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Either Kierkegaard/Or Nietzsche: Moral Philosophy in a New Key

By Tom P.S. Angier

(Intersections: Continental and Analytic Philosophy), Aldershot:
Ashgate, 2006; xi + 159 pp.; hb. £ 40.00; ISBN: 0-7546-5474-5.

[1] For two thinkers so commonly mentioned in the same breath, it is surprising that there have been so few full-length studies comparing Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. In this book, Tom Angier brings into dialogue the two figures who are, he controversially claims, 'the most significant moral philosophers of the nineteenth century' (p. 1). But there is no doubt in whose corner Angier is holding the towel: the book sets out to support his contention that 'Kierkegaard both anticipated, and subjected to detailed critique, Nietzsche's central arguments and views in moral philosophy' (p. 1).

[2] Angier's discussion is divided into two parts, consisting of three and two chapters respectively. Chapter 1 investigates the Nietzschean 'sovereign individual', whose most explicit appearance is at the start of the second essay of *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Based on the idea that the sovereign individual is akin to a Kierkegaardian aesthete, chapter 2 explores Kierkegaardian arguments for the superiority of the ethical life to the aesthetic life in *Either/Or*. Chapter 3, primarily through a reading of *Fear and Trembling*, shows why Kierkegaard sees the need to go beyond the ethical life to the religious. By this point, Angier thinks he has justified the conclusion that Kierkegaard's position is 'sufficiently well-founded to overcome its main rival within the history of philosophy ... Nietzschean sovereign individuality' (p. 66). In part two, he offers two 'case studies': on truth (chapter 4) – on which topic Kierkegaard is again claimed to trump Nietzsche – and communication (chapter 5), in which contemporary work on narrative is used both to offer an interesting twist on a tradition of reading *Fear and Trembling*, and to argue – once again – for the superiority of a Kierkegaardian position to that of Nietzsche. A brief conclusion discusses equality and power in the two thinkers.

[3] Rather than give the prominence that the secondary literature often gives to the rather shadowy notion of the *Übermensch*, it is a promising aspect of Angier's reading of Nietzsche that he treats the 'sovereign individual' as Nietzsche's ideal. Introducing the 'hyper-existentialist' interpretation of this (in which the individual is presented as creating out of nothing, apart from any culture or history, his own table of values) and a rival 'biologistic' interpretation (in which Nietzsche's fatalism is stressed, and where, as Brian Leiter puts it, each person has

a 'fixed psycho-physical constitution' (p. 15)), Angier argues, following Paul Valadier and Simon May, for a synthesis of the two. The biologicistic reading, he argues, downplays Nietzsche's emphasis on creativity, but the hyper-existentialist view requires us to make sense of purely private values, and it seems impossible to see how any values thus created could possibly have any authority. The Valadier/May interpretation sees creative originality as self-formation and self-fashioning that takes place *within* a socialised context, and so does not require the sovereign individual to create entirely unrecognisable new values *ex nihilo*. However, in one of the most important sections of the book, Angier argues that even this maximally coherent picture of Nietzschean sovereign individuality is anticipated and effectively criticised by Kierkegaard's pseudonym Anti-Climacus, in his attack on the 'despair of defiance' in *The Sickness Unto Death*. The gist of this criticism is that the defiant self, like the Nietzschean sovereign individual, recognises no power over itself: despite its having 'perseverance and endurance' (p. 22) as central virtues, this means it can ultimately conjure up only the *appearance* of seriousness. It is thus not a genuine, but a merely 'hypothetical', self.

^[4] How so? To support Kierkegaard on this Angier, like other Kierkegaard commentators such as John Davenport, draws on Harry Frankfurt's work on volitional ambivalence and wholeheartedness. Frankfurt claims that, in the absence of categorical demands upon the will, it is 'insufficiently formed' (p. 23). If the will is free to pursue a profusion of projects and break its own rules, the likely result is the volitional disunity Frankfurt calls 'ambivalence': the inability to 'sett[le] upon . . . any coherent affective or motivational identity' (p. 22). Binding constraints are necessary to overcome ambivalence and attain 'wholeheartedness': the condition of having a set of internally consistent volitional characteristics. If this is right, then the sovereign individual cannot be wholehearted in Frankfurt's sense. For if, as Nietzsche claims, our tests are 'taken before ourselves and before no other judge' (*Beyond Good and Evil*, sect. 241) how, if I am my own examiner, can I be sure that I won't let myself cheat?

