

# **Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* and the Parable of the Prodigal Son: Or, Three Rival Versions of Three Rival Versions**

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I propose an interpretive thought-experiment. What if Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* is a kind of parable? I say a kind of parable, because part of the definition of a (standard) parable is brevity.[1] An 800 page long parable is obviously out of the ordinary. But if we can allow our thinking about what a parable is to be somewhat flexible on that point, then we may be able to notice some interesting parallels between *Either/Or* and, for example, the biblical story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). Noticing such parallels will be the focus of the first section of this essay. The latter sections will consist of a consideration of recent books by Alasdair MacIntyre and James Breech. These works contain thought-provoking insights into contemporary moral thought, which can be fruitfully compared with Kierkegaard's concept of the three primary spheres of existence: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. Throughout, it will be my contention that Kierkegaard's thought can only be interpreted accurately when it is seen in connection with the Bible.

Let us consider now the parable of the Prodigal Son. The younger son in the story treats his father as if he were already dead by demanding his portion of the inheritance. He then takes the money, travels to another place, and squanders it in loose living. His actions reveal his character. He is so self-indulgent that he resembles someone who is mentally ill.[2] He could be compared to a drug addict whose actions are so self-destructive that they make the continuation of the addiction impossible. He is so full of self-interest that he cannot even act according to enlightened self-interest. He lives entirely in the present moment. In this he has come to resemble the swine which he feeds; the animals do not live with an awareness of the past and the future. His existence has been reduced to his wants.

When the younger son returns home, the elder brother is out in the fields. He is acting as a mature, responsible manager of the family property. He is not concerned with himself alone, but with his proper role in maintaining his father and in stewarding the family property for the potential benefit of future generations. In a word, he seeks to live ethically. When the elder brother returns home and learns that a party has been organized for his younger brother, he is angry. His anger reveals that he lives within a world of moral codes. He expects that those who live ethically will be rewarded, while those who are self-indulgent will have to suffer the consequences of their actions. "Lo, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command; yet you never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf!"[3]

The father's response shows that his highest concern is not enforcing a moral code, but rejoicing in the return of one who was "lost." The father interprets the situation in terms of spiritual death and life. His words and actions point to a source of renewal and hope for those whose actions have been self-destructive. "God" is not specifically referred to in the story, but it is not out of place to suggest that the father is intended by Jesus to be a sign of the grace of God. The source of renewal which the father points to is the source of all life.

What do we learn from a parable such as this? We learn that there are various possibilities open to human beings concerning their pathway in life. Different pathways will lead to different outcomes which must be borne by the individual.[4] The parable opens our eyes to these possibilities and to the complications which they produce in human relationships. The parable helps us to understand that there are others in the world besides ourselves.

This is a very brief indication of what we learn from Jesus' parables. They arose out of a situation of conflict between the Pharisees and the "sinners." To say that Jesus ate with sinners is not to say that he approved of sin. Neither did he recommend the confidence which the Pharisees seemed to place in their own moral probity. Jesus separated himself from the Pharisees by refraining from identifying God as the giver of an increasingly determined legal code.[5] He pointed through his words and deeds to a new possibility, which he called the kingdom of God. This possibility to which Jesus points is the pathway in which the human ego is dethroned; it is led to give up its attempt to be the master of its own universe--either aesthetically or ethically.[6]

Let us turn now to *Either/Or*. What kind of book is this? Is it a philosophical or theological treatise? No. Is it a work of history? No. Is it a social scientific study? No. Is it a self-help book? No. What is it? It most closely resembles a novel or a play. In the normal process of writing, a novelist combines various elements to produce the novel: plot, setting, characters, etc. In Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authorship, we find that he has imagined characters, as a novelist would, but instead of just placing these characters in books, he has had these characters write books. The books (or parts of books) which they write reveal "from inside" their various interpretations of reality and human existence. In reading their productions, we find ourselves encountering different, sometimes contradictory, perspectives on the world. In this encounter lies the possibility that we may come to understand ourselves in a way which we had not before.

Volume One of *Either/Or* depicts the aesthetic sphere of existence. Kierkegaard was reflecting here his perception of German and Danish Romanticism of the early 19th century.[7] This mode of thought and life is fragmented and disconnected, which the reader is led to understand through the form of the book (aphorisms, critical essays, diaries, etc.). The aphorisms collected under the heading "Diapsalmata" express ironic melancholy, swinging back and forth between comedy and tragedy. On the one hand, A says that life is empty and meaningless. When we attend a funeral, "why not stay out there and go along down into the grave and draw lots to see to whom will befall the misfortune of being the last of the living who throws the last three spadefuls of earth on the last of the dead?" (EO, 1: 29). On the other hand, he speaks of the marvelous experience of being given a gift from the gods: to always have the laughter on his side (EO, 1: 43). The remainder of the first volume describes the aesthetic sphere from various angles, focusing on themes such as sexuality and seduction, sorrow and hope, music and the demonic, fortune and misfortune, boredom and emptiness, hiddenness and disclosure.[8]

Overall, the aesthete is depicted as having only a tenuous connection with reality. He lives in the dream world of his poetic ideas and his emotions. He is naturally drawn to the world of the theater, in which the flickering personalities of the stage are more interesting than the banal reality of the Judge. The aesthetic sphere, taken to its logical conclusion, is represented by Johannes the Seducer. He has been insightfully described by George Pattison in this way:

He is, as is well known, no Don Juan, no masterful sensuous presence, but a man of intrigues for whom the 'interesting' aspect of a relationship is of much greater value than mere sexual gratification. A long, complex and delicately nuanced process of psychological manipulation is what gives him most enjoyment. He seduces by means of

words and ideas rather than by glamour or potency. The 'stage' on which he carries out his seduction is the interiority of the victim's consciousness, and his aim is to create an 'interesting' situation on this stage which he can then relish--being as much a spectator as an actor. Indeed, the alarming associations of the title 'the Seducer' should not mislead us. This is no Miltonic Satan nor yet a Hercules of the bedroom. This is a man incapable of genuine relationships, incapable of love, friendship and contentment, a narcissist, a voyeur. What incites him is the possibility of extracting an image from a situation, which he can then take away and enjoy in the privacy of his own mental world, without having to confront the reality of the Other. Unable to allow for the irreducible otherness or autonomous freedom of those he manipulates, his view of life is essentially pornographic. He is sheer perspective, a sequence of ideas with no intrinsic or sustainable relation to reality.[9]

Volume Two of *Either/Or* describes the ethical sphere of existence, with Judge William as its representative. He does not posit a simple conflict between the aesthetic and the ethical spheres, rather he believes that the ethical incorporates the aesthetic within it. His first essay is entitled "The Aesthetic Validity of Marriage," and begins with this thesis statement: "There are two things that I must regard as my particular task: to show the aesthetic meaning of marriage and to show how the aesthetic in it may be retained despite life's numerous hindrances" (EO, 2: 8). The Judge's polemic against his young friend does not consist of a puritanical harangue which commands a denial of the aesthetic. The Judge seeks to show the younger man that his infatuation with the aesthetic in itself is actually a limitation. It is the ethical person who can more fully appreciate the aesthetic aspects of life, because he lives not just in the moment, but within the broader horizon of continuity through time. "Romantic love can be portrayed very well in the moment; marital love cannot, for an ideal husband is not one who is ideal once in his life but one who is that every day" (EO, 2: 135). The ethical sphere is grounded in the claims of the eternal and the claims of the community. It seeks to stabilize human emotions through ordered structures of social life. Its goal is genuine fulfillment through interpersonal relationships which are marked by disclosure and faithfulness, rather than hiddenness and deception. From the Judge's point of view, the aesthetic sphere is a failure to be whole as a person:

Consequently, it is manifest that every aesthetic view of life is despair, and that everyone who lives aesthetically is in despair, whether he knows it or not. But when one knows this, and you certainly do know it, then a higher form of existence is an imperative requirement. (EO, 2: 192)

The concluding sermon by the Jutland pastor is recommended to A by the Judge, but it should not be inferred from this that the sermon represents simply more of the same. Actually, the sermon represents a crucial shift from the ethical sphere of existence to the religious. Whereas the ethical sphere represents the human attempt to place oneself "in the right" existentially, the religious sphere begins with the truth that human beings are always in the wrong before God. The pastor takes as his text the passage from Luke 19 in which Christ weeps over Jerusalem. The pastor meditates on the theme of the suffering of the just and the unjust together, within the universal judgment on humankind. Of what value are the attempts of puny human beings to be "ethical" in the face of the fallibility and corruption of the human race? The pastor seeks to persuade his congregation that even though it is painful, recognizing that one is in the wrong before God is the only pathway to genuine edification:

Therefore this, that in relation to God you are always in the wrong, is not a truth you must acknowledge, not a consolation that alleviates your pain, not a compensation for something better, but it is a joy in which you win a victory over yourself and over the world, your delight, your song of praise, your adoration, a demonstration that your love is happy, as only that love can be with which one loves God. (EO, 2: 351)

Within *Either/Or* as a whole we can see an analysis of relationships. In the first part, the aesthetic sphere is analyzed as a lack of relationship between person and person. Individuals are atomistic consciousnesses. In the second part the emphasis is placed upon a "horizontal" relationship between husband and wife. Individuals exist in and for another. In the concluding sermon, the focus is on the "vertical" relationship between the individual and God. The ultimate "community" in which the individual participates is the life of God. This same dialectic of relationship was foreshadowed in the parable of the Prodigal Son, as we have seen. Our side-by-side exegesis of the parable and *Either/Or* has reinforced our initial observation of a certain parallelism between the two accounts. Of course, there are significant differences between them; the length, complexity, literary allusions, etc. of *Either/Or* have no counterpart in the parable. A does not repent, as the younger son does ( or at least appears to), [10] and the anger of the elder brother is not very evident in Judge William. But even when all of this is considered, the underlying thematic similarities are remarkable. In both cases we have three principal ways of thinking and acting set forth as possibilities for human existence. The first is individualistic and aesthetic, the second is communal and ethical, and the third is transcendent and religious. (We may add in passing that these similarities could be a reflection of the circumstances of Kierkegaard's life. *Either/Or* was written after Kierkegaard's intense university years in which he himself often acted as a "prodigal son" in relation to his older brother Peter and his father.) [11]

My contention is that *Either/Or*, which may appear to be a "secular" work by Kierkegaard, can only be fully appreciated in connection with a passage in the New Testament. In other words, this book has religious resonances which must be heard if it is to be understood accurately. Such an approach to the interpretation of *Either/Or* is completely foreign to a commentator such as Alasdair MacIntyre. We will now turn to his writings to see how far off track one can go if one ignores the theological grounding of Kierkegaard's thought.

