Either / Or – Soren Kierkegaard

Part One – Containing the Papers of A

Preface

In this section, Kierkegaard, writing as the editor of *Either/Or*, Victor Eremita, sets the scene the book is written under. Inside an “escritoire” (writing desk) he discovers by chance a set of letters. Upon closer examination, he learns that they appear to comprise oeuvres (essays and letters mainly) written by two different authors. The first of these contains a number of aesthetic essays and a set of diary entries, while the second contains letters, ethical in content, written to the author of the first. He is able to identify the ethical writer as one judge Vilhelm, but since he cannot find a name for the first author, elects to call him A and, for balance, to simply call Vilhelm, B.

He goes on to tell us that he has collated the various essays and letters and attempted to put them in some kind of order. The result is the book the reader holds in his or her hands, Either/Or.

One interesting point in the preface is that Eremita expresses doubt about the philosophical proposition that the outward is the same as the inward. This is a criticism of Hegel’s doctrine of essence which holds that the inward (essence) and the outward (appearance) of a thing are identical. The papers of both A and B confirm for the author that this is false. The portrayals they present of their respective authors do not align with who they truly are (especially in A’s case). The escritoire is a metaphor for this idea as well, as the exterior (an ordinary writing desk) contained something quite unexpected within (the papers of A and B).

Diapsalmata

This is a collection of short refrains written by A. They seem to espouse a number of themes which can be broadly summarised below:

1. Melancholy – Melancholy and sorrow are praised as “my castle” and the “most faithful mistress I have known” while joy is “attended by death”.
2. Life is empty and lacks meaning – He constantly depicts life as dull and boring, he is “weary of everything”, and sees life as nothing more than a “rehash” without variation. He also says life is “back-to-front”, meaning the future is empty and it is the past which drives the present.
3. Critical of modern society – He lambasts the modern idea that the “meaning of life was getting a livelihood, its goal acquiring a titular office” and that “fear of God was to go to communion once a year.” He also criticises the modern attitude of busyness, which he thinks achieves nothing.
4. Desire/passion/enthusiasm/faith – Desire in folk literature is praised for its boldness. Modern desire is “both sinful and boring” by comparison because all it does is covet its neighbour. Rejects modernity because it is “without passion… The thoughts in their hearts are too paltry to be sinful.”
5. Reason/recollection/intellect/philosophy – Rejects materialist notions of cause and effect because sometimes large causes produce small effects while small causes produce colossal effects. Philosophy fails to deliver value. Disdains recollection because that means that “life-situation… ceases to exist.” Reason is useless without passion.
6. Life is not our choice – “no one is asked when he wishes to enter life, nor when he wishes to leave.”

The Immediate Erotic Stages or The Musical Erotic

This essay is basically given over to praise of the musical erotic and, in particular, Mozart’s opera, Don Giovanni, as the pre-eminent example of this art form. To this end, A offers an argument for why this piece (as a musical erotic) is the greatest of all the classics. He also identifies three stages in the immediate erotic.

A categorises all aesthetic works by two criteria; the idea and the medium, and orders these on a continuum ranging from the abstract to the concrete. His account can be represented by the following table:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Abstract  Concrete | Idea  The sensual  Historical | Medium  Music  Architecture / Sculpture / Painting  (Language) Epic / Poetry |

An idea becomes concrete by being historical while a medium becomes more concrete the closer it comes to language since language is the most concrete of all media. Abstract ideas are portrayed at a general level whereas concrete ideas appear through particulars. The more abstract (and therefore empty) the idea and the more abstract (and therefore empty) the medium, the greater the probability that the work cannot be repeated since it has already acquired its perfect expression; once and for all.

This is important because A reserves the rank of first class for those works whose idea (not medium) is the most abstract; i.e. the sensual. He goes on to point out that the only medium which can represent the sensual is music. Sculpture is insufficient because sensuality is inwardness and art is ineffective because sensuality exists over a succession of moments and therefore cannot be captured in a single moment on canvas. The epic and poetry are equally unsatisfactory because sensuality is immediate whereas language calls for reflection.

To illustrate the point he is aiming at, A contrasts Faust with Don Giovanni. The former is a classic with a historical idea and language as its medium. Since the idea is historical, each age will have its Faust and since the language is medium (therefore more concrete) more works like Faust can be imagined. Don Giovanni, on the other hand, deals with the most abstract idea (sensuality) and the most abstract medium (music) so, standing so far above the concrete (the historical/particular) there can only be a few classics like Don Giovanni possible.

A argues that Christianity brought sensuality into the world because it, for the first time, excluded sensuality from the spiritual; that is, opposed itself to it. Prior to Christianity, the Greeks knew sensuality but under the category of soul, in which sensuality was included as a harmonious part of the whole. Sensuality didn’t therefore exist as a principle until Christianity excluded it under the category of spirituality.

He also argues that Christianity introduced the idea of representation; that is, the total represented in a single individual, vis-a-vis, Christ. By way of comparison, for the Greeks, Eros was the god of love but was not in love himself. Because of this he didn’t represent love; rather his ‘power’ came from other people who referred love to him.

So the sensual, in particular for A, the erotic, appears as a principle and demands representation or expression in its immediacy. The sensual can be represented in its mediate state via reflection through language but for its immediate representation we must turn to music. These considerations lead A to note that while each medium can represent a number of things, they each have their “absolute object”, of which he mentions three:

Music – erotic sensual genius

Sculpture – human beauty

Painting – celestially transfigured beauty

Focusing on the immediate erotic captured in the medium of music, A identifies three ‘stages’, which he nevertheless cautions exist only in concept and are perhaps more appropriately termed “metamorphoses”:

First stage – The sensual awakens but the object of desire is not yet separated out so there is no desire as such (the desire and the desired object are one). Desire at this stage is dreaming. This stage is characterised by melancholy.