^[5] Chapter 2 offers a defence of the kind of self-choice characteristic of the Kierkegaardian ethical life against MacIntyre's by now infamous objection that this choice is 'criterionless'. Angier argues for a quite familiar thesis: that the aesthetic life lacks the possibility of genuine choice as the aesthetic self lacks the unity necessary for such choice (hence 'aesthetic choice is no choice', as Judge William puts it). This is in part because of what Angier calls the aesthete's 'presentism': his unstable goals and 'unwillingness to abide by a constant set of values over time' makes him 'over-vulnerable to being swayed by present stimuli' (p. 38). Angier somewhat confuses matters here by apparently taking the author of the *Seducer's Diary*, whom he calls 'Johannes the aesthete' (p. 38), as his default instance of the aesthetic life (rather than the unnamed young man A, the author of most of the papers in *Either/Or* volume I, and who is the more usual referent of the term 'Kierkegaard's aesthete'). It is an interesting question as to whether the aesthetic life in general can legitimately be rejected on the basis of condemning A. (That it can seems to be a common assumption in Kierkegaard scholarship, but exactly what makes this legitimate is often not explained.) What

is certainly controversial is to suppose that the aesthetic life in general can be rejected on the basis of condemning the Seducer, given that the latter is a more extreme case than A. In general, though, Angier follows in the tradition of arguing that self-development requires commitment to 'life-tasks', which the aesthete's 'presentism' rules out, and that aestheticism is irrational insofar as the ethical better delivers what the aesthete really wants.

^[6] What of Nietzsche? As noted, Angier claims that Nietzsche's sovereign individual is a kind of Kierkegaardian aesthete. As well as the Frankfortian claim that without moral absolutes the self lacks volitional constraints, Angier also notes Nietzsche's praise of 'forgetfulness' and criticism of 'constancy'. But the real problem, he argues, lies in the metaphysics of the Nietzschean self, with its emphasis on multiplicity: the view of the self as an 'arena of competing forces' (p. 43). Angier claims that Nietzsche's criticism of 'a unitary self and a unitary will is reinforced throughout his work' (p. 43). While he amasses numerous quotes in support of this claim, there are – as so often with Nietzsche – others that point in a different direction. For example, what of the following, from 'On Redemption' in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*: 'this is all my creating and striving, that I create and carry together into One what is fragment and riddle and dreadful accident'? This suggests that Nietzsche does have an idea of unity, involving the imposition of order on chaos, and that this is a vital component of what he calls 'giving style' to one's character: 'a great and rare art! It is practised by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye ... In the end, when the work is finished, it becomes evident how the constraint of a single taste governed and formed everything large and small. Whether this taste was good or bad is less important than one might suppose, if only it was a single taste!' (*The Gay Science*, sect. 290)

^[7] So perhaps the problem is not the lack of a concern for unity, but – as the end of this quote suggests – the problems inherent in the sovereign individual's apparent amorality. Angier is on stronger ground, I think, when he asks whether one could trust such a character, and if so, on what basis. The aesthete's position makes him unworthy of trust, and thus likely to be 'a continual fugitive from the social world' (p. 46). Nietzsche's overall admiration for the virtues of stoicism is, Angier argues, a tacit recognition of a similarity between the Nietzschean and the aesthetic self (p. 47): the Nietzschean self will be, like A according to Judge William, 'a stranger in the world'.

^[8] In chapter 3, Angier turns to Kierkegaardian reasons to prefer the religious to the ethical stage of life through a discussion of *Fear and Trembling*. That text's focus on how Abraham stands as the 'single individual higher than the [ethical understood as the] universal'; 'great through an act of purely personal virtue' (cited p. 53) seems uncomfortably close to the hyper-existentialist view of the sovereign individual. Why then, Angier asks, isn't the ethics of *Fear and Trembling* a 'non-ethics of arbitrary wilfulness' (p. 53)? Again, the answer he gives belongs to a recognisable tradition of Kierkegaard interpretation, but with an interesting twist that is not fully revealed until chapter 5.

