1989: 321). Instead, the radical thinker chose to view both the world and human nature as neutral and morally nonaligned domains. To master one’s neutral nature the modern individual had to understand her relationship to others and to the goal of maximizing happiness (1989: 321-322). Human nature had to

clarification, and as a form of contrast to Taylor’s (more balanced and less agenda specific, though underused) account of Kierkegaard’s self-affirming moral philosophy.

¹⁰ Taylor takes the definition of utility from J. Bentham: “that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the

be understood not in inherent moral terms, but as a product of our beliefs, thoughts, relationships, and motives. Taylor clarifies: “our character is formed by the associations which have been set up in our history. These either incline us to serve the general happiness or do not, and on this basis we are judged good or bad” (1989: 321-322). There is in this radical perspective some sense of biographical narrative, a notion of the history of causes and consequences that define the pursued goods of a people. Yet, both narrative and goods, in this context, are ontologically independent of a neutral human nature—they may inform our character but they ultimately serve the issue of how the modern individual is to maximize happiness.

Critics reacted to the hyper-rationalism and utility of the 18th-century Enlightenment, and this reaction is the direct legacy from which Kierkegaard later emerges in the mid 18th-century. Taylor focuses on two such categories of criticism: Kant’s transcendental idealism and the Romanticism of Schleiermacher, Schelling and others. Between the two he believes “there is a point in common, a guiding thread,” namely the intellectual resistance to a narrow and stringent view of the rational will bent on perfect utility, and the wish to retrieve the sympathetic notion that the human being indeed struggles with real issues of good and evil (1989: 355).

2.2 Kant’s Radical Freedom and the Universal Moral Imperative

Immanuel Kant’s part in 18th-century opposition to the radical Enlightenment is manifest in his charges that utilitarianism leaves no room for a moral dimension to life, or at the very least a life that is not defined by the success or failure to maximize pleasure and minimize pain (Taylor 1989: 363). Kant reasoned that a truly free human will has a

happiness of the piety whose interest is in question.” See *On the Principles of Morals and Legislation*

moral dimension to its nature since moral action is itself a fulfillment of one's rational nature. Furthermore, Kant believed one exercises absolute and infinite freedom when acting in accordance with his or her moral agency on imperatives that are universally executable according to a rational law of morality. Kant's contribution to the Radical Enlightenment extends beyond mere criticism and he in fact fortifies the ideal of self-responsible reason by radically defining the extent of freedom. For true freedom to be experienced, one must live according to one's nature and as a rational and moral agent act upon universalizable moral imperatives. Unlike the radical Aufklärer's utilitarian understanding of moral agency, Kant's emphasis on how our rational natures are to act in accord with what is universally good, furthered the moral agent's growth in freedom (Taylor 1989: 366).

Though Taylor presents Romantic criticism of the Enlightenment in tandem with Kantian criticism, Kant's own philosophical efforts later become the target of the critical opposition from the Romanticism of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. For Kant reason can engage objects and concepts only from within the boundaries of subjective experience. Metaphysics and natural theology reach beyond experience and are not feasibly conducive to rational mediation or thought—one can say little of empirical rational consequence about either of them. For Kant religion must find its place in the rational moral life where one's nature can be maximized by following universal moral imperatives. As mentioned at the outset of this chapter, by exploring the philosophical context that led to Kierkegaard's thought we gain a better understanding of the forces that helped shape his aesthetic and ethical theory. While some have acknowledged the influence of Kant on Kierkegaard's traditional conception of what constitute ethical

(chapter I, paragraph 2).

precepts, there is no doubt that Kierkegaard, like Romantics before him, resisted, in part, Kant's uncompromising insistence on the exclusive use of reason in ethical and religious thought (MacIntyre 1984: 43-44; Green 1991: xviii, 175; Pattison 2002: 11).

2.3 Romantic Intuition and the Manifestation of Absolute Spirit

Philosophical theologians like Schleiermacher and Schelling accepted Kant's criticisms of metaphysics and natural theology but they attempted to tame its rationalism by removing the emphasis Kant had placed on moral rationalism, and redirecting it to the notion of intuitive perception and dependence on the "Absolute" (McCall 2000: 366). For Schelling, who latter took up the task of countering Hegel's notion of a dialectical existence worked out through the necessary historical philosophical push toward Spirit (or the Absolute), human nature and moral identity are made manifest through "the history of human consciousness as manifestations in matter and time of the self-unfolding Spirit" (2000: 367). Ultimately, myth, religion, and art are considered as expressions of the self-actualizing God (once again the Absolute) within the historical consciousness of humanity. Hence, in human consciousness lies intuitive moral identity further grounded by humanity's connection to the divine.

Romanticism identifies nature (the material and spiritual undercurrent of existence) as the source of human moral identity. Within the individual is a voice that taps into nature and articulates its truth through feelings and intuition (Taylor 1989: 368-39). Fulfillment of one's moral identity is the act of both uncovering and articulating this intuitive truth. The history of culture is a narrative of the manifested truth, and in particular art, becomes an account of human creativity for apprehending the depth and

intuitive connectedness of human existence to the Absolute or divine (McCalla 2000: 375-76).¹¹

Yet for Kant, reason is incompatible with feelings and intuition; the rational moral agent cannot discern her moral identity and duty from such faculties. In contrast, for the Romantic philosopher, reason has its own deficiencies—it “lacks the force, the depth, the vibrancy, the joy” which comes from one’s intuitive connection to the Spirit of nature (Taylor 1989: 383). A purely rational approach to discerning moral identity removes the agent from her inherent and intuitive association with nature as source of moral identity. Ultimately, like the Radical Enlightenment, Romanticism formulates its own, though decidedly different, narrative of moral selfhood, one of unfolding human identity and nature, one that includes human creativity, intuition, and reason, as expressions of the inner voice and as manifestations of the Absolute. This Romantic narrative is based on the historical cultural record, and the expression of individual moral identity becomes tied up with the extent of that cultural record.

This brings us to Kierkegaard’s contribution to the modern moral identity. While MacIntyre situates Kierkegaard at the tail end of the Enlightenment’s failed efforts to find a rational basis for morality by aligning morality with a particular conception of human nature, Taylor on the other hand, offers a broader context for Kierkegaard’s thought. Taylor’s context that does not place the fate of the modern moral self in Kierkegaard’s hands, and this is the primary difference between MacIntyre and Taylor’s understanding

¹¹ For the Disenchanted Romantic intuition and creative imagination retained a “privileged status” but lost their association to the capacity to perceive and reveal metaphysical realities (McCalla 2000: 375). Intuition and imagination are simply tools used to explore the creative cultural record—namely myth, religion, and art—of the human contemplation and articulation of the divine. The concern of the Disenchanted Romantic is not with metaphysical truths, as it is with the vehicles for expressing those truths, such as myth, religion, and art (376).

of Kierkegaard's ethical theory (MacIntyre 1984: 39-43; Taylor 1989: 446-452). While MacIntyre views Kierkegaard as one who undermines the rational justification of morality through what MacIntyre sees as criterionless radical choice, Taylor on the other hand tells us that like all Romantics, Kierkegaard is highly skeptical of the absolutism of human reason, and chooses instead to affirm the "good" in reality without objective external evidence (McCalla 2000: 369). What separates from MacIntyre is that MacIntyre accuses Kierkegaard as setting out to undermine rational moral discourse, while Taylor acknowledges Kierkegaard's recognition of the failure of reason to establish morality (MacIntyre 1984: 39-43; Taylor 1989: 446-452).

Early on in Kierkegaard's theory of moral selfhood there begins to be manifest a retreat from the excessive metaphysical emphasis of Romantic inwardness (the intuitive apprehension of the Absolute). The Romantic notion of inwardness remains but becomes informed by both the individualism and rationalism of the Radical Enlightenment, as well as the moral subjectivism MacIntyre see as ultimately inherent in the ethical theory of later Enlightenment thinkers such as Kierkegaard (what MacIntyre saw as namely Kierkegaard's emphasis on "radical choice"). Kierkegaard's part in the post-Romantic era from which his thought emerges is illustrated in how he grasps hold of Romantic ideals but replaces the purely Romantic aesthetic/metaphysical parts with his promotion of ethical choice and religious faith. In keeping with this chapter's objective to provide a historical-philosophical narrative from we can better understand Kierkegaard's thought, the following section examines how Kierkegaard took a post-Romantic stance that departed from the aesthetic theory of Romanticism and how this departure informed his own self-affirming ethical theory.

