

# The Place of Reason in Kierkegaard's Ethics

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What role, if any, does Kierkegaard assign to reason in ethics? Making constant reference to a book that challenges Kierkegaard's account of the ethical (Alastair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*<sup>1</sup>) the essay that follows is a reply to this question. Through some fault of his own, Kierkegaard has left MacIntyre and others with the impression that he did not believe the choice to live in ethical terms could be defended on rational grounds. *Contra* MacIntyre, I shall argue that Kierkegaard does in fact offer reasons for advancing from the first to the second stage on life's way. However, having defended Kierkegaard from one charge of irrationalism, I argue that when considered as a moral phenomenologist Kierkegaard did in fact underestimate the role of reason. Thus MacIntyre is right to complain that Kierkegaard paid insufficient attention to the problem of adjudicating between conflicting moral claims.

## 1. A synopsis of MacIntyre's reading

MacIntyre hypothesizes that in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, morality emerged as a concept without a home, either in theology, law, or aesthetics (AV 39). Unhoused as he claims it was, the need for a justification of morality loomed up in the „enlightenment project“. This project first failed, and with all hope being abandoned in the coming of a messianic justification, the more decisive cultural event took place – the project was perceived as a failure. It is in the protracted here and now of this dispiriting perception that MacIntyre situates the present dark age, an age which envisages moral debate in terms of a confrontation between incompatible and incommensurable moral premises and moral commitment as the expression of a criterionless choice between such premises, a type of choice for which no rational justification can be given (AV 39).

Kierkegaard plays a protagonist's role in this, the first of MacIntyre's multi-volume philosophical drama, and with the purpose of illuminating both Kierkegaard's and MacIntyre's texts, I propose in what follows to examine a critical section of *After Virtue*. Please note, however, that in this section MacIntyre identifies Kierkegaard with one and only one text. For MacIntyre, Kierkegaard is *Either/Or* and *Either/Or* is Kierkegaard. Apart from one glancing reference, no other works are touched upon, let alone treated.

MacIntyre isolates three key features of *Either/Or*. For one, he notes that the book's mode of presentation and content are mirror images of one another (AV 39). As for the content, MacIntyre insists that through all the voices in *Either/Or* one message is bell-clear, there are no rational grounds for choosing between the ethical and the esthetic (AV 40f.). There are no real arguments, only hurrahs and gestures of commendation. And so, MacIntyre glosses, we find in this work the perfect coincidence of form and content. Once more, the thesis is that there are nothing but commendations, and commendations are all the reader gets. 'A' commends the life of the esthete, 'B' (Judge Wilhelm) commends the life of duty, and the editor, Victor Eremita, arbitrarily arranges the recommendations of 'A' and 'B'.

Feature number two is this – for Kierkegaard, and not coincidentally, for Kant, „the ethical is presented as that realm in which principles have authority over us independently of our attitudes, preferences and feelings“ (AV 41). But whence comes this absolute authority? For MacIntyre? For MacIntyre's Kierkegaard? And finally for Kierkegaard? To query number one MacIntyre replies:

„To answer this question (whence comes the authority of ethical principles) consider what kind of authority any principle has which it is open to choose to regard as authoritative“ (AV 42).

Be it a principle of practical reasoning or the eleventh commandment, said principle or commandment has as much authority as I can give reasons for heeding it, so that „a principle for the choice of which no reasons could be given would be a principle devoid of authority“ (AV 42). On MacIntyre's reading, Kierkegaard offers no reasons for choosing the ethical over the esthetic and so he presents Kierkegaard as blundering – the ethical has absolute authority, the ethical has no authority (AV 42).

Finally, MacIntyre calls attention to what he takes to be the fact

that *Either/Or* is a highly conservative document, and he adds that the book's hidebound quality is at odds with the novel form of moral self-justification that Kierkegaard is depicted as peddling. True, it could be argued that the author of *Either/Or* was very soon to become, if he wasn't already, a spiritual insurgent of the first order, but just the same, MacIntyre persists in claiming that the Kierkegaard of 1842 was trying to scribble in a „new practical underpinning for an older and inherited way of life“ (AV 43). MacIntyre continues, „it is perhaps this combination of novelty and tradition which accounts for the incoherence at the heart of Kierkegaard's position“ (AV 43).