[9] Taking seriously the idea that the text is an instance of indirect communication, Angier sees the pseudonymous author Johannes de Silentio as unable fully to understand that which he describes. As numerous other interpreters have noted, a hint to this effect is given by the book's motto, which concerns a messenger who does not understand his own message. The book is about sacrifice – Abraham's willingness to resign that which he loves most, while yet receiving it back with joy – and Angier treats this as prefiguring the specifically Christian story of the atonement. An ethics of *Sittlichkeit*, privileging married love and family life – compare here Judge William's valorisation of marriage in his first letter in *Either/Or* – is a threat to the radical demands of Christian ethics. Angier suggests that family life encourages self-indulgence and self-deception ('I'd love to sell everything I have and give to the poor, but unfortunately I have a wife and kids to support'). This 'preferential' love contrasts with the non-preferential *agape* Kierkegaard valorises as fundamental to Christian ethics in *Works of Love*. (We should note here, however, that much recent work on *Works of Love* has stressed that in that text Kierkegaard does *not* reject preferential love out of hand.) On Angier's interpretation, Kierkegaard is arguing for the idea that the true fulfilment of the individual can come through a life of self-sacrifice, and moreover that Christianity provides the 'best rational alternative' to 'the ethics of family love and . . . "ordinary life"' (p. 59) on the grounds that the greatest vocation is Christ's life of absolute self-sacrifice.

[10] Angier treats Nietzsche's rejection of Christianity's ideal of self-sacrifice as a rejection of the idea that the welfare of the mass of humanity is of great value. Certainly, this elitist Nietzsche is a familiar enough figure, but it is worth noting that here as elsewhere Nietzsche hardly speaks with only one voice: James Conant has argued, in an interesting essay, for a decidedly non-elitist Nietzsche on the basis of a reading of 'Schopenhauer as Educator'.¹ While Angier notes that Nietzsche does not reject self-sacrifice *per se* – consider his repeated emphasis on self-overcoming – he claims that Nietzschean self-sacrifice 'is fundamentally instrumental to self-aggrandisement' (p. 61); my self-sacrifices are only in the interests of the work that my self does on and for itself. Ditto Nietzsche's treatment of neighbour-love which, being commended only in the interests of self-love, is hardly neighbour love at all. Nietzsche's is a 'fundamentally self-regarding ethic' (p. 62). His focus on supreme self-sufficiency and self-government means that the sovereign individual's world-view is in tension with the 'virtues of acknowledged dependence' (p. 63) that Alasdair MacIntyre, for instance, discusses in *Dependent Rational Animals*. Moreover, it raises a serious doubt as to whether there could be any such thing as a Nietzschean society.

[11] As to the twist in chapter 5, in a discussion of the significance of Abraham's silence, Angier mounts an interesting argument based on the work of such figures as MacIntyre and Hauerwas on narrative. MacIntyre's point that the

1. James Conant, 'Nietzsche's Perfectionism: A Reading of "Schopenhauer as Educator"' in Richard Schacht (ed.), *Nietzsche's Postmoralism: Essays on Nietzsche's prelude to Philosophy's Future* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

notion of an intelligible action is more basic than an action, and that actions become intelligible by finding their place in a narrative, is here put to work to explain why Johannes de Silentio is unable to understand Abraham with respect to the Akedah. On Angier's story, Johannes dooms to failure his attempt to understand Abraham because he repeats the error of modern moral theory according to MacIntyre: aiming to understand Abraham as a self with no history. That is, because he aims to understand the events of Genesis 22 without understanding their relation to the earlier chapters thereof, it is entirely unsurprising that Johannes finds Abraham's actions incomprehensible.

[12] I am sympathetic both to Angier's claim about the significance of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, and, ultimately, to his Kierkegaardian preferences. However, his interpretation of Nietzsche, while not exactly setting up a straw man, does sometimes fail to apply the principle of hermeneutical charity. Consider some examples.

