

The Philosophy of Science in *Either-Or*

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One might assume that a philosopher of science in the analytic tradition would have no reason to read Søren Kierkegaard's *Either-Or*, except possibly for his own personal edification. After all, *Either-Or* consists of a veritable chaos of poetry, aphorisms, letters, and other literary devices of indirect communication that are intended to push the reader to take stock of her own existential situation. If *Either-Or* has anything to say about philosophy of science, then it must be saying indirectly, via its silence on the subject, that science is irrelevant for the all-important project of "becoming a self".

That is what I would have assumed after my first interaction with *Either-Or* – which, I admit, was forced upon me by an undergraduate philosophy curriculum that thought it useful to include pages from various "classics" of the western philosophical tradition – even when those classics were deemed to be poor examples of clear and rigorous philosophical thinking. Kierkegaard, my philosophy professor said, is more poet than theologian, more theologian than philosopher, and no logician at all. So, if one is interested in contemporary analytic philosophy – e.g. Quine, Kripke, symbolic logic, or the metaphysics of quantum physics – then one would do best to ignore *Either-Or*.

What I didn't understand at the time was the contextual relevance of *Either-Or*, neither the fact that it contains Kierkegaard's argument against the predominant Cartesian-Hegelian ideal of scientific objectivity,¹ nor the

¹There are many questions about whether Kierkegaard really intended to criticize Hegel – as opposed to Danish Hegelians – and, if he did, whether his criticisms hit their mark. See especially the discussion in (Stewart 2003). For the purposes of the present discussion, it would be interesting if Hegel has a view of "the ideal epistemic state" that can withstand the criticisms of *Either-Or*. If he does, then that could be of relevance for contemporary philosophy of science.

fact that Kierkegaard's rejection of that ideal is a forerunner of Niels Bohr's "epistemological lesson of quantum theory."² In other words, *Either-Or* is a central text for the transition from the enlightenment picture of scientific objectivity to the new picture that began to emerge in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

As for the tradition that Kierkegaard inherited, let's take Descartes, as usual, as the starting point for modern epistemology. For Descartes, scientific knowledge – and especially mathematical physics – is God's gift to humans that allows them to overcome the sorts of errors to which they are prone, largely because of their embodied nature. This kind of vision of the epistemic transfiguration of the human being was then taken a step further by Spinoza with his idea of achieving a view of reality *sub specie aeternitatis*. While this aspiration for epistemic transcendence was brought into question by Hume, its achievement became an absolutely central goal of German idealism, reaching its most ambitious expression in the work of Hegel. For Hegel, the aim of *Wissenschaft* is nothing less than a kind of epistemic apotheosis, where the human knower sheds his finitude and becomes one with The Thought.

As is well known, Kierkegaard has some serious problems with Hegel's epistemic ideal, and he states his objections directly (despite the pseudonymous authorship) in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. But this makes it all the more intriguing to look for the first shoots of Kierkegaard's philosophy of science in his first major work, *Either-Or* (published just three years before the *Postscript*). In this chapter, I argue that *Either-Or* is intended as an exercise in indirect communication, where the goal is for the reader to realize that Hegel has misidentified the epistemic ideal for human beings. Hegel conceives of the epistemic ideal as the backward-looking, stationary state of the detached spectator, i.e. the god's eye view. In contrast, Kierkegaard conceives of the epistemic ideal as an ongoing harmonization between the "spectator" and "actor" aspects of the human being, where the actor aspect requires the human to abandon the pretense of detachment, and to exercise her will in "choosing herself" – and, I might add, in choosing what kind of knowledge is worth having.

²The debate began when Max Jammer wrote that "Søren Kierkegaard, through his influence on Bohr, affected also the course of modern physics to some extent" (Jammer 1989, 179). This claim was fiercely contested by David Favrholdt, see e.g. (Favrholdt 1992), but received a slightly more favorable reception from Jan Faye, see e.g. (Faye 1991), who argues that Kierkegaard may have indirectly influenced Bohr via the philosopher Harald Høffding.

If this debate played out exclusively in the writings of philosophers, then it might not be worth writing yet another chapter about it. However, it was precisely these sorts of epistemological issues that were at stake during the quantum revolution in physics that took place in the years between 1910 and 1935. On the one hand, Albert Einstein maintained the Hegelian view that the goal of science is to describe the world as it is in itself, i.e. from a god's eye point of view. On the other hand, Niels Bohr maintained that quantum physics teaches us an epistemological lesson: that human beings cannot achieve the God's eye view, because "in the drama of existence we are ourselves both actors and spectators."³

1 The overall structure of *Either-Or*

Either-Or is primarily about the personal battle between duty (as expressed by the author of Part B) and desire (as expressed by the authors of Part A). In what sense, then, can the book be said to contain an epistemological lesson?