## 2. Who is MacIntyre's Kierkegaard?

Anyone who has browsed through, much less written an introduction or two on Kierkegaard knows well enough that if you must equate Kierkegaard with the author of *Either/Or*, do so with all trepidation, for more than any of his many pseudonymous works, Kierkegaard held this, his bestseller, at a distinct arm's length. MacIntyre has been the full length of the corpus, and he has written a pair of critical summaries, but he still draws the equation with insufficient reluctance. To be sure, the reader is officially informed that one could argue what many scholars feel free to assume, namely, that if there is an ethical theory in *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard himself did not hold it. MacIntyre acknowledges that even if Kierkegaard did take the position *After Virtue* nails him to, it was not for long. Though he does not indicate how he thinks Kierkegaard's ethics have changed, the author is careful to whisper that by 1845 and with the publication of *Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard's characterization of the ethical „has changed radically“ (AV 41). But note well, this radical change „had become already abundantly clear even in 1843 in *Frygt og Bæven*“ (AV 41)<sup>2</sup>; that is, less than a year after completing *Either/Or*<sup>3</sup>. This much of a confession can be dragged out of *After Virtue* – if MacIntyre's Kierkegaard was Kierkegaard at all, it was only for a few of Kierkegaard's earliest semesters.

If, as the narrative insists, the Kierkegaard of *Either/Or* is laboring to lay a foundation for morals, then it would be absurd to identify him with any of his esthetic alter egos. But more than trying to ground morals, it is critical to this chapter of MacIntyre's history that Kierkegaard be considered a regular bastion of conservatism. Kierkegaard is supposed to

be confused and incoherent, and the source of his muddled state is supposed to be the implacable need to combine immiscibles – radical choice and conservative values (AV 43). In point of fact, MacIntyre hints at what he is about to do, namely, to fuse the figure of Kierkegaard with that of the conservative and orotund Judge Wilhelm (or ‘B’). Here are the fingerprints; while Kierkegaard is nowhere and everywhere in *Either/Or*, „perhaps we detect his presence most of all in the belief that he puts into the mouth of ‘B’...“ (AV 41). Perhaps nothing. So far as MacIntyre is concerned, Kierkegaard’s moral theory is the latent content behind the Judge’s manifest moralizing. For, if not the Judge, then who is the credulous curator of traditional values that MacIntyre has as his Kierkegaard of 1842? Note, however, that the Judge’s style, his spongy Christianity, to say nothing of his self-contradictions are signs enough that this frequently touching, but often boorish pate is hardly a man after Kierkegaard’s own heart<sup>4</sup>.

But are the ethics of Judge Wilhelm the ethics of the young Kierkegaard? Though I am by no means certain<sup>5</sup>, I move to accept MacIntyre’s donee, for who, after all, can argue with someone as close to Kierkegaard as Kierkegaard’s Johannes Climacus? And as Johannes tells it, the second part (of *Either/Or*) represents, „an ethical individuality existing on the basis of the ethical“<sup>6</sup>. The equation drawn and accepted, let us examine MacIntyre’s claim that in *Either/Or* Kierkegaard is not only representing the ethical but announcing the utter irrationality of it. According to this announcement, no one person can give another reason for understanding his or her life in ethical terms. No, as MacIntyre reads it, the choice of moral striving and guilt is a criterionless choice. But does MacIntyre’s description fit?

### 3. The so-called criterionless-choice

Although he will disregard Kierkegaard’s self-explanations a page later, MacIntyre is right to report that, „Kierkegaard’s professed intention in designing the pseudonyms of *Enten/Eller* was to present the reader with an ultimate choice“, *enten* – the ethical, *eller* – the esthetic mode of living and regarding life. Hypothesizing again, MacIntyre suggests, „suppose that someone confronts the choice between them, as yet having embraced neither“ (AV 40). Well then, that someone is a self-deluded esthete. For Kierkegaard, there is no sitting on the fence between selves.

If you have not chosen, you are an esthete, but if you are really facing the choice, you have already chosen to choose.

There simply is no earnestly facing the choice qua an individual who has yet to choose, for to acknowledge the choice is to affirm that you have a self, which marks the second, not the first, stage on life's way. And that in one breath is why Kierkegaard believed he only needed „to present the reader with an ultimate choice“ (AV 40).

