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Why Be Moral? A Kierkegaardian Approach

The present text focuses on what resources Kierkegaard offers for dealing with the question “Why be moral?” I sketch an approach to this question by presenting Kierkegaard’s methodology, his negative arguments against the aesthete and the motive he offers for being moral. I conclude that Kierkegaard does provide motivation for assessing ourselves in moral terms, although his approach is more relevant to deontological ethics and virtue ethics than consequentialism.

Introductory Remarks on Methodology and Subject Matter

The fact that the question “Why be moral?” has been discussed many times suggests that the question is meaningful (cf. Hare 2002a, p. 95), even if a fully moral agent will hardly contemplate the question seriously. The present paper focuses on the relevance of the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813 – 55) for discussing this question. When I refer to “historical” issues, I do so mainly in order better to understand and illuminate the points that Kierkegaard tries to make that are still relevant to us. Thus, I am not concerned with historical issues as such but use them to enrich contemporary discussions. The important point for this paper is whether Kierkegaard’s multifaceted ideas, or contemporary versions of them, can offer anything of interest to contemporary debates.¹ As a result, I have deliberately chosen to include Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous authorship, particularly those parts of it which feature the so-called aesthetes and the ethicist, even though some Kierkegaard scholars go as far as maintaining that the pseudonymous writings cannot be attributed to Kierkegaard (cf. Poole 1997). The important thing for present purposes is what these writings bring to

¹ My methodology will be what Gary Hatfield (2005, p. 91) has described as being “aware of the need for historical context to gain better access to past texts while still wanting to use those texts primarily as a source of raw material for solutions or answers to present philosophical problems”. Thus, this paper belongs, at least mainly, to what is often referred to (especially by the Bennett generation) as analytic philosophy of history. A consequence of this is that I seek to use contemporary terminology rather than working with Kierkegaard’s Danish and the Golden Age context (cf. Nadler 2005, p. 217). My main priority is to clarify Kierkegaard’s claims, and to give them a charitable interpretation, although I will also say something about their strengths and weaknesses.

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The Argumentative Structure of *Either/Or*

By *aesthete* I understand an amoralist or someone who lives premorally since he is not fundamentally committed to morality. In what follows, I will focus on Kierkegaard's reflective aesthete (rather than the immediate or pre-reflective aesthete), since the reflective aesthete represents and concretizes moral skepticism.² The reflective aesthete only allows ethical considerations insofar as these considerations are subordinated to other concerns (and not given overriding authority). The aesthete does rely on prudential considerations,³ but Kierkegaard sees these considerations as insufficient for morality proper since he works within the traditions of deontological ethics and virtue ethics (not utilitarianism).⁴ Put in Kantian terms, the aesthete gives priority to empirical (material) principles over moral (formal) principles. The aesthete is not ruled by moral incentives but by competing incentives and principles. Much like Kant, Kierkegaard describes these competing incentives in terms of sensuousness, self-love, self-interest, and happiness (Knappe 2004, pp. 54 f., 94–97). The aesthete, then, is someone who is ruled by sensuousness, so that rationality and reflection serve sensuousness rather than morality. This intimate connection between the aesthete and sensuousness can be partially explained by the fact that Kierkegaard

2 Examples of immediate aesthetes include Don Giovanni in *Either/Or, Part I* and infants who are not yet capable of distinguishing between themselves and the surroundings. See SKS 2, 55 ff.; EO1, 47 ff.; SKS 17, 117 (Journal BB:25). I make use of the following standard abbreviations when referencing Kierkegaard:

CUP1 = *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1992, vol. 1.

EO1 = *Either/Or, Part I*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1987.

EO2 = *Either/Or, Part II*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1990.

FT = *Fear and Trembling*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1983.

SKS = *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, vols. 1–28, Copenhagen: Gad 1997–2013.

SUD = *Sickness unto Death*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1983.

UD = *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2009.

WL = *Works of Love*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1998.

3 See particularly “Rotation of Crops: A Venture in a Theory of Social Prudence” in *Either/Or, Part I* (SKS 2, 271–289; EO1, 281–300).

4 See Davenport 2001b, p. 273. Regarding virtue ethics, see Roberts 1998 and Rudd 2005, pp. 78–80, 99–105. Regarding deontology, see Knappe 2004, Chs. 3–5; Lübbcke 1991, pp. 99f.

takes aesthetic in the original Greek sense of *aisthesis*, as perception from the senses, although he associates the aesthetic with sensation, sensibility, and sensuousness (cf. Furtak 2005, p. 54; SKS 3, 29f.; EO2, 21f.).

Kierkegaard's *ethicist*, by contrast, is already fundamentally committed towards morality. He is convinced that he, or anyone who is seriously interested, is capable of being moral, since moral action relies on our volition rather than on luck or external conditions outside our control (Lübcke 1991, pp. 99f.). *Either/Or* (and later pseudonymous works) can then be interpreted as a *dialogue* between various aesthetes (notably the pseudonym "A") and the ethicist (the pseudonym "Judge William" or "B" for short) that shed light on why we should be moral. Kierkegaard's pseudonymous writings develop the ethical position, or the ethical stage, by engaging in dialogue with other positions, notably the aesthetic stage. The different pseudonyms are used to describe different positions from within the first person perspective. It is just this dialogical approach that makes Kierkegaard's pseudonymous writings both interesting from a literary perspective and philosophically relevant for discussing the issue at hand. As Anthony Rudd has argued, *Either/Or* gives an extremely vivid literary portrayal of an amoralist instead of the colorless place-holder for a position of theoretical interest usually found in philosophical texts. Rudd elaborates:

Either/Or as a whole challenges us to compare the self-portrait of the aesthete in Volume [Part] 1, with the description of him that emerges from Judge William's letters [to him] in Volume [Part] 2, and consider whether the Judge's account enables us to gain a better understanding of [the aesthete] "A" as he had appeared in his own writings. Within the work itself, the Judge challenges "A" to consider whether the ethical perspective will enable him to articulate more adequately what he already feels about his own life. (Rudd 2001, pp. 144f.)

The ethicist Judge William is not just portraying the aesthetic and ethical forms of life but he argues against the aesthete.⁵ The ethicist's first letter to A is called "The Esthetic Validity of Marriage" and his second letter is called "The Balance between the Esthetic and the Ethical in the Development of the Personality" (SKS 3, 13–151, 153–314; EO2, 3–154, 155–334). These two letters focus on the central importance of *love*, *selfhood*, and *freedom* not only for the aesthetic stage but also for the ethical stage. The ethicist argues that it is in the aesthete's true interest to become an ethicist, since the central notions of love, selfhood, and free-

⁵ I agree with Rudd (2012, p. 70) who says "I do think that Kierkegaard means to endorse Judge William's critique of the aesthetic stance, though he doesn't want to endorse all the Judge's positive views."

dom are better preserved ethically than aesthetically. Roughly, the idea is that without ethical commitment, love is episodic, lacking continuity and importance, while selfhood is unbalanced and freedom is negative, empty, and arbitrary.