The answer to that question is revealed by reflecting on the fact that *Either-Or* is intended to communicate indirectly, i.e. Socratically. In particular, Kierkegaard believes that Hegelian philosophy cannot be criticized directly, because it is engaged in the pretense of fully objective inquiry, i.e. in the sphere of contemplation. What Kierkegaard does instead is create a tragic character (A), and then has the author of Part B (Judge William) advise A that there are flaws in the worldview that he shares in common with "modern philosophy":

I am well aware that the position you take is anathema to [modern, i.e. Hegelian] philosophy, and yet it seems to me that it itself is guilty of the same error; indeed, the reason this is not immediately detected is that it is not even as properly situated as you are. You are situated in the area of action, philosophy in the area of contemplation [Overveielse]. As soon as it is to be moved into the area of practice, it must arrive at the same conclusion as you do.⁴

³(Bohr 1949, 236)

⁴EO 2, 170/SKS 3, 166. Citations of *Either-Or* are taken from the Hong translation, published by Princeton University Press.

In other words, Hegelian philosophy cannot recognize its failure to guide practice, because it maintains the pretense of being a totally objective account, from the god's eye point of view. As Judge William later says:

... especially in our day, we see people who have despair in their hearts and yet have conquered doubt. This was especially striking to me when I looked at some German philosophers. Their minds are at ease; objective, logical thinking has been brought to rest in its corresponding objectivity, and yet, even though they divert themselves by objective thinking, they are in despair, for a person can divert himself in many ways, and there is scarcely any means as dulling and deadening as abstract thinking, for it is a matter of conducting oneself as impersonally as possible.⁵

Judge William hopes, however, that A can be brought out of the pretense that he can remain a pure spectator to life. So, while the immediate conclusion of *Either-Or* is that A's "life philosophy" or "worldview" leads to practical absurdity – "for the difference in yours [i.e. your life philosophy] is precisely that it prevents a choice"⁶ – the deeper conclusion is that there is a fundamental problem with Hegelian philosophy: it fails to provide guidance about what one should *do* if one wishes to acquire knowledge.

However, the epistemological message of *Either-Or* is still difficult to decipher. Is Kierkegaard telling us that a person is forced to choose between obtaining objective knowledge or being a self? Or is Kierkegaard suggesting that Hegel has the wrong picture of the epistemic ideal for a human being? While much of *Either-Or* will tolerate either one of these readings, the final section ("Ultimatum") tips the balance in favor of the latter reading. For Kierkegaard, the ideal epistemic state is not passive but active. The ideal epistemic state does not call for Hegelian infinite reflection, but for "double reflection"⁷, where knowledge is integrated into the personality of the knower.

⁵EO 2, 212/SKS 2, 190

⁶EO 2, 164

⁷Kierkegaard first uses the phrase "double-reflection" in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. However, a similar notion is already operative in the Ultimatum's emphasis on integration of knowledge into one's personality.

2 The worldview of A

The lesson of *Either-Or* is that if a person internalized Hegel's philosophy and lived his life accordingly, then that person would be far from ideal. The author of part A is indecisive, uninvolved, duplicitous, and unhappy. Worst of all, A is not transparent to himself and he is unable to truly love. In short, A is defective as a human being.

It should be alarming for anyone who buys into the Cartesian-Hegelian view that Kierkegaard diagnoses A as being a defective human being. After all, Descartes' "project of pure inquiry" (to borrow Bernard Williams' phrase) is supposed to raise human beings above their natural (or, theologically speaking, fallen) state, and to make them like angels, or even like God himself. This description of the final aim of scientific knowledge is frequently endorsed by the spokespeople and defenders of this tradition.⁸ Take, for example, Bernard Williams' description of Descartes' project: "What God has given us, according to Descartes, is an insight into the nature of the world as it seems to God, and the world as it seems to God must be the world as it really is."⁹ Similarly, Hegel narrates the history of European philosophy in phrases such as the following: "... all the various philosophies ... are of necessity one Philosophy in its development, the revelation of God, as He knows Himself to be."¹⁰ The picture here is that the ideal epistemic state is achieving the God's eye view.

Hegel does not directly address the question of what an "ideal epistemic agent" would be like, since he is more interested in what actually happened (by necessity) than in what ought to happen. However, if we transpose Hegel's talk of what actually happened in the history of philosophy – culminating, of course, in Hegel himself – into talk about what an ideal thinker would be like, we can pick up on the following themes.

1. An ideal epistemic agent sees things under the aspect of eternity, i.e.

⁸Bernard Williams famously defends the idea that science aims for, and is well along the way to achieving, the absolute conception of reality, i.e. a conception of reality as it is in itself: "In a scientific inquiry there should ideally be convergence on an answer, where the best explanation of the convergence involves the idea that the answer represents how things are" (Williams 1985, 136). Hilary Putnam's criticism of Williams (Putnam 1992, chap 5) is similar in concept to Kierkegaard's criticism of Hegel, although Putnam opts for a direct dialectical attack.

⁹(Williams 1978, 196)

¹⁰(Hegel 1896, 547)

sub specie aeternitatis.