MacIntyre obliquely discloses the impossibility of the Kierkegaardian self on the fence. He comments that for Kierkegaard and certainly Judge Wilhelm, there is no choosing the esthetic (AV 40–41)<sup>7</sup>. MacIntyre writes as though he believed the infallibility of the first genuine choice follows from the passion with which it is made – and that is that. It isn't. Of course, once the inwardness, which earmarks the ethical is present, the choice is made; and so, again, one cannot earnestly hover between life A and life B. But even apart from this, there is no choosing the esthetic, simply because there is no one to choose it. As our public servant defines it, „the esthetical in a person is that by which he is spontaneously and immediately what he is“ („det æsthetiske i et Menneske er det, hvorved han umiddelbar er det, han er“<sup>8</sup>). Be he or she a sensualist, sincere social activist, or knight of faith, everyone has, or is, their esthetic side, and Kierkegaard repeatedly warns, we had better remember it. Once more, the earnest choice of oblivion that MacIntyre reproaches Kierkegaard for overlooking would amount to an earnest choice not to choose. But the choice not to choose would be the very kind of serious choice that the purely esthetic precludes. Rightly or wrongly, the Kierkegaard that MacIntyre's narrative takes to task has it that there is no leaping in and out of the lethe of immediacy. There is despair and defiance, but no dashing the brains out of self-consciousness<sup>9</sup>. The individual who is either gullible or serious enough to come to the uncoerced conclusion that he must choose between one self-perspective and another, is, by Kierkegaard's standards, a pretty serious fellow who has, in his very quandary, already acknowledged his ethical identity.

All unacceptable hypotheses aside, MacIntyre explains that the self, so situated between selves, could not be given reasons for the final imperative: I should choose the ethical, or for that matter, I should choose the esthetic (AV 40). Echoing *After Virtue's* analysis, the esthetic is no choice at all and, so for the purposes of the reconstructed argument we may proceed – any chain of moral reasons that might be stretched

before an esthete presupposes his regarding those reasons as having force. Choose good and evil, the moralist imagines he is arguing, for by relating to yourself in those terms you will best, „serve the demands of duty, or to live in that way will be to accept moral perfection as a good and so give a certain kind of meaning to one’s actions“ (AV 40). But what does a Sybarite care about duty, moral perfection, or meaning? Nothing, answers MacIntyre in his synopsis; for Kierkegaard it is only by radical choice, that is, a choice for which no reasons can be adduced that we come into the ethical, and it is only by radical choice that the ethical comes into its foundations.

Judging both from his encyclopedia entry<sup>10</sup> and *After Virtue*, MacIntyre has been pressing long and hard to inoculate every student against what he takes to be the dangerous charms of Kierkegaard’s irrationalism. The already mentioned scourge term is the so-called „criterionless choice“ that MacIntyre’s Kierkegaard enjoins us to make. And what renders the choice of the ethical a criterionless choice? Once again, the fact that it is supposed to be a choice of first principles renders it a criterionless choice. And if the proof is in the act of choice? It makes no difference. If a converted Don Juan cannot provide the next Don Juan with compelling reasons to follow his lead, his conversion is without a basis in reason. And what is to count as a compelling reason? As I understand MacIntyre, so long as the esthete has a choice that reason cannot mindlessly make, say the choice whether or not to give force to appeals to a meaningful life, he has no reason. But, to cover the same ground again, we always have a choice, which is not to say that we always have a coin to toss. There is, as the sequel to *After Virtue* concedes<sup>11</sup>, something in between chance and demonstration; or more to my point, from the fact that one life view cannot be strictly deduced from a crumbling or absent other, it does not follow that the choice of the one, from within the context of the other, is necessarily arbitrary<sup>12</sup>. Besides, the Judge explains that and why it is in an individual’s enlightened self-interest to choose the ethical.

Make no mistake about it, A and B are not from different planets. Whether or not it is to his ultimate discredit, if the Judge could step out of his pages, he would be quick to remind MacIntyre that there is more continuity (equilibrium) between the ethical and the esthetic than MacIntyre encourages us to imagine. Even assuming that the Judge has made the turn he is prodding A to make, he has not left the esthetic behind<sup>13</sup>. He need not march back and forth to the Royal Library and lucubrate

for months on end in order to reconstruct the world as seen through the categories of hedonic interests. The Judge argues that A has every good reason, every rational motive, for choosing to live seriously as opposed to indifferently. There is only space and call for a sample of these briefs<sup>14</sup>, but each comes to this – an ethical existence is superior to and/or a cure for the ills endemic to estheticism.