Second stage – Desire awakens, yielding the possibility of an object. However, this desire is aimed, not at a specific object, but at discovery, searching the multiplicity for the object it seeks to discover. Because of this desire is still not specified as desire; it is a seeking.

Third stage – Desire, as desire for a specific object, is fully realised. This is desiring.

The immediate sensual is characterised by passion, intoxication and indulgence but it cannot be said to be sinful because it is without reflection. It is only with reflection that action enters the ethical realm and becomes subject to ethical categories.

Bringing the conversation back to Don Giovanni, A notes that the sensual erotic is there conceived as something novel, seduction. The seducer is absent from the Greek consciousness because their erotic was of the soul and therefore faithful; even if a particular individual were to take many lovers.

However, the word ‘seduction’ brings to mind images of wily cunning and planning whereas Don Giovanni lacks this kind of reflective consciousness. Rather, he merely desires passionately and immediately. It is in this fashion, and only in this fashion, that he seduces. Because of this, A claims Don Giovanni lacks the power of speech, rather he is musical. If he had language, he would be reflective.

Ancient Tragedy’s Reflection in the Modern

In this essay, A argues that modern tragedy is more centred on pain, as opposed to ancient tragedy which was more about sorrow. He attempts to show how tragedy as sorrow (therefore true tragedy) can nevertheless be found in modern tragedy.

Before getting to the meat of the section, A notes that the modern age is dissolute, with the bonds that hold the state together and the power of religion both having been weakened. We are more melancholy and more in despair than the ancients were.

In ancient tragedy, subjectivity was not fully conscious and reflective. Rather, the individual was intricately tied to external factors like state, family and destiny. It is this interplay between action (active) and event (passive) that yields genuine suffering. Modern tragedy, on the other hand, removes these external factors, transforming the immediate tragic into a reflective subjectivity.

This is best illustrated in tragic guilt. Modern tragedy, in removing all ‘events’ from the narrative, makes the hero absolutely guilty and fully accountable or responsible for his or her life, but this transforms aesthetic guilt into ethical guilt, making the tragic hero or heroine, bad. The problem is that we are relative (related to a world full of events and people over which we have no control), not absolute, and a portrayal that denies this is both an illusion and ridiculous. In losing the tragic, the modern age has thus gained despair.

A remarks that the aesthetic tragic is infinitely lenient (a maternal love), while the ethical is strict and harsh. The religious, on the other hand, is a paternal love since it contains the ethical but in a modified form. The aesthetic (tragedy) kicks in before the ethical (sin) whereas the religious appears after the ethical, bestowing its consolation on the individual. A bemoans the fact that modernity has lost both the aesthetic (tragedy’s tears) and the religious (divine mercy).

There is a distinction between sorrow and pain that is important to be aware of here. In ancient tragedy there was more sorrow and less pain, whereas in modern tragedy this is reversed. Sorrow is always more substantial than pain because pain involves a reflection on suffering. The sorrow in Greek tragedy is therefore always deeper because of the ambiguity in the aesthetic guilt; i.e. the hero is not absolutely responsible or accountable for his problems; the gods, his family, his destiny, etc., all share some of that burden. In modern tragedy, the hero alone must shoulder this burden so the pain is greater while the sorrow is less. This pain tends to be revealed through anxiety in modern tragedy because anxiety always involves a reflection on time; either the past or the future. One cannot be anxious about the present.

A illustrates all of this by demonstrating how Antigone from the Greek tragedy Oedipus can be reworked in a modern tragedy so as to still elicit sorrow and therefor qualify as a true tragic interest, even given the relative weaknesses of modernity.

(In this essay, A introduces a Society of people he calls his Symparanekromenoi (a word Kierkegaard invented meaning roughly, ‘fellowship of buried lives’). He mentions that this Society does not produce completed works because such works no longer have any connection to the poetic personality. Rather, they produce “essays in the fragmentary endeavour” or what he calls “posthumous papers”, which in Kierkegaardian lexicon does not mean something published after death, but rather refers to written works which are broken-off and incomplete.)

Shadowgraphs

In this essay, A investigates reflective sorrow as it is manifested in three tragic female characters; Marie Beaumarchais in Goethe’s Clavigo, Donna Elvira in Mozart’s Don Giovanni and Margrete in Goethe’s Faust. ‘Shadowgraphs’ are what A calls pictures which contain hints of the reflective sorrow raging within the individual.

He begins with a very Nietzschean address to his Symparanekromenoi that toasts the night before discussing the subject matter properly. Later, he describes this Society as an order that loves sorrow and boldly sallies forth to find it wherever it lies hidden in the world and bring it to the light of day.

Art belongs to the category of space so it is capable of representing “repose” while poetry, which belongs to that of time, can represent movement. This has significance because A wants to consider how best to represent joy and sorrow aesthetically. The former, he claims, is capable of representation in art because while joy manifests externally, sorrow, particularly reflective sorrow, hides deep within, often even with the aim of deceiving others as to its presence.

There are two reasons reflective sorrow cannot be represented in art. The first is that since there is no correlation between the inner (a person’s feelings) and the outer (a person’s appearance), the former cannot be represented spatially. Secondly, reflective sorrow lacks repose, it is constantly in motion, and so cannot be represented by a static art form.