2.4 *What a Little Time in Berlin can do:
Kierkegaard's Post-Romantic Critique of Aesthetic Sensibility*

In the fall of 1841 shortly after successfully defending his dissertation *The Concept of Irony*, and decisively breaking his engagement to Regine Olsen, Kierkegaard departed for Berlin. His intention was to sit in on the “comeback” lectures of Friedrich Schelling in the hope of witnessing a successful counter and dismantling of Hegel’s systematic philosophy (Hannay 2001: 1; Lowrie 1944: 144). Instead, Kierkegaard’s enthusiasm and optimism for Schelling’s potential waned and he himself took up the task of constructing a radical critique of Hegelianism.¹² In his papers and journals, Kierkegaard writes of how during the early days after his arrival in Berlin he spent much of his time writing out Schelling’s lectures. Soon after it became apparent that Schelling was not to be the potent critic of Hegel’s system, it appears that Kierkegaard turned his time and effort to writing the beginning portions of *Either/Or*, before choosing to return to Copenhagen in early winter of 1842. The events of late fall 1841 profoundly affected Kierkegaard: his defense of his dissertation (a formal Hegelian critique of Romantic aestheticism); his controversial and difficult breakup with Regine; and his disappointment in Schelling’s potential; and the beginning of his first major philosophical work *Either/Or*, all played a part in forming his concept of modern moral selfhood. In this next section of the paper, I will consider in what manner Kierkegaard departed philosophically from the popular Romantic aesthetic theory of his time. In specific, I will examine how

¹² Schelling regarded art as the superlative instrument for conducting philosophy because it unified both sensuality and the Absolute in the aesthetic form (Pattison 2002: 14). Hegel, on the other hand, understood art in limited terms, as merely an imperfect stage toward the teleological apprehension of Spirit. Hegel believed that in the past art may have fulfilled primal aesthetic and intellectual needs, but that the modern individual’s highest needs are met purely through historically driven systematic philosophical reflection (McCalla 2000: 367). In his own aesthetic theory, Kierkegaard leans closer to Hegel than to Schelling.

he developed his own theory of aesthetic and ethical selfhood primarily through his first major philosophical publication *Either/Or*, and as a secondary part of my examination consider aspects of his personal life that may have contributed to the development of his post-Romantic criticisms. Perhaps it can be said that that Kierkegaard had a critical reaction to Romanticism is less obvious when considering the usual targets of his philosophical critiques. After all, it is easy to identify Hegel and a Hegelian-influenced Europe's preoccupation with grand systems and systematic dialectical process as Kierkegaard's clear polemical target. It is even possible that a careful consideration of Kierkegaard's thought could lead one to posit Kant as an influence and foil.¹³ Kant, Hegel, and the Romantics are all potential targets of Kierkegaard's first major work *Either/Or*. In his book *Kierkegaard, Religion and the Nineteenth Century Crisis of Culture*, George Pattison offers a fresh perspective on the polemical agenda of *Either/Or*, suggesting that the Romanticism themes expressed in Friedrich Schlegel's erotic autobiographical novel *Lucinde*, were its primary target (2002: 127). *Either/Or*, in which Kierkegaard's self-affirming aesthetic and ethical philosophies first appear, takes a critical stance against excessive Romantic aestheticism, while promoting the possibility of passion in the ethical and committed choice of marriage.

However, Kierkegaard makes ethical choice, and ultimately religious faith, the vehicle of fulfillment rather than Hegel's systematic and teleological dialectic.

¹³ There are, I will suggest, obvious, though seldom investigated commonalities between the two men. Kierkegaard assumes many similar foundational positions to Kant, since he provides Kierkegaard with the necessary premises to his philosophical aesthetic, moral, and religious theory. I would like to mention briefly the comical contrast between Kant's disapproval of those who publish the academic work of others without their expressed permission, and the pseudonymous character of *Either/Or*, in which "Victor Eremita" finds and publishes manuscripts of "A," "B," "Johannes," and "Wilhelm" (see Kant's "On the Wrongfulness of Unauthorized Publication of Books," *Practical Philosophy* [1785]). For a greater consideration of the influences of Kant on Kierkegaard, see Ronald M. Green, *Kierkegaard and Kant: The Hidden Debt* (Albany: State of University of New York Press, 1992).

Some forty years prior to *Either/Or*'s own critical public reception, Schlegel published a controversial account of his adulterous affair with Dorothea Veit, daughter of Jewish Philosopher Moses Mendelssohn.¹⁴ *Lucinde* sparked a literary scandal in Berlin as the reading public reacted against the novel's unconventional and shameless attitude toward sexual propriety and social norm. Not unlike *Either/Or* in form, *Lucinde* offered the 18th and 19th centuries' reader no straightforward narrative structure. With its blend of narrative bits, letters, dialogues, myth, and fantasy, the reader had it as her task to piece together a somewhat fragmented picture of the moral personality of "Julius," Schlegel's alias in the book. The typically Romantic character of *Lucinde* is expressed in both its eclectic literary form, as well as in the themes it expresses. Ultimately, as a Romantic work, it was intended by Schlegel to represent an ideal of reality in touch with the profound meaning and fulfillment that lies behind and beyond the finite terms of our social existence.

The ideal reality expressed in *Lucinde* was the notion that human fulfillment could be achieved in the passionate erotic love between a man and a woman.¹⁵ Pattison elaborates on this ideal reality, by drawing the causal relationships between Kantian rationalism and meager metaphysics, and Romanticism's turn to nature as bridge to the metaphysical apprehension of the Absolute. According to Pattison, *Lucinde* and the sentiments expressed within are Schlegel's answer to the impasse put forward by Kant that "given the division of human reality into radically distinct spheres of spirit and sense,

¹⁴ Mendelssohn's greater know works include *Phaedo: or On the Immortality of the Soul*, and "On Evidence in Metaphysical Sciences," which earned him a prize from the Royal Prussian Academy of Sciences. Mendelssohn's own theory of aesthetics is given in *On the Main Principles of the Fine Arts and Sciences*.

¹⁵ Later when Friedrich Schleiermacher took up the themes expressed in *Lucinde* in an attempt to defend and clarify Schlegel's thesis, he would downplay the role of heterosexual love in bringing the man and

noumena and phenomena, how can we find a standpoint . . . from which existence can be grasped and understood as a whole?” (2002: 118). Schlegel’s solution to the identity/fulfillment problem posed by Kant is the Romantic ideal that a truly passionate love fuses together the polarities embodied in man and woman, and that from this union finite human life can coherently witness the infinite Spirit reality (Schlegel 1971: 113, *passim*).

It would be oversimplifying to conclude that Schlegel’s use of Romantic erotic ideal would be sufficient (forty years later) to set Kierkegaard against the sentiments expressed in *Lucinde*, hence aligning him with popular society’s own critical reaction to the novel. Typically, Kierkegaard was a strong critic of Bourgeois conventions, yet Pattison tells us “in the *Lucinde* debate he put his considerable polemical powers at the service of the Establishment” (2002: 127). Of course, Schlegel’s ideal and romantic understanding of human fulfillment in the passionate erotic love between two individuals is not precisely what set Kierkegaard in opposition. What had turned Kierkegaard against the themes expressed in *Lucinde* was what he interpreted as a perpetually aesthetic and careless treatment of sexuality, love, and the commitments and responsibilities inherent in such erotic relationships.

The shocking force behind the ideals expressed in *Lucinde* was fueled by Schlegel’s assertion that the exchanging of sexual roles—where the woman takes on the dominant, seducing, mastering task, while the man assumes the submissive, seduced, mastered position—offered a beautiful “allegory of the development of male and female to full and complete humanity” (Schlegel 1971: 49). Schlegel described this inversion of

woman to wholeness and fulfillment, preferring, like Kierkegaard, to assign realized fulfillment to a religious not erotic category of being. See Pattison 2002: 120-27.

roles as a competition spurred on by childish pleasure wherein he (Julius) and Dorothea labored to the fullest, with vicious passion, to adopt each other's social sexual posture (1971: 47-49). Pattison suggests that Schlegel's subversion of traditional sexual roles is also a critique of Enlightenment culture, both popular and academic (2002: 119).

Schlegel's erotic inversion called for a parallel inversion within Enlightenment culture; society's rational, orderly, vocational, and goal-directed agendas are to be traded in for the sensuality, anarchy, and idleness of aesthetic forms of human fulfillment.