For present purposes I will focus on the dialogue between the ethicist and aesthete, abstracting largely from the religious perspective that is also developed in Kierkegaard's authorship (including "Ultimatum" in *Either/Or, Part II*). Thus I will focus on what is traditionally referred to as the aesthetic and ethical stages, rather than the religious stage.⁶ For the sake of argument this paper will accept the central point that mere prudence is insufficient for morality proper, since virtue and what is morally right cannot be reduced to a question of what brings happiness or well-being.⁷ Kierkegaard even goes beyond this point by criticizing eudaimonism, and implicitly virtue ethics, for relying too much on prudential considerations.⁸ By setting up the task in this way, that is, by disallowing arguments that are mainly prudential, utilitarian or even eudaimonistic, Kierkegaard makes it difficult to answer the question why we should be moral. This makes it even more interesting to see what, if anything, Kierkegaard can bring to the table.

Kierkegaard's intuition here might be sketched by saying that arguments which give us non-moral reasons or motives for being moral throw out the baby with the bath water, since we would then be moral for the wrong kind of reasons (something that would amount to legality instead of morality). Morality cannot be explained or justified in terms of anything more basic; it therefore needs to be (subjectively) recognized (Rudd 2012, p. 121).⁹ On the other hand,

6 Unlike the ethicist, the religious person does not accept that we are capable of being morally perfect, but holds instead that morality presupposes divine grace. However, the religious writings generally presuppose the validity of ethics, arguing that philosophical ("first") ethics leads way to Christian ("second") ethics. Thus, the religious writings take philosophical ethics for given, much like revealed (transcendent) religion builds on natural (immanent) religion. Cf. Fremstedal 2014.

7 Recent scholarship on virtue ethics has argued convincingly that moral virtue is valuable in itself, not merely as a means for reaching happiness. See Annas 1993, pp. 125–128, 225–227, 260–290; Horn 1998, pp. 202–213, 220–224; Hare 2001, pp. 78–84.

8 Like Kant, Kierkegaard relies on arguments against eudaimonism that appear to have more force against hedonistic and Epicurean eudaimonism than Stoicism or even Aristotelianism (cf. Annas 1993, pp. 128, 236 ff.).

9 Davenport (2001, pp. 79, 91) argues that Kierkegaard is a metaethical *internalist* in the sense that acting ethically means acting for the sake of the ethical, which means being motivated by the ethical rightness of the acts, rather than the goodness of their ends. Kierkegaard does not endorse the old saw of "the ends justify the means".

if we only give moral reasons or motives for being moral, then we stand in danger of begging the question, or so the aesthete might argue. Still, this does not necessarily prevent happiness or prudence from playing any role whatsoever; it only means that happiness and prudence must be a matter of secondary importance, while moral duty plays the primary role.¹⁰ This means, arguably, that Kierkegaard's general approach to the issue at hand and ethics in general, is largely post-Kantian.

The ethicist sees the ethical task as the human task, arguing that the existential choice of oneself is identical to the choice of the ethical. Unless this account is to be circular, we must assume that there is some non-moral content to the self that a person should become (Evans 2006, p. 97). We need therefore to distinguish between the moral form of the self and its material content. The idea is that the aesthetic elements of the self are not to be eradicated but given a moral form. More specifically, sensuousness should not be eliminated but merely subsumed under morality.

The ethicist develops a quite sophisticated response to the aesthete A in *Either/Or, Part II*. Instead of merely condemning the aesthete on moral grounds, something that may appear moralistic and unhelpful, the ethicist sketches an *internal critique*; on the one hand, the aesthetic stage fails on its own terms, and on the other it is preserved in the ethical stage (Evans 2009, pp. 90 ff.; Ferreira 2009, p. 22). This argument can be said to involve a Hegelian *Aufhebung* of the aesthetic stage, where the aesthetic is partially negated because it is self-defeating, and partially recontextualized or lifted up to the ethical. Thus, apart from an external (transcending) critique of the aesthete on ethical grounds, the ethicist sketches an internal (immanent) critique that involves negative arguments as well as correctives. The ethicist argues on both aesthetical and ethical grounds, something that is also suggested by the title "The Balance between the Esthetic and the Ethical in the Development of the Personality". One example of this dual strategy is the claim that love needs moral obligations in order to endure; another is that the ethicist gains aesthetically by disciplining his desires. In what follows, I will focus on the internal critique of the aesthetic since it involves an indirect, dialogical, and maieutic approach that seems more effective and persuasive than a straightforward condemnation of the aesthete on moral grounds.

¹⁰ In this respect, Kierkegaard's approach overlaps with that of Kant, particularly the synthesis of morality and happiness found in Kant's doctrine of the highest good. Cf. Fremstedal 2014, Chs. 4–6.

The Argument from Despair

It seems that Kierkegaard's relevance to discussion of the question "Why be moral?" is reflected in his general methodology as much as in the content of his works. Still, this methodology is tied to the content of Kierkegaard's thinking. Kierkegaard can be said to develop a *via negativa* approach to ethics that claims that we only understand the ethical through its failure, through guilt, sin, and despair (Grøn 1997, p. 227). In German and Danish scholarship, this methodology is currently referred to as being "negativistic".¹¹ The methodology denies that we first have the ethical and then only afterwards have the possibility of failure. Rather, the normative task of being ethical, or becoming oneself, presupposes the possibility of failure, so that being ethical represents a problem (Grøn 1997, pp. 227, 261f., 277). And the case of failure represents the rule rather than the exception insofar as ordinary human agents are concerned. In order to get a proper understanding of ethics, we therefore need to approach it indirectly by focusing on the aesthetic stage and how it can be said to involve despair. Kierkegaard's (Anti-Climacus') psychological analysis of despair can then be interpreted as disclosing ways in which one fails to be a moral agent, even though the ethical is inescapable.

In *Either/Or, Part II*, the ethicist develops a negative argument against the aesthete that I will refer to as the argument from despair. This argument tries to reduce the position of the aesthete *ad absurdum*. The absurdity, however, does not mainly take the form of a logical contradiction but rather involves a practical absurdity in the form of existential despair (and not merely something immoral). The central idea is that in order to avoid despair, one must transcend the aesthetic by choosing oneself, something that amounts to choosing the ethical. The ethicist thus offers a motive, rather than a proof, for transcending the aesthetic (Lübcke 1991, p. 97). This analysis of despair that is sketched in *Either/Or* is developed further in later works, notably *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, "Purity of Heart,"¹² and *Sickness unto Death*.

The ethicist argues that the aesthetic view involves despair, either explicitly or implicitly. The part of *Either/Or* that describes the aesthetic stage from within, namely *Part I*, gives several indications of despair, particularly in the chapter "The Unhappiest One" (SKS 2, 211–223; EO1, 217–230). It is more difficult, how-

¹¹ The main representatives are Michael Theunissen in Germany and Arne Grøn in Denmark. Cf. Theunissen 1991 and 1993; Grøn 1997.

¹² The text commonly referred to as "Purity of Heart" is Part One of *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* (SKS 8, 115–250; UD, 3–154).

ever, to show that the different aesthetic views all imply despair. If the ethicist is to succeed in this, he has to distinguish between conscious and non-conscious despair and between authentic and inauthentic despair, as is done later in *Sickness unto Death*. The point then is that the *aesthete* (given the definition above) *has to be in despair*, even if he is not conscious or aware of it himself. This is the central claim that I will focus on in the following.¹³ One relatively uncomplicated way to make sense of this claim is to say that despair is implicit in the aesthetic stage, and that it can be made explicit by reflecting upon it.