[13] On the idea of the tests being taken before oneself alone, we should note that some Nietzsche commentators have seen him as not being committed to such a radically 'private' view at all. In describing the sovereign individual at the start of chapter 1, Angier curiously overlooks one crucial aspect of Nietzsche's discussion of that figure: the claim that the sovereign individual is the 'animal which has the right to make a promise' (GM II 2). Nietzsche describes him as viewing responsibility as an 'extraordinary privilege' (ibid.) (rather than as merely a burden), and that this becomes his 'dominant instinct'; an instinct that he calls his 'conscience' (ibid.) Once we are reminded of this, it becomes easy to see why some have considered integrity to be a central Nietzschean virtue and why David Owen, for example, has argued that for Nietzsche integrity serves as 'the exhibition of self-mastery since one's capacity to keep one's promises to oneself is dependent on one's mastery of oneself'.² Furthermore, these promises are not only to oneself. In contrast to the picture Angier paints, in which the sovereign individual is a law unto himself in a radical (and implausible) way, Owen suggests that Nietzschean self-mastery must be exhibited '*publicly* by acting in accordance with the commitments one espouses'.³ (Perhaps this is one implication of the socialisation thesis Angier adopts from May.) This is supported by the text: the sovereign individual, Nietzsche claims, 'gives his word as something which can be relied on' (*Genealogy of Morals* II 2), and is explicitly contrasted with 'the febrile whippets who make a promise when they have no right to do so' (ibid.). Contrast this with Angier's allegations of the sovereign individual's untrustworthiness. If the sovereign individual were really the creature of ultimate whim that Angier is worried about – 'absolutely freed from the norms that inform the social order' (p. 11) – it is hard to see why Nietzsche would stress the importance of promise-keeping, reliability and responsibility to the extent that he does. This seems a significant weakness in Angier's account.

[14] A more speculative suggestion arises from asking the question of exactly

2. David Owen, *Nietzsche, Politics and Modernity* (London: Sage, 1995), p. 117.

3. Ibid., p. 118.

what role the sovereign individual is supposed to play in Nietzsche's thought. It is important to note that Nietzsche describes him as 'the ripest fruit' (*Genealogy* II 2). Some commentators, such as Aaron Ridley, have taken this to mean that the sovereign individual, far from being anything ever achieved, is 'a rather misty, if beautiful, kind of hope for man's future . . . the vaguest prophecy'.⁴ This opens up the possibility that the sovereign individual is a goal for which we should strive without ever being able to reach.

[15] The idea of there being great value in striving for standards we nevertheless cannot hope fully to reach, in turn, suggests echoes of Kierkegaard's view of Christ as the Pattern for a human life. This connects with the questions that arise from chapter 3 above. First, Nietzsche would surely want to ask, what would count as non question-begging evidence in favour of the claim that a life of self-sacrifice was the most valuable kind of life? And second, even to those of us who do not share Nietzsche's *animus* to Christianity; who stand within the Christian tradition, there are still major questions about the role of self-sacrifice in what it means to 'follow Christ'. The second love commandment, Kierkegaard points out in *Works of Love*, maintains room for an appropriate, non-selfish form of self-love: am I perhaps called, therefore, to something less than *absolute* self-sacrifice? Even if it is true, as Angier suggests, that fulfilment can come through self-sacrifice, does it follow from this that maximal fulfilment comes through maximal self-sacrifice?

[16] I have a similar hesitation about Angier's charge that the sovereign individual, like the defiant self, is unwilling to acknowledge its dependence on others. It cannot be denied that there are passages in Nietzsche that support this, but on this as on so many other matters, he speaks with more than one voice. In both personal correspondence and the often overlooked writings of Nietzsche's middle period, for instance, numerous remarks on the importance of friendship paint a rather different picture from the excessively self-sufficient picture Angier paints of Nietzsche's ideal. Some examples: 'Think what life would be like without a friend. Could one, would one, have borne it? *Dubito*.'⁵ In stark contrast to the much better known critique of pity in the *Genealogy*, he also talks about how when we discover someone we admire is suffering, we may grow '*tenderer* . . . the gulf between us and him seems to be bridged, an approximation to identity seems to occur. Only now do we conceive it possible that we might give back to him. . . .' (*Daybreak*, sect. 138). There is no hint that these remarks are only about 'weak' individuals.