This inversion of Enlightenment cultural values is expressed further by Schlegel in his account of "Little Wilhelmine" who in her playful abandon derives wonderful joy from lying on her back and waving her legs in the air (1971: 50-53).¹⁶ Schlegel wonders why he should not imitate Wilhelmine's example; after all, he is a creature of desire whose sensuous poetic appetites demand a vigorous satiation. For the Enlightenment culture that consumed *Lucinde* in a state of enthralled shock, it was precisely this parallelism between the innocence of a child and the shamelessness subversion of sexual conventions that caused so much controversy. Pattison suggests that public shock and outraged literary criticism was not Schlegel's goal. Instead, Schlegel sought to liberate popular European culture's sexual sensibilities, and its apprehension and internalization of the sensual element constrained by Enlightenment culture and tradition, by mirroring the sensual in the innocent play of a young child.

Philosophical, religious, and moral dimensions of Kant's dilemma regarding the polarities of human personhood are addressed in Schlegel's inversion of sex roles and Enlightenment values. Furthermore, erotic love is elevated above social and ecclesial

conventions, wherein marriage is seen as a “curb on the regrettable and scarcely restrainable lusts of the flesh” (Pattison 2002: 120). Perhaps it is this shallow aesthetic assessment of marital commitment that prompts Kierkegaard to comment on the particular brand of Romanticism expressed by Schlegel in *Lucinde*. Over a year and half before the publication of *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard had taken a Hegelian critical position on Romanticism in his successfully defended dissertation *The Concept of Irony*. Kierkegaard argued against the Romantic claim that the polarities of personhood (whose irreconcilable separation had previously been delineated in Kant’s hyper-rationalism), could be integrated in art and the sub-sphere of sensuality. Kierkegaard remarked that this Romantic assertion of integration and reconciliation had no factual ground. The claim of integration was no more than an aesthetic ideal whose substance and reality did not extend beyond the individual’s insistence upon the ideal’s factualness. Kierkegaard uses poetry as an example of the Romantic delusion of reconciliation, stating that poetry, as a form of reconciliation of the polarities of personhood, deals purely with imaginary (1966: 297). In Romantic ideal, as in poetry, there is no “transubstantiation of the given actuality . . . but it reconciles me with the given actuality by giving up another actuality” (Kierkegaard 1966: 297). This other actuality referred to by Kierkegaard refers to is the form and fictional content of poetry itself. Reconciliation of polarities via the form and fictional content of poetry is no more tangible than merely saying to oneself that ‘I am reconciled’ while one’s personhood remains divided among the sexual, philosophical, and social categories of life. For Kierkegaard authentic or tangible reconciliation can only take place at the religious level of existence where the individual “posses himself in

¹⁶ Kierkegaard’s may have derived *Either/Or*’s ‘Judge Wilhelm’, the Christian and married man who writes to a young aesthete about the revelation of the Self through pursuit of ethical and committed choices,

infinite clarity” (1966: 298). In this state of clear self-possession, the individual’s self-identity moves from identification with the task of aesthetic self-gratification, to identification with the Absolute. The creative and imaginative qualities of the aesthetic life are dependant on a finite sense of self, while religious life appeals to infinite qualities of experience apprehended through clarity of self-possession.

In *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard attacks Julius, Schlegel’s *Lucinde* alias, with the purpose of exposing Schlegel’s insincerity, his perpetual aesthetic reflection, and his failure to truly embody what he claims to revel in—the erotic. In the “Seducer’s Diary” portion of *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard constructs a portrait of the prototypical self-deluded aesthete, Johannes, who is marooned at the reflective stage of aesthetic existence, and is deluded into regarding himself as a true *Don Juan*. Kierkegaard’s Seducer, Johannes, embodies Schlegel’s philosophical demeanor as well as his misplaced search for intellectual gratification through erotic encounters. The Seducer also mimics Schlegel’s pretense of seeking out the reconciling nature of passionate sensual lovemaking by pursuing self-gratifying erotic love affairs. Both Julius and Johannes regard the polarities of selfhood as located in the two sexes, yet Johannes’ erotic agenda and preoccupation of self-gratification through the physical surrendering of his lover, is an aesthetic exaggeration meant to highlight the dishonest and deluded quality of Schlegel’s own search for reconciliation through erotic love. Such a Romantic ideal of reconciliation is wholly dependant on the complete submission of the “other”—the woman. Whether she adopts a dominant lovemaking role is irrelevant and still a form of submission for furthering the Seducer’s self-gratifying agenda. Kierkegaard’s Johannes expresses the exercise of aesthetic erotic love in the following manner: “the moment [of self-

from Schlegel’s “Little Wilhelmine”.

surrendering] is everything and in the moment the woman is everything. The consequences [commitment, marriage, children] I do not comprehend” (Kierkegaard 1992: 365).

I would argue that Kierkegaard’s critique of Schlegel’s erotic autobiography *Lucinde* is not motivated by a prudish regard for sensual lovemaking spurred on by his own anxiety over sexual performance. Rather, Kierkegaard seeks to force a distinction between Romantic concepts of a form of love that fulfills both human infinitude/potential, and that of a merely pleasurable and self-gratifying finite Eros. In later half of *Either/Or* we read the letters of Judge Wilhelm, a Christian and committed married man, who seeks to affect the deep aesthetic life of Johannes through appeals to ethical selfhood.¹⁷ In the “Aesthetic Validity of Marriage” Wilhelm argues for the grounding of passion and sensuality in ethical commitment and religious faith.¹⁸ The Judge upholds the marriage ceremony as the means for relating true love to Spirit or God—this is the means for building a love that can facilitate a tangible and firm union of the polarities of selfhood inherent in the sexes. Mere erotic union is not enough to ensure that the sexes will reconcile and integrate their respective polarities, what is needed is God’s witness (Kierkegaard 1992: 409). Wilhelm explains that the presence of a Church held wedding ceremony reminds the man and woman that true abiding love develops not out of an exclusively erotic relationship, but out of a resolute and committed human will

¹⁷ It is unclear who the young aesthete or “B” of the second half of *Either/Or* is, whether he is the Johannes of the “Seducer’s Diary” from the first half, or some other young man living the life of aestheticism and wit. Drawing the correlation between Johannes and “B” certainly is useful; in addition to adding coherency to the eclectic form of *Either/Or*, the association of the two literary characters strengthens Kierkegaard’s criticism of aesthetic existence and the place it has in the individual’s coming to selfhood.

¹⁸ I believe this is not an appeal to the “Religious” stage of existence on the part of the Judge. Instead, Wilhelm exhortations to the young aesthete remain ethically motivated since the “Ethical” would involve a narrative of choice that entailed religious expression.

that sets itself against the natural, though finitely concerned, inclinations of human nature (1992: 410-412). Without a religious foundation, love dissipates into a stuttering narrative of fractured erotic relationships comprised of affairs within which the participants can never experience the full moral self-identity brought about through committed ethical choice. Judge Wilhelm eventually acknowledges that art is a more expressive rendering of sensuous passion than the vehicle of marriage, but claims that marriage is ultimately more aesthetic because it allows for a true reconciliation of the polarities of the self, embodied in the opposite sexes (1992: 413-414).

Aware that the poetic artistic expression of the aesthetic is effective in communicating sentiments of love, Judge Wilhelm combines this poetic expression with an ethical embodiment of erotic and religious sentiment, the result is ultimately the ethical commitment of the marriage union, he writes:

“Marriage is holy and blessed by God. It is a civic, for thereby the laws belong to the state and the fatherland and the concern of fellow citizens. It is poetic, ineffably poetic, as love is, but resolution is the conscientious translator who translates enthusiasm into reality, and this translator is so precise, oh, so precise! . . . Such is marriage.” (Kierkegaard 1940: 121)

The active fulfillment of the ethical is the commitment of marriage. In this act of union ethical selfhood is concretized in the passionate yet truly abiding love of marital life. In marriage, the polarities of the self are reconciled, united in a sensual attraction mediated by persons that remain possessed of their individual selfhoods. In marriage the freedom to choose and the will to commit, reside at the heart of a union where lovers can, in the existential despair of self-awareness, observe the infinite and absolute Spirit.