No more an ethical theorist than an ethical rigorist, the Judge charges that there is no unity in a life that cannot sit still<sup>15</sup>. Since there is no unity in his life, A cannot provide a coherent account of himself<sup>16</sup>. And in the event A couldn't care less about giving a coherent account of his life, B admonishes, „he who cannot reveal himself cannot love, and he who cannot love is the most unhappy man of all“<sup>17</sup>. Everyone wants to be happy, therefore one should choose the ethical, for it is only by that act of choice that a person can create the ballast that makes unity and happiness possible. In 1839 Kierkegaard remarked, „longing is the umbilical cord of the higher life“. The Judge more than agrees<sup>18</sup>, he fills in the content of what he takes these ubiquitous longings to be. There are, he assumes, universal desires for *inter alia* a life view, meaning, serenity, and as mentioned, happiness. In short, the allegedly debunking question of the esthete's „giving force“ to the terms of the Judge's appeals does not arise. True, every desire will appear differently according to the categories through which it is conceived, but both the Judge and Kierkegaard suppose that there is enough continuity to reason the esthete out of one conception and toward another. And so B writes as though to grant „think of these ends as you may, there is more meaning, peace of mind, and happiness in a life devoted to duty than in one devoted to fleeing boredom“. And if beauty be your lodestar then take heed, there is more beauty to be garnered with an eye fixed upon the Good than with one trained for the interesting<sup>19</sup>.

Finally both character and creator assume that despair is everyone's negative Prime Mover. On solid evidence, if not confession, the Judge diagnoses his friend as a case of intense (and so for Kierkegaard, promising) despair. Though only possessing a balm, B offers the remedy that Kierkegaard's anthropology has A groping for. What is twice as important, he argues, and with Kierkegaard's blessings, that where the esthete has a goal – e.g., happiness, success – the conditions for satisfaction are always beyond the ken of his control<sup>20</sup>. This, having one's axis outside of oneself, emerges as the primary definiens for despair and from it B draws out the conclusion that a fleeting, unduty-bound existence is

necessarily a despairing one<sup>21</sup>. Despite the curtain of problems that Johannes de Silentio is poised to let drop, the Judge assures his distraught companion that nothing can come between an individual and his duty. So again, if only by reason of its being a cure, A should choose the ethical and by implication, he should choose to regard himself as the culprit responsible for his despair<sup>22</sup>.

Even Aristotle throws up his hands here and there, and not just at the individual who will not listen to the law of non-contradiction. There is, for instance, no reasoning with the underground man who refuses to accept happiness as his final good. If the choice that Kierkegaard worked into his every work were an unloaded one between box A and box B, MacIntyre would have his point – but it isn't<sup>23</sup>. Explaining their inevitable failure to make compelling moral sense, MacIntyre remarks that Diderot, Smith, and alas, Kierkegaard, „all reject any teleological view of human nature, and of man as having an essence which defines his true end“. And this is „why their project of finding a basis for morality had to fail“ (AV 54). I cannot vouch for the other defendants, but the author behind the editor of *Either/Or* has his *telos*, and it is relative to it that choice finds its rational grounds. Whether or not Kierkegaard has the right *telos* remains another gaping question, but the *telos* is assumed to be there, pushing from behind (despair) and pulling from above (longing). All children of miraculous faith aside, every natural person is naturally in despair, some much more intensely than others. Some much more intensely than others, every natural person naturally yearns to be free of the despair which Kierkegaard contends every natural person is himself spinning. Aristotle's *Ethics* presupposes his psychology, and likewise Kierkegaard's concept of choice presupposes a universal but not universally recognized need to be whole. Despair is sin, sin the universal sickness, and faith alone the cure, which can only begin to be secured by a choice that A has yet to make and other choices that B (the Judge) may need his C and D to awaken him to.

