

## **A few words about Kierkegaard and the Kierkegaardian method:**

Kierkegaard was Danish, 19th century Christian thinker who was very influential on 20th century Christian theology. His views—both theological and philosophical—were complex and highly idiosyncratic for their time. The selections we will be reading for this course I have chosen merely to give a flavor and somewhat of an overview of Kierkegaard's works. To embark on a full understanding of Kierkegaard's philosophical views and methodology would require multiple courses. Nevertheless, the pieces we will read provide a nice introduction.

You may notice as we progress through some of the ideas of Kierkegaard that Kierkegaardian themes will emerge in retrospect in the works from the first unit. Perhaps this is not so surprising; Kierkegaard is often labeled *the father of existentialism*.

Below are some bits of information to assist in your understanding of the Kierkegaard selections you are reading.

### **Spheres of existence**

Kierkegaard believed that purpose of human existence is to cultivate and actualize *the self*. To be a true self, according to Kierkegaard, is no easy task. To be a person, he believed, meant that you had to wrestle with very fundamental existential questions about the kind of values you are going to commit to, the kind of life you want to live, and the kind of person you want to be. In short, one must self-consciously choose to commit to a certain way of life. Choosing, i.e. actively willing, is what drives the soul toward realization. To be a self, however, requires making very specific commitments to live one's life in a particular way. Thus, the concept of being a self for Kierkegaard is not a passive understanding of a concept, but an activity, the direct action of the will.

The process one undergoes in willing the soul to self realization occurs by willing oneself to 'leap' into higher and higher spheres of existence. A metaphoric way to look at it is to think of the soul as a center-point surrounded by three concentric spheres. The spheres are sort of like developmental stages that the soul needs to undergo in order to authenticate itself. The driving force of the soul on this journey of actualization is, again, the will.

Kierkegaard posited that there were three basic spheres (or stages) of existence: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious.

The **aesthetic sphere** of existence is marked by a ceaseless need for immediacy. What is most important to the aesthete is to be poised for immediate pleasure/stimulation. The only kind of true love, according to the aesthete is the immediate pangs of romantic love. But not for the sake of love itself, the aesthete's focus is on personal satisfaction. Ironically however, there is despair involved in constantly seeking new pleasures. The will will's this onto itself with hopelessness, as the mark of immediate pleasure is that it is fleeting, and impermanent. Thus, the aesthetic can never rest. He must always seek out more. This causes the aesthete to participate in the act of recollection. Recollecting a previous episode of pleasure, the aesthete attempts to feel the excitement again. But again, ironically, because the fact that the experience is recollected and not actual is a source of despair. It is not only personal suffering that is caused by the aesthete. There is also the suffering of those whom he loves. Since the quintessential feeling of love can only be found in the instant of falling in love, the aesthete must be constantly falling in love, and causing others to fall in love with him. **But with no commitment.** Once having fallen in love, the aesthete grows restless and moves on to the next.

It is the pain of this process which inspires the aesthetic to write poetry (or some other aesthetic expression). The poetry is beautiful lyrical recollection of pleasure, and also of the pain of its impermanence: made possible only by the poet's suffering.

The **ethical sphere** of existence is marked by duty, a duty to ethical principles. Rather than doing things for one's own sake like the aesthetic, the ethical person moves away from this and realizes that she must commit to a set of universal, abstract ethical principles. Something is done for the sake of what is right, and left undone to the extent that it is wrong. The ethical person wills this commitment and acts in accordance with her moral obligations even to her own displeasure. (The focus is not on pleasure; it is on doing the Good). The ethical person realizes that recollection is backward-looking, and in willing himself into the ethical, looks forward instead. Kierkegaard claims that the forward-lookingness of the ethical person is represented by the theme of *repetition*. Instead of recollecting the past, the ethical person looks toward the future, repeatedly reinforcing past commitments.