2. An ideal epistemic agent is dispassionate.
3. An ideal epistemic agent stands outside of the situation being considered, i.e. he is a spectator, and does not interfere with, or participate in, that which he is describing.

Kierkegaard portrays A as exemplifying these epistemic virtues, but in a very practical way, i.e. with regard to his own life. In A's own words, "I think I have the courage to doubt everything, but I do not have the courage to acknowledge anything, the courage to possess, to own, anything."¹¹ Of course, doubt was the epistemic virtue that was enshrined in Descartes' method, and taken by Hegel to be the beginning point of all true philosophy.¹² Similarly, A states that his ideal is to stand outside of time, looking backward at history.

To live in recollection is the most perfect life imaginable; recollection is more richly satisfying than all actuality, and it has a security that no actuality possesses. A recollected life relationship has already passed into eternity and has no temporal interest anymore.¹³

In fact, A boasts that he has achieved this blessed stance outside of time: "It is not merely in isolated moments that I, as Spinoza says, view everything aeterno modo, but I am continually aeterno modo."¹⁴

In Part B, Judge William affirms that A possesses the Cartesian-Hegelian epistemic virtues in the highest degree: "If deliberating [*at overveie*] were the task for human life, then you would be close to perfection."¹⁵ The Danish verb *at overveie*, which is translated here as "to deliberate", can also be translated as "to think over", "to consider", "to reflect on", "to ponder" or "to weigh".¹⁶ For example, in Danish it would make sense to *overveie* various scientific hypotheses, a situation, one's life up until this point, or

¹¹EO 1, 23/SKS 2, 32

¹²"There has been more than sufficient talk in modern philosophy about all speculation beginning with doubt." EO 2, 211/SKS 2, 190

¹³EO 1, 32

¹⁴EO 1, 39/SKS 2, 48

¹⁵EO 2, 165/SKS 3, 162

¹⁶Gyldendals *Den store røde Ordbog*

even all of world history. With this in mind, William is not saying that A's problem is simply that he is indecisive, or that he thinks too long before making a decision. No, A's problem is that he has become the incarnation of Hegel's ideal epistemic agent: he stands outside of reality, and he thinks about it dispassionately. The implication here is that modern philosophy, i.e. Hegel's philosophy, assumes that an ideal epistemic agent will sustain himself indefinitely in this reflecting stance, and A is simply trying to live up to this epistemic ideal.

Kierkegaard indicates that A has achieved the kind of detachment that is necessary for objective knowledge. If, for example, A were asked to engage in some kind of useful social activity, then his answer, says William, would be: "I am not a participant at all; I am outside; like a little Spanish 's' I am outside."¹⁷ William immediately follows up by claiming that A's non-participatory, purely spectatorial, stance is precisely what the Hegelian philosopher aims to achieve: "So it is with the philosopher. He is outside; he is not a participant."¹⁸ The point is clear: A is meant as a tragic incarnation of something that was quite seriously taken to be an epistemic ideal: to detach oneself from the thing that is to be known.

3 Backwards and forwards

At this point it might be helpful to introduce a metaphor that Kierkegaard uses to illustrate what he takes to be the defect in the Cartesian-Hegelian ideal. The metaphor here is of looking forwards versus looking backwards, and Kierkegaard states it clearly in a well known journal entry written shortly after the publication of *Either-Or*: "It is quite true what [Hegelian] philosophy says, that life must be understood backwards. But then one forgets the other principle, that it must be lived forward."¹⁹ This metaphor works for Kierkegaard because of the historical nature of Hegelian philosophy. Hegel looks at the past, and comes up with a theory that is supposed to make sense of it all. This theory, being purely descriptive, gives no guidance or advice about what to do next. Thus, the Hegelian philosopher is stuck, so to speak, looking backwards.

¹⁷EO 2, 171/SKS 3, 168

¹⁸EO 2, 171/SKS 3, 168

¹⁹JJ, 167/SKS 18, 194

Like the Hegelian philosopher, A excels at the task of deliberation. However, the deliberating part of a human being is just one half, namely the backward-facing half (i.e. the spectator), whereas a healthy and whole human being also has a forward-facing half (i.e. the actor). Kierkegaard continues with the metaphor when he has William say that if a person could manage to hold himself in the objective (deliberative, backward-facing) stance, then the result would be a complete dissolution of his personhood.

The choice itself is crucial for the content of the personality: through the choice the personality submerges itself in that which is being chosen, and when it does not choose, it withers away in atrophy.²⁰

... there are also people whose souls are too dissolute to comprehend the implications of such a dilemma, whose personalities lack the energy to be able to say with pathos: either/or.²¹

In other words, the ideal of the objective observer is ultimately self-undermining, for if one managed to achieve complete objectivity, then one would cease to exist as an individual. There can be no question here of a Faustian bargain, in which one sells their soul for objective knowledge: if there is no soul, suggests Kierkegaard, then there can be no genuine knowledge.