Reflective sorrow is that sorrow which has become intellectual rather than aesthetic, thought rather than felt, which we constantly turn over in our minds, replay scenes and conversations over and over, etc. It is also constantly in search for its object and this is what constitutes its sorrow and pain. The best example of this is an unhappy love grounded in deception. The deceived cannot be certain that she (or he) was in fact deceived and this constant toing and froing creates the reflective sorrow. Because of this constant fluctuation, to represent reflective sorrow would require a series of pictures which would lack artistic value because they would then be true, not beautiful.

The remainder of this essay is spent analysing reflective sorrow in the three female tragic characters mentioned earlier.

The Unhappiest One

This is another short essay in which the Symparekromenoi feature heavily as an imagined audience. It praises misfortune and constitutes a search to find the unhappiest person.

A begins this essay with an address to his Symparekromenoi describing them as not just thinking and speaking aphoristically (recall their dislike of completed works) but as living aphoristically. They are solitary individuals standing outside the society of normal men, not sharing in their joys and sorrows, without faith in happiness, “we who believe in nothing but misfortune”.

They do not fear death because they realise this is not the greatest misfortune… life is. Happiness is dying in old age, happier is dying at birth and the happiest is not even being born at all. And thus begins the “competition” to find the unhappiest person, from which none, living, dead or fictional, are excluded save the happy and those who fear death.

To be unhappy, one must be “absent from himself”, that is, never present to oneself, and this means living either in the past (remembering) or in the future (hoping). However, even someone hoping or remembering isn’t truly unhappy because they are still present to themselves in their hoping or remembering. The truly unhappy must be unable to be present to themselves at all and that means constantly being thrown between the two; hoping (remembering), then losing hope (losing memory), then hoping (remembering) again, and so on.

A then asserts that the unhappiest will involve a combination of the two; hoping and remembering, and this must mean that “what prevents him being present in hope is memory, and what prevents him being present in memory is hope.” In Kierkegaard’s own words:

This is what it amounts to: on the one hand, he constantly hopes for something he should be remembering, his hope is constantly disappointed, but on its being disappointed he discovers that the reason is not that the goal has been moved further on but that he has gone past it, that it has already been experienced, or is supposed to have been, and has thus passed over into memory. On the other hand, he constantly remembers something he should be hoping for; for in thought the future is something he has already taken up, he has experienced it in thought, and that which he has experienced is something he remembers instead of hopes for.

In short, all of this means that this person’s life has no meaning. “His life knows no rest and has no content, he is not present to himself in the moment, not present to himself in the future, for the future has been experienced, and not in the past, because the past has still not arrived.”

A goes on to specify a number of individuals who come close to winning the title including Niobe, Antigone, Job, and the prodigal son’s father, but finally awards the prize to an unknown, nameless individual, perhaps to emphasise the abstract over the particular.

The essay finishes with the paradox that since they believe in unhappiness over happiness, the unhappiest is actually the happiest and the happiest actually the unhappiest, “what is life but madness, and faith but folly, and hope but reprieve, and love but salt in the wound.”

Crop Rotation

This essay is a reflection on how “boredom is a root of all evil” and people in the modern age are the most boring of all. A also suggests how we can remedy this through change (an analogy with the way farmers rotate their crops).

A divides boring people into two categories; those who bore others and those who bore themselves. The former are the “plebeians, the mass”, while the latter are the “elect, the nobility”, who also tend to be those who are “busy in the world”.

He disagrees with the common understanding that idleness is a root of all evil by claiming that it is only those who know how to be idle who have raised themselves above the level of animals. Despite the fact that restless activity keeps a person beneath the level of humanity, many people manage to believe that it is human nature to work.

He also finds fault in the “apostle of empty enthusiasm” who derives pleasure from the significant and the insignificant equally, classifying this as an attempt at diversion which is actually a form of boredom.

The remedy for boredom is change (crop rotation), but he contrasts *in*tensive with *ex*tensive change. Extensive change (changing the soil) involves constantly moving, looking for something new and different and is fundamentally unhelpful. Intensive change (changing the method of cultivation and type of grain), on the other hand, involves limiting oneself so that one can get pleasure from the smallest of things.

Every particular change one performs under this principle involves a relation between remembering and forgetting. We all want to forget certain things, however “being able to forget depends on how one remembers, but how one remembers depends in turn on how one experiences reality.” If we let ourselves get carried away and enjoy everything to the utmost, we will be left with a number of memories we will be unable to forget. In addition, we ought not to aim to only forget the unpleasant because even the pleasant can be unpleasant, as in when they arouse a feeling of privation once the pleasant activity has been completed. In fact, he goes on to say, the unpleasant ought *not* to be avoided just because it is unpleasant, since it is actually a “piquant ingredient in the contrariety of life”.

This ties in with what A says about forgetting not being the same as forgetfulness, i.e. the disappearance of particular impressions. Rather, this is remembering in such a way that what was experienced is shorn of anything you cannot use. A calls it “remembering poetically”.

Friendship ought to be treated in the same way. We ought not to “stick fast” in our relationships with others. Naturally, marriage is to be avoided at all costs. The man and woman promise each other something they cannot deliver, namely, eternal love, and when the falsehood is realised it is too late to do anything about it. This is why marriage is “stiffened in so many ways with moral supports.” Any life relation in which “one can become several” is to be avoided because it curtails freedom; here he is particularly thinking of raising children.