#### 4. A critical note

Understandably, Kierkegaard scholars complain that Kierkegaard was simply not trying to do the kinds of things that MacIntyre chides him for failing to do. As *After Virtue* tells it, Kierkegaard perceived Kant's failure to provide a basis for morals, panicked, and took up the search



for the next Holy Grail. Now, there are entries aplenty on Kant in the *Papirer*, and it is true that Kierkegaard recognized that Kant had not exactly proven the esthetic life to be one of self-contradiction<sup>24</sup>. Nevertheless, there are no textual signs that this recognition ever prodded Kierkegaard into taking up the foundational project that MacIntyre charges him with bungling. Kierkegaard wrote and wrote about his writing and there is no hint of his aspiring to produce a basis for morals, and of this MacIntyre is well aware. Why then the decision to ignore Kierkegaard's hyperconscious intentions? Does MacIntyre believe that while Kierkegaard thought he was writing about choice in fundamental connection with the formation of the self and the purification of the will, he was actually struggling to solve a problem that he was unaware of being driven by? Is there a latent appeal to the unconscious behind MacIntyre's manifest historicizing? There has to be.

Do not get me wrong, I have no innate aversion to the idea that neither Kierkegaard nor MacIntyre necessarily knows what he is really up to; just the same, I see no reason for automatically dismissing an author's long-held and continuously-stated intentions. MacIntyre has a lot of territory to cover and naturally travels in seven league boots, oblivious to the nitpickers. But is it nitpicking to complain that MacIntyre has not shown Kierkegaard's self-explanations to be inadequate? He has not justified his appeal to oblique purposes by showing us why he takes Kierkegaard to be in the dark about his projects. If I am any judge of the present age, someone is bound to reply that the story is the demonstration, but that is a rather unconvincing story. As some of Freud's early case studies will attest, the richness of a narrative is no proof of the details of that narrative. Far from it, historical narratives, personal and otherwise, that roll smoothly and comprehensively along usually do so because they plow everything under. And for all his epiphanies, it must be said that MacIntyre has done his share of plowing. But now for one of the epiphanies.

## 5. The place of reason in the moral life

Though we may not have access to the justifications, Kierkegaard certainly held that there are universal moral truths. There is, however, another critical message in the bottle of *After Virtue*, and I shall argue that this message sticks. As I read him, MacIntyre charges that Kierke-

gaard fails to acknowledge the role of reason in the moral life, and in a related blindspot, he fails to appreciate, let alone help us come to grips with, a fact that unsettles many a conscience and nearly every ethical theorist – the fact of moral diversity.

Kierkegaard's greatest service may well have been to paint the ideal or at least one constellation of ideals from the inside out. A psychological realist in his own right, Kierkegaard teaches us to see with discernment just what the world looks like through ideals otherwise quite easily bandied about. I am no expert keeper of records on such topics, but on my judgment Kierkegaard ought to be reckoned either the first or the best moral phenomenologist, and yet for all of the arresting detail of his portraits of perfectly fallen creatures striving to live in their thoughts of the right and the good, there is something missing. As MacIntyre observes, Kierkegaard pictures the earnest life as though there were nothing to it but what we moderns and post-moderns might call commitment. In his words and silences, Kierkegaard affirms that behind every piece of moral confusion there is a will flapping in the breeze of whims. If you don't rightly know what to do, then you don't really will to do what is right.

That moral worth has as little to do with moral reasoning as it does with knowledge, is indirectly revealed in Kierkegaard's jottings on the method of indirect communication. In his outlined but never delivered lectures on the ethico-religious dialectic of communication, Kierkegaard teaches that in the realm of the truly important there is much for a moral teacher to do, but nothing to teach; there is no object of communication, no knowledge to be conveyed. Kierkegaard's thinking is clear and Kantian enough. Moral duties are universal. If, however, I was wanting in knowledge, then I wouldn't be possessed of the duties that my sense of guilt assures me obtain. And Kierkegaard avows that if there is one thing I can trust it is my sense of guilt. Thus, while I may require a moral teacher to prevent me from eclipsing the knowledge to which my duty and guilt witness, I don't need anyone to put me in the know.

As every student of Kierkegaard comes quickly to understand, Kierkegaard believed the age to be suffering from an excess of mental activity; but in the excess of his struggles against such excesses, Kierkegaard could easily lead one to believe that every act of deliberation is an ethical evasion, that is, the will using reason to confuse and so excuse itself from what it now knows and is now trying to forget is its uncondi-

tional duty<sup>25</sup>. A grand master of suspicion, Kierkegaard was right to observe that reason often functions in the service of the pleasure/complacency principle, but is the abuse of reason a good reason to sow blanket suspicions about reason? My reason says, „no“.