Both Kierkegaard’s dissertation *The Concept of Irony* (1841), and his first major work *Either/Or* (1843), contain formal philosophical and artistic critical accounts of

Romantic aesthetic and sensual philosophy. Furthermore, both works bracket a significant event briefly mentioned at the beginning of this section namely, the breakup of Kierkegaard's engagement to Regine Olsen. According to Kierkegaard, he had been convinced almost immediately after his engagement to Regine that he could not reconcile the obligations of committed married life with his vocational desire to be a writer and critic of Christianity (Rhode 1960: 37-43). Kierkegaard attempted to rationalize his position to himself by interpreting his intense melancholy over the engagement as "God's chastisement" and "a divine protest against our union" (Rhode 1960: 38-39). Kierkegaard came to see himself "sacrificed," and perceived his suffering, both in and after the engagement, as a creative source for "delving for the Truth which, in turn, might benefit others" (Rhode 1960: 43). On a number of occasions, Kierkegaard attempted to convince Regine and her father to accept his wish for an end to the engagement. When Regine remained unwilling to give him up, Kierkegaard offered her the social advantage of publicly declaring their breakup as her own initiative—again she refused (Rhode 1960: 40). Kierkegaard finally resorted to publicly imitating the life of aestheticism and wit wherein he attempted to prove himself a true cad unworthy of Regine's attention (Lowrie 1944: 142). In the end, after Regine capitulated, ultimately out of affection for his wishes, Kierkegaard parted from Regine with a dispassionate kiss (Rhode 1960: 39-41). The effect of the break up appears to have devastated not only Regine, but also Kierkegaard, who believed his decision to be best for both Regine and he. Kierkegaard writes in an 1849 entry to his diary:

To step out of the relationship as a cad, perhaps as an arch-cad, was the only thing to do; to put her on an even keel and start her on her course toward another marriage; but at the same time it was exquisite chivalry . . .

Thereupon our ways parted. I spent the nights weeping upon my bed . . . My brother said to me that he would go to the family [Olsen] and prove to them that I was no cad. I said: If you do that I'll put a bullet through your head.—The best proof of how deeply concerned I was about the matter. (Rhode 1960: 41)

Pattison speculates that part of Kierkegaard's motive behind the termination of the engagement was his anxiety over the sexual obligations of married life.¹⁹ However, one could also speculate that the force and determination with which Kierkegaard ended his engagement with Regine is compatible with the sort of authenticity and soft relativism that allows for the disavowing of all personal relationships that fail to provide exclusive self-fulfillment (Taylor 1991: 16-18). Taylor describes this compulsion to sacrifice love relationships and the care of children as a "calling," one that if unheeded would amount to the individual feeling he or she had wasted his or her life or failed to be "authentic" (1991: 17). Yet, whatever the motives for detaching himself from Regine Olsen, Kierkegaard retained the themes of marriage, choice, commitment, and the erotic close to the core of his early philosophical writings. Moreover, the decidedly religious tone (his regard for the wishes of God) behind Kierkegaard's rationale for breaking his engagement to Regine further distances him from the sorts of individuals who practice the authenticity and soft relativism about which Taylor is so critical. This brief consideration of a select point in Kierkegaard's personal life contributes two important findings to the overall aims of this essay. First, it examines certain choices and actions taken by Kierkegaard that in turn inform his own personal moral narrative. In chapter three it will become evident how important the consistency of individual personal narrative is when evaluating the

¹⁹ Though, perhaps counter to Pattison's speculation, one can turn to an 1849 diary entry in which Kierkegaard writes, "I cannot quite make out what impression she has made on me in a purely erotic sense. For it is certain that the fact that she had given herself almost in adoration, and asked me to love her, moved me so strongly that I would risk everything for her. Still, how highly I loved her is also evidence thereby

authenticity of one's moral selfhood. Second, it sets out in detail personal events leading up to the writing of *Either/Or*, the principle text under consideration in this essay (to be examined primarily in chapter three). When reading the explicitly aesthetic and ethical portions of *Either/Or*, one gains the sense that the above events in Kierkegaard's life have infiltrated the text and contributed its central themes namely, romantic aestheticism, marital commitment, ethical choice, and the existential anxiety (melancholy) that accompanies one's efforts to cultivate moral selfhood.

At the outset of this chapter, I argued that in order to better defend what Taylor identified as Kierkegaard's post-Romantic self-affirming moral theory against MacIntyre's criticisms, chapter two would first place Kierkegaard's theory within the development of the modern moral self as set out by Charles Taylor in his work *Sources of the Self*. Therefore, it was within what Taylor considered the third facet of modern identity namely, the 18th-19th century "expressivist turn" toward nature, and its philosophical treatment of nature as the inner wellspring of our moral being, that this chapter began its historical outline of the intellectual influences on Kierkegaard's ethical theory. Second, I claimed that chapter two would serve to establish the historical-philosophical context that allows for the emergence of Kierkegaard's thought. Outlining this historical-philosophical narrative revealed the influences that shaped Kierkegaard's aesthetic and ethical theory of becoming a "self." We saw how following the changes and developments in the moral philosophy of the Radical Enlightenment, Kant, and his Romantic critics revealed not only the intellectual relationships between philosophical rivals, but also allowed for Kierkegaard's philosophical emergence into the realm of

that I constantly have wanted to conceal to myself how much she really moved me, but this, after all, has no essential relation to the Erotic" (Rhode 1960: 39).

moral theory. Third, chapter two also provided a detailed account of Kierkegaard's early engagement with the aesthetic theory of Romantic Friedrich Schlegel, thus revealing Kierkegaard's own account of moral selfhood. Combined, these three objectives supplied the essential background to Kierkegaard's theory of moral selfhood. In the following chapter I explore in depth Kierkegaard's conception of aesthetic selfhood, its limitations, and ultimately is transition to the ethical stage wherein the aesthete endeavors to cultivate a fuller embodiment of moral selfhood through cultivating a narrative of personal moral choices

CHAPTER THREE

KIERKEGAARD'S CONCEPT OF THE SELF

The purpose of this chapter is to uncover the rational and justifiable basis that lies behind Kierkegaard's ethical theory. Establishing this basis serves two purposes: First, it denies the charge made by MacIntyre that the ethical theory set out by Kierkegaard in *Either/Or* (1843) demonstrates the utter failure and breakdown of various enlightenment thinkers (namely Diderot, Hume, and Kant) to provide a basis from which rational public moral discourse could take place. Second, I believe that in establishing the rational and justifiable basis behind Kierkegaard's ethical theory, the theory cannot be seen as the forefather of the sort of soft relativism and authenticity that Taylor claims is plaguing contemporary western liberal moral identity. In order to achieve these two purposes this chapter's second section will describe in detail the three central features of *Either/Or* that MacIntyre believes undermines the ethical theory offered within as a coherent, rational, and functional theory. In the third, fourth, and fifth sections I address MacIntyre's three criticisms of the ethical theory in *Either/Or*, and through my defense attempt to establish a rational and justifiable basis for that same theory rooted in what I call the "narrative of choice." The claim put forth in the fifth subsection is that deliberate and committed choices constitute the narrative structure of an authentic selfhood in becoming. Yet, before addressing MacIntyre's criticism, this chapter will first open with an account of the existential move from the aesthetic stage to the ethical stage. For Kierkegaard, the individual "self" comes into its own being through three stages of existence—"aesthetic," "ethical," and "religious."²⁰ The aesthetic stage of existence, with its two degrees of self-

²⁰ Of which the first and second stages are the concern of this essay.

dispossession (immediacy and reflection), represents a mode of life wherein the individual is most plagued by the despair of existential moral free agency. The individual's duration in and movement out of the aesthetic stage of life, provides the critical step toward that individual's realization of her own authentic selfhood. Not only is the following section related to Kierkegaard's criticisms of Schlegel's emphasis on the aesthetic (as seen in the last section chapter two), but it also reveals the process necessary to establish a rational and justifiable basis for one's morality namely, a narrative or personal history of ethical decision and choice.

3.1 From Aesthetic Immediacy to Ethical Choice: And The Existential Push to Authentic Selfhood

The aesthetic stage of life has within it the processes for coming to an eventual grasping of authentic self-identity. Initially the aesthete is immersed in immediacy and fails to distinguish between herself and the source or object of her aesthetic obsession (Taylor 2000: 232-233). Kierkegaard understands the aesthete's predicament as one in which the individual, though unconscious of her individuality and personal responsibility, is nonetheless ruled by natural desires. This is symptomatic of the individual's failure to be conscious of herself as a being in despair, a being who is ultimately devoid of self. However, once desire for the object of immediate sensual self-gratification itself becomes the cognitive concern of the aesthete, there occurs a tearing away of both the desirer and the object of desire, leaving behind the conscious distinction of self (subject) and other (object) (Kierkegaard 1992: 89; Taylor 2000: 232-233). This separation is a necessary step toward the individual's realizing an infinite sense of self independent of all other things (its own particularity), but dependent nonetheless on its relation to all things

(universal accountability). The aesthete has gained a dim consciousness of self that becomes defined by the new division of desire and object of desire (1992: 89-90). This awareness displaces the previous entrenched position of immediate sensual immersion, giving way to the second degree of aesthetic existence—the reflective.