Despair is not a merely psychological concept that only refers to subjective experiences or a certain state of mind in which one lacks hope. In a way reminiscent of the concept of eudaimonia, which involves activity in accordance with virtue and (objective) well-being, despair involves objective, formal constraints that go beyond subjective experiences. In much the same way that it is possible to be unhappy even though one believes oneself to be happy, it is also possible to despair or lack hope (the expectancy of the good) without being conscious of it.¹⁴ Inauthentic despair arguably implies self-deception or bad faith or that one lives in a way that is unstable (residing in a bubble) without being aware of it.¹⁵

Michelle Kosch (2006a, p. 154) argues that despair consists in an unwillingness to accept human agency (or selfhood) with all its particular conditions. On this interpretation, despair involves holding a false conception of oneself, a conception that does not reflect human agency and its conditions adequately. This interpretation allows for inauthentic despair, because it is perfectly possible to have an inadequate conception of oneself without being aware of it. This line of interpretation makes it possible to explain, among other things, why despair involves self-deception and why despair consists in an act (in which one actively despairs) and not merely a psychological state. Despair is not just a result of suffering a loss, or experiencing hardship, but also something self-inflicted through guilt and sin (cf. Grøn 1997, pp. 143–153).

¹³ At this point I agree with Kosch and Rudd who have argued that there is a quite strong connection between the notion of despair in *Either/Or* and in later works such as *Sickness unto Death*. Kosch 2006a, pp. 142, 152ff.; Rudd 2012, pp. 40, 70.

¹⁴ Kierkegaard appears to rely on a traditional Judeo-Christian understanding of the generic features of hope. To hope is to expect good (rather than just wishing for it). The object of hope must be possible to realize, yet uncertain; otherwise there would neither be room nor need for hope. In addition, what we hope for must be difficult to attain since there is hardly any need for hope if our goals are easily attainable (see Fremstedal 2014, Ch. 9).

¹⁵ SKS 11, 158ff., cf. 136; SUD, 43ff., cf. 20; Grøn 1997, pp. 125–140, 166–169.

This means, however, that human agency has a certain structure, a structure Kierkegaard scholarship has described mainly in terms of selfhood. This structure has important ramifications for the question of why one should take oneself to be a moral agent, subject to ethical demands. On this reading, the aesthete fails because his basic attitude towards his own existence involves a misconstruction of the nature of agency (Kosch 2006a, p. 143). Thus, the very structure of human agency or selfhood connects it to moral agency so that even aesthetic agency presupposes moral standards.¹⁶

In his influential analysis of human selfhood, Kierkegaard argues compellingly that selfhood is characterized both by freedom and necessity, transcendence and immanence. Neither of these two elements can be done away with; we cannot just identify with our given character (as Schopenhauer thinks we can) or with our freedom (as Sartre tends to think). However, these two elements always stand in a tense relation to each other, and we therefore tend to exaggerate either freedom or necessity. Still, it is only by reconciling freedom and necessity that we can become selves and overcome despair (Rudd 2012, pp. 48f.).

Kosch (2006a, pp. 143, 149, 152f.) offers a reconstruction in which the aesthetic stage collapses by denying the very possibility of choice, thus committing the aesthete towards passivity and fatalism. On this reading, the aesthete sees his own identity or character as essentially given, with no room for changes or modifications. At this point, Kosch invokes the systematic analysis found in *Sickness unto Death*, particularly the analysis of the “despair of necessity” which consists of a lack of possibility or freedom.¹⁷ One clear problem with this interpretation is that it does not account for all the types of aesthetes Kierkegaard portrays. Although it shows that one attempt to escape the ethical fails, it does not preclude the possibility of other successful strategies.

One particularly important strategy that Kierkegaard devotes much attention to is the “despair of possibility” which consists of lacking necessity or limitations.¹⁸ This type of position collapses by over-emphasizing freedom and self-creation, not by denying it as the fatalist does. Instead of seeing limitations as

16 Similarly, Theunissen (1991 and 1993) argues that the very notion of selfhood contains demands or normative requirements, at least implicitly.

17 The very similar “*despair of finitude*” consists of a lack of infinity (transcendence). Both these types of despair consist of believing that one is not capable of transcending facticity, or that one is not capable of breaking with the past. See SKS 11, 153–157, 149–151; SUD, 37–42, 33–35.

18 The very similar “*despair of infinity*” consists of lacking finitude. Both these types of despair imply that one wants to create oneself, without ethical restrictions, in order to get rid of the constraints of the present situation. See SKS 11, 151–153, 146–148; SUD, 35–37, 30–33.

something that makes real freedom possible, limitations are seen as a mere hindrance to freedom. This type of despair absolutizes freedom, understood negatively as the freedom from limitations (facticity). However, the result is that freedom itself is abstract and empty, since it does not allow for positive freedom to realize anything concrete. Neither does it allow for criteria making it possible to choose between different possibilities or alternatives, which means that it ends up with arbitrariness (and whims) because all possibilities are equally valid and equally abstract and empty.¹⁹ This type of despair implies that one wants to create oneself, without ethical restrictions, in order to get rid of the constraints of the present situation. Kierkegaard argues that this implies not wanting to be the specific person one is, or not wanting to be positively free.²⁰ As a result the agent is double-minded or in despair, since he is split between necessity and possibility, immanence and transcendence. This makes sense if we keep in mind that one's possibilities only reside within the specific individual one is and in the particular situation one finds oneself in. And these possibilities are not morally neutral.

The ethicist argues that the solution to the problems posed by this type of despair lies in getting continuity or coherence in one's existence by appropriating necessity (facticity). He stresses that one's history is not solely a product of one's own free acts, but something closely related to the history of mankind as a whole (SKS 3, 171; EO2, 175). Hence, one's life can only have continuity if one sees that one stands in relation to other human beings, both the living and the dead (SKS 3, 239; EO2, 250f.). When one sees reality as something one has appropriated, one sees oneself and one's surroundings in a *historical* and *social* perspective. In this context the ethicist stresses that the self is socially mediated: “[T]he

¹⁹ Scandinavians (and Germans) sometimes use the expression “like gyldig og likegyldig” here, something that means that the options are equally valid *and* indifferent.