Herein lies the central intervention that Kierkegaard wishes to make in the philosophy of science that he inherited from Hegel: a scientist is also a human being,²² and a human being cannot even theoretically achieve a God's eye view. For human beings, unlike God, there is a fundamental asymmetry between past and future which makes it impossible to achieve perfect objectivity while also embracing the need to make choices. The Cartesian-Hegelian ideal, in contrast, would have the scientist remove all non-essential elements of her personality until all that remains is, in the phrase of Hegel, "thought thinking itself".

²⁰EO 2, 163/SKS 3, 160

²¹EO 2, 157/SKS 3, 155

²²That the humanity of the scientist continued to occupy Kierkegaard's thoughts is shown by a journal entry from 1846: "Just what makes scientific study so difficult is quite overlooked. It is assumed that everyone including the researcher knows (ethically) what to do in the world – and then he gives himself over to his discipline. But it was the ethical consideration that had to be taken care of first – and then the entire discipline might be shipwrecked. The researcher lives in his personal life in quite other categories than those in which he leads his life as a researcher, but it is precisely the former that were the most important." JJ 437

4 Poul Martin Møller

To understand what a philosopher is trying to get at, it sometimes helps to read him or her as a member of a tradition of philosophers with similar ideas. For present purposes, I would suggest that Kierkegaard, qua epistemologist, belongs to the same tradition as Poul Martin Møller (his teacher), Rasmus Nielsen (Kierkegaard's contemporary and Møller's successor), Harald Høffding (Nielsen's student), and Niels Bohr (Høffding's student). While historians question any direct influence of Kierkegaard on Bohr, they must admit that both Kierkegaard and Bohr explicitly acknowledge their debt to Møller. In fact, the epistemological proposal of *Either-Or* – viz. that the highest state of human knowledge is harmony between reflection and action – is a central theme in Møller's *En Dansk Students Eventyr*.

In the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard indicates that it was Møller who helped him get past the Hegelian viewpoint that was then dominant among the intelligentsia and students in Copenhagen.

P. M., when everything here at home was Hegelian, judged quite differently, that for some time he first spoke of Hegel almost with indignation, until his wholesome, humorous nature made him smile, especially at Hegelianism, or, to recall P. M. even more clearly, made him laugh at it heartily.²³

Unfortunately, Møller left little textual evidence of the philosophical ideas he would have shared in the classroom, or even at the tea-house that he and Kierkegaard were known to frequent. When it came to writing, Møller preferred aphorisms, poems, and novellas – such as the one he read out loud to the student association in 1824, and which was published posthumously in 1841 as *En Dansk Students Eventyr*. This novella provides valuable contextual information about what Kierkegaard was trying to say in *Either-Or*. It also provides the key for understanding why Bohr's epistemology has such striking similarities to Kierkegaard's: for both of them, Møller was the guiding light.²⁴

²³CUP 1, 34/SKS 7, 39

²⁴In his memorial of Niels Bohr, Leon Rosenfeld writes, “that which really made a deep and lasting impression on him [Bohr] was the unpretentious story *En Dansk Students Eventyr*, in which Poul Martin Møller has given such a gripping and humorous illustration of the Hegelian dialectic” (Rosenfeld 1963).

When attempting to illustrate his philosophical claims, Bohr frequently pointed to a passage in Møller’s *Eventyr* about the “Licentiatus Medicinæ”, i.e. the doctor in training. This doctor in training, named Claudius, is the cousin of Bertel, one of the main characters of the story. The practically minded Bertel, seeing that Claudius lacks the initiative to make something of his life, secures him a position as a parish doctor in a rural area called Ravnshøj, and sends him on his way. Then a year later, Bertel sets out for Ravnshøj and stops for the night at a country inn called Møllekroen (the inn at the mill). To his surprise, Bertel discovers that Claudius never reached Ravnshøj, but has been living at that very inn for the past year. What ensues is a humorous account of the encounter between Bertel and Claudius – and most importantly for us, a characterization of Claudius as suffering from precisely the same ailment as A of *Either-Or*: a hypertrophied capacity for reflection combined with a complete inability to make decisions or act upon them.

When Bertel encounters Claudius, he begs for an explanation of why Claudius came to a stand still at Møllekroen. Claudius’ answer is telling: when I started considering [*at overveje*] reasons for action, I realized that there can be no *sufficient reason* for departing at one time as opposed to a slightly later time – say, one minute later or even one second later. (Recall here that the principle of sufficient reason is a cornerstone of Hegel’s philosophical method.) Claudius says that he is locked in the mode of contemplation [*Overveielse*], which prevents him from acting.

