

Summer 2019

# The Philosophies of Love and Despair in Kierkegaard's Early Aesthetic Works

James Conley

Follow this and additional works at: [https://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/summer\\_research](https://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/summer_research)

 Part of the [History of Philosophy Commons](#)

---

# The Philosophies of Love and Despair in Kierkegaard's Early Aesthetic Works

James Conley

## Abstract:

This paper tracks the philosophies of love (and correspondingly, despair) in Søren Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* and *Fear and Trembling*. Both were published pseudonymously in 1843 and detail the existential perspectives of Kierkegaard's famous three life spheres: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. Each pseudonym discusses the categories of love and despair at length. By analyzing these three perspectives, the dialectics between the modes of existence illuminates itself and the messages and philosophy of each perspective wrestles with its counterparts. It is through this illumination of conflict that meaning and choice, in an existential sense, are born. This paper is meant to be an introduction to this dialectic in Kierkegaard's early aesthetic works, focusing on the topics of love and despair.

## Introduction:

“All distinctions between the many different kinds of love,” claimed 19<sup>th</sup> century Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, “are essentially abolished by Christianity.”<sup>1</sup> Kierkegaard spent much of his life crafting an existential philosophy that was essentially unique from most of the canonical and modern Western philosophy that had come before it and essentially Christian. In it, he challenged the conventions of the analytic and the speculative philosophy of idealism. He crafted a distinct method of philosophical thinking and writing that, inspired by the classical ironist and conversationalist Socrates as he appeared in the Platonic dialogues, often took on the form of pseudonymous writings. These pseudonymous writings were produced mostly in the early part of his writing career (1843-1849) and are often referred to as the aesthetic works by Kierkegaard scholars.

Two of Kierkegaard's most famous aesthetic works, and his most famous works generally, are *Either/Or* and *Fear and Trembling*, both published in 1843. In these works, Kierkegaard explores three different life views he saw embodied not only in himself at different

times in his life and in his own evolution towards a unique Christian perspective, but also in the general culture of the everyday people and the academic culture of the post-industrial post-enlightenment Denmark of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. These three famous life-views are the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious, represented in *Either/Or: Volume I*, *Either/Or: Volume II*, and *Fear and Trembling* respectively. They each respond to the problem and paradoxes of selfhood in different ways and consequently operate in and intellectualize the world in which they exist in different ways.

Kierkegaard brings the reader into these life views by presenting writings from their perspective. Kierkegaard, by writing under a pseudonym and presenting these conflicting life views side-by-side without offering his own commentary, forces the reader into their own subjectivity, the only place, Kierkegaard believes, truth is to be found. The reader must contemplate the lives that have been lived and recorded and the philosophies professed by the pseudonyms for themselves and decide where truth lies. If either in exclusively one, or another, or a combination, or none. The project's goals, focused on the inward contemplation of the reader, are akin to Nietzsche's "eternal recurrence" and the classic Socratic dialogues of Plato. That is Kierkegaard's task in presenting such a bizarre "aesthetic" authorship.

Because the topics of the pseudonym's writings are sprawling and their resolve towards the existential conundrums permeate the entire psychology of each character, for the scholar writing about these works to be completely analytic and diagnostic is impossible, not to mention a negation of Kierkegaard's purpose in writing the way that he did. However, one topic that each character addresses with at least some clarity is the topic of love and human relationships. Pseudonym A of *Either/Or* Volume I, attacks the concepts of marital love, religious love, the conventions of institutional, ceremonial, and ritualistic love, and any concept of love that

exceeds a sort of hedonistic, transitory, and romantically aesthetic love and its immediacy. Pseudonym B of *Either/Or* Volume II, in response to A, defends the cultural institutions of love such as marriage and champions the everyday love of marriage that connects itself to duty and identification with the universal. Johannes de silentio of *Fear and Trembling*, champions the religious love of the Knight of Faith above all other modes of love. Kierkegaard, too, believed that Christianity's conception of human life and love was the best.