²⁰ Cf. Theunissen 1991, pp. 38–51; Grøn 1997, pp. 119–132, 182–189. Put in Kantian terms, we might say that the aesthete tries to absolutize the power of choice (*liberum arbitrium*; *Willkür*) and to do without pure practical reason (*Wille*). He thereby denies that negative freedom where one is free from alien causes involves positive freedom to be moral and autonomous. The ethicist, by contrast, has been taken by Kosch to endorse Kant's reciprocity thesis. The reciprocity thesis claims that negative freedom where one is free from alien causes involves positive freedom to be moral and autonomous, so that rational self-determination and transcendental freedom entail one another reciprocally. Following Schelling, Kosch argues, however, that this thesis is problematic: when freedom is understood as the capability for autonomy (self-determination), what is lost is freedom understood as the choice between good and evil. The result being, arguably, that moral evil is neither intelligible nor imputable. Thus interpreted, the reciprocity thesis implies that one is either moral or amoral. See Kosch 2006a, pp. 65–67, 87f., 121, 129, 151, 169–173, 179. See also Allison 1995, Chs. 7–8.

self that is the objective [...] is a concrete self in living interaction with these specific surroundings, the life conditions, this order of things. The self that is the objective is not only a personal self but a social, a civic [*borgerligt*] self.” (SKS 3, 250; EO2, 262) The upshot is that one cannot become a self, or synthesize possibility and necessity, without choosing the ethical (cf. SKS 3, 243 f., 249 f., 261; EO2, 255 f., 262 f., 274 f.). Kierkegaard’s view, then, is that without choosing the ethical one either lapses into an unbalanced stress on restrictions and givenness or an equally unbalanced stress on freedom and voluntarism (Rudd 2012, pp. 104, 70).²¹ This is also in line with the famous analysis of despair in *Sickness unto Death*, according to which inauthentic despair takes two basic forms, namely despair of necessity and despair of possibility, respectively (SKS 11, 145–157; SUD, 29–42).

Rudd’s Reconstruction of the Argument from Despair

Recently, Anthony Rudd has attempted to reconstruct the argument from despair, arguing that Judge William’s ethaical views are defensible and relevant to contemporary debates about morality.²² Rudd summarizes his reconstruction of Kierkegaard as follows:

1. One can only avoid the necessity of judging one’s life in moral terms by evading long-term commitments.
2. But to live such a life is to be in despair; for a life without commitments is one without purpose, and hence is one that makes it impossible to develop a coherent personal identity. (Rudd 2005, p. 69)

Rudd argues that a meaningful and fulfilled life requires a stable sense of self, something that

can only be achieved through commitment to social roles and relationships which carry with them objective standards of assessment. One must become a participant in communities and the traditions which define them, and must develop the virtues necessary for such participation. The failure to do this will render one’s life quite literally pointless. Without

²¹ See the previous page for a discussion of the despair of necessity (including references to Kosch 2006a).

²² Like Davenport (2012), Rudd (2012) is particularly concerned with the contemporary debate over whether non-moral caring involves implicit rational commitment to ethical values.

any unifying *telos*, one's life collapses into a series of disconnected moments, and to live in this way [...] is to live in despair. (Rudd 2001, p. 139)

On this Kierkegaardian view, personal identity or selfhood is not something simply given but rather something that must be achieved through purposive moral action which synthesizes freedom and necessity, transcendence and immanence.²³ Rudd follows Bernard Williams in arguing that ground projects give meaning to life and continuity to our characters.²⁴ Ground projects are necessary if we are to develop a coherent personal identity (Rudd 2005, pp. 92f.). The crucial idea, however, is that *any project significant enough to give life purpose and meaning involves social interaction, practices, and institutions*.²⁵ However, these social practices and institutions always come with standards of assessment that are not only intersubjective, non-instrumental, and non-arbitrary, but also

23 Cf. Rudd 2005, p. 84. Rudd (and Davenport) argues that both actions and personal identity involve a narrative structure. Actions that are intelligible are purposive, involving (at least ideally) a decision, an act, and the attainment of a goal (Rudd 2005, pp. 84f.). Personal identity on the other hand requires not just single actions but also projects consisting of a pattern of purposive action. And it is only when our actions and identity belong to a larger narrative that they are intelligible and meaningful (cf. Davenport 2012). Rudd and Davenport thus connect moral agency to the narrative ideal, something that is controversial. John Kekes (2013) has recently formulated a criticism of the narrative ideal (as put forward by Alasdair MacIntyre) that makes the case that narratives are not necessary for a meaningful life. However, Rudd (2012) and Davenport (2012) have both responded to various objections against the narrative ideal, including objections developed by Kekes in his earlier publications (see especially Davenport 2012, p. 197). For the present purposes it seems unnecessary, and perhaps unfeasible, to discuss the narrative ideal thoroughly. However, it could be mentioned that Kekes' criticism concerns meaning in life rather than why we should be moral and that Kekes targets MacIntyre rather than Rudd, Davenport, or Kierkegaard. Kekes (2013, p. 71) argues that only an elite would be able to live according to the narrative ideal, whereas Rudd seem to hold that purposive action and participation in moral practices suffices for basic meaning in life. Kekes (2013) sees narratives as contingent human constructions, something Rudd (2012) and Davenport (2012) seem to deny by connecting narratives to objective meaning and moral realism.

24 Rudd 2005, p. 86; Davenport 2001b, p. 290. At this point, Rudd (2012, pp. 44f.) also makes use of Frankfurt's notion of "final ends" that one cares about for their own sake.

25 Rudd 2005, p. 94; cf. Davenport 2001b, p. 290. Rudd uses MacIntyre's definition of practice here. A slightly different approach is represented by Hare (2001, pp. 42–46) who argues for the necessity of assuming that what other people evaluate as good to pursue is at least roughly consistent with what I evaluate as good to pursue, since many of the goods I am likely to pursue depend for their achievement on the cooperation of others.

moral. Thus, significant projects involve sustaining non-instrumental personal relationships that require recognition of authoritative moral norms and ideals.²⁶

A similar point is made by Rick Furtak (2005, p. 76) who argues that to “accept the roles of husband, judge, and friend (or mother, author, and confidante) is to accept certain beliefs about what is of value.” Social roles and relationships involve intersubjective standards of behavior that are not merely dependent on my will, emotions, or subjectivity. Without such moral standards of assessment, Rudd argues that I would lack something that makes it possible for me to assess whether significant actions and projects are better or worse (Rudd 2005, pp. 71 f. and 2012, p. 110). Rudd (2012, p. 91) proceeds by arguing that there are good reasons for endorsing Harry Frankfurt’s view that full selfhood requires a capacity for evaluation of my desires, dispositions, cares, and loves. However, this need for evaluation also involves an attempt to get things right (or get closer to being right); as evaluative beings, we cannot suppose that our evaluative judgments are incapable of being objectively correct or better (Rudd 2012, p. 95). We can only shape our identity as part of a rational process if we are able to make ourselves better or worse, judged by standards independent of our will. Rudd therefore concludes that “I have to ask, ‘Do *I* consider this, or that good?’ And this is why I think that the idea of *the Good* is unavoidable, if only as a regulative ideal. It is what my moral deliberation has to be constantly moving towards” (Rudd 2012, p. 141). Rational agency presupposes the possibility of rational examination of our higher-order cares and commitments in light of the idea of something that is objectively good (or at least better or worse). Without this possibility, the irrationality (or rather arationality) of our cares and commitments would cascade down the levels, and we would have no basis for thinking of ourselves as more than instrumentally rational agents.²⁷

²⁶ Rudd 2005, pp. 95, 115; Davenport 2001b, pp. 283, 297. Rudd 2001 prefers objective over intersubjective. Rudd (2012, Chs. 4–6) defends robust moral realism, and Davenport (2012, pp. 121 ff. and 2001b, p. 287) also defends moral realism and cognitivism.