MacIntyre has a fixed idea in his mind of Kierkegaard as a "philosopher of radical choice"; in this regard MacIntyre's comments on Kierkegaard at least have the virtue of consistency over time, even if they lack the virtue of accuracy of content. In his encyclopedia article, for example, he says this:

The essence of the Kierkegaardian concept of choice is that it is criterionless. On Kierkegaard's view, if criteria determine what I choose, it is not I who make the choice; hence the choice must be undetermined. Suppose, however, that I do invoke criteria in order to make my choice. Then all that has happened is that I have chosen the criteria. And if in turn I try to justify my selection of criteria by an appeal to logically cogent considerations, then I have in turn chosen the criteria in the light of which these considerations appear logically cogent. [12]

In *A Short History of Ethics*, MacIntyre presents Kierkegaard as a philosopher of "radical choice" who pictures modern individuals as adopting various ways of living through arbitrary acts of decision making which cannot be rationally defended:

The fundamental doctrine of Søren Kierkegaard is that not only are there no genuine objective tests in morality; but that doctrines which assert that there are function as devices to disguise the fact that our moral standards are, and can only be, chosen. The individual utters his moral precepts to himself in a far stronger sense than the Kantian individual did; for their only sanction and authority is that he has chosen to utter them. [13]

In his more recent book, *After Virtue*, MacIntyre continues to develop the same theme: Kierkegaard is an Enlightenment thinker who has accepted the basic assumption of modern relativism, that there is no stable, rational basis for morality:

What I earlier picked out as the distinctively modern standpoint was of course that which envisages moral debate in terms of a confrontation between incompatible and incommensurable moral premises and moral commitment as the expression of a criterionless choice between such premises, a type of choice for which no rational justification can be given. This element of arbitrariness in our moral culture was presented as a philosophical discovery--indeed as a discovery of a disconcerting, even shocking, kind--long before it became a commonplace of everyday discourse. Indeed that discovery was first presented precisely with the intention of shocking the participants in everyday moral discourse in a book which is at once the outcome and epitaph of the Enlightenment's systematic attempt to discover a rational justification for morality. The book is Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*....

Kierkegaard's professed intention in designing the pseudonymous form of *Either/Or* was to present the reader with an ultimate choice, himself not able to commend one alternative rather than another because never appearing as himself.[14]

I have quoted MacIntyre at length so that he may be allowed to speak in his own voice, something which he certainly does not allow Kierkegaard to do in *After Virtue*. If MacIntyre's interpretation of Kierkegaard is correct, then he is justified in describing Kierkegaard in connection with other Enlightenment thinkers such as Hume and Kant who made a significant break with the tradition of Christian rationality. But this "if" is not substantiated by an accurate reading of Kierkegaard.

The mistakes which MacIntyre makes in interpreting Kierkegaard can be outlined as follows: 1) MacIntyre's argument is based on his belief that the literary structure of *Either/Or* implies that Kierkegaard thought that there is no rational basis for morality. He is assuming that the "message" of *Either/Or* can be simplistically stated as follows: the book presents two different ways of living one's life, the aesthetic and the ethical; Kierkegaard does not recommend one over the other; therefore his "fundamental doctrine" is that "there are no genuine objective tests in morality." According to both Johannes Climacus and Kierkegaard, this is a faulty interpretation of *Either/Or*. Both prefer the ethical way of life over the aesthetic way of life. This is clear from Climacus' comments in the *Postscript*:

That there is no conclusion and no final decision is an indirect expression for truth as inwardness and in this way perhaps a polemic against truth as knowledge.... Only the truth that builds up is truth for you. (CUP, 252)

As a thinker, A is superior to B. A "possesses all the seductive gifts of understanding and intellect" (CUP, 253). But B is closer to the truth concerning human existence:

He is a married man ... and, in direct opposition to the hiddenness of the aesthetic, focuses on marriage as the most profound form of life's disclosure, whereby time is turned to account for the ethically existing individual, and the possibility of gaining a history is continuity's ethical victory over hiddenness, depression, illusory passion, and despair. (CUP, 254)

When we look at Kierkegaard's signed works, once again we find that the aesthetic and the ethical are not being viewed neutrally. Consider, for example, this passage from the discourse "Strengthening in the Inner Being," which was published in the same year as *Either/Or*. (It is obvious that MacIntyre could not have quoted this passage in *After Virtue* without undermining his argument concerning Kierkegaard's "professed intention.")

Only a thoughtless soul can let everything around it change, give itself up as a willing prey to life's fickle, capricious changes, without being alarmed by such a world, without being concerned for itself. How unworthy and nauseating such a life is, how far such a life is from witnessing to the human being's high destiny--to be the ruler of creation. If

the human being is to rule, then there must be an order in the world; otherwise it would be a mockery of him to assign him to control brute forces that obey no law. And if he is to rule, then there must be a law within him also; otherwise he would be incapable of ruling; either he would disturbingly interfere, or it would be left to chance whether he ruled wisely or not. If this were the case, then the human being would be so far from being the ruler of creation that creation might wish instead that he did not exist at all. (EUD, 84)

Kierkegaard does not believe that the aesthetic and ethical spheres are of equivalent value, so that human beings are forced to make an arbitrary choice, like the hapless donkey in front of the two piles of hay. Stephen Ross has argued that an interpretation of *Either/Or* along lines similar to those suggested by MacIntyre is mistaken:

... this seemingly evenhanded reading is in fact a deeply partisan one. If we say this and stop there, we have in fact accepted the aesthete's characterization of choice and value. To interpret *Either/Or* as neutral between the aesthetic and the ethical means in fact to have given the aesthete the nod.[15]

The "message" of the book, if we can put it that way, is that one can only gain true selfhood by being serious about making a whole out of one's life. The cost of rejecting the ethical pathway in life is a dissipation of self which leads ultimately to despair.