As stated, Kierkegaard's mission in these aesthetic works is to bring a specific type of subjectivity to the reader. A subjectivity that faces the existential despair Kierkegaard believed was at the core of human existence and chooses, for the right reasons, to return to the world with an attention, a care, an ethic, a religiosity, and a love that makes life meaningful in the deepest sense it can be for a person. For Kierkegaard, the heights of religion allow one to live in the world with ownership of their own subjectivity and trust that God will deliver all that is possible and good in the finite. This topic was not removed from Kierkegaard's personal life. He was raised in the Danish Lutheran church but grew discontent with the passivity of Christian practice he experienced around him. In 1841, Kierkegaard also broke off his relationship with his fiancée Regine Olsen to whom he had been engaged for over a year. This event marked for Kierkegaard his turn towards a more devoted commitment to developing his unique philosophy and theology. It is theorized that justification for this split in the motivation for his early work, including the *Either/Or* and *Fear and Trembling*.

However, this paper will focus on the text itself and the philosophies of love in the three life-views presented in these two "aesthetic works," track the differences, the possibility of evolution and movement between each, and Kierkegaard's intention of illuminating the religious as the highest.

## 1a: Aesthetic Despair

Volume I of *Either/Or* contains the aesthetic papers. The authorship of these papers is attributed to pseudonym A (also referred to just as A) by Victor Eremita, the pseudonymous editor of the book. The papers contain four essays on art and perspective on life, a collection of philosophic aphorisms, and a diary of a seducer's seduction, manipulation of, engagement to, and abandonment of a young woman (of which A claims only to be the editor leaving the reader skeptical as to whether this is true or whether A was also the author of the diary itself). The incoherence of the collection of the aesthetic papers with regard to themes, argumentation, style, and perspective is intentional by Kierkegaard and shows formally the myriad ways in which the aesthetic uses *immediacy* as a distraction from life, choice, authentic existence, and the truth of inwardness. Immediacy here meaning "the unreflective [deeply meant] pursuit of some goal or series of goals – paradigmatically, pleasure in some form... the pursuit of the interesting."<sup>2</sup>A is a highly intelligent young man with advanced philosophical understanding and particular aesthetic taste. However, according to B and to Kierkegaard, A's existence is classified as despair. A, because of his philosophizing, reflective immediacy, and hedonism refuses to choose a life and an existence in actuality.

To unpack what it means that A and others with the aesthetic life view are in despair it is necessary to make reference to pseudonym B and his essays in volume II. The aesthetic papers and the aesthetic world view are formulated in contrast to *Either/Or's* other world view, that of pseudonym B or the ethical world view. Volume II of *Either/Or* presents pseudonymous B's lengthy responses to A and is intended to illuminate that the aesthetic life is despair. Despair throughout Kierkegaard's authorship has many modes, many of which presented most famously in the 1849 pseudonymous work *The Sickness Unto Death*. However, its use by pseudonym B in

the essayistic letter responding to A, "Equilibrium Between the Aesthetic and the Ethical," will be most useful.

As said, the aesthetic life is not in despair as a result of any specific action or materialization in the world, for despair operates on a psychological level and this thus deeper than any single action. The aesthetic mode of living can be embodied in many ways. It can be the seducer, the speculative philosopher, a Nero of Rome<sup>3</sup>, etc. In "Equilibrium Between the Aesthetic and the Ethical," B confronts A's specific mode despair: "For now it is your turn... This last life-view is despair itself. It is an aesthetic life-life view, for the personality remains in its immediacy."<sup>4</sup> To despair at the level of personality, as B puts it, takes someone like A:

"You still have in your power all the requirements of an aesthetic life view. You have wealth, independence, your health is unimpaired, your mind is still vigorous, and you have not yet been made unhappy by a you girl not wanting to love you. Your thought has hurried on ahead, you have seen through the vanity of everything, but you have not come any further. On occasion you duck down into it and in abandoning yourself for a single moment to pleasure you discover also, in your consciousness, that it is vanity. You are thus constantly beyond yourself, that is to say, in despair... Here, then, I have your life-view, and believe me, much in your life will be explicable to you if, with me, you regard it as thought-despair. You are a hater of activity in life; quite right, for before there can be any meaning in activity life must have continuity, and this your life lacks. You occupy yourself with your studies, that is true, you are even industrious. But it is only for your own sake and is done with as little teleology as possible... You stick your hands in your pockets and observe life."<sup>5</sup>

B's criticism of A's life hinges on A's refusal to become actual in any existential sense.

Inwardly, A intellectualizes everything, pokes holes in the logic of life, refuses to make commitments to any theory. Outwardly, A is the same, refusing to actualize anything with any amount of sincere commitment. Key in B's initial critique is the word teleology. B's meaning is not the generally use of the word as descriptive of historical development or the continuity of political systems, but rather B is noting A's lack of an inward teleology and A's refusal to

commit to choose an existence and construct an inward continuity. To generalize, A's specific brand of despair comes from his rejection of choosing any continuity or internal teleology in life. This is reflected in the mishmash of opinions and contradictions that arise in A's papers. The result of this rejection of choice is dark:

“In theoretical respects you are through with the world, the finite cannot sustain itself in your thought; in practical respects, too you are to some extent through with it, in an aesthetic sense, that is. Nevertheless you have no view of life. You have something resembling a view and this gives your life a certain composure which must not, though, be confused with a secure and refreshing confidence in life.”<sup>6</sup>

Kierkegaard, in a later pseudonyms work titled *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* remarks upon A and the aesthetic life view with more precision and brevity than most other sources commenting on this life view's despair:

“Part I [the aesthetic life view] is an existence possibility that cannot attain existence, a depression that must be worked upon ethically. Essentially it is depression, and so deep that, although autopathetic, it deceptively occupies itself with the sufferings of others (‘Silhouettes’) and otherwise deceives under the guise of desire, common sense, corruption, but the deception and the disguise are simultaneously its strength and its weakness, its strength in imagination and its weakness in attaining existence... A does not want to be conscious of this and holds existence at bay by the most subtle of all deceptions, by thinking. He has thought everything possible, and yet he has not existed at all.”<sup>7</sup>

Aesthetic despair is fundamentally characterized by aesthetic immediacy or thought, action, sorrow, poetry, or reflection devoid of higher consideration. In all such cases, the task of becoming a human being is negated, ignored, or refuted. Thus A, and others despairing in the aesthetic sense, fail to ever live actual meaningful human lives, or so says the ethical's critique and account. And following, human relationships predicated on the aesthetic life view are also despairing relationships.

### 1b: Aesthetic Love

For all the philosophic and speculative capabilities of the person who embodies an aesthetic life view, they still exist in the world and consequently among other human beings. Thus, the philosophy of love of an aesthete cannot be taken strictly from what they record as their beliefs on the matter of love, but also from their actions and involvements with other people. It is not enough to take A at his word when he tells us that rather than be active in the world he would “prefer to remain silent.”<sup>8</sup> Or to understand that the only extent that A’s being reaches into actuality is in the intellectualized mocking of the absurdity of all human activity, like when he claims “marry, and you will regret it. Do not marry, and you will regret it. Marry or do not marry, you will regret it either way.”<sup>9</sup> What the writings of A and the Seducer’s Diary (whether it is A’s diary or not) show are that the aesthetic life view creates action in the world and interaction with other human beings that is ultimately vampiristic and self-serving in a perverse and despairing way.

Aesthetic love, as it is presented in volume I of *Either/Or*, passes through various levels of characterization and various levels of reflection. To begin an investigation of the philosophy of love in the aesthetic papers, we will start in the “Diapsalmata,” the section at the beginning of *Either/Or*. It consists of A’s poetic aphorisms spanning many topics. The few that regard “love” are great precursors to understanding the aesthetic position more comprehensibly.