Aesthetic self-reflection serves to awaken repeatedly the individual from the immediacy of aesthetic self-gratification while strengthening the distinction between ‘subject/self’ and ‘object/other’ (Taylor 2000: 235). The self now begins to understand the difference between the aesthetic ideal embodied in the object of desire, and the reality of a self-consciousness that is separate from yet still aesthetically dependant on the object/other. (Taylor 2000: 232, 244). The reflective aesthete is now only cognitive flickers away from a self-consciousness that comprehends the despair of freedom and responsibility that accompanies authentic selfhood (Kierkegaard 1968: 189). A first and true “prime” choice now confronts the individual: the choice to embrace one’s ‘self in despair’ and ‘in despite of despair’ (1968: 200-201). The unveiling that results from moving through the aesthetic stages is irreversible; its devastating conscious effects are permanent (1968: 185).

As mentioned in the preceding paragraph, authentic inward reflection produces an acute though potentially chronic sense of despair. Such despair is a result of finally recognising the emptiness of one’s life manifest in the failure to actualise and undertake possibilities, actions, and the pursuit of personal vocation. This is the failure to be a responsible, truly balanced, and authentic being that forges herself through passionate and committed choice. It can be said that despair has a profound link to choice, that despair in fact leads one to choose (1992: 513). The ‘choice in despair’, or the ‘choice of

despair', is a choice of the responsibility to exercise the potential that the individual may have thus far squandered while in the aesthetic stage. The individual who chooses in despair has acknowledged his abilities and potentiality, and knows she ought to employ them in a passionate and committed ethical existence. For Kierkegaard there may well be a sense that the choice of despair that leads to self-awareness is essentially 'the choice of self'. Judge Wilhelm explains:

Anyone who chooses himself ethically has himself as a task . . . The person who lives ethically has seen himself, knows himself, permeates his whole concretion with his consciousness . . . The ethical individual knows himself, but this knowledge is not mere contemplation . . . it is a reflection on himself, which is itself an action, and that is why I have been careful to use the expression 'to choose oneself' instead of 'to know oneself'" Although inward reflection reveals one's condition of despair, which is itself a choice, the ethical life requires more than introspection and contemplation. It requires a reflection that responds through the act of choice and for the purpose of living an authentic, determined, and inevitably ethical life. (1992: 549)

Addressing the relation of selfhood to the stage of the ethical, Judge Wilhelm explains in a letter to a young aesthete, possibly Johannes, that "The aesthetic factor in a person is that by which he is immediately what he is; the ethical factor is that by which he becomes what he becomes" (Kierkegaard 1992: 492). Here the Judge sums up the nature of a self-identity that is worked out at the aesthetic and ethical stages of life. Aesthetic existence, characterized primarily by immediacy (an immediacy found even at the reflective stage of aestheticism), does not allow for complete distinction of the individual self from the object of immediate desire. Ethical existence on the other hand is self-creating, self-revealing, and self-affirming. Choice is the marker of the ethical life and it is what makes the reality of selfhood tangible and possible (1992: 485-486, 491-492). Deliberate and committed choice provides the narrative structure of a selfhood in

becoming; it is the personal history of the gradual construction of an authentic and self-possessed personality (Taylor 2000: 242).

3.2 MacIntyre's Criticism of Kierkegaard's Notion of Ethical Selfhood

For MacIntyre, *Either/Or* demonstrates how the Enlightenment project's attempt to supply a rational justification or basis for morality ironically results in contemporary society's perception of moral discourse as the meeting of incommensurable moral positions (1984: 1-12, 39-50). *Either/Or*, according to MacIntyre, can aptly be considered as the "outcome and epitaph" of the Enlightenment project (1984: 39).

MacIntyre suggests that if today we fail to read *Either/Or* in the context of the failure of the Enlightenment project and the emergence of the distinctively modern stance on moral discourse, it is because "over-familiarity with its thesis has dulled our sense of its astonishing novelty" at its time of publication (1984:39).

MacIntyre begins his critique of Kierkegaard's ethical theory by claiming that there are three central features in *Either/Or* which he views as issues complicating the rationality of the book's presentation of the ethical. The first feature is the relationship between the book's form of presentation and its central thesis. MacIntyre claims that Kierkegaard's declared motive in using the pseudonymous approach for *Either/Or* was to present to the reader an "ultimate choice" (the aesthetic or ethical) without personally recommending one choice over the other (1984: 40).²¹ Through pseudonyms Kierkegaard distances himself from *Either/Or*, using "A" to recommend the aesthetic life and "B" the ethical life, while Victor Eremita serves as founder and editor of both. In

²¹ We can further understand the role of pseudonyms in *Either/Or* when we consider how difficult it might be for readers to perceive either the aesthetic or the ethical as authentically represented, if it had been known at the time of book's publication that Kierkegaard was the sole author.

effect, Kierkegaard creates fictional characters (with personal narratives) that appear to authentically recommend their life's own particular path.²²

Yet, the choice between the aesthetic and the ethical stages is, as MacIntyre understands, not a choice between what is good and what is bad, but a choice more basic and primal than that – it is “the choice whether or not to choose in terms of good and evil” (1984: 40). The ethical life cannot be thought of as good nor the aesthetic life as bad until one chooses to associate the actions or choices that typify each mode of life with such prime categories. MacIntyre concludes that an individual must somehow, without criteria, choose in terms of what is good and what is bad without having ever previously identified with either category. This being the case, a reason for choosing the ethical or the aesthetic should never influence the individual who has yet to embrace either the ethical or the aesthetic. MacIntyre's issue is that Kierkegaard starts the individual in a vacuum where concepts of “good” and “evil” must themselves first be chosen as defining categories. As “first principles” good and evil are chosen without reason or justification precisely because there exists nothing prior to each category that can recommend one over the other” (MacIntyre 1984: 39). MacIntyre's particular interpretation of Kierkegaard's notion of radical choice – as the choosing of first principles without reasons or justification – is central to his assessment of Kierkegaard's role in the Enlightenment project and contribution toward the project's eventual breakdown.

²² Julia Watkin suggests that pseudonyms, as a “community of discussion,” give voice to different and opposing view points. These different view points belong to “poetized individuals, poetically maintained so that everything they say is in character with their poetized individualities” (2000:50). Furthermore, these poetized individualities establish a ‘narrative of character’ by embodying particular view points according to their character and, in the context of *Either/Or*, embodying particular radical choices, namely aesthetic or ethical.

Epitomising the emerging state of moral discourse, Kierkegaard could offer only criterionless choice as the basis for morality.

The second central feature of *Either/Or* is what MacIntyre understands to be an inconsistency between the book's conception of radical choice and its conception of the ethical. The ethical is presented as "that realm in which principles have authority over us independently of our attitudes, preferences and feelings. How I feel at any given moment is irrelevant to the question of how I must live" (MacIntyre 1984: 41). Yet, MacIntyre asks from where does the ethical obtain its authority? MacIntyre tells us that an ethical principle obtains its authority from the *reason* behind choosing that principle; any principle chosen that cannot be justified by a reason, is a principle without authority. MacIntyre concludes that the philosophical message of *Either/Or* is that ethical principles are to be radically chosen for no reason (1984: 42). The contradiction in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* is evident: any principle, adopted without reason, cannot have authority over the individual. Radical choice is choice without reason which in effect makes it a criterionless choice. Therefore, radical choice, as MacIntyre understands it, cannot furnish the moral and ethical principles of Kierkegaard's ethical system with the necessary rational basis.

The final central feature of *Either/Or* identified by MacIntyre is the incompatible pairing of Kierkegaard's "conservative and traditional" concept of the ethical, with his unique and new notion of radical choice (1984: 43). Kierkegaard sought to combine his notion of radical, and according to MacIntyre, criterionless choice with an established concept of what principles traditionally constitute the ethical life (1984: 43). It is MacIntyre's suspicion that Kierkegaard is merely suggesting new foundations for an

older and inherited way of living the ethical life. Kierkegaard offered readers of *Either/Or* an “incoherent combination of the novel and the inherited,” an unworkable and unjustifiable synthesis that, according to MacIntyre, was the “logical outcome of the Enlightenment’s [failed] project to provide a rational foundation for the justification of morality” (1984: 43).

MacIntyre interprets Kierkegaard’s radical choice as a criterionless choice, a choice without reasons. Criterionless choice deprives moral and ethical principles of their authority. Even if one’s moral and ethical principles are of a conservative and traditional nature, through radical choice the *prima-facia* duties of one’s life could be arbitrarily adhered to and then abandoned. “If I then choose to abandon the principle whenever it suited me,” writes MacIntyre, “I would be entirely free to do so” (1984: 42). This is precisely what MacIntyre sees as the contradiction and failure of Kierkegaard’s ethical theory as presented in *Either/Or*.

