

Kierkegaard: Eithers and Ors

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Introduction

At first glance, a systematic examination of *Either/Or* apparently yields a clear analysis of its structure. The project is straightforward. There are two words in the title. There are two volumes, each with its principal speaker. In the course of the work a speaker for the ethical perspective follows an aesthetic speaker and comments critically on him and his ideas. As a judge, he clearly has the requisite temporal authority and moral ascendancy to do so. Moreover the judge appeals to eternal authority, embodied in a sermon, as additional support for his position.

Thus the content of the debate seems plain; we have a simple all-or-nothing choice: *Either* the aesthetic *Or* the ethical. The practical conclusion is also plain: Aesthetic living is deficient, and the ethical is to be preferred.

The rhetorical form of the work is no less simple: we have two speakers in debate. Only one can be vindicated - all or nothing. The debate proceeds in linear form from A to B, and the position of B is not challenged by A; B is vindicated.

No doubt many readers are so eager to reach the substance of this debate that they neglect to read the preface. Surely they might be pardoned: the work has a transparent structure, and portions of the first volume have attained a certain notoriety. Here a preface can only be superfluous, if not positively irrelevant; and certainly to read it delays the pleasure of the reading proper. Yet having reached the end, perhaps some readers return to the preface - whether out of outrage that the brilliant style of A should have been ground so fine by the overbearing dullness of B; or out of eagerness to know the identity of such a thoroughgoing ethicist; or out of puzzlement at the place of the "Ultimatum"; or simply out of curiosity. At any rate one might well expect that in the preface the editor would enlighten us as to the true identities of the two participants. But that expectation is destined to be disappointed, for as you probably know the editor has no conception of their true identities. The papers were discovered by accident in the secret drawer of an antique desk which he purchased out of obsession, and of whose true history he could never get a clue. Thus he can never tell us whether the participants in this debate were good enough systematicians to be persuaded by its simple logic. The editor even raises doubts as to whether the "two" participants might not be one person at different times. In fact he has the gall to claim that all this uncertainty is a good thing: he remarks that

We sometimes come upon novels in which specific characters represent contrasting views of life. They usually end with one persuading the other. The point of view ought to speak for itself, but instead the reader is furnished with the historical result that the other was persuaded. I consider it fortunate that these papers provide no enlightenment in this respect.¹

All this is sufficiently annoying. But it gets worse. Being good scholars we must take due notice of the appearance of a new edition, a uniform translation, with a new inclusion never-before-published, a "historical introduction." By its form this fact raises hopes of some systematic resolution to the conundrums of the work. Perhaps new evidence has arisen to show that the editor had second thoughts about the historical! And yet having read it we will be bewildered as well as annoyed, for there it is confirmed that the entire work is a fake, a deception from beginning to end: the "true author" is one S. Kierkegaard, about whose life and career one may hear such incredible stories that one might well wonder whether he is not *also* a fictional character. Indeed one hasn't far to seek in recent scholarship before encountering precisely that thesis.²

Methodology

"It may at times have occurred to you, dear reader, to doubt somewhat the accuracy of that familiar philosophical thesis that the outer is the inner and the inner is the outer."³ But never more than during an encounter with *Either/Or*. Yet for all the blatancy of the markers within and surrounding the text, it is all too easy to forget to apply the lesson consistently. In particular, though the title phrase "either/or" is obviously a guide to the form, intent and content of the work, its application is not so easy as might first appear.

The application of the title clearly depends at least to some extent on the audience at whom the work is directed. *Either/Or* is addressed to "us" as readers, of course, but in what capacity? If we dare to take a clue from Kierkegaard's dedication of other works, it is to us in our capacity as existing individuals. Insofar as there is a choice to be made, only each individual can make it.

But of course as we participate in the scholarly process we are not present as existing individuals - or rather, the interest in *Either/Or* we are evincing is not *as such* an existential interest (though some of us may have or develop such an interest). Our interest is not in making a choice between different forms of existence; rather we consider the theoretical possibilities inherent in the discourse embodied in the work. As such we ignore (I do not say transcend) the existential choice implicit in the work; we consider it abstractly.

But supposing that such an abstract stance toward the text is possible, is it desirable? Kierkegaard would certainly deny that it is the way to get at what he is doing. I have the misfortune to be an assistant professor (and thus for Kierkegaard, public enemy number one), and the scholarly community of readers constitute "the crowd" (for Kierkegaard, the principal locus of untruth).