2) But even if it were the case that the ethical was not being recommended over the aesthetic, which it is not, MacIntyre's interpretation would still be faulty, because he would have jumped to a false conclusion. If an author were to reveal "from inside" what it feels like to live one's life in mode A and in mode B, without recommending either, this would not mean that the author believes that there is no sound, intelligible basis on which human beings can ground their thought and action. It may very well be the case that the author has in mind a third way of living, mode C, which he is recommending. This journal entry is relevant at this point:

My contemporaries cannot grasp the design of my writing. *Either/Or* divided into four parts or six parts and published separately over six years would have been all right. But that each essay in *Either/Or* is part of a whole, and then the whole of *Either/Or* a part of a whole: that, after all, think my bourgeois contemporaries, is enough to drive one daft. (JP, 5: 5905)

When we pull the zoom lens back and look at Kierkegaard's authorship as a whole, it is clear that the ethical sphere of existence is not an end in itself, but a pointer to the religious sphere of existence.

3) One would never get this idea, however, from reading MacIntyre. This is pointed up by the fact that in the chapter of *After Virtue* we are referring to, "The Predecessor Culture and the Enlightenment Project of Justifying Morality," he does not mention the concluding sermon by the Jutland pastor at all, and thus cannot begin to gauge how its contents impact his version of Kierkegaard's "intention." Also, he does not mention the large corpus of works in which Kierkegaard speaks his mind most directly: *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, *Two Ages*, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, *Works of Love*, *Christian Discourses*, *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, *The Sickness Unto Death*, *Practice in Christianity*, *For Self-Examination*, and *Judge for Yourselves*. This is the procedure of an author who claims to have a better insight into Kierkegaard than "the best Kierkegaard scholars of our own time." [16]

4) In sum, MacIntyre paints a misleading picture of Kierkegaard by portraying him as an "Enlightenment" thinker whose writings focus on the concept of "radical choice." Actually, Kierkegaard is a Christian thinker, who inhabits the same tradition of intellectual

enquiry as Paul, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Barth. The heart of Kierkegaard's thought is not "radical choice" but the grace of God embodied in Christ. If there is a choice which is of fundamental importance for Kierkegaard, it is the choice of God to redeem sinners, without consideration of their merits. The *telos* to which Kierkegaard's thought points is a life of discipleship to Christ:

As [Christ] is the truth, you do not learn to know from him what the truth is, to be left then to your own devices, but you remain in the truth only by remaining in him; as he is the way, you do not learn to know from him which way you shall go, and then being left to your own devices can go down your own path, but only by remaining in him can you remain in the way; as he is life, you do not have life given to you from him, and then can shift for yourself, but only by remaining in him do you have life: so it is also that he is the covering; only by remaining in him, only by living in him, are you covered, is there a cover over the multitude of your sins.[17]

It should be clear by now that MacIntyre's comments on *Either/Or* are considerably off the mark.[18] I say this, however, as one who finds himself in basic agreement with much of what MacIntyre has said in his recent books. It is my concern, then, to show how it is the case that Kierkegaard's thought is actually an example of MacIntyre's conception of what it means to inhabit a tradition of philosophical rationality. Before I get to that point, however, I need to bring into view some of the central ideas of MacIntyre's most recent book.

In *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, MacIntyre divides modern moral thought into three broad categories: encyclopedia, genealogy, and tradition. Under the heading of encyclopedia he has in mind the optimistic version of Enlightenment thought. This was the milieu in which Adam Gifford established his lecture series on "natural theology and ethics," and which produced the Ninth Edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1875-1889). It was an age in which the intellectual heirs of the Enlightenment believed that "progress" was steadily being made in all of the fields of thought, from astronomy and chemistry to anthropology and ethics.[19] The good, decent, educated, civilized people of the Victorian world conceived of themselves as being on the cutting edge of human evolution.

Under the heading of genealogy MacIntyre has in mind Nietzsche and his heirs. This school of thought is the dark side of the aftermath of the Enlightenment. Nietzsche ridiculed those 19th century professors who contributed, directly or indirectly, to an enterprise such as the Ninth Edition. He analyzed their conception of progress in knowledge of the truth as a hangover from the "sickness" of the Christian era. From Nietzsche's point of view, there is no such thing as truth in itself. There is only a "mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms--in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people." [20] "Truth" is always relative to a perspective, and an individual's perspective can shift from one moment to the next. MacIntyre explains:

Nietzsche, as a genealogist, takes there to be a multiplicity of perspectives within each of which truth-from-a-point-of-view may be asserted, but no truth-as-such, an empty notion, about the world, an equally empty notion. There are no rules of rationality as such to be appealed to, there are rather strategies of insight and strategies of subversion.[21]

The version of moral enquiry which MacIntyre himself recommends is embodied in the Roman Catholic tradition. Its leading representatives are Augustine, Aquinas, and Pope Leo XIII, who published *Aeterni Patris* in 1879. The central feature of this tradition which distinguishes it sharply from the other two is the authority which is recognized in

canonical texts. While the encyclopedists dispense with the authority of tradition in favor of the authority of the enlightened professor, and the genealogists dispense with authority altogether, those who live within a tradition of moral enquiry accept the essential validity of certain texts such as the writings of Plato and Aristotle and the Bible. These texts describe the world in which their readers live and give them the concepts which they need to engage in rational enquiry into the nature of reality. Without such texts and the guidance they provide, these readers would only flounder in intellectual darkness. With them, they are enabled to carry on a conversation which is meaningful and productive. In MacIntyre's words:

The order of good teaching is ideally the same as the order of effective learning and a book which is well designed to teach, perhaps especially a book designed to teach teachers such as the *Summa Theologiae* was, will follow the order of exploratory learning, through which the pupil relives the history of enquiry up to the highest point of achievement which it has reached so far, by rescruinizing those arguments which have sustained the best supported conclusions so far. Hence the *Summa* sets out in its ordering of universal concepts the framework for a type of narrative of moral enquiry to be enacted by individuals who do and will exhibit their rationality by participating in the forms of rationality established by and through a particular tradition and indeed, insofar as moral enquiry is integral to the moral life itself, a framework for a set of narratives of particular lives.[22]

This brief outline of MacIntyre's book gives us food for thought. Have we not encountered a three-fold schema for interpreting modern Western cultural life somewhere before? Yes, we have, in Kierkegaard's conception of the three spheres of existence. I believe that the outline for MacIntyre's book shows the influence on him of Kierkegaard's thought. But influence is difficult to prove. I will be content, then, with this mild suggestion. At the very least, MacIntyre ought to admit that Kierkegaard is a thinker who inhabits the Christian tradition of rationality. MacIntyre should recognize this and retract the faulty comments which he makes on Kierkegaard in *After Virtue*. He should realize that Kierkegaard's life mission was to be an advocate of Christian discipleship within the context of the tradition of Danish Lutheranism, and the context of the emerging tradition of the "Enlightenment." Kierkegaard spoke to these traditions, carrying on an argument about the goods to which they were committed. This is MacIntyre's own definition of what it means to live in a tradition:

A living tradition then is an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition. Within a tradition the pursuit of goods extends through generations, sometimes through many generations. Hence the individual's search for his or her good is generally and characteristically conducted within a context defined by those traditions of which the individual's life is a part, and this is true both of those goods which are internal to practices and of the goods of a single life.[23]

Kierkegaard carried on his argument through a very subtle strategy of indirect and direct communication. He narrated the story of those other traditions through his imaginary authors. Once again, MacIntyre's words are very insightful:

... that narrative prevails over its rivals which is able to include its rivals within it, not only to retell their stories as episodes within its story, but to tell the story of the telling of their stories as such episodes.<sup>24</sup>

This is precisely what Kierkegaard has done as the cleverest of all narrative theologians (before the invention of "narrative theology"). Through his invention of imaginary authors, Kierkegaard was able to tell the stories of the dominant factions of his day in

literature, philosophy, and religion, in such a way that he could recount in his own voice the story of New Testament faith.

Again, in speaking of the Augustinian tradition of theological enquiry, MacIntyre puts his finger on the heart of Kierkegaard's theology:

The key texts were of course those of sacred Scripture. Reading was reading aloud and the liturgical recitation of Scripture was an act of reading in which the oral and written text were one. The reader in his or her own life enacts and reenacts that of which he or she reads in Scripture; the enacted narrative of a single life is made intelligible within the framework of the dramatic history of which Scripture speaks. So the reading of texts is part of the history of which the same texts speak. The reader thus discovers him or herself inside the Scriptures.[25]

Two passages from Kierkegaard come immediately to mind in this connection, the preface to *Purity of Heart*, and the theses of the first part of *For Self-Examination*:

[This little book] seeks that single one, to whom it gives itself wholly, by whom it wishes to be received as if it had arisen in his own heart, that single individual whom I with joy and gratitude call my reader, that single individual, who willingly reads slowly, reads repeatedly, and who reads aloud--for his own sake. (UDVS, 5)

What is required in order to look at oneself with true blessing in the mirror of the Word? The first requirement is that you must not look at the mirror, observe the mirror, but must see yourself in the mirror. (FSE, 25)

Nelly Viallaneix argues that this manner of discovering oneself in the Scriptures is the theme of Kierkegaard's authorship from right to left, top to bottom. In her words:

The structure of the totality of Kierkegaard's authorship is religious. It is Christian, centered on Christ. Christ is the Word of God: the universe to which he gives access vibrates with the creative Word of a God whose "only joy is to communicate"; it is also filled with the resounding waves of the words which human beings exchange one with another. The Christian structure of the totality of the authorship and of the existence of Kierkegaard thus cannot fail to be resonant.[26]

I, along with Viallaneix, am arguing that Kierkegaard's thought world is profoundly shaped by the Bible. This means that it is not accurate to describe Kierkegaard as an irrationalist, unless one holds that the theological content of the Bible as a whole is irrational. Kierkegaard was acutely sensitive to the problematic of faith and reason as it is presented in the Bible. This is obviously the theme of several of his books, and it has already been addressed in countless secondary books and articles. Briefly stated, my own outlook on this problem is that Kierkegaard was attempting to articulate a theological understanding of rationality over against Kant's agnostic understanding. Human reason is a gift from God, but it is limited. There are some things which reason cannot fully grasp. For reason to recognize its own limits is itself an inherently rational act.[27] A mature individual is one who lives with an attitude of faith seeking understanding; the religious self seeks to comprehend reality, but does not arrogantly presume that he or she can do so on this side of the grave. That such arrogance is a temptation for human beings is seen in the comic figure of Hegel.