²⁷ Rudd 2012, p. 112. Rudd (2012, p. 115) concludes that “Rawlsian liberalism collapses into Schlegelian (or Rortian?) ironism – the valuing, not of *rational* choice, but of choice itself. But it is hard to see how such ironism can avoid collapsing into full-blown nihilism; for why should we treat the sheer power of choice as valuable, if there is nothing else that is genuinely valuable that it enables us to choose.” Much like Rudd, Davenport (2001b, pp. 297–299) argues that moral standards provide a firm point outside of our first-order states that is much needed, since without such an objective basis, we have no stable ground for working upon ourselves; any attempt to better oneself will then be at the mercy of the contingencies of time. On this view, moral norms and ideals provide an *Anstoß* (in the Fichtean sense) by representing something radically different from subjective perspectives and first-order states (Davenport 2001b, pp. 297 f.).

Rudd's reconstruction of Judge William's argument for the ethical relies on moral virtues without the traditional idea of life having a final end (eudaimonia) that all human beings share.²⁸ Rudd argues that ground projects involve developing and exercising moral virtues.²⁹ He follows Peter Geach (a Thomist virtue ethicist) in arguing that "[w]e need prudence and practical wisdom for any large-scale planning [...], we need temperance in order not to be deflected from our long-term and large-scale goals by seeking short-term satisfactions. And we need courage in order to persevere in face of setbacks, weariness, difficulties and dangers."³⁰ The argument can be summarized as follows:

Whatever projects one undertakes, one will need the virtues of courage, self-control, and practical wisdom, and also the virtue of honest perception [of oneself] [...]. In so far as one is committed to living in a society [...], one will also need the virtues of justice and benevolence, in some measure anyway. [...] the ethical task of developing the virtues is the same for everybody [...]. The need to cultivate the virtues derives from the need to engage in projects, and this derives from the need to live a coherent and meaningful life.³¹

On this view, there is a very close connection between the objectivity of moral values and the idea of meaning in life (Rudd 2012, p. 149). More specifically, a

28 Rudd 2005, pp. 78–80, 99–105; Kosch 2006a, pp. 146f. See also Davenport 2001b, pp. 291–293 who argues for a minimalistic telos consisting of self-integration and an existential unification of life-narrative (rather than eudaimonia). Against broadly eudaimonistic reconstructions of Kierkegaard like that of Rudd, Kosch objects unconvincingly that (1) agents who succeed according to aesthetic criteria are not only happy but also in despair, and (2) that Judge William does not dismiss aesthetic satisfaction but tries to preserve it in the ethical stage. However, for Kierkegaard the latter (2) seems to involve an *Aufhebung* of aesthetic values where they go from having absolute priority to being conditioned on morality. This way, pleasure can be consistent with moral duties or Kantian-Hegelian ethics. And the former point (1) suggests that a lucky aesthete can feel happy and therefore avoid psychological despair but this is perfectly compatible with inauthentic despair. This point is based on a questionable translation where “*lykkelige*” is translated as “indeed happy,” giving the impression that the aesthetes are truly happy (SKS 3, 186; EO2, 192).

29 Rudd (2005, p. 94) follows B's distinction between personal virtues (courage, valor, temperance, and moderation) that are necessary for self-development and civic virtues (notably justice) that are necessary for participation in social life.

30 Peter Geach, *The Virtues*, p. 16 quoted in Rudd 2005, pp. 100f. Rudd (2005, p. 101) follows Iris Murdoch in stressing the importance of honesty with oneself.

31 Rudd 2005, pp. 108f., cf. 87. Virtue is described as “a disposition [...] giv[ing] constancy and stability to my character” (p. 108). Rudd does not think that Geach or classical virtue ethics succeeds completely in justifying the virtue of justice. Even though justice is necessary in order to secure cooperation and mutual trust among men, this hardly explains why I need to be just (pp. 101f.). Rudd concludes that justice remains problematic within the ethical stage, but not within the religious stage (p. 115), something that seems questionable at least exegetically.

coherent and meaningful life requires significant projects, something that involves social interactions and practices that presuppose moral norms. The aesthetic stage necessarily involves despair (or ennui) in the sense of lacking point and purpose with one's life. Since the aesthete does not want to commit to any projects, his life is pointless and without purpose.³² And without anything that gives meaning to his life, the aesthete lacks something to unify the different parts of his life, something that makes it into a coherent whole with a clear personal identity. As a result, his life is nothing but a mere series of moments or episodes without a unifying structure. His life is ruled by a multiplicity of moods and situations, unlike the ethicist who relies on the unifying power of personality (Rudd 2005, pp. 75, 79 and 2001, pp. 138 f.).

An important part of this is the fact that Kierkegaard's aesthetes do not identify with social roles and commitments. For this reason, *Either/Or* describes the aesthetes as refraining from promises and obligations, and as warning against entering into friendship, marriage, and the acceptance of official positions (SKS 2, 284–287, 356; EO1, 295–298, 367). This, however, indicates a certain respect for the ethical (SKS 2, 356; EO1, 367). The idea is that one must avoid getting seriously involved with others; one must avoid commitment if one is to live aesthetically; otherwise, one will be trapped into social morality. One must therefore be able to avoid relationships, or to break them off by a sheer act of will (SKS 2, 286; EO1, 297; Rudd 2005, p. 71). Associated with this is the aesthete's view that morality is strict, harsh, boring, and rigid (Danish, *kantet*³³) (SKS 2, 145, 356; EO1, 145, 367), since moral duties are opposed to our inclinations (SKS 3, 144; EO2, 146). It is not coincidental that this view resembles Schillerian criticism of Kant-

32 The aesthete writes that "My life is utterly meaningless. When I consider its various epochs, my life is like the word *Schnur* in the dictionary, which first of all means a string, and second a daughter-in-law. All that is lacking is that in the third place the word *Schnur* means a camel, in the fourth a whisk broom." (SKS 2, 45; EO1, 36)

33 The Hongs translate the Danish word "kantet" as "rigid" here. However, in this context the word "kantet" might be interpreted as an allusion to Kant or as a play on the word "kant". The Danish word "kantet" is based on the root "kant" and has the meaning rigid, edgy, rigorous, and inflexible (especially when "kantet" is used as a short for "firkantet"). The very meaning of the words "kantet" and "kant" in the Scandinavian languages fit perfectly the view that Kantian philosophy is overly rigid and rigorist. Moreover, the Danish reception of Kant closely associated Kantian ethics with moral rigorism (see Thuborg 1951, pp. 111–120). To this very day, Scandinavian philosophers can say that a philosopher is too "kantet," suggesting that he is too Kantian in the sense of being overly rigorous and inflexible.

ian ethics, since Kierkegaard's aesthete is heavily influenced by German Romanticism.³⁴

One might worry, however, that this reconstruction leaves room for aesthetes who have infinite passion for non-moral projects without recognizing the validity of moral standards.³⁵ Why cannot a self-seeking egoist create his own projects or values, without caring about morality? Furtak (2005, p. 105) argues that when one loves nothing unselfishly, one must also "suffer the unbearable emptiness of a life in which there are no final ends, because nothing is cared about for its own sake." Kierkegaard goes a step further by arguing that the attempt to create one's own values, without caring about anything for its own sake, leads not only to values that are revocable and unstable but also to motiveless and arbitrary choice. When subject and lawgiver are identical, the subject influences the lawgiver; if one can bind oneself at will, one can also unbind oneself at will. This makes it possible to constantly change one's mind about what to do, to lazily concoct new tasks instead of realizing tasks that are given (SKS 8, 389f.; UD, 294f.). When values are mere contingent constructs of individuals who are fallible, imperfect, and non-moral, this leads to lawlessness or arbitrary experimentation not only as a possibility but also as a likely result. As long as it is not grounded in intrinsic values or objective norms, human freedom therefore threatens to collapse into an arbitrary and motiveless choice. Finally, Kierkegaard argues that consistency or wholeheartedness cannot be achieved without unconditional moral dedication. Although he concedes that an aesthete is capable of developing goals that may involve some unity and coherence (SKS, 3, 178; EO2, 183), he nevertheless insists that there is something superficial or inconsistent about such an aesthete (Davenport 2001b, pp. 299f.). This is a claim to which we will turn in the next section.