Thus rather than considering *Either/Or* from the abstract position, the scholarly view from nowhere, it would be better to ask what we can learn from the usages inherent in the native intention of the work. What critical reminders can we assemble about the nature of discourse and about the structure of eithers and ors from this address by the single individual to the single individual? Such an investigation may teach us something about Kierkegaard's project and its possibility, and also about the possibility and form of religious and scholarly discourse in general.

The outer form of *Either/Or* suggests that the term is a systematic one. Such a usage is reinforced by the critical stance inherent in an investigation of what the work can tell us about "the nature of discourse." But within the work, the category "either/or" is presented in three existential possibilities, and none of these incarnates the systematic use. Thus it behooves us to look briefly at each of these uses and its grammar.

The Aesthetic Either/Or

The aesthetic "either/or" is encapsulated in the well known "ecstatic discourse" found in the "Diapsalmata."

Marry, and you will regret it. Do not marry, and you will also regret it. Marry or do not marry, you will regret it either way. Whether you marry or you do not marry, you will regret it either way. Laugh at the stupidities of the world, and you will regret it; weep over them, and you will also regret it. Laugh at the stupidities of the world or weep over them, you will regret it either way. Whether you laugh at the stupidities of the world or you weep over them, you will regret it either way. Trust a girl, and you will regret it. Do not trust her, and you will also regret it. Trust a girl or do not trust her, you will regret it either way. Whether you trust a girl or do not trust her, you will regret it either way. Hang yourself, and you will regret it. Do not hang yourself, and you will also regret it. Hang yourself or do not hang yourself, you will regret it either way. Whether you hang yourself or do not hang yourself, you will regret it either way.⁴

What we have here is certainly not an all-or-nothing choice. It looks rather more like "nothing or nothing," or perhaps a gloss on Ecclesiastes: "all leads to nothing." Yet the aesthetic author of this maxim would deny that it is intended to *lead*; for once one takes it as a "point of departure," one is already embroiled in the situation which the maxim warns against. In this context it is important to remember that the "Diapsalmata" are directed *ad se ipsum*; the aesthete does not presume to give advice.

Thus anyone who nevertheless decides to take the aesthete's ironical maxim to heart should not act on it. One must say "Neither," and then the principle of contradiction does not come into play - for it presupposes the existence of a genuine option requiring existential choice.⁵

But would not taking the ironical maxim to heart be just such a choice which one might later regret? More to the point, what is the practical consequence for the aesthete of taking this maxim to heart? It might seem peculiar that a maxim restraining choice is put into his mouth, for choice is surely the central principle of the aesthetic.

It might be argued that there is a distinction in this regard between the various kinds of aestheticism. For instance, the unreflective "immediate stages of the erotic" might seem to predate choice: after all, Don Juan "lacks the time to be a seducer, the time beforehand in which to lay his plan and the time afterward in which to become conscious of his act."⁶ Thus he is not a reflective chooser. Yet he is the culmination of immediate eroticism because of his perfectly focussed desire. Despite the transitory nature of Don Juan's passion, and the comic aspects of its inconstancy (1,003 in Spain), his passionate decisiveness surely constitutes him as an absolute chooser.

At the other extreme lies Johannes the Seducer, who represents reflective aestheticism. His reflective and cerebral nature diffuses the focus of his choosing. Not content with one object at a time, he always has "lines out on the side."⁷ But by the same token of reflectivity his making of choices becomes much clearer; the central seduction reported in the Diary is very self-conscious and drawn out over a period of months of intense mental activity. Furthermore his methods involve Cordelia and her aunt in corollary reflection and decision; the seducer's greatest triumph is the complete subversion of Cordelia's will - she seduces herself.

Clearly an *existing* person cannot live without acting, and cannot act without choosing. The nearest that one can come to non-choice is ease and randomness in action. The appearance at least of such ease is actually an effect which Johannes strives for. To make Cordelia into a self-seducer requires all his efforts to be transparent. The point is made even more strongly in the "Guilty/Not Guilty" section of *Stages on Life's Way*, where randomness becomes so symbolic of the aesthetic that by the end of the

relationship the roles are reversed: the aesthete, having determined to extricate himself, is striving for the appearance of causal regularity, while his erstwhile beloved makes unpracticed attempts to simulate chance encounters.⁸ But in both cases, at least from our privileged viewpoint as readers of the diary, the striving gives the game away. When Johannes and Quidam must strive to appear random, then they have already been false to the doctrine of uncaring randomness.

To sum up, the aesthete's rhetoric of "either/or" is highly ironic, and constitutes a commentary on the dangers of irrevocable choice. But while this rhetoric of either and or is clear enough, it is equally clear that as a guide to life such a rhetoric is doomed to self-abrogation.