We turn now to James Breech. In *Jesus and Postmodernism*, Breech lays out three basic alternatives for philosophical and religious thought. The first possibility which he describes is "postmodernism," which he associates with authors such as Nietzsche, Derrida, and Mark C. Taylor. The postmodernist/ nihilist viewpoint seeks to deconstruct all traditional conceptions of moral selfhood. It holds that Death is God.[28] All efforts to

construct moral, philosophical, or religious systems of thought are at root false attempts to give to human life a meaning and purpose which it does not have in reality. The lack of any meaning built into the fabric of the universe means that moral beliefs are all relative and are all inventions. Narrated stories are fictions which human beings dream up out of their desire to believe that good people will be rewarded and evil ones punished.

The second major alternative which Breech outlines is referred to as the "pro-closure party." Breech has in mind Paul Ricoeur and other theorists who defend traditional philosophy and theology from the attacks of the postmodernists.[29] Such authors hold that the way in which human beings tell stories does "fit" with the basic realities of our life. The plots of stories actually reflect the "plots" found in human lives:

Stories with closure allow us to evaluate the actions of the characters and to draw inferences concerning what actions are valid or invalid. Ricoeur claims that there is no action that does not give rise to "approbation" or "reprobation," that an action can never be ethically neutral. Narrative, in his view, responds to a universal human impulse to pass judgment on the actions of others and of themselves, and Ricoeur would argue that this need corresponds to the way reality is ordered.[30]

Breech articulates and recommends a third possibility, distinct from either postmodernism or "moral closure." He calls this third way "living in story," and finds it rooted in the parables of Jesus. Breech is particularly interested in the way in which Jesus' parables, such as "the rich man who had a steward" (Luke 16:1-7), "the man who once gave a dinner and invited guests" (Matt. 22:2-9/ Luke 14:16-23), "the householder who went out at dawn to hire laborers" (Matt. 20:1-15), "the man going down the road who fell among robbers" (Luke 10:30-35), and "the man who had two sons" (Luke 15:11-32), seem to lack the "closure" which we expect from stories. They leave us hanging; they don't give us pat answers, and thus lead us to ask: What is the question?

Paying close attention to Jesus' parables reveals that we will never know whether the man going down the road ever regained consciousness or whether the third man was ever rewarded for his actions. We will never know whether the man who had two sons was ever reconciled with the elder. We will never know whether the householder who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard ever subsequently devised a satisfactory working relationship with them. Nor will we ever know whether the man who once gave a dinner and invited guests ever did find people to entertain. There is a permanent gap where the ending should be in all of the stories Jesus narrated.[31]

*Either/Or* has this same characteristic. This is a significant sense in which it is like a parable. Victor Eremita himself notes this aspect of the papers which he published:

A's papers contain a variety of attempts at an aesthetic view of life; to convey a unified aesthetic life-view is scarcely possible. B's papers contain an ethical life-view. As I let this thought influence my soul, it became clear to me that I might let this guide me into determining the title. This is just what the title I have chosen expresses. If there be any loss in this to the reader, it cannot be much, for he can just as well forget the title while reading the book. Once he has read it he may perhaps then think of the title. Doing so will free him from every finite question as to whether A was actually persuaded and repented, whether B won the day, or whether, perhaps, it ended by B's going over to A's point of view. For in this respect these papers are without an ending.[32]

Breech asks: How are Jesus' stories true? He observes that they are markedly different from Homer's narratives, for instance, in that they are not "eyewitness" reports which rely on visual descriptions to paint a believable picture of events. Jesus is not a reporter of events but a teller of stories which he himself has created:

As narrator, he never abdicates the role of selecting and ordering reality. He never permits the scene to dominate; by implication, his own imagination remains in control of events, selecting and ordering them....

The kind of authority Jesus exercises is extremely rare. No other narrator, or artist for that matter, in all of late Western antiquity presumes to speak about what is really the case based only on his own imaginative capacity to select and order reality.[33]

Jesus' parables do not paint visual pictures, but they do tell us what their characters say. Jesus used words in the most accurate way in which they can be used, to recount the speech of human beings. The words of the characters reveal who they are. When we hear them speak, we can see into their spiritual condition. This is the fundamental way in which Jesus' stories are true. They reveal to us the human condition. Here again, we are struck by a parallel with *Either/Or*. It is described as a novelistic work rather than a novel precisely because it does not rely on painting a believable picture of scenes and events. It consists primarily of the words of its characters, whose speech reveals to us the various possibilities open to us as human beings.

Another aspect of Jesus' parables is the way they depict existence in time. Stories usually depict events in a linear sequence, because that is the only way in which a story can be told. But linear "story" time is an abstraction, because the real time in which human beings live is multilinear.[34] Jesus' stories lack conventional moralizing endings; instead, they open our eyes to the reality of the multilinearity of time. In other words, they awaken us to the fact that there are other people in the world. Breech explains:

In each story the main character has acted for awhile in his own temporal sequence. But at the end of the story each of these characters is addressing a new, disconcerting situation brought about by the awareness that his own time is contingent with the sequence of another. What opens up here is the dimension of self and other. Previously the householder had ignored the workers' time, the father had ignored his elder son's time, and the host ignored his guests' time. Now, as each one speaks, each is aware of the time of others....