One must avoid “vocational responsibility” because one then becomes a “tiny little pivot in the machinery of the corporate state”. Titles, in particular, are to be avoided. However, this doesn’t mean one should be inactive. One must also vary oneself and he points here to the importance of controlling moods (in others and the environment, it is impossible to produce one’s own moods at will) and arbitrariness. To live arbitrarily we ought to do things like watching the middle of a play, reading the third part of a book, etc. In this way one gets an entirely accidental enjoyment from these things. There are also an abundance of arbitrary enjoyments to be had outside oneself, in life, and one should be prepared to take advantage of these when they present themselves.

The Seducer’s Diary

This section consists of diary entries and letters written by a seducer, Johannes, which recounts in detail the seduction he visits on one young lady named Cordelia. He deliberately worms his way into her life after catching a brief glimpse of her one day then befriends a young man, Edvard, who likes Cordelia but is too shy and backwards to act on his urges. Johannes helps Edvard court Cordelia for the sole purpose of priming her, making her more “interesting” for him while he ingratiates himself with her aunt. At the right moment, he declares his love to Cordelia and the two become engaged even though she still doesn’t know what love is and certainly doesn’t love him yet. After he has made Cordelia fall in love with him, he induces her to break the engagement (convincing her that love can only bloom in the absence of betrothal) before sleeping with her. Of course, the moment he sleeps with her, she loses her innocence and he in turn loses all interest in her.

Johannes is an intelligent but arrogant man who sees himself as ‘above’ the people (typically women) whom he manipulates, analysing them in intense psychological detail as if they were nothing more than toys to be moved about and positioned simply for his aesthetic amusement. Much of his commentary is something like a playbook for how to get girls. He describes how to arouse a woman’s attention (this involves a considerable amount of stalking), how to make her fall in love, what to write in letters, when to be forward and when to play it cool, etc.

He is obsessed with controlling every detail of his romantic liaisons and the reason for this is what separates him from a typical ladies man, what makes him an ‘aesthete’. He lives his life seeking aesthetically ‘beautiful’ moments; attempting to live “poetically”. The beautiful is best captured in the erotic which is why he works to manifest it in romantic relationships and this goal requires him to meticulously plan every meeting, every conversation, every action, in order to extract every ounce of the erotic “beautiful” from the seduction.

This whole endeavour is an attempt to ‘poeticise’ his way into her heart, that is, construct an aesthetically “beautiful” relationship, every second of which he can savour to the fullest. The diary entries end with Johannes musing over whether it would be possible to “poeticize oneself out of a girl” and make her terminate the relationship in such a way that she were to believe that she wanted to end it herself.

Part Two – Containing the Papers of B: Letters to A

The Aesthetic Validity of Marriage

This is a letter written by the judge, Vilhelm, directly to either the author of the Seducer’s diary in the first part, Johannes, or A (who may actually be the same person), specifically defending the theses that marital love retains and enhances the aesthetic significance present in romantic love by embracing, rather than standing in opposition to, the ethical and the religious.[[1]](#footnote-1)

First, Vilhelm criticises Johannes’ working so hard to bring out the “beautiful” because all he captures in reality is his own exalted mood and it provides him with nothing more than “phantom-images” which ultimately mean nothing.

Vilhelm analyses romantic love into the following aesthetic elements; immediate (as opposed to reflective), based on sensual beauty and containing the eternal. The problem is that when it becomes reflective love, and therefore ethical in nature, these aesthetic elements reveal themselves as illusory. One way this manifests is where romantic couples can love each other (forever) today but reserve a way out if they should so desire later (divorce) and also in the marriage of convenience which focuses mainly on the details or practicalities of life rather than love for the partner. The eternal is lost here because this depends on a rational calculation, and a rational calculation is always concerned with the temporal.

So romantic love loses its aesthetic qualities when it becomes reflective. However, Vilhelm claims that the aesthetic resurfaces when it enters a higher sphere; the religious (namely, Christianity), where rational reflection ends and we find ourselves beholden to a different standard.

Next, he moves to marriage (which includes the ethical and religious factors in addition to the aesthetic), but since this presupposes being in love, he must consider love first. He elects to focus on first love. First love, by virtue of it being first in time, is eternal (your first love will always be your first love) and therefore unable to be repeated. It is therefore of the highest significance. It is also a state of absolute wakefulness, focused completely on a definite object, to the exclusion of everything else. In addition, it is the unity of opposites; freedom and necessity (while the lover feels him or herself drawn irresistibly to the other, in this very attraction, he or she feels their total freedom in desiring the beloved), the universal and the singular (in that it has the universal (love) *as* the singular (the beloved)), the sensual and the spiritual (the spirit *is* sensual), and the instant and eternity. And it has all of this, not via reflection, but immediately.

But first (romantic) love can raise itself to the religious if the lovers feel gratitude to God. In this way the religious *encompasses* first love and the sensual rather than opposing or annihilating it. Marriage is a further deepening of this transition to the religious which nevertheless retains and even enhances all of the aesthetic beauty present in first love *without being reflective* and thereby stranding itself in the ethical.

Vilhelm thinks that marriage has an “inner harmony” which makes asking the question ‘why’ a misunderstanding. Marriages which don’t rely on any external ‘why’s’ – that is, reasons, such as to have children, to make a home, to build character, for money, etc. – are the genuinely successful and loving ones. To be aesthetic marriage must have no ‘why’s’. Nevertheless, *through* marriage all of those ‘why’s’ are naturally satisfied and this too provides marriage with aesthetic beauty.