The Ethical Either/Or

The ethical presentation of the category is made at great length in the section on "The Balance Between the Esthetic and the Ethical in the Development of the Personality." It is worth noting at the outset that this section is cast in the form of a didactic lecture, aimed at a specific individual, and rather thinly disguised as a letter. Unlike the aesthete, who does not presume to give advice, the ethicist gives advice in a form so prolix that he himself is forced to joke about it. He expresses the key to the matter thus:

Rather than designating the choice between good and evil, my Either/Or designates the choice by which one chooses good and evil or rules them out. Here the question is under what qualifications one will view all existence and personally live. That the person who chooses good and evil chooses the good is indeed true, but only later does this become manifest, for the esthetic is not evil but the indifferent. And that is why I said that the ethical constitutes the choice. Therefore, it is not so much a matter of choosing between willing good and willing evil, as of choosing to will, but that in turn posits good and evil.⁹

Whereas the aesthete is characterized by a fundamental unwillingness to choose (or at any rate an unwillingness to choose decisively), the ethicist's existence is defined by the act of choosing. As Judge William puts it, the aesthetic "is that in a person by which he spontaneously and immediately is what he is; the ethical is that by which he becomes what he becomes."¹⁰ The ethical is the sphere of historical choice and teleological becoming. It is not defined by any particular and accidental choice. Rather it is focused on the category of choice or the acceptance of choice as the key life-category.

This is not to say that accidental choices have no importance for the ethicist. Indeed Judge William goes so far as to say that with the positing of genuine choice the aesthetic is returned in its true possibility.¹¹ What this could mean is taken up below.

But how satisfactory is this ethicist's position? Certainly his is not the dilemma of the aesthete whose attempt to choose no-choice is *logically* self-contradictory. But his account of the content of his choice - the absolute choice of the life of choice - is none the less disturbing. For what is important is not so much choosing the right, as the "energy, the earnestness, and the pathos with which one chooses."¹² Even a wrong choice, made with personal inwardness, brings purification and immediate relationship with "the eternal power that omnipresently pervades all existence." This language obviously foreshadows the famous formulation of subjective truth found in the *Postscript*.¹³ However Kantian he may sound elsewhere, William here shows a distinct existentialist streak. When he goes on to name this absolute which the ethical individual chooses "the absolute that chooses me, . . . that posits me,"¹⁴ anyone familiar with the *Postscript* or *Sickness unto Death* - indeed any Christian - expects him to declare that this absolute is God.¹⁵ Yet instead he goes on to say that the absolute is "myself in my absolute validity" or more succinctly *freedom*.¹⁶ A more careful reading of this passage yields the information that this choice is made in despair and through the choice of

despair. "I choose despair, and in despair I choose the absolute, for I myself am the absolute."[17](#) At this point William looks rather like a French existentialist of a later period. The reader of *Sickness unto Death* is reminded of one of the forms of that sickness, namely "in despair to choose oneself."[18](#) While this is a more advanced and reflective stage of existence than that of the aesthete, in Anti-Climacus's analysis it is for that very reason all the more serious if the sick one proceeds no further.

Surely Judge William's absolute sickness is not so simple as that of the pure subjectivist or the Sartrean existentialist. William would not claim to be the absolute arbiter of moral standards, nor does he say that existence precedes essence. In fact he claims that the ethical task is for the individual to transform himself into the "universal individual" which is already present in him as a possibility.[19](#) But he does apparently claim an absolute ability to recognize the universal - to understand and meet moral standards. He claims to choose himself in his freedom and consequent responsibility for his own repentance, redemption and salvation. He remarks that, just as a well brought up child accepts culpability and instruction, so must he. But he believes that it is within his power to accept these things and to "repent himself" back into God without further ado.[20](#) In that sense he is the victim of a particularly common and nasty form of the "sickness unto death."

In sum, the ethical use of the term "either/or" is built on the notion of genuine choice and the absolute ability to choose absolutely. This usage bears only a verbal relation to the ironic word of the aesthete. At the theoretical level there is a clear difference between these two usages. Yet given that the ethicist's rhetoric is equally untenable with the aesthete's, this choice is vitiated.