The voice of each makes the characters present to the maximum degree possible in narrative. Each is real in that sense. Moreover, each addresses a situation in which his previously closed temporal sequence has been brought into contiguity with another temporal sequence and so opened up. In place of closure, ending, or finality, at the end of these stories we have opening and complexity, a sudden revelation of the genuine ambiguity that occurs when the consequences of actions are seen in terms of the way they penetrate the lives of others.[35]

According to Breech, this is what it means to live in story: to become aware that one's life impinges on the lives of others. How will one's interactions with others be characterized? By ignoring them? By manipulating them for one's own purposes? By being envious of them? By helping them if they are injured? Instead of answering our questions, Jesus' parables place our lives and our character in question. Breech suggests that they direct us toward becoming creatures of God who are open to God's life-giving spirit, and to the ways in which we can participate in that spirit with our fellow creatures.[36]

I would argue that this description of Jesus' parables is also an accurate description of Kierkegaard's thought. This is clearly the case in a book such as *Works of Love*, but even here, in *Either/Or*, we can see intimations of this theological message. To read *Either/Or* is to become aware that the way in which we live our lives is one among a variety of options. When we encounter others who are living out different options, we are reminded of the fractured nature of fallen human existence. With this awareness we can open ourselves to God who is the source of redemptive transformation, and we can turn to our neighbors with the humility which we have learned from being in the wrong before God.

Breech argues that Jesus' parables are nonhistorical, nonmythological, and nonmoralizing. As such, they represent the first examples in Western history of what we now call realistic fiction.[37] This is a startling assertion. What I would like to point out is that *Either/Or* shares these same characteristics. It is not an account of historical events, it does not involve stories of gods taking on human form, and it does not have a simplistic moralizing ending. It is a kind of realistic fiction. More precisely, it is a 19th century literary echo of the parable of the Prodigal Son. We can say then, that *Either/Or* is a work which inhabits a genre which has its home in the New Testament.

In conclusion, we have encountered in this essay three different authors who each divide the intellectual terrain into three spheres, for heuristic purposes. We can summarize these spheres in this chart:

Kierkegaard:	<b>aesthetic</b>	<b>ethical</b>	<b>religious</b>
	Don Giovanni	Kant, Hegel	New Testament
MacIntyre:	<b>genealogy</b>	<b>encyclopedia</b>	<b>tradition</b>
	Nietzsche	Adam Gifford	Augustine
	Foucault	9th Ed. Encyclo. Br.	Aquinas
Breech:	<b>postmodernism</b>	<b>moral closure</b>	<b>living in story</b>
	Nietzsche	Ricoeur	New Testament

The point which I would like to make is that there is a significant degree of commensurability between these three columns, and the headings in the third column are all pointing in the same basic direction. In other words, I believe that Kierkegaard's conception of the life of Christian faith is commensurable with MacIntyre's conception of the rationality of the Christian tradition. Breech's conception of living in story is another way of formulating the same basic philosophical perspective. This is not to suggest that these authors are saying exactly the same thing. Of course they are not. But I am suggesting that we are not gathering together three unrelated languages such as Mandarin and Swahili and Portuguese. We are gathering together French and Spanish and Italian. There ought to be a way for these three to converse productively. I have attempted, in a sketchy way, to suggest the outlines of such a conversation in the preceding pages.

My argument in this paper has been that *Either/Or* should be interpreted as a literary echo of the parable of the Prodigal Son. This can be seen on three different levels of interpretation. The first is the exegetical level, on which the two stories are compared in terms of their contents. The second is the level of genre, on which we saw that both stories are a kind of realistic fiction. The third could be called the theological level, on which it is seen that *Either/Or* communicates a message which is linked with the meaning of Jesus' life and teachings.[38] When we hear what is being spoken in *Either/Or* we are hearing indirectly the voice of Christ.[39]

Two concluding notes: 1) A certain question has most likely arisen in my reader's mind: "Did Kierkegaard consciously design *Either/Or* as an echo of the parable, or not?" I am not asserting that there was any conscious connection in Kierkegaard's mind, and I have no textual evidence to suggest that there was. There are two minor references to the parable at EO, 1: 228 and 261, but they do not amount to any sort of proof texts for my thesis. My contention is that there was what could be called a subtle, subconscious influence of the biblical parable on Kierkegaard's thinking. There is no question that Kierkegaard had read the parable before writing *Either/Or*. And when we compare them, as I have done in this essay, we can see in the texts (regardless of any speculations on authorial intentions) certain striking parallels. All that I am asserting is that these parallels are present in the texts, and that it is entirely plausible to suggest that

*Either/Or* is an "echo" of the parable, given Kierkegaard's theological education up to that point in time. That this parable was important to Kierkegaard is clear from the three 1850 Journal entries on it, JP, 4: 3939 and 3949, which are sermon outlines, and the following:

In the Gospel story the prodigal has an older brother, but he will not do a single thing to save the prodigal.

But Christianity itself is, indeed, *katexovchn* [in an eminent sense] the gospel. And in this gospel the prodigal son (the human race) has an older brother (the only begotten Son), and he does everything, loses his life, in order to save the prodigal, in accord with the Father from the beginning. (JP, 3: 2875)

2) I must admit that when I began writing this essay, I was working with the assumption that *Either/Or* is basically an apolitical book. (I write this as one who is seriously committed to defending Kierkegaard's thought as a whole against the charge that it is apolitical.)[40] Yet by the time I arrived at the conclusion, I was surprised to find myself once again thinking politically. The clash between A and the Judge, each in his own psychic world, evokes the tension between different existing human beings: between atheist and fundamentalist, Republican and Democrat, Serb and Muslim, Arab and Jew, pro-life and pro-choice, in sum, between me and my neighbor. How will we all get along? If Kierkegaard is truly asking the question, "How will we all get along?", then *Either/Or* does make a contribution, however unusual, to political thought. Perhaps this conclusion would not sound so strange to us if we had paid more attention to the text for the Jutland pastor's sermon:

And when he drew near and saw the city he wept over it, saying, "Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace! But now they are hid from your eyes." (Luke 19:41-42)

We will certainly not achieve any sort of genuine peace on this earth as long as we live in fragmented psychic colonies, each one sure that it is in the right--before itself. The way to real change in this area has been indicated by the pastor: to acknowledge that we are all in the wrong--before God.