Vilhelm next looks at the wedding ceremony. The ceremony does a number of things. It fastens the bride and bridegroom to the body of the human race, uniting the singular with the universal. It announces that sin has entered the world, but in the first place this is only a general statement (not necessarily applying to individuals) and in the second, having acknowledged sin and humbling oneself before it, it enables one to stand higher than one stood before. It also exacts a vow but, rather than this being a third-party binding, it is actually an expression of the individual’s absolute freedom. The result is that marriage is even more aesthetically pleasing than first love because “in its immediacy it contains the unity of a larger number of opposites.” Marriage, far from being a tiresome moral enterprise, is in fact, poetic.

The key distinction between first love and marital love is that the former is external while the latter, with an ethical and religious focus, is directed inward.

Vilhelm also mentions some difficulties marital love has to contend with and which he divides into the external and the internal. For Johannes, the former rob life of its aesthetic beauty but Vilhelm claims that nothing external can overcome the aesthetic in a person and the way to deal with them is to make them internal.

Regarding the latter, the internal difficulties, Vilhelm discusses Johannes’ belief that the monotony of married life is a problem for aesthetic beauty. He resolves this with reference to ‘history’. The individual life has two kinds of history, external and internal. External history reflects the individual’s struggle to acquire what he or she desires. Internal history begins with this brute possession and develops as the individual fully appropriates the thing possessed. The difference in the words ‘possess’ and ‘appropriate’ here can be illustrated by a conqueror that ‘possesses’ a land he has conquered and one who can be said to have ‘appropriated’ that land because he rules it wisely. The former (external) occurs in the instant while the latter (internal) can only occur over time. Romantic love manifests in the moment but being a good husband is something that must be done every day. The former can be represented in the arts but the latter can only be represented by being lived. With this we have reached the highest form of the aesthetic, which reconciles with life itself.

Johannes lives for the exhilaration of the moment but when that moment ends, as it must, he has nothing left. Just when he needs to begin, he abandons the endeavour because he has failed to understand its historical nature. ‘First love’ obtains its significance precisely because it is locked in time and repetition is therefore impossible, but true love, being historical and having a completely different relation to time and repetition, works itself out *in time* thereby acquiring a deeper, internal significance. In this way, the healthy individual lives in hope and also recollection, the latter allowing him or her to mark each instant, so that the further back the recollection goes, the more repetition he or she notes giving life a deeper, more substantial continuity.

Related to the above, Johannes has mistaken peace and quiet in marital life for boredom. He constantly lives outside himself, deriving stimulating experiences from circumstances around him but Vilhelm argues that this is not true happiness or true love. True love is built on something deeper and more substantial than constant change and external titillation.

Finally, Vilhelm mentions that Johannes has the despairing notion that duty is the enemy of love and he therefore turns tail as soon as duty rears its ugly head. Doing this, however, admits that love is impotent and weak in the face of duty. If this is true, Johannes is then contradicting himself in chasing after it as the highest and most valuable among aesthetic pleasures. Johannes’ position as a seeker of aesthetic beauty through romantic love then becomes inconsistent if it turns out that love cannot overcome duty.

Equilibrium between the Aesthetic and the Ethical in the Development of Personality

This is another letter written by Vilhelm to Johannes (or A (see earlier footnote)). Here he justifies the title of the book by presenting the case for the ethical life as opposed to the aesthetic and emphasising the importance and gravity of making the either/or choice between the two.

The first point Vilhelm raises is that we make minor either/or choices every day but the *absolute* either/or choice only appears when we choose between good and evil. Despite this, it is the choice itself (that is choosing *either* this *or* that) which is the crucial element in forming a personality, rather than the actual content of the either/or choice. *What* we choose is, in this sense, less important than *that* we choose, because in truth we cannot refrain from choice except by deluding ourselves. In that case, either others will choose for us or some element within us will make the choice without our conscious will.

So one might be tempted to say that Johannes has taken the either/or choice between the ethical and the aesthetic and chosen the latter. However, Vilhelm disagrees because the *absolute* either/or choice, the one between good and evil, *is itself ethical*. To choose the aesthetic is therefore no choice at all. A choice in favour of the aesthetic is wholly immediate and made among a multiplicity of differing options, any one of which may be chosen in the next moment. Because of this, the ‘choice’ of the aesthetic does not qualify as an *absolute* either/or choice. The absolute either/or arises not when this or that is chosen but when the personality chooses with seriousness and “proclaims itself in its inner infinitude”. Such an attitude lifts the either/or to the ethical sphere, regardless of which path is chosen. If someone then ‘chooses’ the aesthetic, they have still made this choice under the category of the ethical, even if the life they have chosen can best be described as *un*ethical.

Another way to envisage this is to see that the first, the absolute, either/or is something of a ‘meta-choice’ meaning the choice between whether to choose good and evil or exclude them. This ‘primordial’ choice decides how one approaches and views the world; ethically (in categories of good and evil) or unethically. After this initial choice, one is then presented once more with the *relative* choice between good or evil in which the aesthetic may still be chosen but only *relatively*.

The either/or choice presented here is a choice in which a personality becomes, not something different from what he or she was before, but in which one becomes oneself. It is the defining moment for consciousness to be. Prior to this it is nothing.

Vilhelm also briefly mentions two spheres which are crucial to this essay; thought and freedom. The former is the province of philosophy. It looks at the world under the category of necessity and is therefore devoid of any absolute either/or. It is purely externally-directed. A worldview that embraces freedom is inward-directed, turns on choice and is concentrated on action.