This is the way, he answered, that you – along with everyone else who is lucky enough to be able to act without thinking about his life – always talk. If I could have seen any sufficient reason that the trip ought to take place on one day as opposed to another, then things would have taken care of themselves. My misfortune consists of the fact that I see all too clearly the truth of the fact that any action can, without causing serious damage, be put off by a day.²⁵

We see here precisely the same complementarity between reflecting [*at overveie*] and acting [*at handle*] that makes it impossible for A to “accom-

²⁵DSE, 41-42. Page numbers for *En Dansk Students Eventyr* are taken from the 2007 edition published by Lindhardt og Ringhof (Møller 2017). The book first appeared in 1841 with the posthumous publication of Møller’s papers. The English translations are my own.

plish anything” or to “commit to anything”.²⁶ Similarly for the licentiate, “my infinite investigations [*uendelig Grandsken*] make it that I accomplish nothing,”²⁷ emphasizing again the complementarity between reflection and action. The problem with the licentiate is that he has developed the psychological version of a muscle imbalance: he has strengthened his backward-facing, reflective stance, and allowed the forward-facing, active stance to atrophy – which is precisely the imbalance that A suffers from.

To complete the diagnosis of the licentiate, and also to make the implied criticism of Hegelian philosophy of science more clear, let us turn to the licentiate’s own description of the cause of his problems.

My infinite investigation about [the reasons for action] bring it about that I accomplish nothing. I come to think about my thoughts about it, indeed I think about the fact that I am thinking about it, and I divide myself in an infinite sequence of regressive I’s that observe [betragter] each other. I don’t know which I should be stopped at as the actual one, and at the moment I stop at one, there is again another I that is standing beside it.²⁸

The first thing to note here is the licentiate’s overtly Hegelian method. In particular, there is not just a single subject; instead what was the subject becomes the object when a new subject is created. What’s more, the reason for the creation of a new subject is because the current subject is operating according to some unquestioned presuppositions, and a new subject is needed to investigate the validity of those presuppositions. We cannot stop the sequence of reflections, says Hegel, until there are no presuppositions left.²⁹

Like the writer of part A of *Either-Or*, Møller’s licentiate is a parody of a human being striving to achieve Hegel’s ideal. In particular, Hegel’s

²⁶It was Niels Bohr, not Kierkegaard, who employed the word “complementarity”. I am suggesting, however, that Bohr’s concept of complementarity has some precedent in Kierkegaard’s way of thinking, and in particular, in *Either-Or*. The conceit of *Either-Or* is that human beings cannot avoid making choices, and these choices do cut off some possibilities. It is not a far stretch from that to Bohr’s idea that an experimenter must choose to pose specific questions to nature – he cannot simply ask nature to reveal how it is in itself.

²⁷DSE, 28.

²⁸DSE, 28-29

²⁹Interestingly, the second chapter of Houlgate’s (2005) introduction to Hegel bears the title “Thinking without Presuppositions”.

account pictures the ideal agent as engaged in an infinite reflection – never considering how one would manage to carry out such a process in real time. The answer we get from Møller is that if a real human being were in the state that Hegel recommends, then the person would cease to function. Hegelian reflection makes a pretense of existing outside of time, or stopping the flow of time, but a human being exists in time, which will not allow him to stay suspended in the deliberative stance.

We have established that Møller’s *Eventyr* anticipates *Either-Or*, in that both aim to show the absurdity of the Hegelian epistemic ideal. Where Kierkegaard advances upon Møller is in developing an alternative to the Hegelian ideal, and thereby laying the foundation for a new conception of the ideal epistemic state for human beings.

5 The scientist as human being

Throughout his authorship, Kierkegaard is at pains to remind the reader that the knower – the philosopher, the scientist – is a human being. Of course that is an obvious point. Why is it even worth saying? The reason is that it is all too tempting to engage in “superhuman dreams” – the licentiate’s “overmenneskelige drømmerier” in the phrase of Bertel.³⁰ In this case, the superhuman dreams are the result of mistaking a methodological idealization – the knowing subject is detached from, and stands outside of, what is known – for a concrete goal. While few contemporary philosophers would call themselves Hegelians, they nonetheless maintain his picture that, in the limit of perfectly objective knowledge, the concrete condition of the knower becomes completely irrelevant. In Kierkegaard’s particular diagnosis of this ideal, the personality of the knower must be dissolved in order for the knower to achieve perfectly objective knowledge.

In analytic philosophy of science, we would hardly know what to make of the word “personality”, and instead we might replace it with something with a more scientific ring, such as “context of utterance” or “frame of reference” or “background information state”. Nonetheless, Hegel’s ideal, and Kierkegaard’s criticism of it, can also be expressed in this more abstract

³⁰Compare with the Postscript: “Now, should we not agree to be human beings! As is well known, Socrates states that when we assume flute-playing, we must also assume a flutist, and consequently if we assume speculative thought, we also have to assume a speculative thinker or several speculative thinkers.” (CUP, 92-93/SKS 7, 56)

language: according to the Hegelian ideal, objective knowledge is context-independent. Kierkegaard would reject this ideal. He believes that what is known stands in an essential relation to a concrete human being, and that makes the human being's context, or personality, very relevant to what is known.