The Religious Either/Or

The final existential possibility for the use of the term "either/or" is presented in the form of a sermon on the theme that "as against God we are always in the wrong." The author of this sermon is a humble Jylland pastor who plans to deliver it next year, and confidently expects to make every peasant understand it.[21](#)

The judge commends this sermon as a simple extension of his position. Indeed there are many parallels between it and his exposition. For instance, both focus on the absolute, internal, and singular quality of duty. William argues that "duty" cannot be ramified into a succession of particular duties external to the individual. He says that the human task is to be uniquely human and at the same time to incarnate the universal.[22](#)

Yet there is a substantial point of disagreement between William's position and the notion that "we are always in the wrong." Surely he would have to say that, insofar as he may be in the wrong as against God, it is merely accidental: for *essentially* he is in the right, given that he has repented and chosen choice. Perhaps the parson's scriptural reference that "you are not to argue with God"[23](#) reminds him of his own childlike diffidence in the face of Divine power. But in the context of the sermon this assertion has an absolute force which it could never have in the Judge's scheme of things - in which the individual, not God, still retains the absolute power of action.

The annulment of the Judge's position is carried out in the first part of the sermon, in which is considered the Kantian wisdom "one does what one can." Surely, counsels this wisdom, God will not require the impossible of us, imperfect as we are. Surely it is enough that we are in touch with the absolute freedom within us; even our wrong decisions will be of some benefit to us.[24](#)

William begins to defend this claim with an argument which might be taken from recent cultural anthropology. He asserts, perhaps as an example of the working of Kantian

natural law, that "there has never been a nation that believed that children should hate their parents." But he goes on to say that even the discovery of a tribe which puts the elderly to death would not refute this claim, since it would still be possible that this misguided custom did not result from a desire to do evil.²⁵ In short, every human being may incarnate the universal within the limits of her finitude. Ought implies can, and we are not responsible for not knowing better. Through such casuistry, William asserts, any skeptical claims against a universal ethic may be overcome.

But the parson shows up the weakness of this Kantian argument. He asks:

Was it to your comfort that you said "One does what one can"? Was not the real reason for your unrest that you did not know for sure how much one can do, that it seems to you to be so infinitely much at one moment, and at the next moment so very little? Was not your anxiety so painful because you could not penetrate your consciousness, because the more earnestly, the more fervently you wished to act, the more dreadful became the duplicity in which you found yourself: that you might not have done what you could, or that you might actually have done what you could but no one came to your assistance?²⁶

Who will make the determination of rightness and wrongness - who else but the absolute, and for Judge William this is his free essence. Yet who is he to judge his own actions? The wisdom of "doing what one can" may free him to act, but given his reflective nature it cannot free him from care. He must still ask, with infinite recursion, whether in his own best judgement he has done what he can.

This impasse in the ethics of freedom is addressed in the positive part of the sermon through a dynamic of love. Where freedom is inadequate in its ability to cope with ethical problems, love supplies a sufficiency. Yet this sufficiency does not lie in a positive ability to resolve ethical dilemmas by putting one in the right, but rather in an ability to relativise worldly right and wrong.

The pastor claims that love makes one desire always to be in the wrong. For in relation to a loved one we can only unselfishly desire the loved one to be in the right - and thus logically we must desire to be in the wrong ourselves. But in this desire any finite friendship is doomed to disappointment: no matter how painful it may be to admit it, at some point each party to a human relationship proves to be fallible, and thus every lover eventually finds herself to be in the right.

Then your soul turned away from the finite to the infinite; there it found its object; there your love became happy. I will love God, you said; he gives everything to the one who loves. He fulfills my highest, my only wish - that in relation to him I must always be in the wrong. Never will any alarming doubt ever tear me away from him; never will the thought terrify me that I could prove to be in the right in relation to him - in relation to God I am always in the wrong.²⁷

But does not this eternal wrongness nullify ethical choice, and lead back to a skeptical no-choice? The true aesthete would surely see it this way: in the "Diapsalmata," A makes clear that for him the novelty of a faithful lover would wear thin fast.²⁸ From the religious perspective, on the contrary, such a situation restores choice even in taking away moral ambiguity. For in love one does not sit idly by, waiting to be found in the wrong. Every lover must strive to be in the right, for only then could the beloved's desire to be in the wrong be gratified! Thus in love both parties must strive to be in the right, even while hoping against hope always to be in the wrong. But in regard to God, who will always be in the right, this hopelessness is attenuated. We will always be in the wrong, no matter how hard we try. Thus fear and doubt are annulled, and we are freed to act at

our full potential, by the thought that we are always in the wrong. As in the aesthetic, choice and rightness are separated, but here the result is joyously affirming.

Kierkegaard himself takes up this same theme in *The Gospel of Sufferings*, in a section on "the joy of it that in relation to God a person always suffers as guilty."²⁹ Here he says that the most agonizing type of unhappy love between humans is that in which the lover discovers that his object is unworthy of love.³⁰ If the object is worthy and the fault lies with the lover, on the other hand, there is still hope that the situation may be retrieved.