3.3 Moral Identity through the Radical Choice to be Governed by Principles: Responding to MacIntyre’s First Issue

Initially MacIntyre is correct when he claims that radical choice, as presented in *Either/Or*, is not a choice or decision that deals in categories of good and bad, but one that deals with choosing to choose in terms of the two. Yet, I will suggest that radical choice is also an inner act that signifies that the individual is choosing to govern herself according to principles. Furthermore, radical or primal choice is ultimately the act of ‘choosing to choose’.²³ The two clarifications I just offered conflict with what MacIntyre

²³ My term, “primal choice,” was developed independently of Davenport’s “primordial choice” but for the most part the two communicate the same idea (2001: 82). Davenport distinguishes between primordial choice or choice_p, and choice that deal with ethical decisions or choice_e. We can understand Kierkegaard’s radical choice as beginning with an initial choice (choice_p), and thereafter ethical or aesthetic choices

interprets radical choice to be, especially once he broadens his interpretation to include the idea that radical choice is a situation in which the individual exists in a vacuum, outside either the aesthetic and ethical stages, and without any inherent or learned codes of conduct to inform this isolated individual's initial choice. The idea of a radical, initial, or primal choice gives MacIntyre the mistaken impression that because it is a true *first* choice, then the individual can have neither inclinations nor dispositions toward the aesthetic and ethical stages before she makes her primal choice to choose.²⁴ Furthermore, MacIntyre seems to feel that if an individual finds herself inclined toward the aesthetic or ethical when confronted by primal choice, then this individual has already made his or her choice. Rather, I maintain that radical choice, for the aesthetic individual, is that first absolute choice; it is the aesthetic individual's initiation into the ethical life through the primal act of choosing absolutely and with passionate commitment.

MacIntyre's first central issue with *Either/Or*, is that Kierkegaard starts the individual in a vacuum where concepts of "good" and "evil" must themselves first be chosen as defining categories, without reason or justification precisely because there exists nothing prior to each category that can recommend one over the other. My response has been that MacIntyre is too narrow in his interpretation of radical choice, and it is this narrowness that prevents him from seeing the depth behind the concept of radical choice. Though MacIntyre interprets choosing to choose to be a situation in which the individual exists in a vacuum, I have added two clarifications namely the notions that

(choice_e) follow from the initial choice (choice_p). The ethical stage or life can therefore be defined as ethical choice, which as a part of radical choice, involves an engagement between the decisions one makes, and the principles that one had initially chosen to govern his or her 'self'.

²⁴ Although I consider radical choice, primal choice, and initial choice to convey the same idea namely, the first choice that an individual makes when he or she chooses to choose in terms of good and bad, radical

radical choice is an inner act that signifies that the individual is choosing to govern herself according to principles, and that radical choice is essentially the primal act of ‘choosing to choose’.

3.4 Radical Choice as Allowing the Authority of Principles to Acquire Personal Relevance: Responding MacIntyre’s Second Issue

According to MacIntyre, an ethical principle obtains its authority from the *reason* behind choosing that principle. Therefore any principle chosen that cannot be justified by a reason, is a principle without authority. MacIntyre concludes that the philosophical message of *Either/Or* is precisely that ethical principles are to be radically chosen for no reason. In his essay, “The Meaning of Kierkegaard’s Choice Between the Aesthetic and the Ethical: A Response to MacIntyre,” John Davenport rejects MacIntyre’s claim that Kierkegaard’s choice is criterionless and therefore an impossible basis for the ethical life. Davenport suggests that, “for Kierkegaard, choosing in terms of the ethical means identifying . . . with the motives guiding one’s actions” (2001: 75). In this way the aesthete steps toward becoming a responsible moral agent by giving traditional moral and ethical principles something against which their culturally accepted authority can apply. Choice essentially furnishes ethical principles with their authority. The individual chooses to choose in terms of good and bad and in doing so she begins immediately to identify with her own inner disposition. Yet, until such a radical and absolute choice is made, the aesthete cannot govern herself according to such principles. The aesthete may understand that certain principles have authority, but without the act of choice in her life

choice also includes the subsequent ethical decisions an individual makes and which first contribute to his or her narrative of choice.

those same principles have nothing on which their authority can apply, and are therefore deprived of their “personal relevance” (Davenport 2001: 88).

According to MacIntyre’s second central issue with *Either/Or*, an ethical principle obtains its authority from the reason behind choosing that principle. Yet, MacIntyre asserts that it is the philosophical message of *Either/Or* that ethical principles are to be *radically* chosen for no reason. According to MacIntyre, the contradiction in *Either/Or* is evident: any principle, adopted without reason, cannot have authority over the individual. Therefore, radical choice cannot furnish the moral and ethical principles of Kierkegaard’s ethical system with the necessary rational basis. My response to MacIntyre’s criticism is a simple one, one that falls precisely inline with the existential and self-affirming character of Kierkegaard’s notion of radical choice namely, that choice essentially furnishes ethical principles with their authority. The individual chooses to choose in terms of good and bad and in doing so, she gives traditional moral and ethical principles something against which their culturally accepted authority can apply.

3.5 The Individual’s Narrative as a Corrective Personal Moral History: Responding to MacIntyre’s Third Issue

In his third and final issue with *Either/Or*, MacIntyre asserts that Kierkegaard sought to combine the notion of radical (and according to MacIntyre) criterionless choice with an established concept of what principles constituted a traditional understanding of the ethical life. Since MacIntyre interprets Kierkegaard’s radical choice as a criterionless choice or a choice without reasons, radical choice would deprive moral and ethical principles of their authority whether those principles be traditional or not. As a result of practicing radical choice the very basic moral and ethical duties of one’s life could be

arbitrarily picked up and then abandoned. To answer MacIntyre's third issue this section will delve into the concept of narrative, arguing that the inclination and disposition an individual exhibits toward a specific moral choice reveals inertia behind her moral identity or narrative. Narrative reveals a personal history of moral actions and dealings that both correspond to one another and are therefore dependant upon prior similar actions and dealings. Essentially, the individual's moral narrative or "narrative of choice" dictates, to certain extent, the inclination of her ethical and moral actions and therefore the nature of her moral selfhood. For the moral agent who chooses engage radically the ethical life, the consistency of her moral narrative makes it difficult for her to simply adopt and then drop traditional principles without consequence to her moral identity.

Attending to narrative is a way of understanding and adjudicating the moral judgments and choices we make in our lives. Personal narrative reveals that we are agents of the events in our lives, and the interpreters of the moral import of these events (Rossi 1979: 239). When we narrate or give expression to a personal story, we situate our moral development within more or less a coherent path, revealing that moral education is an ongoing process. Narrative theory also illustrates how morality is tied not only to individuals but also to the history of a specific community. Through a community shared moral vision that shapes judgment and action, narrative accounts "for the overall configuration of human moral life in a way that the most general concepts of much previous moral theory often have not" (Rossi 1979: 240).²⁵ While moral theory has tended to separate ethical deliberation from its lived context, the narrative context shows

²⁵ See also MacIntyre's "Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and Philosophy of Science," (1977): 456.

that individual moral formation is often embedded within a community's own.

Individual or community ethical and moral identity can be rendered intelligible in a narrative that follows the thread of connection between our birth and death (MacIntyre 1984: 205, 217). Along this life-path, we cannot help but witness the components of moral and ethical self-identity, namely judgment, choice, and action.

Inner reflection and the telling of personal stories is "a valuable opportunity to address personal, cultural, spiritual, moral and emotional development" (Ota 2000: 199).

Ultimately, narrative allows us to tell our stories, and render them intelligible under our own autonomy, hence self-validating our choices, experiences, beliefs, and values.

"Dialogical relationships" formed by telling the story of our narratives can create healthy and unified communities composed of autonomous moral individuals (2000: 199). This unity does not imply that all beliefs and values become homogenous, but because difference comes to be accepted and incorporated into the community's own unique narrative (Hauerwas 1980: 71, 72). Narrative becomes simply the context in which ethical judgments, choices, and actions occur; it is our everyday existence; the story of our self-identity. Furthermore, morality itself is the product of life-stories. The judgments and choices we make and the actions we take are contingent upon the stories we tell, stories that ultimately shape us. For example, even how we raise our children, setting them on their own narrative journey, is influenced by the stories of our own lives – our moral compass is necessarily set by not only our personal histories, but often by those who have come before us.