As I have complained, MacIntyre is mistaken to think that Kierkegaard does not offer reasons for choosing the ethical, but the justification of particular ethical precepts is altogether another matter. To reiterate, MacIntyre argues that a principle has as much authority as we have reasons for abiding by that principle. As MacIntyre notes, Kierkegaard could not disagree more. An enemy of every form of meliorism, Kierkegaard is unambiguous, the ethical no less than the religious is „the unconditionally unconditional“. Just as unambiguously, Kierkegaard warns that while the unconditional has its reasons, the provision of those reasons relativizes it and thus subtracts rather than increases authority<sup>26</sup>. MacIntyre reports that Kierkegaard was the first to sever the connection between reason and authority (AV 42). Again, Kierkegaard couldn't disagree more. According to his chronology of emerging ideas, it was only in the age of pure reason that people began to require explanations of their imperatives. Either way MacIntyre is on the mark, for Kierkegaard the force of our oughts in no way rests upon the answers to our whys. More than that, Kierkegaard would have judged the whole project of pressing for such reasons unethical. This is not hyperbole; listen to the terms in which Vigilius Haufniensis upbraids the individual who would dare to accuse good conscience of being unreasonable in its expectations: „The more ideal ethics is the better. It must not permit itself to be distracted by the babble that it is useless to require the impossible. For even to listen to such talk is unethical ...“<sup>27</sup> – whether that talk be about being unable or about being unsure.

Kierkegaard all but takes it as a given that we ought to do what our father, worldly and other-worldly, commands us to do, and that is pretty much that. The ideal is obedience, and for all its other merits, obedience is not an ideal that is likely to prod consciousness-raising about either the interests of others or the consequences of our actions. But why should it? These are precisely the kinds of conditions that devotion to the unconditional has to be careful to blinker itself to. Though this is not to advise that one should ruminate until the moment to act has passed, it is irresponsible to cut the process of reflection short with the reflection that a choice must eventually be made, and besides, so long as you can imagine that you possess the best intentions, you cannot

go morally wrong. But what is more important, doing the right thing or having the right intention? For Kierkegaard, as much as for Schopenhauer<sup>28</sup>, it is the intention, the relative purity of heart<sup>29</sup> that determines the moral worth of an action. The rest is external, which for Kierkegaard is to say, not of the utmost importance, i.e., „accidental“. Take this page from the Journal, a page which happens to find its way into the papers of Victor Eremita:

The main point is still that one should not be diverted by the external. When, in order to subvert the position that there is an absolute in morality, an appeal is made to variations in custom and use and such shocking examples as savages putting their parents to death, attention is centered merely upon the external. That is to say, if it could be proved that savages maintain that a person ought to hate his parents, it would be quite another matter; but this is not their thought; they believe that one should love them, and the error is only in the way of expressing it. For it is clear that the savages do not intend to harm their parents but to do good to them<sup>30</sup>.

Note the initial intimation – such questions are not raised in good faith, but rather in an attempt to subvert and so to excuse oneself from the unconditionality of absolutes. Slit your parent’s throats or sacrifice your life taking care of them, it is all essentially the same, so long as your intentions are good. For the one who finally gave us the esthetic of morals that Kant lacked the Muse to write, the main thing is not to allow externals – i.e., the perceived consequences of our actions – to make us flinch. As though perceived consequences had nothing whatsoever to do with our intentions!

The inordinate emphasis that Kierkegaard lays on the how of our actions and our beliefs has its natural shadow in a delusory de-emphasis on the question of what precisely is to be done. This imbalance is nowhere more apparent than in the lack of urgency Kierkegaard shows with respect to questions of social justice. And yet, it hardly needs to be written that our virtuoso of inwardness did not decry all forms of reflection. While Kierkegaard did not trouble himself unduly about the moral worth of this action as opposed to that, his conscience was downright yeasty when it came to trying to decide whether or not it was God’s will that he do X or Y. Make no bones about it, he was quite concrete on

this score, or as Kant would have judged him – he was quite fantastic. For Kierkegaard, believing in a personal God entails the belief that God may at any time be personally involved in the events of this world. Thus, the true believer utters his intercessory and petitionary prayers; and thus, Kierkegaard rather quietly insists that the knight of faith is ever searching the palimpsestal text of daily events for directive „hints from God“<sup>31</sup>.