How much more portentous and dreadful is the situation with respect to God. If we could ever demonstrate that God was not love, God was not worthy, then all would be lost; indeed God would be lost³¹. The joy in the fact that we suffer as guilty is a function of God's constancy, which ensures that God is love. In that case any discrepancy between humans and God is necessarily a function of human guilt. The existential task of self-perfecting always remains for every imperfect human individual.

Thus the dialectical tensions within the category "either/or," whose implicit presence in the aesthetic and ethical meanings of the term leads them to self-destruct, are made explicit and necessary within the religious use. But if this is a self-consistent rhetoric, it can be so only by using the term in a way which stands over against the uses intended by the other two stages. Nor does this use approximate the systematic use of the term. For the parson, the validity of "either/or" choices can be assured only through a recognition of human finitude and inadequacy. Only by an absolute forejudgment of human choices can the parson assure true freedom to choose. Only in the assurance that we suffer as guilty is there certainty that our existential task is never complete.

The Structure of Debate

What rhetorical lessons can be gained from this ethical debate? Surely one lesson concerns the structure of critical debate itself. The outer form of the debate is that of an either/or, but as we have seen the internal structure has three parts. Each part incarnates its own conception of the meaning of the central term, "either/or," and hence its own notion of the meaning of critique and of the debate itself. Furthermore, each incarnation by its use of the term ironically deconstructs the *prima facie* duality and finality of the term. None of the three allows the central stress to remain on particular cases of either/or (unitary decisions); instead each makes such decisions secondary to a different central claim. Thus through his invocation of this specific ethical conflict, Kierkegaard effects a clear critique of the notion of critique as dichotomous, piecemeal, and decidable.

If *Either/Or* is not a dichotomy, what is it? We might (heaven forbid) conceive it in Hegelian terms, as a triad: aesthetic no-choice and ethical choice sublated into the religious life of choice affirming its own ultimate non-effect. We might also conceive a linear structure (Either/Or/Or).³² This would have the additional advantage of potentially expanding the debate beyond three parts - for once we have denied duality, we may need to recognize any number of perspectives.

Yet each of these choices runs afoul of the same difficulty which renders intractable any conception of the work in dualistic terms: the language of the various parts, and in particular the grammar of the central term, is not consistent and unitary. Clearly it is not entirely diverse - some communication is going on between the three writers, and each of them speaks to us. Yet their use of key terms is sufficiently divergent that one might well wonder how well the speakers understand each other. Certainly the judge seems to have misunderstood the parson in a fundamental way. So a systematic understanding of the relation between the three speakers is elusive. Indeed we are left with a puzzle as to

whether accurate communication is possible at all. That puzzle is not unfamiliar in the context of modern academic opinions about culture and language.

But Kierkegaard appears to have no practical concern about the possibility of useful communication. In his works the phenomena which lead modern scholars to debates about relativism and meaning serve his absolutistic and critical purposes. Clues as to how this is possible can be found within the language of the work itself.

A key to the solution appears in Judge William's analysis of the aesthetic validity of marriage, and more specifically in the context of his attempt to show that the aesthetic category of first love is compatible with the ethical category of marriage. This is very fitting in that "love" is another term which is used in very different ways in the three sections of the work. Judge William's assertion is that marriage, far from annihilating aesthetic love, "transfigures" it in a "higher concentricity."³³ Rather than being distinct or "eccentric" regions, he asserts, love and marriage (standing for the aesthetic and the ethical) are *concentric*, such that the ethical confirms and completes the true essence of the aesthetic. Ethical reflection does not come to taint the first love, rendering it stale; the concentricity is immediate and the lightness of the erotic is preserved. Thus William suggests speaking of a "metamorphosis" of the love into marriage.³⁴ Steven Evans, in commenting on this passage, suggests thinking of the aesthetic as providing the "content" and the ethical the "form" of marriage.³⁵ This language might be connected with the figure of "concentricity" by thinking of the relation of a balloon and the gas which it contains.

The discourse on the immediate stages of the erotic presented by the aesthete incarnates a similar pattern of concentricity. For he argues that the three stages of the erotic - dreaming, seeking, and desiring - cannot appropriately be described as a linear progression, but rather as a gradual "disclosure of a predicate" in such a way that we see what is basic to it and what has come to be sedimented about this kernel. One must not talk of eccentric stages, says A, but of "metamorphosis."³⁶

The notion of metamorphosis between concentric spheres is an important reminder about Kierkegaard's view of relations between individuals and between world views. His phrase "stages on life's way" may easily yield a linear image. "Spheres" of existence (another term he uses) might well be conceived as inhabiting separate orbits, with leagues of space between. But considering that the dichotomy suggested by "either/or" is effectively deconstructed by Kierkegaard, who shows the complex and multitudinous relationships between varying uses and senses of the term, so it would be fruitful to investigate the images of linearity and separation, implicit in the ideas of "stages" and "spheres," in light of the notion of concentricity.