#### NOTES

1. According to Oden, a parable is "a brief story of spare characterization and surprising reversal, with the underlying intent of moral or spiritual illumination." Thomas C. Oden, ed., *Parables of Kierkegaard* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978) x.
2. James Breech, *The Silence of Jesus: The Authentic Voice of the Historical Man* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1983) 192.
3. *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version* (New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1952) Luke 15:29-30.
4. Breech, *The Silence of Jesus*, 212.
5. For this insight I am indebted to David Barrett-Johnson.
6. See Merold Westphal, "Kierkegaard's Teleological Suspension of Religiousness B," in George B. Connell and C. Stephen Evans, eds., *Foundations of Kierkegaard's Vision of*

*Community: Religion, Ethics, and Politics in Kierkegaard* (New Jersey: Humanities Press International, 1992) 113.

7. See George Pattison, *Kierkegaard: The Aesthetic and the Religious* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992) ch. 1.

8. See Gregor Malantschuk, *Kierkegaard's Way to the Truth*, trans. Mary Michelsen (Montreal: Inter Editions, 1987) 23-39.

9. Pattison, *Kierkegaard*, 58.

10. See Breech, *The Silence of Jesus*, 195.

11. See Johannes Hohlenberg, *Søren Kierkegaard*, trans. T. H. Croxall (New York: Pantheon Books, 1954) 74-76.

12. Alasdair MacIntyre, "Søren Aabye Kierkegaard" in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 4, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967) 337.

13. Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics* (New York: Macmillan, 1966) 215.

14. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984) 39-40.

15. Stephen L. Ross, "Editor's Introduction" to *Either/Or: Abridged Edition* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986) xiii.

16. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 41.

17. My translation of Søren Kierkegaard, *Samlede Værker*, 2nd ed., ed. A. B. Drachmann, et al (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1929) XII: 336. The quotation is from the second of the *Two Discourses at the Communion on Fridays* which were published on August 7, 1851. Lowrie's translation is found on page 24 of *For Self-Examination and Judge for Yourselves!* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944).

18. For other critiques of MacIntyre's reading of *Either/Or*, see M. Holmes Hartshorne, *Kierkegaard, Godly Deceiver: The Nature and Meaning of His Pseudonymous Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990) 87-88; and Jeffrey S. Turner, "To Tell a Good Tale: Kierkegaardian Reflections on Moral Narrative and Moral Truth," *Man and World* 24/2 (1991) 181-198.

19. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1990) 20.

20. Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense," in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Press, 1971) 46.

21. MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions*, 42.

22. MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions*, 129-130.

23. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 222.

24. MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions*, 81.

25. MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions*, 83.
26. Nelly Viallaneix, *Écoute, Kierkegaard: Essai sur la Communication de la Parole* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1979) 1: 38 [my trans.]. Viallaneix's quotation from Kierkegaard is found at JP, 2: 1414.
27. I take this to be the argument of C. Stephen Evans in his article, "Is Kierkegaard an Irrationalist?: Reason, Paradox, and Faith," *Religious Studies* 25/3 (1989) 347-362.
28. Breech, *Jesus and Postmodernism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989) 15.
29. Breech, *Jesus and Postmodernism*, 39.
30. Breech, *Jesus and Postmodernism*, 40. Breech is referring to Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellhauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) 1: 59.
31. Breech, *Jesus and Postmodernism*, 28-29.
32. *Either/Or*, trans. Alasdair Hannay (London: Penguin Books, 1992) 36. Cf. EO, 1: 13-14.
33. Breech, *Jesus and Postmodernism*, 67.
34. Breech, *Jesus and Postmodernism*, 73.
35. Breech, *Jesus and Postmodernism*, 74.
36. Breech sees his work as being a contribution to the doctrine of creation. See p. 78 and p. 79, n. 2.
37. Breech, *Jesus and Postmodernism*, 64.
38. In his book, *Kierkegaard: The Myths and Their Origins*, trans. George C. Schoolfield (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), Henning Fenger argues that Kierkegaard only conceived the idea of becoming a "religious" author after his attempt to become an "aesthetic" author failed to sufficiently impress Copenhagen's literati, who were led by Heiberg. Fenger's argument, clearly, relies on the assumption that *Either/Or* was an aesthetic, not a religious, book. It is obvious that my thesis is a direct contradiction of Fenger's. One can argue, as I have, that the later religious writings show the true "heart" of Kierkegaard's thought to be theological. But in this essay I have countered Fenger (and MacIntyre) not obliquely but directly, by arguing that *Either/Or* is itself an inherently religious work.
39. I have come across an essay which has a very striking first sentence: "The fullness of what Jesus the man means to say about man may be found in the philosophy of Kierkegaard." Robert S. Hartman, "The Self in Kierkegaard: Some Remarks on Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Dread* and *The Sickness Unto Death*," *Journal of Existentialism* 2 (1962) 409-436.
40. See my essay, "Toward a Kierkegaardian Understanding of Hitler, Stalin, and the Cold War," in *Foundations of Kierkegaard's Vision of Community*. (Note 6 above.)
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