Despair as Double-Mindedness

Rudd abstracts from much of what Kierkegaard says about despair. For Kierkegaard, despair is more than the absence of ground projects that convey meaning

³⁴ For Schillerian criticism of Kantian ethics and its influence on Hegel and Kierkegaard, see Stern 2012, Ch. 4 and pp. 193–199. For Kierkegaard and German Romanticism, see Behler 1997; Bohrer 1987, pp. 62ff.; Tjønneland 2004, esp. Ch. 2; Stewart 2003, pp. 170–181.

³⁵ It should be clear that this argument only tries to make plausible that we should evaluate ourselves in moral terms; the argument does not try to show that doing so amounts to succeeding in fulfilling the ethical task (Davenport 2001b, p. 287). It is perfectly possible, of course, to recognize the authority of moral standards without living up to these standards.

to our lives. Kierkegaard actually claims that despair takes the form of being in conflict with oneself by having *two wills* that are inconsistent with one another. Kierkegaard writes, “everyone in despair has two wills, one that he futilely wants to follow entirely, and one that he futilely wants to get rid of entirely.” (SKS 8, 144; UD, 30) Whereas the despair of possibility (futilely) wants possibility without necessity, the despair of necessity (futilely) wants necessity without possibility. The upshot is that it is only by willing the good unconditionally that one can will one thing, and therefore be in agreement with oneself and avoid despair (SKS 8, 139f.; UD, 24; cf. Grøn 1997, pp. 261f.). The real choice then stands between willing the good unconditionally and willing it to some degree only. Whereas the ethicist and the religious strive for the former, the aesthete can be said to settle for the latter.

But why does the aesthete despair or why can he be said to be in despair? The point seems to be that the aesthete has two different wills that cannot be reconciled. On the one hand, the aesthete is ruled by non-moral incentives and principles. We have seen Kierkegaard describing these in terms of sensuousness, self-love, self-interest, and happiness. The aesthete, then, is someone who is ruled by sensuousness, so that rationality and reflection serve sensuousness instead of morality (something that appears to make the aesthete heteronomous in the Kantian sense). On the other hand, the aesthete is not a mere natural being who could not have prioritized differently. The aesthete is not some animal that cannot be held responsible for his acts, since he has freely chosen to prioritize sensuousness over morality. However, subsuming morality under sensuousness means that morality is conditional on non-moral incentives or principles. This means that the aesthete acts morally in a very limited sense, that he, for instance, loves himself and his neighbor when he feels like it, but not all of the time.

However, this is deeply problematic since morality, by its very nature, requires unconditional and universal compliance. For if the will were to compromise on morality as the aesthete does, it would partially affirm its nature and partially affront it. It would partially express its essence and partially violate it, allowing itself to be determined sometimes by aesthetic standards and sometimes taking morality to be of absolute worth. But as Seiriol Morgan has pointed out, in trying to do so,

the will would actually fail to achieve in any measure any of the things it half-heartedly attempted to commit to. You do not live up to the demands of morality at all by committing yourself to do so to a certain extent, and you cannot appreciate the dignity of humanity if

you resolve to respect it only now and then. Rather, this would just show that you had failed to grasp the importance of any of these things in the first place.³⁶

Throughout his writings, Kierkegaard argues that we cannot be entirely indifferent towards existence or life. As long as we are conscious, we have to adopt at least some kind of attitude towards our lives, selves, and surroundings. Even someone who suffers greatly will have to relate to this suffering by adopting some kind of attitude towards it. Put in Sartrean terms, this means that we are condemned to be free, since we have to exercise our freedom by choosing. Even the choice not to choose is a choice, Kierkegaard famously reminds us. This point may be stated more precisely by using Kantian terms (cf. Irwin 2011, vol. 3, p. 301): Our will (*Willkür*) has to incorporate incentives (*Triebfedern*) into our maxims (dispositions) and to posit ends. In order to follow inclinations, we must freely (spontaneously) incorporate these into our maxim instead of other incentives, since inclinations must be taken as an appropriate basis of action. And in order to pursue an end, we must have freely chosen it as our end.³⁷

The next step then is to argue that we are responsible for our choices, at least insofar as we could have chosen otherwise or insofar as we could consider an inclination or an end to be appropriate to act on because it can be supported by reasons. This step makes it possible to blame someone for choosing incorrectly or for adopting the wrong kind of attitude. This point is usually seen as uncontroversial, and Kant and Kierkegaard both accept it.

The final step is to argue that my choice needs to be consistent with the choice of others so that my freedom does not undermine the freedom of others but rather promotes it. Basically, the reason for this is that I am dependent on others, since my self-consciousness, self-relation, and rationality are dependent on others. We therefore not only need to passively respect the freedom of others

36 Morgan 2005, pp. 96 f. This is the doctrine of moral rigorism associated with Kant. Unlike Rudd, I read Kierkegaard as a rigorist relying on a Kantian notion of ethics. The reasons for this are threefold: First, there is clear textual evidence for Kierkegaard's rigorism. Second, rigorism seems preferable to latitudinarianism, something that has been argued by Allison (1995, pp. 146–152), Firestone/Jacobs (2008, pp. 127–133) and Morgan (2005, pp. 96 f.). Finally, there are strong Kantian elements in Kierkegaard's ethics (Fremstedal 2014).

37 Allison comments: "I cannot conceive of myself as [...] [a rational] agent without regarding myself as pursuing ends that I frame for myself and that I regard as rational to pursue. Correlatively, I cannot conceive of myself as such an agent without assuming that I have a certain control over my inclinations, that I am capable of deciding which of them are to be acted upon (and how) and which resisted. These are, as it were, necessary presuppositions for all who regard their reason as practical. Kant indicates this in the *Groundwork* by suggesting that we cannot act except under the idea of freedom [...]" (Allison 1995, p. 41)

by refraining from violating it, but we also need to actively promote the freedom of others. Even though the principle of right may help with the former, it seems that moral obligations are needed to secure the latter. If these broadly Kantian points are accepted, then it seems to follow that we have to accept the necessity of moral restrictions insofar as we are free and conscious agents. The next section will go beyond these points by elaborating on our dependency on others.