In Taylor's book *Sources of the Self*, he suggests that selfhood and morality are "inextricable and intertwined" (1991: 14). How we account for our conception of the

good life lies in the narrative selfhood of who we are. Who we are, is a product of our moral narrative or the story of the capacity to which we have lived that “good life”.

Taylor acknowledges the depth and degree of unity between selfhood and morality by exploring the broad scope for accountability inherent in the moral life. If we accept the limited notion that morality encompasses only our obligations toward others, we leave out the formative and evaluative questions of our own selfhood. Questions of moral self-identity must be treated in tandem with our moral regard for others; Taylor writes, “To understand our moral world we have to see not only what ideas and perspectives underlie our sense of respect for others but also those which underpin our notions of a full life” (1991: 14). A full life offers the agent a more comprehensive self-identity, an identity that is inseparable from the good life, and a good life accounted for in the narrative of the agent’s self-identity. Similarly, MacIntyre believes that “narrative selfhood is correlative”—personal moral narratives are linked and often parallel one another (1984: 218). Not only am I accountable for the moral quality of the sort of life I seek and end up living, but I can also ask for an account of your ethical narrative by virtue of our association (1984: 218). Without accountability of the moral self, narratives lack intelligible consistency. Hence, any attempt to define identity independent of moral narrative will fail. Moreover, ethical choices themselves are correlative, and the inclination and disposition that an individual exhibits toward a specific moral choice shows there exists a “narrative” inertia behind one’s moral selfhood. Narrative reveals a personal history of moral actions and dealings that correspond to one another and therefore become essential to an individual’s self-identity.

MacIntyre's third central issue concerns what he saw as the incompatibility between Kierkegaard's concept of radical (criterionless) choice and Kierkegaard's 18th-century inherited conception of what moral and ethical principles traditionally constituted an ethical life lived well. In response to MacIntyre's criticism I argue that within the text of *Either/Or* it is the "reality of choosing" that matters, and therefore binds together this new notion of radical choice with previously accepted moral principles (Kierkegaard 1992: 490). How one ties together one's life's path or future narrative with the commitment of present choices determines whether the narrative of this ethical individual can be authentically called a "narrative of choice". That first act of absolute choice that initiates the individual's narrative is the primal choice from which the individual embarks on the ethical life. Though the individual has chosen to give guidance and meaning to her inner motives and inclinations by governing herself with traditional authoritative principles, the individual has *chosen*, as Judge Wilhelm writes, "what categories one wants to contemplate the entire world and would oneself live" (1992: 486). Once choices are made consistently and with commitment, the individual, as a character with a particular personality, begins to be affected by a disposition to choose in a certain way; she is attracted to certain options or alternatives more so than to others. Davenport tells us that this disposition in choice occurs because, "The free choice of an existing individual is embodied in this existential structure which has a kind of inertia of its own" (2001: 101). This disposition in choice occurs because, for an individual with free-agency, the act of choosing accumulates inertia of its own. Wilhelm describes this disposition of choice as the inner work of personality wherein momentum takes the

individual in a direction typical of her narrative identity. In other words the personality's disposition is a product of, and can be discerned in, her personal narrative of choice.²⁶

The aesthetic stage is itself partitioned into two degrees of existence—the “immediate” and the “reflective” (Taylor 2000: 231). Both degrees are marked by the nonexistence of choice or more specifically the absence of the conscious act of choosing with commitment and finality (2000: 231). Furthermore, the absence of decisive choice is itself both product and perpetuator of the two degrees of aesthetic existence, namely, (1) obsessive engagement with immediacy, and (2) intellectual absorption in self-reflection (2000: 231-232).²⁷ While the attempt to lose oneself in the experience of the present moment is characterised by the immediacy of aesthetic life, adherence to conscious and deliberate choice characterises the ethical life of an individual willing to be bound to the accountability inherent in an ongoing narrative or personal moral history. Judge Wilhelm tells the young aesthete that every individual “has a history, and this is not just a product of his own free actions. But the inward work belongs to himself and will belong to him in all eternity” (Kierkegaard 1992: 489). This inward action of ethical choice draws together and hones the various aspects of the individual's personality and

²⁶ Yet, the personality's disposition toward a particular choice could be construed as a kind of aestheticism where choice almost ceases to be an act of volition (the capacity of conscious choice and decision and intention). Without a conscious engagement with choice it makes sense that there would be insufficient commitment invested in the choice itself. The disposition of one's personality puts one's choices at risk of being arbitrarily reversible. The notion of reversible choice greatly affects the possibility of sustaining a narrative of ethical choices. If any choice is reversible, then later choices, as Davenport writes, “are arbitrary with respect to earlier ones, since the agent ‘starts anew’ from nothing each time” (2001: 98). In a way, the disposition toward choice, created by the personality, ensures that choice is not arbitrarily reversible. The personality affects the act of choice by recognising only a limited number of options, and in turn personality is affected by a particular choice that, as a part of a narrative of choice, predisposes the personality toward a limited number of options. Essentially, choice is calculated, tailored, and compatible with previous choices, and therefore cannot be “*arbitrarily* reversible” (Davenport 2001: 104). That choices are in “respect to earlier ones,” shows that they are based upon a motive and are accountable within a narrative (Davenport 2001: 101).

²⁷ See also “The Immediate Erotic Stages,” *Either/Or* (Kierkegaard 1992: 85-86, 89, 93, 96-97, 104-105).

identity, rendering them intelligible within a personal narrative and thus produces a more cohesive self.

At the outset of this chapter, I indicated that its purpose would be to uncover the rational and justifiable basis that lay behind Kierkegaard's ethical theory. I suggested that establishing this basis would serve two purposes: First, to deny the accusation made by MacIntyre that the ethical theory set out by Kierkegaard in *Either/Or* demonstrates the failure and breakdown of certain enlightenment thinkers to provide their own basis from which rational public moral discourse could take place. Second, to prevent Kierkegaard's ethical theory from being seen as the originator of the sort of soft relativism and authenticity that Taylor claims haunts contemporary western moral identity. Yet, before I addressed MacIntyre, I first opened with an account of the existential move from the aesthetic stage to the ethical stage. The individual's duration in and movement out of the aesthetic stage, provided the critical step toward that individual's realization of her own authentic selfhood. It also revealed the process essential for an individual to establish a rational and justifiable basis for her morality otherwise known as a narrative or personal history of ethical choice.

I followed this brief but necessary look at the transition from the aesthetic to the ethical with a detailed account of the three central features of *Either/Or* that MacIntyre believed undermined Kierkegaard's ethical theory. MacIntyre's first issue with Kierkegaard's radical choice was that the individual initially chose to choose in terms of good and evil. The problem with this initial or primal choice is that there could be no reason or influence behind individual's choice since she had yet to identify with categories of good and bad, ethical and aesthetic. MacIntyre's second issue addressed

the inability of radical choice to back one's moral and ethical principles with the authority. For MacIntyre, radical choice was a choice without reasons, and according to MacIntyre, it is our reasons for choosing a particular ethical principle that furnishes that principle with its authority. His third issue was that Kierkegaard followed a conservative and traditional notion of what principles comprised the ethical life. Yet, without reason behind choosing one's principles, the principles could be taken up in one instance and abandoned in the next.

I then addressed each of MacIntyre's three criticisms. My response to MacIntyre's first issue was that he had taken a too narrow interpretation of radical choice, and that it was this narrowness that prevented him from grasping the depth behind the unique concept. I sought to broaden MacIntyre's interpretation by adding two clarifications namely, the possibility that radical choice was an inner act that signified the individual was choosing to govern herself according to principles, and the suggestion that radical choice was essentially the primal act of 'choosing to choose'. I then approached MacIntyre's second issue—the inability of radical choice to furnish the ethical principles of Kierkegaard's system with the requisite authority—with a simple hypothesis. I proposed that it was precisely the existential and self-affirming character of Kierkegaard's notion of radical choice that furnished ethical principles with their authority. The individual chooses to choose in terms of good and bad gives traditional principles something against which their socially accepted authority can apply. In response to MacIntyre's third issue I argued that according to the text of *Either/Or* it was the "reality of choosing" that mattered. Choice itself is was unities what MacIntyre saw as the incompatible paring of radical choice with traditional moral precepts. How the

individual ties together her future narrative with the commitment of present choices determines whether her narrative can be authentically called a “narrative of choice”.