Kierkegaard was not much concerned with trying to hammer out the right secular „oughts“, and in MacIntyre's terms, MacIntyre is essentially correct – for Kierkegaard „there were no great problems of interpretation“, or at least not beyond deciding whether or not he was an exception to duties otherwise accepted. But when it came to hammering out what it meant to believe in God, Kierkegaard's reflections render it easy to see how Kierkegaard came to associate reflection with dizziness. For this essay's final illustration, in a much abused teaching, Jesus tells us that the poor will always be with us<sup>32</sup>. He also commands us to be merciful. Yet how can a peasant with neither money nor power be merciful? Kierkegaard understood well that the impecunious have plenty to wrestle with, but he was in his own way generous enough to add this characteristically Kierkegaardian scruple. The poor ought to be merciful enough not to make the filthy rich feel filthy about their riches:

So the discourse turns to you, you wretched one, who can do nothing at all; do not forget to be merciful! Be merciful. This consolation, that you can be merciful, let alone that you are that, is far greater than if I could assure you that the most powerful person will show mercy to you. Be merciful to us more fortunate ones! Your care filled life is like a dangerous criticism of loving providence; you have it therefore in your power to make us anxious; therefore be merciful! In truth, how much mercifulness is shown toward the powerful and the fortunate by such an unfortunate! Which, indeed, is more merciful –powerfully to alleviate another's need or by suffering quietly and patiently to take care mercifully lest one disturb the joy and happiness of others?<sup>33</sup>

The answer worked out with both rigor and consistency is that the one fortunate in his misfortune is the more merciful, but I present this only as an instance of the kinds of interpretive problems that Kierkegaard recognized and of the kind of reflection he would seem to recommend. For all the paragraphs he may have turned over in his mind and into his

diaries, there are precious few of the form: Is it right, for example, to do as Kierkegaard seems to have done, to lend money at interest?<sup>34</sup> There are double, triple, and quadruple reflections upon his duties to God, but very little scrupling about his duties to his fellow human beings.

Unfortunately, MacIntyre pays no heed to Kierkegaard's rather congenial critique of the tradition MacIntyre is trying to resuscitate, but as one distinctively Lutheran line of that critique repeats, the opposite of sin is not virtue, but faith<sup>35</sup>. Whether it be for the reasons Kierkegaard himself adduced, or for those woven into *After Virtue*, Kierkegaard had no faith that reason could compel us to compel ourselves to make the sacrifices that Kierkegaard understood to be the signature of the ethical. The conquest of self-love, to say nothing of the demon Kant could not discern, defiance, requires a much stricter taskmaster than we can bring to bear upon ourselves. For all his affinities with Kant, Kierkegaard marks this important difference:

Kant held that man was his own law (autonomy), i.e., bound himself under the law which he gave himself. In a deeper sense that means to say: lawlessness or experimentation. It is no harder than the thwacks which Sancho Panza applied to his own bottom. I can no more be really stricter in A than I am or than I wish myself to be in B. There must be some compulsion if it is to be a serious matter. If I am not bound by anything higher than myself, and if I am to bind myself, where am I to acquire the severity as A by which, as B, I am to be bound, so long as A and B are the same.<sup>36</sup>

One of Kierkegaard's most astute interpreters, Louis Mackie, aptly puts the meaning of this journal entry in Kierkegaard's own apothogem – „no man is stronger than himself“<sup>37</sup>. To put it in words that some claim have seen their day and their twilight, it is only by the love/fear of God that we are able to slip out of the snare of self-love and willfulness, and that – getting outside of oneself – is what distinguishes the ethico-religious from the esthetic. On this decisive point, MacIntyre's reading of Kierkegaard is true to the author that I know; for Kierkegaard early, middle and late, moral reasoning and ethical theorizing have as little to do with being moral as they do with the quest which Kierkegaard marks as singularly important – the quest for a pure will.