So what does it mean to live aesthetically? It is to live in such a way that “[a person] is immediately what [he or she] is”. The aim of the aesthete is to enjoy life and the emphasis is placed on immediacy. Vilhelm then divides into two the different views of life which embrace this underlying theme:

* Enjoyment derived from outside the individual; e.g. wealth, glory, nobility, etc.
* Enjoyment derived from within the individual though not “posited” by him or her:
  + Health or beauty
  + Developing talent
  + Satisfying desire

The above all choose a single aspect to be life’s meaning but a single aspect that is inherently diverse (e.g. desire is a single aspect but we each have many competing desires) and confined to the immediate.

It is no defence to claim that one must enjoy oneself enjoying life under one of the above conditions because the enjoyment is still tied to an external condition and this makes it inherently relative and dissatisfying.

Next, Vilhelm discusses melancholy. He defines it as “hysteria of the spirit”. When life becomes totally saturated in its immediacy, the individual personality seeks to lift him or herself above this earthly realm to one of eternal validity. If this process is thwarted and the “spirit” is sent back, melancholy sets in. Melancholy is different from sorrow in that it lacks a definite worldly object. People suffering from melancholy typically can’t explain their melancholy whereas a person who is merely sad knows precisely the reason for their sorrow.

He also discusses despair. Despair arises when one of the aforementioned aesthetic goals of life fails to materialise; the guy doesn’t get the girl, someone fails to realise their talents, a certain desire is thwarted, etc. But why does this arouse despair? Vilhelm argues that it can’t be because they discovered that their goal was transitory since the goal itself hasn’t changed in any way; it was always transitory. Therefore, if they do despair, it must have been the case that they were actually in despair beforehand and just didn’t know it. In this way every aesthetic view on life turns out to be despair because it is built on what may or may not be and is necessarily a life-view with its condition outside oneself.

In addition, despair turns out to be the final life-view of the aesthetic individual and a valuable one because it indicates that the individual is ready to transition to the realisation that there is something more, something absolute and eternal, to life. Vilhelm specifically mentions poets in this regard, who live unhappy lives in their despair, suspended above the finite but beneath the infinite as they are.

So, how does despair differ from doubt? Doubt is a despair of thought while despair is a doubt of the personality. The former is not a conscious choice but a necessity which follows from a logical and *impersonal* assessment of the situation. Despair, on the other hand, is a deeper and more comprehensive movement because the whole personality is engaged. In addition, despair never follows necessarily; rather one always despairs in full freedom. To truly despair then one must truly choose despair (as an absolute), but in doing so one has already moved beyond despair and chosen oneself in one’s eternal validity. Despair is thus the key to overcoming melancholy and the inconstancy of the frivolous.

This brings us back to the main theme of this essay; namely that choosing absolutely, irrespective of whether the choice is for this or that, is to choose oneself. So what is the self? Vilhelm’s answer is that the self is the most abstract of things and the most concrete of things – freedom. We can wish for many, many things but we never wish to become someone else. So, we imagine there is something about us that remains absolute in relation to everything else. The most abstract expression for this thing is freedom. However, we still choose ourselves and not another therefore the self must also be concrete. My consciousness is not a consciousness of freedom in general but a consciousness of this determinate free being.

There are two dialectical movements here. What is chosen (the self) must exist prior to the choice (or else it is creation, not a choice) but it also does not exist prior to the choice (or the choice is a choice merely between finite things and therefore not absolute). The solution is to realise that my choice is a choice of a self which already exists, but a self which is absolutely different from my former self because it is chosen absolutely.

In choosing this self one now discovers that it comes with a history in which he or she stands in relation to other individuals and groups of people. In this way, delving into the isolated personality ends in a deeper connection with the whole.

This choice of self does not come easy; it is a fight. The expression of this fight is *repentance*. We repent ourselves back into the family, into the race, until we find ourselves in God. Repentance is the only way one can absolutely choose oneself, it is what it means to do so. Vilhelm also equates repentance with loving God. To love God is to repent. The love we have through thought is not absolute love because it is a necessary love. When we love freely and love God, we repent.

In addition, if choosing myself absolutely is not to create myself then I must also choose myself as guilty. In this framework, we can see why the sins of the father must also be inherited and repented by the son; because it is only in this way that he can choose himself absolutely. Naturally, repentance found its first true expression in Christianity.

At this point, Vilhelm asks what it is to live ethically. In contrast to the aesthetic, which was to live in such a way that “[a person] is immediately what [he or she] is”, “the ethical factor is that by which [one] becomes what [one] becomes”. The former is built on a necessity, the latter, a free choice. Another formulation Vilhelm gives is living ethically which means disregarding appearance for conscience.

First, the ethical, absolute self is accessed through despair. Vilhelm points out that we are unable to judge another’s progress in this area because the external appearance may differ from the internal state (a recurring motif through *Either/Or*). As we have seen, the self chosen absolutely is not a mere abstraction, but rather an infinitely “rich concretion, a multitude of determinate qualities, of characteristics; it is, in short, the whole aesthetic self which is chosen ethically.” In this way, nothing changes about the specific individual and yet he or she is completely different.

This absolute choice of the self is not accomplished through thought. In thinking, I can be infinite but not absolutely so because the very act of thinking eliminates the self. It is only when I *choose* myself absolutely that I make myself infinite absolutely. This absolute choice of myself is my freedom and only once this choice has been made is an absolute difference posited, namely that between good and evil. The interesting inference from this is that good and evil only *are* by virtue of my willing them (through willing/choosing myself), which is not to say they are merely subjective. Under this, both evil *and* good are essential parts of me *and* they are both not essential parts of me.