A narrative can hold the individual accountable by means of establishing a record of the personal history of choices she has made. The narrative should also be able to predict what choices the individual is most likely to make. A consistent narrative of committed ethical choices allows others to read the past, present and possible future path of an individual—narrative offers a tangible account of the individual’s moral self-identity. In cultivating a reliable narrative of committed ethical choices, as is advocated in the latter portions of *Either/Or*, the moral agent insulates her self-affirming moral identity from both soft relativism and authenticity. While the rejection of transcendent values and the defining of relationships exclusively in terms of personal self-fulfillment may be a feature of contemporary western liberal society, it is not a feature or outcome of the moral philosophy found in the pages of Kierkegaard’s first major aesthetic work, *Either/Or*

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

In chapter one I stated that the primary objective of this essay was to consider the question of how to interpret Kierkegaard's legacy in the modern world in terms of the aesthetic and ethical theory articulated in his first major work *Either/Or*. To carry out this objective, this essay sought to counter MacIntyre's accusation that Kierkegaard's ethical theory (as laid out in *Either/Or*) lies at the heart of contemporary moral problems not unlike what Taylor himself sees plaguing western liberal society in the form of "soft relativism" and "authenticity" (MacIntyre 1984: 6-11, 39-50; Taylor 1991: 13-69). To accomplish this I needed to establish a rational and justifiable basis for Kierkegaard's ethical theory, and in doing so demonstrate how this basis removed Kierkegaard's theory from being the intentional source of contemporary moral malaise as defined by Taylor. After setting out the essay's objectives and intentions, I gave an account of Taylor's concepts of soft relativism and authenticity and linked these concepts to the Romantic era before moving into chapter two.

In chapter two, I argued that in order to better defend what Taylor identified as Kierkegaard's post-Romantic self-affirming moral theory against MacIntyre's criticisms, Kierkegaard's theory would need to be placed within the development of the modern moral self as set out by Charles Taylor in his work *Sources of the Self*. Chapter two served to establish the historical-philosophical context that allows for the emergence of Kierkegaard's thought. Chapter two also provided a detailed account of Kierkegaard's early engagement with the aesthetic theory of Romantic Friedrich Schlegel, thus revealing Kierkegaard's own account of moral selfhood. Combined, these three

objectives supplied the essential background to Kierkegaard's theory of moral selfhood. Chapter two also involved a brief consideration of a select point in Kierkegaard's personal life, namely, his engagement to Regine Olsen. First, it examined certain choices and actions taken by Kierkegaard that in turn informed his own personal moral narrative. Second, it sets out in detail personal events leading up to the writing of *Either/Or* which was examined primarily in chapter three).

In chapter three I opened with an account of the existential move from the aesthetic stage to the ethical stage. I followed this look at the transition from the aesthetic to the ethical with an account of the three central features of *Either/Or* that MacIntyre believed undermined Kierkegaard's ethical theory. In my response to MacIntyre's first issue I suggested that radical choice was an inner act that signified the individual was choosing to govern herself according to principles. I then approached MacIntyre's second issue with a simple hypothesis: I proposed that it was the existential and self-affirming character of Kierkegaard's notion of radical choice that gave ethical principles with their authority. In response to MacIntyre's third issue I argued that choice itself is what unites what MacIntyre saw as the incompatible pairing of radical choice with traditional moral precepts. How the individual ties together her future narrative with the commitment of present choices determines whether her narrative can be authentically called a "narrative of choice". I then suggested that while the rejection of transcendent values and the defining of relationships exclusively in terms of personal self-fulfillment may be a feature of contemporary western liberal society, it is not a necessary feature or outcome of the ethical of Kierkegaard's first major work, *Either/Or*. Rather, in cultivating a reliable narrative of committed ethical choices (as is encouraged in the

pages of *Either/Or*), the moral agent insulates her self-affirming moral identity from both soft relativism and authenticity.

Consider further the nature of the Kierkegaardian existential sense of the self, one that engages in what Taylor identifies as “self-affirmation” (1989: 447). Individuals must make the existential choice to affirm a good world independently of there indeed being a truly “good” objective order of things. To do this the moral free agent must passionately choose to name her existence good in absence of an intrinsically good essence (1989: 448). Taylor claims that in context of *Either/Or*, this is precisely what Kierkegaard’s moral philosophy entails. Unlike the aesthetic individual who moves from one thing to the other with no deliberate choice, the ethical individual chooses absolutely. True choice, like Kant’s true radical freedom gained through following absolute and universally willed imperatives, involves an “absolute” or “radical” choice to live out one’s true and full nature. For Kierkegaard the choosing of one’s self is an ethical choice whereby all things associated derive their value in the presence of the absoluteness of that choice. Taylor, though, seems unconcerned with what MacIntyre sees as a serious flaw in Kierkegaard’s conception of the ethical. Unlike MacIntyre, Taylor has no explicit agenda against the Enlightenment wherein Kierkegaard could be used as an example of modern philosophical yet irrational ethical failure. Rather, Taylor situates Kierkegaard in a post-romantic and self-affirming context. An explicitly rational and authoritative basis for morality or moral self-identity is not required. What is required is that the individual chooses, and chooses absolutely, despite the absence of the possibility of an inherently ‘good’ world.

In both *Sources of the Self* and *Malaise of Modernity*, Taylor makes a case for the perception that contemporary western liberal notions of the modern moral “Self” are a product of the Enlightenment era. Yet, to what extent is popular society informed by the rigours of Enlightenment ideal of ‘self-responsible reason’, or even Kant’s notion of the rational moral will? The grim assessments Taylor and MacIntyre make concerning the condition of contemporary moral discourse, describe a society that retains the individualism of early modernity, while dispensing with the moral centre or objective of cultivating an explicitly modern selfhood. I would suggest that the lack of a moral consensus and the seemingly arbitrariness of ethical choice and action in contemporary society indicates that, like a disillusioned modern of the mid 19th century, and as illustrated in the self-affirming moral philosophy of Kierkegaard, popular society is forced to affirm the “good” through the choices it makes independently of there being a firm and obvious objective and inherently good reality. Yet, the decentred moral character of contemporary relativism is hyper-affirmative, and therefore qualifies all goods as individual and particular expressions of the plurality of authentic goods.

Granted, it seems that any moral agreement in contemporary society will be impossible to attain as long as opponents continue to engage in debate with premises that are conceptually incommensurable. Competing groups may be able to offer up valid arguments that proceed from a particular set of premises, but they have no rational capacity for evaluating one argument derived from a set of premises, against a rival argument derived from an entirely different set of premises. The premises of our moral arguments are both the starting and ends of those same arguments. Ultimately, we lack rationally defensible criteria for our choice of one moral premise over another; the task of

evaluating rival premises and their logically derived arguments is an exercise in asserting the preferability of one premise over the other without rational basis for doing so.

Hence, once again, we return to the Kierkegaardian option of affirming the goodness of reality through establishing one's own moral narrative, and in doing so creating an authentic source of self. If we can accept that the condition of contemporary moral discourse is not the absence of morality, but the incommensurableness of multiple moralities, then perhaps we can accept that moral discourse has been further fragmented by the incommensurable quality of the content of our individual moral narratives. Our narrative are often patched together with moral contradictions resulting from the actions we have taken, the actions we wish to take, and the nagging belief that all actions are ultimately ineffective in their relative application. This is precisely the condition that needs self-affirmation, both at the obvious social level, as well as in the inner moral sense of our own moral self-identity. That "background picture" that Taylor refers to, depicts the landscape of our moral intuitions and expectations. It is a product of what parts of reality we feel strong enough to affirm as good. We habitually affirm these same parts in the consistency through the rationality of our "narrative of choice".

In recognizing the narrative and dialogical character of life, we can approach a semblance of authentic authenticity. The relationships we have and the transcendent values we choose to adhere to become our dialogical partners and through them, our inner moral identity is discovered (Taylor 1991: 49, 52). We begin to recognize that the committed choices we make hold significance in both our commitment to them as well as in the background or horizon of significance against which we have made those same choices. Granted, the subjectivist reasoning that underlies soft relativism implies that all

choices hold equal value and significance against any other choice, in other words our moral choices draw their personal and exclusive authority from our misguided respect for absolute relativism. Hence, for Taylor, when choice is the reason for following a particular moral personal or public preference, that preference has no more significance than say any arbitrary and aesthetic preference for which no justification can be supplied. The choices we make must come from a careful consideration of our nature and character, and whether what we choose truly fits or serves to forward an authentic representation of our moral selfhood (Taylor 1991: 37-40). Ultimately, because we are members of communities, participants in narratives, and gain a sense of our identity through self-referential dialogue with others, true and authentic choices are always made in dialogical interaction and against a horizon that eclipses the all that encompasses who we are as individuals (Taylor 1991: 40, 49, 52).

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