In *Either-Or*, the active role of the knower receives its clearest articulation in the closing "Ultimatum". Here we have Judge William sending a sermon from a pastor in Jutland, with a note saying that it makes his main point all the more clearly. As is typical with Kierkegaard, the significance of the "Ultimatum" admits of multiple interpretations. While many interpret the Ultimatum as a corrective to Judge William's ethical (as opposed to religious) stance, I claim that it also completes William's epistemological argument that the ideal epistemic state cannot be achieved via deliberation, i.e. Hegel's methodological ideal for objectively weighing the evidence. The piece of knowledge in focus in the "Ultimatum" is the claim:

I'm in the wrong with respect to God.

The pastor contrasts the thought "I'm in the wrong" with something a person might say to assuage their doubts about their moral status:

I did what I could, and hence I'm in the right with respect to God.

Kierkegaard (through the pastor's words) indicates that Hegelian deliberation, i.e. objective inquiry, cannot settle the question of which hypothesis to accept. The first problem is that there is no limit to the amount of evidence needed to establish the claim that one did what one could: "Was not the real reason for your unrest that you did not know for sure how much one can do, that it seems to you to be so infinitely much at one moment, and at the next moment so very little?"³¹. The claim here should ring true to anyone who has ever tried to do something difficult and failed. You might try to comfort yourself by saying that you did everything that you could possibly have done. But are you sure? Can you really say with confidence that there was no point in your life at which, had you done something differently, you might have succeeded?

The pastor has a second argument for why deliberation cannot justify the conclusion that one is in the right. It's not just that "I did what I

³¹EO 2, 345/SKS 3, 325

could” seems impossible to establish by a purely objective investigation, it’s also that the truth-value of “I am doing what I can” might be affected by the very investigation into its truth-value. In particular, if you pause to deliberate over whether you have done all that you can, then you might thereby be omitting to do some action that would tip the balance in your favor. In other words, deliberation is also a kind of action, and so the picture of deliberating about what is the case without having an effect on what is the case is an idealization that holds only to a certain degree and only in certain situations. There is a clear echo here of what Møller’s licentiate says about himself: “the observer constantly becomes again the actor”³², i.e. just when you thought you could step back and become an outside observer, time moves forward again and you are forced to act.

We may engage in a sort of pretense where we are just onlookers of the drama of existence – as A would say “I am not a participant at all; I am outside” – but existence will not allow the pretense to be maintained. While one pretends to be on the outside, one’s choice to engage in this pretense is actually complicit in the creation of the future. In the case of the one deliberating about his moral status, he is by that very act possibly failing to do everything he could: “He could not find time to deliberate upon what he could do, for at the same time he was supposed to be doing what he could do”³³. Here we see again the complementarity between deliberation (backward) and action (forward). One cannot, according to Kierkegaard, have it both ways, i.e. one cannot stay suspended in the deliberative stance while simultaneously choosing to act.

At this point, one might accuse Kierkegaard of simply asserting that there is a dilemma, i.e. a complementarity, where none really exists. Is it not possible for a single person to perform “dual processing” where one half of the person is engaged in deliberation (objective thinking) while the other half is making choices and exercising his will (subjective thinking)? The short answer to this question is that Kierkegaard certainly does realize that human beings can do more than one thing at a time, and there is no sense in which he is imagining that we literally switch back and forth, in a temporal sense, between these modes. His point, rather, is that “deliberation” is an idealization that never occurs in a pure form in human life. In particular, the ideal of deliberation requires time to stop, that the subject detaches himself

³²“Tilskueren bliver bestandig paa ny Skuespiller.” DSE 45.

³³EO 2, 351/SKS 3, 330

from what he is deliberating about, and that he holds all possibilities open. But that, of course, is impossible. As he deliberates, time continues to pass. And as time passes, more and more possibilities fall away. Just think again about the licentiate attempting to remain uncommitted about the best day and time to travel onward to Ravnshøj. As he does this, he implicitly chooses against those times that are rushing past him. His pretense to neutrality cannot be maintained in the face of the need to choose. The same point is made by William in his letter to A.

When the choice is about an issue of elemental importance to life, the individual must at the same time continue to live, and this is why the longer he puts off the choice, the more easily he comes to alter it, although he goes on pondering [overvejer] and pondering [overvejer] and thereby believes that he is really keeping separate the two alternatives of the choice.³⁴

While Judge William's advice might at first seem to be of a purely practical nature – i.e. wisdom for a young person who has lost his way – the connection with the Ultimatum and the journal entries shows that we are supposed to see A as the practical incarnation of a particular epistemic ideal – viz. the ideal of the perfectly objective investigator.

6 The ideal epistemic agent

According to the Cartesian picture of pure inquiry, the human subject gradually overcomes the illusions and errors that result from the fact that he, unlike a pure mind, is connected to a body, has five senses, is located in one specific place, and is subject to temporal change. Descartes' vision of the ideal epistemic agent is taken up to an extreme degree by Hegel, for whom "the method" is a systematic implementation of Descartes' method of doubt. But what becomes of the human subject and his personality during this process? Kierkegaard claims that the result of the method, if it actually could be carried out, would be to destroy or dissolve the agent's personality, with the absurd consequence that there would be no agent to have the knowledge. In *Either-Or*, Kierkegaard makes this point by describing the acidic effects of the Hegelian ideal on the personality of A. Thus, *Either-Or* stays true

³⁴EO 2, 163/SKS 3, 160

to Kierkegaard's stated belief that some truths can only be communicated indirectly.