Intersubjectivity, Love, and Emotions

Works of Love presents an interesting argument why the aesthete is in despair which supplements the arguments we have considered so far. *Works of Love* argues that hope without the moral duty to love one's neighbor is false, so that the real alternative to neighbor-love is despair. *Works of Love* proceeds by discussing a case where I hope for myself while giving up others by viewing them as hopeless (SKS 9, 253–256; WL, 254–256). However, hoping only for myself involves conceiving of hope and the good as something private that does not concern my relationship to others, as if I have a future of my own without others or as if what is good for me is entirely unconnected to what is good for others. Kierkegaard argues convincingly that by hoping in this way I fail to appreciate the extent to which I am dependent upon others. If there is no hope for others, then there cannot be any hope for me either, since I am dependent upon others. If they are trapped in hopelessness, this must also hold for me, even if I do not realize it myself. In this sense, I can be trapped in despair or hopelessness without realizing it.

Kierkegaard's point is that hoping for oneself must involve hoping for others, hoping for society (SKS 9, 253 f., 248; WL, 253 f., 248). Kierkegaard stresses that neighbor-love takes upon itself the work of hope, the task of hoping for others: "love is [...] the middle term: without love, no hope for oneself; with love, hope for all others—and to the same degree one hopes for oneself, to the same degree one hopes for others, since to the same degree one is loving." (SKS 9, 259; WL, 260) Love thus connects hope for oneself with hope for others, transforming the object of hope into something universal, arguably an ethical commonwealth or invisible church.³⁸ The upshot is not only that there must be some connection

38 One may object that one is not dependent on all human beings but only on some. However, whom I depend upon in different contexts seems contingent. There does not seem to be a principled reason that prevents me from being or becoming dependent on anyone in particular. Still, Kierkegaard's point is not mainly that I may find myself being dependent upon a stranger or an enemy. Put in Apelian or Habermasian terms, Kierkegaard is concerned rather with how actual

between what is good for me and what is good for others but also that one is trapped in despair without the moral obligation to love one's neighbor.

Kierkegaard appears to make use of the broadly Hegelian idea that self-consciousness presupposes intersubjectivity, and that the self-relation is mediated by the other (cf. Furtak 2005, pp. 74, 99; Grøn 1997, Ch. 5). Although Kierkegaard does not fully accept Hegel's ethics of recognition, he does agree that I am dependent on others and that this dependency implies moral restrictions. I must behave so that my freedom does not undermine the freedom of others but rather promotes it by letting the other stand on his own as an individual different from me. The central claim here is that we need something to mediate between the self and the other, and that this mediating principle needs to be ethical. Whereas Hegel describes this principle in terms of moral recognition, Kierkegaard describes it in terms of neighbor-love.³⁹

discourses (performatively) presuppose an ideal discourse. Put in ecclesiastical terms, he is concerned with how the individual depends on the invisible (true) church rather than the visible church. The Kantian parallel to this seems to be Kant's claim, in Book III of *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, that individual struggle against moral evil requires an ethical commonwealth that makes the victory of the good principle over the evil one possible. Hare elaborates on this by saying that "His argument is that we will have ends which require the help of others if we are going to reach them [...]. We are linked together by our needs and abilities into a single unit, or kingdom, which we must be prepared to will into existence as a whole. It contains our needs (for even in the true church we will be creatures of need), and it contains other people with the developed abilities to meet our needs; but it also contains the needs of others, and our developed abilities to meet their needs." Hare 2002b, p. 265.

39 A different but related argument is sketched in *Fear and Trembling*. *Fear and Trembling* argues that I am dependent on the understanding of others for a right understanding of what to do. More specifically, it is argued that I am likely to overlook relevant arguments unless I communicate openly with others (SKS 4,177; FT, 87). Based on this, Vittorio Hösle (1992, p. 7) has argued that Kierkegaard anticipates the central idea of Habermas's discourse ethics. Put in Kantian terms, the touchstone for assessing the objectivity of subjective judgments (claims about something being true) is whether others agree. Kant says that we cannot do without the understanding of others because such an understanding is an *external criterion* for truth. Without this criterion, we could not test the correctness of our own judgments, and hence we would be at the mercy of mistakes. This criterion means that the rational validity of judgments depends on it being possible to *communicate or share* them universally (Fremstedal 2009, pp. 27 f.). Put in contemporary terms, the point seems to be that we are dependent on a practical discourse for understanding what we ought to do. And this practical discourse, like intersubjectivity more generally, presupposes certain ethical norms. Kierkegaard's ethicist formulates this by saying that personal and civic virtues are interdependent, so that I cannot have any personal virtues without also having civic or social virtues (SKS 3, 249; EO2, 262). The ethicist distinguishes between personal virtues (courage, valor, temperance, and moderation) that are necessary for self-development and civic virtues (notably justice) that are necessary for participation in social life.

Both the aesthete and the ethicist are deeply concerned with love as an emotion (or a passion). The aesthete focuses on romantic love, whereas the ethicist focuses on marriage as the paradigm case for the ethical stage.⁴⁰ The aesthete believes in love as an experience that makes life beautiful and interesting, seeing marriage and its duties as incompatible with the freedom and spontaneity required by genuine love (Davenport 2001b, pp. 91f.). Kierkegaard suggests, however, that there is some continuity between the different forms of love. *Stages on Life's Way*, for instance, describes different forms of love in a manner reminiscent of Plato's famous description of different forms of love in the *Symposium* (cf. Furtak 2005, pp. 103f.). Whereas the aesthete sees love as a mere feeling, the ethicist and Kierkegaard seem to approach it as a virtue with affective and emotional aspects that can, and ought to, be cultivated.

The ethicist argues that even though we have first-order desires and states, these can only have (lasting) significance by being actively endorsed and guided by practical rationality involving intersubjective standards of assessment. More specifically, first-order desires only acquire real importance if we are ethically committed by relating to what happens to us, either by identifying with or distancing ourselves from first-order desires. This can be done either by viewing first-order desires as appropriate or as inappropriate, as something we ought or ought not to act on, based on the merits of different options, or on reasons that hold irrespective of the strength of our inclinations (Irwin 2011, vol. 3, pp. 299f.). We thus need to introduce the idea of a rational choice that is based on the merits of different options, not just on inclinations and desires. This means that we enter the area of good and evil as features to be considered in a free choice (Irwin 2011, vol. 3, p. 300).

The aesthete experiences different emotions and desires, but he does not give his assent to them by actively embracing their significance or by endorsing them. He lacks second-order desires that make it possible to develop and cultivate first-order desires and to develop a long-standing attitude. He hardly views himself as the owner of his inclinations and desires, and he does not take re-

Even if there is some uncertainty how far Kierkegaard actually developed this point, it nevertheless seems to be a valid point that could have developed by him. Still, it seems that some of this point is perhaps better, or more systematically, developed by Kant, Hegel, and Habermas than by Kierkegaard, even though Kierkegaard goes beyond these thinkers by analyzing despair. ⁴⁰ The ethicist makes use of the Fichtean idea that marriage is a step on the path to becoming an ethically developed person and that the love relation is nature's way of overcoming itself and pushing us toward becoming ethical beings. Marriage is therefore considered a duty (something both Kant and Kierkegaard were opposed to). See Kosch 2006b, pp. 270–273. See also Hannay 2006, pp. 94–101.

sponsibility for them, although they do make up the basis of his decisions, ends, and actions. He is free in the sense of being independent of his inclinations, but he does not recognize or affirm his freedom like the ethicist does (Irwin 2011, vol. 3, pp. 301, 304). The reflective aesthete takes up the perspective of a spectator towards his own emotions and his own life. By doing this, he denies that he is already involved in life and therefore responsible.⁴¹