[17] Similarly, in following commentators such as Owen and Ridley who have stressed Nietzsche's relation to the Kantian tradition of maturity as self-government, one might claim that an element of self-reliance and self-mastery is essential before one can be in the position to 'come good' on any other-regarding ethic: before, that is, one can be 'an animal with the right to make a promise'.

4. Aaron Ridley, *Nietzsche's Conscience* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 146.

5. Oscar Levy (ed.), *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche* (New York: Doubleday Page, 1921), p. 97.

(Kierkegaard himself hints at something similar when he suggests that loving oneself in the right way and loving the neighbour ‘fundamentally . . . are one and the same thing’.⁶)

[18] With respect to Kierkegaard, I think Angier is insufficiently critical of the Frankfurtian emphasis on volitional unity and wholeheartedness. I believe that Frankfurt and his Kierkegaardian followers, implicitly or explicitly, exaggerate the extent to which we may predict and order our lives. As Philip Quinn has suggested, a focus on unity also brings with it the related danger that faced with a potentially life-changing decision, we might opt for the line of minimising risk and thus, in Cora Diamond’s phrase, ‘miss the adventure’ in life. I do not have space to go into this in detail here, but the overall thought is that the focus on wholeheartedness, unity and psychic harmony is exaggerated in importance; that life may be less a matter of volitionally well-ordered plans, and more a matter of creatively and skilfully managing the tensions that inevitably arise from the conflict between the plural goods we welcome into our lives.⁷ If this is right, Angier’s claim that the *telos* of the defiant self/sovereign individual is opaque, that (as Anti-Climacus puts it) his life-project is ‘in the final instance a riddle’ (p. 25) may in fact be a feature of most of our lives, whatever carefully edited and possibly self-deceived stories we may tell of them.⁸

[19] Though Angier’s use of recent work on narrative contributes to an interesting reading of *Fear and Trembling*, other questions arise. As so often with philosophical uses of the term ‘narrative’, one wishes for greater precision in exactly what the term signifies. I have considerable sympathy with the judgment that Nietzsche’s use of historical exemplars such as Napoleon tends to embed them insufficiently in the wider narratives – such as the French Revolution- of which they are part, having made a similar argument myself with respect to Nietzsche’s use of ‘types’ rather than genuine exemplars. But I do not think we need to accept Angier’s suggestion that sovereign individuals are likely to be unable to communicate successfully with other sovereign individuals, to say nothing of the ‘herd’ (p. 126). Again, Conant’s reading of ‘Schopenhauer as Educator’ opens up a possibility that Angier does not consider: what if that communication takes the form of exemplarity, as Nietzsche understands it in that text?

[20] Finally, a curious question arises as to the place of this book in the series of which it is a part. The expressed overall aim of Ashgate’s ‘Intersections: Continental and Analytic Philosophy’ series is to hasten the demise of the traditional analytic-continental divide. Yet in his somewhat contentious ‘Recommended Reading’ section, Angier seems quite clear in his own mind what it means for a study to be ‘analytic’, and of the value of such approaches to his two figures;

6. Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, ed. and trans. H. V. and E. H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 22.

7. See Philip Quinn, ‘Unity and Disunity, Harmony and Discord: a Response to Davenport and Lillegard’, in John J. Davenport and Anthony Rudd (eds), *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre* (Chicago: Open Court, 2001), pp. 327–337.

8. For more on this, see my ‘Getting the Story Straight: Kierkegaard, MacIntyre and Some Problems with Narrative’, in *Inquiry* vol. 50-1 (2007), pp. 34–69.

he also uses the term 'continental philosophy' quite uncritically (p. 147). Yet the criteria Angier is using for a study to count as 'analytic' remain unclear: I suspect it might surprise the Kierkegaard scholar Edward Mooney, for example, to find his work straightforwardly described as 'analytic'.

^[21] Despite the above criticisms and queries, this is a worthwhile and interesting study. Reading Nietzsche and Kierkegaard as partners in critical dialogue is a philosophically very rewarding exercise, and whatever criticisms one might have, Angier is to be commended for his contribution to a fascinating debate which others will hopefully take further.