About the theme of repetition, D. Anthony Storm writes

The idea of repetition is influenced by two Greek theories. The first is that of motion, actually, the impossibility of motion, which the Eleatics, notably Zeno and Parmenides, affirmed. It was asserted that motion is impossible, because if a man wants to go from point

A to point B, he must first traverse a midway point—call it X—to get there. However, he cannot get to X unless he first gets to a midway point between A and X, and so forth. This reason is applied ad infinitum. Therefore motion is impossible, an illusion. Kierkegaard reminds us that one Greek sought to refute this merely by pacing back and forth without uttering a word.

The second Greek concept is Plato's idea of recollection, which has to do with knowledge acquisition. In the Phaedo we find Socrates discoursing on the acquisition of knowledge as a recollection of things from a previous incarnation. Ostensibly, this idea is put forth by Socrates as a way to comfort his friends. That is, if a man can learn anything he must have already known something about what he is going to learn or he would not be equipped to learn anything. And if he has known something without having been taught it (in this life), he must have learned it before his birth. And if the soul existed prior to birth it stands to reason that it survives death, and thus his friends have no cause for grief. This innate and prior knowledge is triggered into consciousness by sensory input. Plato is striving to work beyond a two-fold paradox. Namely, if a person does not know something, he cannot learn it since he knows nothing about it. If, on the other hand, he knows it, he does not need to learn it. Plato uses recollection to get beyond this problematical hurdle. This theory is also pursued in the Meno and the Philebus. (from the Website).

The repetitive motion of the ethical person is the reaching out and reaffirming her commitment to the universal. The end result of repetition is the realization of the religious sphere of existence.

The **religious sphere** of existence is marked by faith. The movement from the ethical to the religious sphere of existence, like before, is a direct action of the will. For the aesthetic, the will stood in relation to itself. For the ethical person, the will stood in relation to universal ethical principles. The religious person is like the aesthetic in that the self stands in relation to itself. The religious person is like the ethical person in that she is committed to the universal. The difference is that the act of willing this occurs consciously before, and in relation to, God. Thus the focus of the religious sphere is on one's relation to God. It is only when one leaps all the way into the religious sphere and does so while remaining consciously committed to remaining in that relation to God is one a true self. There is much to say about the religious sphere. Most of Kierkegaard's writings that he signed with his own name are on the subject.

Suffice it here to say that you can't ultimately provide reasons for adopting any one of these spheres over the others. Kierkegaard, in fact, thought that religious faith was more groundless than the other two (if that makes any sense) because it actually requires that people make a commitment that not only cannot be rationally justified, but that actually ran counter to reason. In short, Kierkegaard thought that rationally speaking faith was absurd. Christianity is the truth, but that truth is cloaked in paradox.

But no matter how we choose to live our lives, from Kierkegaard's perspective, a leap of faith of some kind or another is required.

### **The pseudonyms**

Kierkegaard wrote many works pseudonymously. Part of the reason for this was to distance himself from the opinions touted in these works. Sometimes this was because he did not want the public to confuse the views expressed therein as his own. Other times he did not want the public to know that the views were, in fact, his. Perhaps a more substantial reason for this method of writing is that Kierkegaard thought that this was the only way he could get his message across to his contemporaries. This is largely because he thought most of his contemporaries were deeply and fundamentally confused about all of the really important issues in human existence. Specifically, he thought people were confused about what it meant to exist as a human being, and what it meant to be religious (to have faith in God). Even more specifically, he thought people failed to recognize that life generally (and religious faith particularly) involve personal, passionate, individual choice and commitment.

Another way to view this method of writing is as an internal struggle—the personas representing conflicting aspects of Kierkegaard's own belief system. Kierkegaard wanted to share this, but share it in secrecy. Storm offers yet another reason. According to Kierkegaard's journals, Storm points out, Kierkegaard was employing a Socratic method. Just as Socrates spoke to others in many 'voices', and each of these voices represented a unique and defensible philosophical position, so too did Kierkegaard use his many pseudonymous personas to represent different philosophical positions.

The pseudonymous personas are at a level of understanding that overlaps the sphere of existence in which they dwell. While some of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous personas are clearly trapped in the lower spheres of existence, unwilling to leap to the next, Kierkegaard by no means placed himself at the pinnacle of selfhood – standing as an individual in a perfect dialectical relation to God. Rather, Kierkegaard also crafted pseudonyms to capture the perspectives of individuals that allegedly had it more figured out than he. How exactly one writes above one's own level of understanding is left a mystery to me. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard wrote from each the perspectives of individuals at all different points of development among the three spheres.