One such aphorism claims that “the most beautiful time is the first period of falling in love, when, from every encounter, every glance, one fetches home something new to rejoice over.”<sup>10</sup> Here, one gets a sense for the romantic and erotic elements of the aesthete’s psyche. This phrase suggests that, for A, the most important period of a relationship is the falling in love, its genesis. This contributes to the understanding of the intentional aesthetic romanticizing of



others for one's own pleasure. "The Diapsalmata" continues with phrases claiming, "if erotic love is to have any meaning, in its hour of birth it must be shone upon by the moon,"<sup>11</sup> and "Girls do not appeal to me. Their beauty passes away like a dream and like yesterday when it is past."<sup>12</sup> Both alluding to the transitory nature of love and erotic moments and their inherent inability to be sustained meaningfully. This commentary on love is inextricably linked thematically to A's aesthetic nihilism shown in statements, which in the text itself appear above or below the statements on love, like "life for me has become a bitter drink, and yet it must be taken in drops, slowly, counting,"<sup>13</sup> and "my life is utterly meaningless."<sup>14</sup>

Ultimately, "The Diapsalmata" reveals to the reader a direct commentary on the aesthetic philosophy of life and subsequently, philosophy of love. As the aphorisms unfold, the picture painted is of a type of nihilism. Not a coherent theoretical one, but the expressions of the meaninglessness of human existence sublimate into the philosophy of love and the aesthetic way of being. "The Diapsalmata" is key to piecing together the ideologies that fuel the aesthetic philosophy of love. Those ideologies are given more explicit expression in later essays in the aesthetic papers like "The Rotation of Crops."

*The Rotation of Crops* is the last essay of the aesthetic papers and is placed right before *The Seducer's Diary*. This essay illuminates the aesthetic perspective of A more lucidly than any other writing in the aesthetic papers. The essay's primary concern is boredom, A's general thesis being that "all people are boring... [and] this basic principle has to the highest degree the repelling force always required in the negative, which is actually the principle of motion. It is not merely repelling but infinitely repulsive, and whoever has the basic principle behind him must necessarily have infinite momentum for making discoveries."<sup>15</sup> For A, the claim that all people are boring creates activity by repulsion. This results in two possible motions in life. One, an

outward motion that, powered by repulsion of the boringness of others, seeks to make them interesting. And, an inward motion, a movement, through reflection away from ones own principled boringness. The essay follows with various opinions on how to exist following from this principle. For example, A jokingly postulates that the best action the Danish government could take would be to take out loans and spend the money on entertainment and make everything free. The result of this would be “Copenhagen would become another Athens.”<sup>16</sup> On the personal level, the key to living best, in the movements away from boredom, is to master the art of remembering and forgetting. A claims that “no part of life ought to have so much meaning for a person that he cannot forget it any moment he wants to; on the other hand, every single part of life ought to have so much meaning for a person that he can remember it at any moment. The age that remembers best is also the most forgetful: namely childhood.”<sup>17</sup> A theorizes that what is best is to remember *poetically*. This involves stripping memory of all pain, leaving nothing but enjoyment. Developing the proper attunement of poetic remembering and forgetting creates A’s ideal of aesthetic living: “When an individual has perfected himself in the art of forgetting and the art of recollecting in this way, he is then able to play shuttlecock with all existence.”<sup>18</sup>

The formula for the playing of “shuttlecock with all existence” ushers A into the explanation of his philosophy of love and human relationships, stapled to the thesis that “the art of recollecting and forgetting will also prevent a person from foundering in any particular relationship in life and assures him complete suspension.”<sup>19</sup> Relationships, with a teleology that implicitly involves boredom, discomfort, unwanted attention, non-aesthetic development and the nuisances that come with commitment are relinquished for the aesthetic actor. The reason is they simply refuse to engage in any substantial relational actuality, but rather remain in “suspension.” A’s polemic on relationships continues as he first attacks friendship and then marriage:

“Never become involved in *marriage*. Married people pledge love for each other throughout eternity. Well, now, that is easy enough but does not mean very much... They do say that marriage partners become one, but this is very obscure and mysterious talk. If an individual is many, he has lost his freedom and cannot order his riding boots when he wishes, cannot knock about according to whim. If he has a wife, it is difficult; if he has a wife and children, it is impossible.”<sup>20</sup>

It is a maxim of A’s aesthetic philosophy not to marry. If one surrenders themselves to marriage, one loses the faculties of aesthetic existence, namely those of self-oriented hedonism and action for one’s own enjoyment. And perhaps worst of all, a married life is boring, and it kills eroticism, that thing that defines love experience for the aesthete. A continues that

“just because one does not become involved in marriage, one’s life need not for that reason be devoid of the erotic. The erotic, too, ought to have infinity – but a poetic infinity that can just as well be limited to one hour as to a month. When two people fall in love with each other and sense that they are destined for each other, it is a question of having the courage to break it off, for by continuing there is only everything to lose, nothing to gain. It seems to be a paradox, and indeed it is, for the feelings, not for the understanding. In this domain it is primarily a matter of being able to use moods; if a person can do that, an inexhaustible variation of combinations can be achieved.”<sup>21</sup>

And so, the aesthete seeks infinity through poetic consciousness and an open distaste for the categories and the pains of ethical or religious life. And so, as the title of the essay suggests, the best life consists in constantly rotating the material and ideological content of one’s life in order to satisfy one’s desire to make life interesting and to escape the trappings of boredom.

Fundamentally, the aesthete never sets up that teleology that B praises. The aesthete’s soul remains grounded in poetics and is constantly changing the method by which it sustains its desire for *entertainment*. The hedonistic element of the aesthete’s philosophy of love shines through explicitly in the philosophy of living argued for in “The Rotation of Crops.”

Finally, when it comes to aesthetic philosophy of love, no piece in the aesthetic papers is more illuminating than “The Seducer’s Diary.” The diary is an account of a highly reflective aesthete who gets pleasure from manipulations and manufacturing of situations of seduction. The

preface to the diary introduces an ambiguity as its authorship. A, who writes the preface, claims to have found the diary in an open drawer of the desk of a “corrupt man.” A goes on to explain that this man was corrupt in the sense that “his life [was] an attempt to accomplish the task of living poetically.”<sup>22</sup> This criticism and seeming ethical condemnation seems quite strange considering all that the reader has learned about A’s personality and beliefs up to this point. It has been theorized that A is in fact the Seducer. These accounts reference that alignment of the Seducer’s activity with the rest of A’s aesthetic philosophy, the refusal of A in the preface to give a name to the Seducer, claiming he had “known him without knowing him,”<sup>23</sup> his confession that he “knows” the young woman who was the victim of the Seducer’s action.

The ambiguity set up by the preface is most likely Kierkegaard’s attempt to reveal the depth of the existential desperation and crisis of the aesthetic person. A’s very first lines read “hide from myself, I cannot; I can hardly control the anxiety that grips me at this moment when I decide in my own interest to make an accurate clean copy of the hurried transcript, I was able to obtain.”<sup>24</sup> The reference to self and A’s “best interest” suggests one of two things. Either A is in fact the seducer and is confronting his own actions or A recognizes his own beliefs in the actions of the seducer and is frantic to resolve the resulting despair with an ethical confession and correction. Nonetheless, the preface opens to the reader a glimpse into the crises of personality that exist on the deepest existential levels of the aesthete.