In order to clarify the issue it is worth turning briefly to a problem in the interpretation of the work of another semi-mythical figure, Wittgenstein. The parallel issue is of course that of "forms of life" and "language games." Elsewhere I have joined the debate on the question of how precise this parallel is;³⁷ but let us bracket that question and concentrate on the formal similarities in the difficulties of interpretation encountered. Forms of life have been construed both very broadly and very narrowly - all the way from Winch's position that "humanity" is a form of life,³⁸ to Hilmy's claim that specific signs must be grounded in specific forms of life.³⁹ Yet a specification of the intended breadth of this term appears to be a prerequisite to the solution of various problems in the interpretation of Wittgenstein's work.

The common presupposition of the various positions is that there is one, narrowly defined and metaphysical entity which is named by the term "form of life" - and thus one correct solution to questions about the meaning of the term. If that is so, then Wittgenstein is certainly greatly deficient in delineating it. For despite the importance of the term, he

makes no attempt to suggest the scope of such a phenomenon, and in general leaves various features of it undefined.

But one might also think of the notion of "forms of life" as suggestive rather than definitional. Perhaps Wittgenstein's intent never was to specify an ideal definition; rather he may have introduced the term only as a tool for the investigation of particular cases, leaving systematic loose ends untied. Accepting this suggestion allows us to use this tool in a variety of ways - to apply the term where it is useful. Then "forms of life" may include both very narrow and much broader phenomena which are of central importance to one's life. This notion seems truer both to Wittgenstein's comments on definition and to the phenomena. For instance, writing a scholarly paper might well be construed as a form of life; certainly there is a distinct set of rules governing one's actions. Yet one might also think productively of scholarship in general, or Christianity, as "forms of life" - though they are not of the same scale or degree of restrictiveness at all. And of course each journal, each conference, has its own rules about tone and format; again these are of a different scale and degree of restrictiveness. Thus we are left with the idea of a rich individual existence, composed of a variety of forms of life of varying specificity.

Non-Reduction of Either/Or

Accepting the parallel notion that Kierkegaard's intent in using the imagery of stages and spheres is equally suggestive and polemical, rather than metaphysical and definitional, provides a similar service in opening up his terminology to a variety of fruitful uses. Kierkegaard scholars have tended to accept Johannes Climacus's bald statement that there are three stages: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious.⁴⁰ Perhaps worse, they have often reified this talk into a strict system. But both A and Judge William also use the terminology of stages: A with regard to the erotic, and William (in addition to his own definition of "aesthetic" and "ethical" living) with regard to the "development of the personality" through "the personal, the civic, the religious virtues".⁴¹ Then there are also disagreements as to the number of subphases which might be contained in the religious sphere: Climacus has A and B, but a supertranscendent Religiousness C has recently been suggested.

One could of course insist on systematizing this material into a nice Hegelian triad of triads, and think of social or individual development in terms of a journey through them. Such a project would have its own difficulties; in addition to the question about Religiousness A, B, and C, there are inconsistencies in Climacus's treatment of the place of the transitional categories, humor and irony (as Steven Evans has pointed out).⁴² But before attempting to systematize the stages one should ask what point would be served. For there are a variety of fruitful ways of conceiving the relation of the stages or spheres of existence.

In some ways the stages are linearly separated - indeed sometimes separated by an "ugly ditch." Climacus makes great play on this image in the *Postscript*, and it well expresses human frustration with the phenomenon of conversion. Such an image also resonates with the notion of spheres as necessarily social phenomena; each of us "moves in certain circles" and occasionally sees members of other circles as utterly eccentric.