Moreover, these personas seem to come to life, interact and debate each other, even outright conflict with one another. This is all part of Kierkegaard's elaborate scheme to capture the reader at his/her own level of development, and through the course of proceeding through his corpus, come to understand the truth of Christianity, and the proper relation one must have to God to be a true self.

One last thing I wish to point out about the method of having multiple pseudonymous personas is that by writing in this way, Kierkegaard is no longer communicating *directly* with his readers. While nearly all of his works are written in a narrative form, the narrative is always from the perspective of the pseudonym's character. This functioned to get people to see the different types of existential choices one can make (and get to see them from the "inside," as it were). He also wanted people to come to grips with the consequences of these choices – for example, what does it mean, concretely to have faith in God? What effect does that have on my life? On my relationships with other people? On my view of myself? Etc.

This makes Kierkegaard's communication with his reader *indirect*. Since Kierkegaard does not come out and tell us directly what he thinks, his own voice tends to be heard obliquely and obscurely. In using this indirect method of communication, Kierkegaard is trying to get the reader to do a lot of work in figuring out what exactly he's trying to say on their own. Notice again the parallel to Socrates.

An entire summary of Kierkegaard's use of pseudonyms and how these personas exist and interact with each other would require book-length treatment. For more information, see D. Anthony Storm's Commentary Page via the link in the Kierkegaard folder. The most important thing to remember with respect to the pseudonyms is that each really is the voice of Kierkegaard, whether he denies his association with the pseudonyms or not. The pseudonyms were all along part of Kierkegaard's plan.

### **The Author(s)/Editors of *Either/Or***

*Either/Or* is itself a confusing tangle of pseudonyms in its own right. The introduction is written by a man calling himself Victor Eremita. He claims to be the editor of the volumes of *Either/Or*. The works themselves have at least two distinctly identifiable authors, whom Eremita dubs A and B, though he suggests there may be third. A claims only to be the editor of one section of the text, namely *the Seducer's Diary*. Eremita tosses around the idea that A may himself be the author of the diary, but the evidence is inconclusive. He seems eventually to accept A's disavowment of the credit for the diary. Again, each and every one of these personas is crafted by Kierkegaard, and he means to disassociate himself from all of them.

## **Victor Eremita**

Victor Eremita's name means 'victorious hermit'. He is the victorious hermit, because like a hermit he has isolated himself. His victory is weighed by the massive volume of work he has produced. Storm points out that "Kierkegaard, even while he was devoting many hours everyday to writing, would visit the theatre and mull about before and after the performance so that people might think he was an idle person. His foppish appearance contributed to this effect. He was the "victorious hermit" because he managed to fool many people with this scheme" (the website). Eremita, again, is the editor of the two volumes of *Either/Or*.

## **A**

Most (all?) of volume 1 is attributed to A. Eremita claims in the introduction that it is difficult to determine not only the order of A's works, but also to determine which he has authored and which he has edited. Of the works I have selected for this class, Eremita believes that A is the author. Another part of vol. 1 of *Either/Or*—a novel length narrative called *the Seducer's Diary* is believed to be edited by A and written by yet another of Kierkegaard's mysterious pseudonyms.

A symbolizes the aesthetic sphere. Prominent in the reading is A's obsession with immediacy and romantic love. A seems to think that love is only ideal when it is given up, and later recollected through poetry. This theme of submerging oneself in recollection is a mark of the aesthetic.

## **B, or Judge William**

Judge William is the author of volume 2 (the "Or" part) of *Either/Or*. Eremita, for the sake of symmetry, dubs William "B."

B symbolizes the ethical sphere. The symbolism is prevalent in his advocacy of marriage. Marriage, as opposed to the romantic love idealized by A is a forward-looking commitment.

This idea of a forward looking commitment is known as *repetition*. A's notion of love, on the other hand, is backward-looking. This backward-looking notion of love is captured by the aesthetic concept of *recollection* represented by A.