## Notes

- 1 Alastair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981). Hereafter referred to in the text as „AV.“
- 2 It is clear that MacIntyre must recognize *Fear and Trembling* for the counterexample to his reading that it is. As MacIntyre's history repeats, Kierkegaard discovered the concept of radical choice and put it to the task of forming a basis for morals (AV 33). But if anyone ever made a radical choice it was Abraham, and he was anything but ethically justified. Just the opposite, as Johannes de Silentio puts it, no matter what the religious expression might be, „The ethical expression for what Abraham did is that he would murder Isaac.“ (*Fear and Trembling*, ed. Howard and Edna Hong, Princeton U. Press, 1983, p. 30).
- 3 By the latest reckoning we are actually talking about a period of approximately six months. See, „The Period of Composition of Kierkegaard's Published Works“, by Alastair McKinnon and Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, *Kierkegaardiana* 9 (1974): 132-146.
- 4 For an excellent likeness of the Judge see Stephen Dunning's, *Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Inwardness*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 75ff.
- 5 In his *Kierkegaard* Routledge: London, 1982) Alastair Hannay meticulously shows that one need not go beyond the covers of *Either/Or* to find a critique of the Judge's 'both/and' view that one has only to will the conventional ('*Det Almene*') and all will be reconciled-inner and outer, spirit and flesh, ethical and aesthetic. See pp. 58-63.
- 6 Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. Howard and Edna Hong, (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1992), p. 253.
- 7 I follow George Stack here. See his „Kierkegaard's Analysis of Choice: The Aristotelian Model“, *The Personalist* 52 (1971): 643-661.
- 8 Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, trans. Howard and Edna Hong. (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1987), Vol. II, p. 178.
- 9 This is certainly one of the central claims of Kierkegaard's *Sickness Unto Death*.
- 10 *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards, 4 vols., (New York: MacMillan Press, 1967), 4:336-340; see also MacIntyre's *A Short History of Ethics* (New York: MacMillan Press, 1966), pp. 215-218.
- 11 MacIntyre, A. *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame Press, Indiana, 1988.)
- 12 And so I would argue that the author of *After Virtue* is working with a somewhat hyperbolic notion of what is to count for a moral justification. For authors who have come to a conclusion similar to my own, see C. Stephen Evans in his essay, „Where there is a will there's a way: Kierkegaard's theory of action (in *Writing the Politics of Difference*, ed. H.J. Silverman, SUNY Press: Albany, 1991, pp. 73-88) and Anthony Rudd, *Kierkegaard and the Limits of the Ethical* (Oxford U. Press, 1993).
- 13 *Either/Or*, II:177-178.
- 14 For more exhaustive presentations of the Judge's defense of the ethical, see Harold Ofstad, „Morality, Choice, and Inwardness: Judge Wilhelm's distinction between the esthetic and the ethical way of life“, *Inquiry*, 1965, 8:33-73.
- 15 *Either/Or*, II:248,262ff.
- 16 *Ibid.*, II:202,254,322.
- 17 *Ibid.*, II:159.
- 18 *Ibid.*, II:242.
- 19 *Either/Or*, II:271ff.
- 20 *Ibid.*, II:179-180.
- 21 *Ibid.*, II:192.

- 22 Ibid, II: 208f.
- 23 Ibid, II:163-164.
- 24 MacIntyre is, however, right to emphasize what all too many Kierkegaard scholars, myself included, have failed to stress – namely Kierkegaard’s debt to and dialogue with Kant. For an example of a scholar without this blindspot, I refer the reader to Ronald M. Green’s, *Kierkegaard and Kant: The Hidden Debt* (SUNY Press: Albany, 1992).
- 25 For a truly genial page in the hermeneutic of this kind of suspicion consider the *Sickness Unto Death* (trans. Howard and Edna Hong, Princeton University Press, 1980, p. 48).
- 26 See *Journals*, vol. 4 entry no. 4895-4896; also, vol. 3, entry no. 3091; 4900.
- 27 Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, (trans. Reidar Thomte, Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 17.
- 28 See, for example, Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Representation* Vol. I Bk iv, sec. 66, p. 367f in E.J. Payne’s translation (Dover: NY, 1969).
- 29 Kierkegaard, S., *Works of Love*, (ed. Howard and Edna Hong, Harper, 1962), p. 150.
- 30 *Journals*, entry 889, p. 393 Vol. I and *Either/Or*, II:69.
- 31 *Sickness Unto Death*, p. 82.
- 32 Matthew 26:11.
- 33 *Works of Love*, p. 301.
- 34 See Frithiof Brandt, *Søren Kierkegaard og Pengene*, 1935.
- 35 *Sickness Unto Death*, p. 82.
- 36 Kierkegaard. *The Journals of Søren Kierkegaard*, (trans. and ed. A. Dru, London: Oxford U. Press, 1938), no. 1041., pp. 364-65.
- 37 Mackie, L., *Points of View: Readings of Kierkegaard* (University Presses of Florida: Tallahassee, 1986), pp. 31-32.

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