The Hegelian ideal epistemic agent is supposed to commit to a claim if and only if the method compels him do so. Conversely, the state of the ideal agent is supposed to be one of suspension in a state of doubt. When this agent is moved to a state of belief, it is because she is being moved along by the force of objective reasons – i.e. reasons that would be compelling for any rational agent as such – and her individual will plays no role in the process. For Hegel, the ideal epistemic agent marches forward according to the dialectical method, and there is never any point at which she needs to make a genuine choice.

According to Kierkegaard, the notion of pure reflection/deliberation is an idealization, for pure reflection could not actually endure for more than an instant: “I can at no instant find complete rest to adopt the position: backward.”³⁵ Recall the operative metaphor, to be backward-facing is to be in the condition of indifferent deliberation, i.e. Hegelian doubt. A himself seems, at times, to recognize the infeasibility of practically implementing the Hegelian ideal.

The doubter is “*Memastigomenos*” (one who is whipped); like a spinning top, he remains on the point for a shorter or longer period depending on the strokes of the whip; he is not able to remain on the point any more than the top is.³⁶

This passage is taken from the *Diapsalmata* – a series of disconnected aphorisms – making it difficult to place it into any overarching argument. However, in his unpublished “*De omnibus dubitandum est*” (written, most likely, just after *Either-Or*), Kierkegaard says that modern philosophy, i.e. Hegelianism, states that “philosophy begins with doubt.” In other words, for Kierkegaard “the doubter” is the person following the method of Hegel.

In his letter to A, Judge William similarly claims that it is impossible for a person to remain indefinitely in this state of objective deliberation.

Now, if a person could continually keep himself on the spear tip of the moment of choice, if he could stop being a human being, if in his innermost being he could be nothing more than an ethereal

³⁵JJ:167/SKS 18, 194

³⁶EO 1, 39/SKS 2, 33

thought, if personality meant nothing more than being a nisse who admittedly goes through the motions but nevertheless always remains the same . . . (then) there could be no question of choice at all.

For a moment that between which the choice is to be made lies – for a moment it seems to lie – outside the person who is choosing; he stands in no relation to it, can maintain himself in a state of indifference toward it. This is the moment of deliberation [Overveielse], but, like the Platonic moment, it actually is not at all.³⁷

To the extent that Judge William’s sentiments mirror Kierkegaard’s own, we are being told that the Hegelian ideal agent – the agent *sub specie aeternitatis* – is an idealization that could never be achieved in time. But what then about the project, launched by Descartes, of finding firm epistemic footing? Is that project to be abandoned?

The evidence suggests that Kierkegaard, while perhaps wavering on this point, is not ready to give up on Descartes’ project of finding the cure for epistemically sick human beings. Kierkegaard simply wants to make a course correction by recalling the active nature of the human knower. To see this, we can turn again to the “Ultimatum”, where the pastor, not incidentally, returns to the question of doubt. Here he addresses the question of one’s doubts about being in the wrong with respect to a loved one – and here things take an unexpected turn. The true lover, says the pastor, desperately wants to be in the wrong with respect to the beloved. The reason, he says, is that the true lover cannot bear the thought that the beloved would love him less. Thus arises the gnawing doubt: what if I have missed some evidence and it is actually my beloved, and not me, who is in the wrong? How can I be sure that I’m in the wrong?

Here the pastor answers: the kind of certainty that you want, a certainty that you can base your life on, cannot be delivered the Hegelian method of doubt. For Hegel’s method aims at producing logically compelling belief, whereas human beings cannot be compelled to “incorporate” beliefs into their whole being: “. . . to incorporate [*at optage*] this acknowledgment in your whole being – this you cannot actually be forced to do.”³⁸ The pastor’s words here illuminate what Judge William had said earlier about the

³⁷EO 2, 164/SKS 3, 160

³⁸EO 2, 350/SKS 3, 329

inadequacy of the method of doubt: “The supposed objectivity that doubt has, and because of which it is so exalted, is a manifestation precisely of its imperfection.”³⁹ That is, the imperfection of the method of doubt is that it calls for detachment, whereas the desired epistemic state is the opposite of detached: it is incorporation of the truth into one’s whole being.

What we see here is Kierkegaard suggesting a correction to the course of modern epistemology: as Descartes had recognized, people want an Archimedian point, i.e. a belief that they can base their lives upon. Philosophers such as Spinoza and Hegel envisioned this Archimedian point as issuing from reason alone, and in such a way that it would compel belief from the rational thinker. However, says Kierkegaard, to function as the Archimedian point for one’s life, a belief must be “incorporated” into one’s whole being.