The aesthete is detached from his ends, not because he chooses them without energy or dedication, but because he sees them as external to himself, insofar as they are objects of inclination that are purely accidental to him (Irwin 2011, vol. 3, p. 299). The aesthete would be less detached from his ends if he could regard them as appropriate for him, as the sort of agent he is, because they represent the type of ends that he ought to choose irrespective of the strength of his inclinations (Irwin 2011, vol. 3, p. 299). Terence Irwin writes:

Since we regard ourselves as continuing selves; and think it right, irrespective of the strength of our desires, to plan for our continuing selves, we can also see—though we may not see—that a purely aesthetic attitude to ourselves cannot satisfy us. If we treat our ends as matters of mere inclination, we do not ask the questions that, as continuing agents, we recognize as legitimate, about whether we have reason to pursue this end rather than another. The aesthetic outlook does not fit the self that adopts it. (Irwin 2011, vol. 3, p. 299)

Irwin concludes that the aesthetic agent is liable to despair because aesthetic agency presupposes some basis of non-aesthetic agency (Irwin 2011, vol. 3, pp. 299f.). The aesthete thinks of himself as a particular continuing self that is free but this self does not fit aesthetic agency, which is ruled by inclinations and desires that are accidental and external.

The ethicist argues that romantic love needs to be both endorsed and restricted in marriage. The idea is that romantic love is transfigured in marriage so that love's needs are completed and fulfilled. On this view, marriage is not an alien imposition on romantic love, but something that makes it possible for romantic love to develop and endure. The ethicist proceeds by arguing that love itself wants to be strengthened, since it wants to ensure that love will last. Even in the absence of a marriage ceremony lovers therefore swear faithfulness to each other in the name of something perceived to be higher (e. g. moon, stars, father's ashes) so as to bind themselves (SKS 3, 61f.; EO2, 56; Davenport 2001b, pp. 91–94). This indicates that love itself seeks moral commitment

⁴¹ Furtak 2005, pp. 58f., 62f., 66, 79. For the interpretation of the reflective aesthete as a sophisticated wanton, see Rudd 2012, pp. 80–85; Davenport 2001b, pp. 294f.

(SKS 3, 61, 66, 144–147; EO2, 56, 60f., 146–149).⁴² The ethicist presents a somewhat Hegelian (and Schillerian) argument to the effect that moral obligation is not opposed to love, as has been pointed out by existing scholarship (cf. Stern 2012, pp. 190–199). At this point the ethicist stresses that moral duty should not be interpreted as something external that is opposed to my inner being, but rather seen as something that expresses my true being (SKS 3, 242f.; EO2, 254f.). Freedom is therefore seen as realized *in* moral and social commitment.

The more general point, however, is that there is no free lunch. Things cannot have (lasting) importance or meaning if they do not imply some commitment or obligations. Emotions that are not actively endorsed and regulated are merely episodic sensations without meaning. The aesthete lives in a world of fleeting and abbreviated emotions, lacking emotional integrity (Furtak 2005, pp. 59, 65). He may consider emotions and passion to be the deepest part of the human being; but these are wild and unruly as long as the aesthete does not have any definitive aim or end (as the ethicist does).⁴³ Without an active endorsement of emotions, these will disintegrate into mere fragments and the aesthete will be ironic and indifferent towards his own life. Furtak elaborates:

He avoids taking anything seriously, and thereby guards himself against the emotional risk of being more than ironically involved. And the fragmentary nature of his temporal existence also keeps him from occupying any role that requires sustained care: he can be a dilettante but not a devoted artist, a temporary acquaintance but not a loyal friend. [...] Rather than letting his episodic emotions grow into longstanding attitudes, the aesthete lets them weightlessly pass away, so that both joy and torment end up meaning nothing. (Furtak 2005, pp. 68, 79)

Conclusion

The points sketched above are extracted from Kierkegaard's writings, notably *Either/Or*.

Rather than proving why we should be moral, Kierkegaard can be said to provide strong motivation for a transition from the aesthetic to the ethical

⁴² Kierkegaard himself has a somewhat less optimistic take on this in *Works of Love*. He argues that love's need for obligation show that love is dimly aware that it is insufficient by itself; love is insecure, anxious about the possibility of change, that love may vanish or change. As a result, love needs moral obligation (SKS 9, 40, 73; WL, 32f., 66). Kierkegaard's claim that difficulties remain with B's notion of marriage (SKS 7, 167; CUP1, 181) need not undermine B's general attempt to criticize the aesthete or his attempt to explain why we should be moral.

⁴³ Furtak 2005, p. 77 referencing Johannes Sløk.

stage by arguing that despair can only be overcome if we choose the ethical. *Either/Or* portrays the ethical as inescapable, so that we can speak of the intrusion of the ethical (cf. Grøn 1997, pp. 261f.; Evans 2009, pp. 87–89). MacIntyre is therefore mistaken in claiming that Kierkegaard's existential choice between the aesthetic and the ethical is criterionless like the radical choice of Sartre (Davenport 2001a).

Perhaps the most characteristic feature of Kierkegaard's work, as compared to his predecessors, is the central role despair plays in it. Kierkegaard went beyond his predecessors by analyzing the importance of despair and hope for moral agency, offering a systematic analysis of despair that makes extensive use of (moral) psychology and phenomenology.⁴⁴ Still, it might seem that Kierkegaard's general methodology is perhaps stronger than the specific arguments. The arguments are typically incomplete and sketchy, standing in need of interpretation and reconstruction.⁴⁵

The renewed interest in Kierkegaard over the last decades has led both to new historical research and attempts to use Kierkegaard in contemporary debates. The present paper belongs mainly to the latter category and focuses on reasons for seeing the human task as the ethical task, seeing the choice of oneself as the choice of the ethical. Even if the arguments considered are somewhat incomplete or equivocal, they still seem to make plausible that we need to evaluate ourselves in moral terms. It seems fair therefore to conclude that Kierkegaard comes at least some way towards answering the question "Why be moral?" – although his approach is more relevant to deontological ethics and virtue ethics than consequentialism.

Kierkegaard's work is so rich and multi-faceted that it has the potential for adding something valuable to contemporary discussions, as is exemplified by the work of Rudd, Davenport, Furtak, and others. What makes Kierkegaard's work interesting are not only its arguments and dialectics but also its vivid literary descriptions and examples as well as its use of phenomenology and psychology. I agree with Davenport that, in the contemporary context, Kierkegaard may be seen as allied with MacIntyre, Korsgaard, and Taylor against Williams in thinking that non-moral caring involves implicit rational commitment to ethical values, whether or not we recognize it or like it. The connection that Kierkegaard draws between earnest purpose in life and choosing the ethical is controversial

⁴⁴ Cf. Stokes 2010, pp. 7f.; Hannay 2006, p. 4. Regarding phenomenology, see Grøn 1997, pp. 137–142.

⁴⁵ Theunissen (1993, pp. 13, 108) has pointed out that there exist relatively few attempts to defend or reconstruct Kierkegaard's theory in a rational or argumentative manner.

and provocative, but it should nevertheless be taken as seriously as similar views voiced by contemporary thinkers (cf. Davenport 2012, pp. 130, 122).

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