But while these images are useful, the stages may equally be considered as concentric - building on each other in the individual person in such a way that I may be at the same time (though not necessarily without tension) "religiously" a Christian, "ethically" a scholar, a father, an article writer, "aesthetically" a tourist, a lover. In stressing the concentric within the context of *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard brings out a particular feature of life - this accretion of cultural roles which all of us find built up in us, and to which we are constantly adding. The metaphor finds its limits in that, unlike pearls, we are self-conscious. Thus we do not only develop at the surface. Added layers may also change the

way we understand other layers, and even the relative importance we grant to the various layers. To use Wittgenstein's terminology, we participate in a variety of forms of life, and each influences the way in which we see the others. Evans suggests that the "teleological suspension of the ethical" may be understood as just such a change, in which the suspension may become more or less permanent.⁴³ Within the framework of *Either/Or* this change can be seen in the ascription of self-transforming power to the individual in the ethical stage, and to God in the religious.⁴⁴ Climacus, of course, speaks of modifications of one's existence depending on one's particular *telos*; and for him the ultimate is to have an absolute relation to the absolute telos, which modifies our relation to all other ends.⁴⁵ Evans also points out the changes in the conception of "eternal happiness" in the different stages.⁴⁶

Examples could be multiplied. But it should be clear enough that Kierkegaard's work illustrates the appeal and fruitfulness of resisting the reduction of the "spheres" to *either* a concentric model *or* a linear one.

Application to Kierkegaard's Stages

From Kierkegaard's particular work we have thus extracted some general considerations, but it must not be forgotten that his own project is a very limited one. As he succinctly says, his entire work is "related to Christianity, to the problem of 'becoming a Christian'."⁴⁷ But how do the twin notions of metamorphosis between concentric spheres of existence and journey between linear stages support that polemical project - how do they promote communication beneficial to conversion?

In attacking this question we are extremely fortunate, for Kierkegaard - too great a mind to be reduced to consistency - devotes a great deal of very direct theoretical argumentation to his doctrine of communication - known famously as the theory of *indirect* communication!

Kierkegaard explains the method of indirection as a way of forwarding "existence-communication," especially to dispel existential illusions. His particular concern is of course the illusion "that in Christendom all are Christians of a sort." But in such a case supercilious direct preaching can only cause the other "to set his will in opposition."⁴⁸ Thus "if real success is to attend the effort to bring a man to a definite position, one must first of all take pains to find *him* where he is and begin there."⁴⁹ The teacher must understand the other, and show from within where his opinions lead.

The notion of indirect communication both presupposes the stages or spheres, and is a practical solution to the problem of communication between them. It presupposes the more linear understanding of the stages in that the point of Kierkegaard's communication is to lead a reader from one sphere into another - that is Kierkegaard's analysis of the phenomenon of conversion. But what is vexing about that phenomenon is that it is difficult to see how communication can take place between the once- and twice-born. Being on opposite sides of an "ugly ditch," they speak different languages.

The idea of concentricity suggests a new image and a new language to show how this transition is possible. For while those in different stages or spheres clearly differ in their understanding of some key concepts (such as "either/or"), they naturally share an understanding of many other concepts. For instance, whatever one may think of Judge William's style (I personally find him somewhat boring), he clearly attempts to bridge the gap between aesthetic and ethical by claiming that the aesthetic notion of "love" is *by its own rules* only completed in the ethical category of "marriage." Given the insight that this sort of bridge is possible at all, the problem of communication then reduces on the practical level to ferreting out some common sphere which can be used as a base for

non-boring analogical communication clarifying the differences. This practical task is one at which Kierkegaard was rather more accomplished than Judge William!

Either/Or, as the first of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works, is one of the best places to see the indirect method at work. It is immediately clear to anyone reading the work in the context of a knowledge of Kierkegaard's project (or even with the benefit of a "historical introduction") that this is not direct communication. What is directly communicated is opinions about marriage and Mozart, and a really juicy psychological seduction. But we have it from him that the final point is polemical in the direction of the Christian.

The polemic is accomplished by an internal presentation of the aesthetic and the ethical, which merely shows (rather than reporting) their internal inconsistencies. The final sermon can only serve as a pointer to further work. Both the polemic and the pointer depend for their effect on our ability to focus on both the linear incommensurability and the concentric connection of the stages.

The notion of indirect communication builds on the very feature of "modern" (and perhaps even "post-modern") life which appears as a stumbling block to communication - that is, our tendency to see key concepts in ways relative to personal and cultural history. This problem is transmuted into a virtue by Kierkegaard, who accepts and even stresses relativity at the individual level. But Kierkegaard's model of concentricity deconstructs the harmful consequences of relativity. In suggesting that an existing individual can be seen as a concentric accretion of a variety of forms of life, of varying degrees of complexity, he makes clear that the line between stages may be a line of communication rather than a line of demarcation. By its very existence his project demonstrates the use of these lines of communication, and helps to make a place for absolute values.