The aesthetic life-view was despair because it was built on the transitory but the ethical transcends despair because it is built on what *is*. Considering oneself aesthetically, one becomes conscious of oneself as a multiplicity, a diversity amongst which the self does choose but in a relative, not an absolute, way. I can be this or that, cultivate this or that trait, do this or that, but these are all immediate ways of becoming that lack a deeper founding on an absolute difference, namely that which operates on the ethical category of good and evil as opposed to a non-ethical category which excludes them.

Aesthetic living finds pleasure through *mood*. The aesthete tries to completely lose him or herself within mood because the more one merges with mood, the more he or she is in the moment. Ethical living is no stranger to mood but here mood doesn’t assume the same degree of importance. Someone living ethically is not lost inside the mood; he or she is above mood. This discussion also contains the secret for overcoming desire, namely not in trying to do away with it but in determining the instant. Once you master the moment and rise above the immediate, desire, because it is a phenomenon of the instant, loses its hold on you.

To illustrate some of the above, Vilhelm now looks at two different life-views. The first is Greek. For the Greeks, the choice was an individual one in which they severed themselves from the whole until they found in themselves an abstract identity. This is still an ethical attempt and was expressed in the individual’s attempt to develop virtue within him or herself. Hence the extolled virtues were personal, as opposed to civic. The defect here is that the ideal state was too abstract and removed from the world.

The mystic life-view is deeper than this. The mystic has chosen him or herself absolutely although they usually express this by saying they have chosen God, which amounts to the same thing. The problem with this is that the world is meaningless to the mystic for he or she is completely absorbed in contemplation of God. The mystic’s real life is prayer. This is fine, but ethical prayer is more an intention, a call to action, the mystic’s prayer is powered by eroticism, a burning love for God. It is commendable that the mystic’s eyes are turned towards God but not at the expense of the concrete existence he or she is placed in.

The mistake of both of the above life-views is that the individuals have chosen themselves in isolation or abstractly, they have not chosen themselves ethically. There is no connection with concrete reality and therefore no way an ethical life-view can be put into practice.

Regarding history, choosing oneself ethically also means choosing one’s history (this is the only way one can obtain a history) and this makes one responsible for it. Hence choice is inevitably connected with repentance and guilt. I don’t have a history by merely summing the events that have befallen me, I acquire *my* (not *a*) history to the extent that I choose it as *mine*, in freedom not necessity.

In choosing myself ethically, I choose myself concretely. As far as I choose myself in complete freedom, I can call this concretion my possibility or my task. The former term sounds somewhat aesthetic (the aesthete sees relative possibilities everywhere) so Vilhelm prefers the latter since the word ‘tasks’ carries more gravity with it. This frees the ethical individual from the anxiety that fills the aesthete of “not having found one’s place in the world”. The aesthete feels this way because he or she expects everything from outside and nothing from him or herself. The ethical individual knows that what lies outside a person cannot bring happiness and so he or she is not subject to the anxiety of the aesthetic individual whose happiness and goals are all tied to external things.

Vilhelm now discusses another life-view often opposed to the aesthetic, that in which the meaning of life is the fulfilment of one’s duties. The problem with this is that it places duty outside the individual and therefore cannot truly be ethical. In the ethical life-view duty is not a multiplicity of directives because that always implies I stand in an external relation to them, rather I have invested myself in the duty as an expression of my inmost nature.

The ethical is the universal and as such is the abstract. However, the ethical can only be realised when the ethical individual makes himself the universal; that is, expresses his or her life in the universal, not by getting rid of the concrete but permeating it with the universal.

Vilhelm now wants to compare the ethical and the aesthetic individuals. Our ideal and actual selves are actually one and the same. The ethical individual has her ideal self within her (or else her ideal self would then be abstract and therefore empty) but in choosing it absolutely and striving for it, she has that goal outside of herself. This prompts Vilhelm to say that “the ethical life has this twofold nature, that the individual has himself outside himself within himself.”

Another distinction comes between the essential and the accidental. Whatever the ethical individual posits with his freedom is essential and everything else he sees as accidental. But this doesn’t mean his personality is the product of whim. In accepting his freedom he also accepts a responsibility to his history. To pick and choose is to live aesthetically. The aesthete might observe her talent for painting and for wit but regard the former as accidental and the latter as essential; i.e. the thing she cannot lose without becoming someone else. Vilhelm notes that this distinction, for an aesthete, is an illusion because she hasn’t chosen her wit ethically, “as a task, as something you are responsible for, it does not belong to you essentially, and that is mainly because, so long as you only live aesthetically, your whole life is totally unessential”.

Having read thus far one might think that the ethical does away with the aesthetic but this would be a mistake. Not only does Vilhelm say that the ethical transfigures the aesthetic, he maintains that a life can only have beauty when it is regarded ethically. The key lies in the definition of beauty, which Vilhelm accepts from Johannes, as “that which has its teleology within itself.” This means something like being totally self-contained or complete in itself.

The problem is that Johannes sees the beautiful in a single individual in nature; seeing it as this particular thing (as opposed to the universal), where even the accidental and insignificant appear to contain the imprint of beauty. Vilhelm disputes this. Teleology (a goal) requires movement (towards that goal) but what Johannes calls beautiful lacks movement because the beautiful in nature appears all at once, as in a work of art. To see a painting is to be presented with the beautiful all at once, any movement occurs within the observer, not the beautiful object itself. Movement, therefore, means leaving the realms of art and nature and entering that of freedom, and so of ethics. Since an individual has her own teleology within herself, as the inner goal (the concrete, absolute self) towards which she strives, the movement will be an inner one. However, this movement cannot ignore the world around her or the self would remain an abstraction. In order to complete the movement to self she must open herself to the whole of reality; “So [her] movement will be from [her]self, through the world, to [her]self.” Choosing herself in this way is ethical but possessing her own teleology within herself is also beautiful, hence the ethical is beautiful.