Kierkegaard’s picture here becomes a bit less mysterious when we understand the role that the notions of “incorporation” [*Optagelse*] and “appropriation” [*Tilegnelse*] play in his thinking.⁴⁰ The key point is that an incorporated belief has a decisive effect on one’s personality, including one’s motivational structure: “It [i.e. belief that I am in the wrong] manifests its upbuilding power in a twofold way, partly by putting an end to doubt and calming the cares of doubt, partly by animating to action.”⁴¹ We are reminded here that Kierkegaard began his philosophical career by saying that he wanted to find that idea for which he would be willing to live or die – i.e. not just to know something objectively true, but to find a truth that would animate him to action.⁴²

7 The way forward

Given that Kierkegaard’s primary criticism of Hegelian philosophy is that it fails to address “what should I do?” it would seem suitable to raise the

³⁹EO 2, 212/SKS 3, 191

⁴⁰The Danish verb “at tilegne” is a difficult to render into English, but it is similar to the notion of “making something one’s own”. In the major translations, “at tilegne” is usually translated as “to appropriate”, and the notion plays a central role in the *Postscript*, where it is used to distinguish faith [*Tro*] from knowledge [*Viden*]. It is interesting to see then that this notion is already doing significant work in *Either-Or*, especially in the criticism of A as attempting to hold the world at arm’s distance.

⁴¹EO 2, 350/SKS 3, 330

⁴²“What I really need is to be clear about what I am to do, not what I must know, except in the way knowledge must precede all action.” AA 12

question of what Kierkegaard is suggesting, via *Either-Or*, that his reader should do. It's one thing to extract a descriptive philosophy of science out of Kierkegaard – e.g. what is the aim of science? – and it's another thing to ask how one ought to approach science if one has “appropriated” the lessons of *Either-Or*.

Some of the lessons of *Either-Or* seem already to have been taken on by analytic philosophers of science – not because they learned them from Kierkegaard, but because of Bertrand Russell's rejection of Hegelianism, which brought a renewed appreciation for all that is contingent in the actual practice of science. Thus, for example, it is a commonplace in contemporary philosophy of science that finding a replacement for a failing scientific theory is never a matter of a logical (dialectical) process, but is always a matter of creative discovery involving non-trivial choices or “dares” on the part of the theorist. Of course, most philosophers of science would say that these kinds of dares are radically different than the Kierkegaardian kind of dare, i.e. a leap of faith. In particular, while it may be permitted to make non-logical leaps when one is in the “context of discovery”, there is a later stage, viz. the “context of justification” where objective standards of theory acceptance come back into play.

Nonetheless, even the relevance of this distinction – between context of discovery and context of justification – is brought into question by the considerations in *Either-Or*. In particular, philosophers of science engage in an idealization when they separate out a context of discovery, which is conceived of as timeless and resource-unlimited domain for free invention. In actual scientific practice, there are many significant choices that occur within the context of discovery – such as the choice of whether to look for more data, or to take the current data set as sufficient – and these choices are (as Judge William would say) decisive. Thus, scientific practice cannot be cleanly divided into two phases – discovery and justification – where only the second phase is regulated by standards of rationality.

Either-Or also puts forward some more innovative ideas about science that are similar to the ideas of Niels Bohr, but which would still be viewed with suspicion by many contemporary philosophers. Most particularly, while few of us would identify as followers of Descartes, and fewer still as followers of Hegel, we are nonetheless firmly embedded in the Cartesian-Hegelian tradition, where the ultimate goal of science is thought to be: to describe the world *as it is in itself*. (In fact, many philosophers would say that's just basic scientific realism.) If this were the aim of science, then Kierkegaard

would say that the pursuit of science would indeed have an erosive effect on one's personality. But I have claimed something even stronger: Kierkegaard is pushing for a different picture of the aim of science.

What could this alternative view of the aim of science be? If science does not aim to see the world as it is in itself, then aren't we left with the view of David Hume or Ernst Mach, where science is a tool to help human animals satisfy their desires? In my opinion, Kierkegaard provides us with the resources to reframe the debate between naïve realism (science aims to describe the world as it is in itself) and antirealism (science aims to save the phenomena). First, Kierkegaard warns us against anthropomorphizing science, as if it were a thing that has goals. We should remember, instead, that science is a set of activities that human beings choose to do in a certain fashion in order to try to realize their goals. Second, Kierkegaard reminds us that it is the responsibility of each individual to choose herself. Combined with Kierkegaard's talk about integration of knowledge into one's personality, we see that part of choosing oneself is deciding what kind of knowledge one sees as valuable, and worth the effort to acquire. Seen in this light, the scientist's goal should not be to become the perfect spectator, who passively describes the world as it is in itself. The scientist is also an actor, who must make countless non-trivial choices about which research program to pursue, which methods to employ, which data to collect, which books to read, whom to talk to, etc. This simple point is easily forgotten if one gets stuck looking backwards.

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