Broader Applications

The intent of this paper has been to assemble some reminders from Kierkegaard's methods which may prove useful in scholarly analysis. But while the sphere of scholarly discourse has many technical pointers to gain from Kierkegaard, we would do well to take to heart a scriptural admonition which he stressed: "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves."⁵⁰ The upshot of *Either/Or* is to disclaim the ultimate importance of any truth which is not personally upbuilding, and to call for an absolute ethic of selfless love. It is in this sense that Kierkegaard would affirm the dichotomy "all or nothing." Not only does Kierkegaard hold out the possibility of communication between divergent world views, he calls for its use in a specific cause. Thus if we borrow some tools from Kierkegaard, it is morally incumbent on us to use them in his spirit.

From the point of view of one seeking examples of "either/ors" at which to point a finger it might seem a misfortune that the most recent world-historical "either/or" (capitalism/communism) has disintegrated of its own weight. Yet this fact may serve to point all the more ironically at the seriousness with which the various sides maintain their positions in the welter of petty conflicts which have arisen in its stead. To find an absolutely dichotomistic rhetoric of "either/or" at work in the world today we need look no further than the positions of the sides in any of these conflicts. Any permanent resolution of such crises requires this dichotomy to be overcome. Conventional cultural-linguistic relativism cannot serve this purpose, since (while recognizing the existence of two or more agendas, each with its rhetoric of "either/or") it would maintain a central dichotomy between world views while removing any pretense at a potential for dialogue.

Kierkegaard's deconstruction of "either/or" suggests a method for the deconstruction of "lines drawn in the sand." The theoretical requirement is to find common interest, at some level of concentricity, between the two sides. The practical requirement is to find a way of expressing this common interest which will be comprehensible to all concerned.

At the time of the Gulf war, both these requirements were addressed by the Fellowship of Reconciliation, which sent Americans to Iraq during the heat of the hostage crisis as a "witness for peace." One of the strengths of this witness was that it was aimed as much at American preconceptions as at Iraqi ones. It was an attempt to short-circuit the dichotomistic rhetoric of "either/or" expressed in the official pronouncements of both sides by showing at the grass-roots level that common concerns are more important.

Such a project of reconciliation runs against the grain of human life. Each of us has a temporal center which is deeply rooted. The very desire to communicate with those who are centered elsewhere requires a tenacious humility which insists on seeking common ground whatever the dichotomies involved. The nurture of such a humility is part of the edification to be gleaned from the thought that "as against God we are always in the wrong."

NOTES

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1987), I:14.
2. See for instance Henning Fenger, *Kierkegaard, the Myths and Their Origins*, trans. George C. Schoolfield (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1980).
3. *Either/Or* I:3.
4. *Either/Or* I:38-9.
5. *Either/Or* I:39.
6. *Either/Or* I:99.
7. *Either/Or* I:311.
8. Søren Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 249.
9. *Either/Or* II:169.
10. *Either/Or* II:178.
11. *Either/Or* II:178.
12. *Either/Or* II:167.
13. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 199.
14. *Either/Or* II:213.
- 15.

- Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 14.
16. *Either/Or* II:214.
 17. *Either/Or* II:213.
 18. *Sickness Unto Death* 67.
 19. *Either/Or* II:261.
 20. *Either/Or* II:216.
 21. *Either/Or* II:338.
 22. *Either/Or* II:254-56.
 23. *Either/Or* II:344.
 24. *Either/Or* II:167.
 25. *Either/Or* II:265.
 26. *Either/Or* II:346.
 27. *Either/Or* II:351.
 28. *Either/Or* I:29.
 29. Søren Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 264-89.
 30. *Upbuilding Discourses* 266.
 31. *Upbuilding Discourses* 267.
 32. See Robert Perkins, "Either/Or/Or: Giving the Parson his Due," in *Either/Or, II* (International Kierkegaard Commentary, 4; Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1995), pp. 207-31. Perkins comments that this could well have been the name of the book, except for "persuasive literary reasons."
 33. *Either/Or* II:31, II:47.
 34. *Either/Or* II:57.
 35. C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard's "Fragments" and "Postscript"* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1983), pp. 82-84.
 36. *Either/Or* I:74.
 37. Charles L. Cregan, [*Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard*](#) (London: Routledge, 1989).
 38. Peter Winch, "Understanding a Primitive Society," in *Rationality*, ed. Bryan R. Wilson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979), pp. 107-11.
 - 39.

- S. Stephen Hilmy, *The Later Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), pp. 179-89.
40. *Postscript* 501-502.
 41. *Either/Or* II:262.
 42. Evans 198.
 43. Evans 44-45.
 44. Evans 141.
 45. *Postscript* 387.
 46. Evans 144-47.
 47. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, trans. Walter Lowrie (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1962), p. 6.
 48. *The Point of View* 25.
 49. *The Point of View* 27.
 50. James 1:22 (Revised Standard Version).