Vilhelm goes on to say that he sees the beautiful in everybody, even the humblest waiter, because, completely opposite to Johannes, he sees in this individual person the “universal man” at the same time; a concrete yet universal being, with his teleology within him, realising the task he has set himself.

As we have seen, the ethical is the universal while the aesthetic is the concrete. Vilhelm wants to expound on this a little more. Since the ethical is entirely abstract it can tell us, for example, that we ought to marry (the universal concept) but it can’t tell us whom to marry (the concrete accidental). The former requires ethical understanding while the latter calls for a close familiarity with the aesthetic characteristics of the individuals. Ethics grasps the universal, advising how every couple can become happy, but cannot prescribe happiness advice for this or that particular couple. In short, it sees the relationship as the absolute.

Vilhelm’s position on women is something of a mixed bag. He acknowledges women as “everything for man” and “man’s deepest life” but only because she clarifies finiteness while man chases after infinity. Woman is the stabilising force for man but, like a root, she must remain concealed. He sums this up by saying that he hates “all that contemptable talk of the emancipation of women.”

Vilhelm concludes this essay by asserting that the universal task assigned to humanity is to express the universally human in his or her individual life. This means that the “truly extraordinary man is the truly ordinary man. The more of the universally human an individual is able to realize in his life, the more extraordinary he is.”

Last Word

In this brief section Vilhelm simply explains that the final section is a sermon written by a priest friend of his.

The Edifying in the Thought that Against God We Are Always in the Wrong

The priest points out that people complain about God being unfair or wrong in his pronouncements or judgements. One particular thing people have a problem with is God’s punishment of innocent people for the sins of their forefathers (He “visits the sins of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generations”). How is this fair or just? And even when it is our own transgressions we are considering, how can God expect the impossible from us? We are just fragile humans after all. As a result of this, many people take comfort in the face of their mistakes through the phrase, “One does what one can”.

The priest won’t answer the question of God’s “rightness” in these cases directly. Instead he takes a different tack. First, he notes that if we are criticising God then we are proclaiming that we are correct. But our judgements (being ‘human’ in nature) must always be subject to doubt since although we are sometimes right, we are also sometimes wrong. This ought to cause us constant uneasiness which we can only alleviate by assuming that *we are always in the wrong against God*.

Being in the wrong is usually something we try to avoid at all costs. However, there is something edifying about it in that by admitting that we are wrong we improve ourselves and reduce the chances of being wrong in the future. But this doesn’t help us with the thought at hand because his claim is that we are *always* in the wrong against God.

He then asks us to imagine the case whereby someone we love wrongs us in some way. Would the thought that you are in the right put you at ease in this situation? He argues that it wouldn’t. In fact, you might “endeavour to edify yourself with the thought that you were in the wrong” simply to preserve your beloved in your eyes. The difference between this and the former case is that this relationship (where you love the wrongdoer) is infinite, whereas the former (where you didn’t love the wrongdoer) was finite. Wanting to be in the right therefore signifies a finite relationship whereas wanting to be in the wrong signifies an infinite relationship. In addition, edification only comes from being in the wrong (and wanting to be wrong) which means it only comes with the infinite.

Being in love with a human being then leaves us in a constant contradiction. We know we are in the right but at the same time we want to be in the wrong. How about if, instead of a human, the object of our love is God? Well, since God is obviously greater than us in every possible way, we are compelled to recognise that He, by his very nature, *must* be in the right. This overcomes the contradiction but leaves us without the edification because there is no longer any conflict between our knowledge and our wish.

This directly relates back to a distinction Vilhelm made earlier between thought and freedom. Thought is governed by logic and therefore reaches its conclusions by necessity, one thought rationally and inevitably leading to another in a long, necessary chain. Freedom, on the other hand, stems from a conscious choice emanating from and affecting one at the very core of one’s being. In acknowledging that God must *always* be right, and we must therefore always be wrong, we have reasoned our way to a conclusion which, due to that very fact, strips any meaning the thought had, robbing it of its power to edify.

The priest dissolves this problem by declaring that even though we *can* reason our way to the realisation that we are always in the wrong against God, this does not render the route through freedom redundant. The former grants an intellectual understanding which is very much superficial hence the latter is crucial because it is only once we have *made the decision* to always be wrong against God as a free choice that we “let [our] whole being appropriate this recognition.” This snatches the edifying back from the clutches of necessity.

The notion that we are always wrong against God edifies in two ways. In the first place, it removes doubt since we no longer have to wonder whether we are right or wrong. In the second place, it incites us to action. This may seem contradictory because you might imagine that knowing one is always wrong would breed a sense of hopelessness which would zap ones will to act. The priest argues that this fact can be viewed from another angle though. Knowing that God is always in the right, that his love is always greater than ours, ought to make us happy to act. Doubt robs us of the strength to act, certainty does the opposite.

The priest concludes his sermon by circling back to, and pointing out that we have now settled, the complaints we started with – “If you knocked but it was not opened unto you, if you sought but did not find, if you laboured but nothing gained… If the punishment which the sins of the fathers had called down were to fall upon you” – in all of these cases, we can take comfort in knowing that we are always wrong against God. In fact, doesn’t this make perfect sense? Could you honestly wish that it were otherwise, that you were in the right and the law of Nature itself was proven to be wrong?

1. I have chosen to represent the intended recipient of the letter with the name ‘Johannes’, although it may actually be A, and they may be different people. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)