The seducer’s diary continues with the diary entries that track the suiting, manipulation and breaking of engagement with a young woman. The seducer is a highly reflective and artful aesthete. One who seeks to suck as much pleasure from the relationship as possible. This includes the setting up of the engagement and the manipulation to make the woman break it. The actions of the seducer are misogynistic, solipsistic, and, in addition to being

damaging to every party involved, are damaging existentially to the seducer himself. The framework of aesthetics, which has isolated the aesthete into action predicated strictly on egoist pleasure, creates a seducer whose entire focus of mind and being are dedicated to the manipulation of the romantic situation into individual pleasure. This results in all sorts of damage for the woman and shows a foundational existential flaw in the seducer.

Though aesthetic love takes many forms, what is most immediate to the aesthete is the experience of love in its aesthetic or reflective immediacy. This life mode's fundamental function serves to negate despair by distraction. B argues in strong opposition to this aesthetic escapism and challenges A to confront his own despair and to become an ethical person:

“I am a married man, my soul clings surely and unwaveringly to my wife, my children, to this life whose beauty I shall always acclaim. So when I say ‘Despair!’ it is no overwrought youth who would have you whirled off into a maelstrom of passions, no mocking demon shouting out this comfort to the shipwrecked; I shout it to you not as a comfort, not as a state in which you are to remain, but as an action requiring all the soul's strength and gravity and self-command, as sure as it is my conviction, my triumph over the world, that any person who has not tasted the bitterness of despair has missed the meaning of life, however beautiful and joy-filled his life has been... as surely as I can count myself an honorable married man even though I, too, have despaired.”<sup>25</sup>

## **2a: Ethical Love**

The second half of *Either/Or* consists of the ethical papers written by Pseudonym B, also referred to as Judge William. The ethical life view is one that is reflective of ethics in the philosophical system created by Hegel, a system that Kierkegaard studied extensively as a young student. Generally, the ethicist, like B, is a person that believes the highest in life is to choose to attune oneself with the universal: “The task the ethical individual sets for himself is to transform himself into the universal individual.”<sup>26</sup> On the most basic formula, to become an ethical individual, a person must choose themselves in despair as a task in order to *ennoble* their

accidental circumstances by acting to fulfill duty. One's task in life is to align the particular with the universal, or the self's teleology with civic duty (social norms) and for this civic duty to align back with the individual. What this means on a personal level is that Pseudonym B defends social convention and civic morality and their importance on a social level and on the deepest personal existential level. This personal salvation through ethics becomes one of B's most pertinent topics. And one of the most affecting discussions is that of the ethical importance of marriage. The institution of marriage is that key social convention that B attempts to defend. B attempts to explain the importance of marriage and its meaning to him through an ethical lens.

The ethical papers are made up of two long essays/letters to A, the first called "The Aesthetic Validity of Marriage" and the second called "Equilibrium between the Aesthetic and the Ethical", as well as a sermon written by a friend of B's included at the end of the ethical papers called "Ultimatum (A Final Word): The Edifying in the Thought That Against God We Are Always Wrong". The first essay's focus is primarily a defense of marriage against the attacks of A. The second is more broadly about the existential differences between the aesthetic and the ethical ways of life.

This first essay, concerned explicitly with marital love, is long and focused both on a critique of A and propagation of B's own ethical beliefs. B illuminates through this first essay a couple key themes in the philosophy that supports his understanding of love, marriage, and duty. B's thesis' is to "show the aesthetic meaning of marriage and to show how the aesthetic in it may be retained despite life's numerous hinderances."<sup>27</sup> B starts this essay by making a distinction between romantic (or erotic) love and marital love. The form of romantic love that B describes (also called first love), is akin to that praised by A. To reiterate, A's understanding of erotic love is that erotic love and marital love exist in completely separate realms from one another and

marriage is always successful in killing love. To A, the best, highest form of love are erotic moments cultivated through aesthetic and romantic immediacy. They are the “beautiful” moments; the first kiss, the completed seduction, the “accidental” glance. For A, these are the greatest heights that love can reach and that define experience of love, anything that moves beyond this and into the ethical or marital is a betrayal of the erotic’s beauty and a perversion and gutting of love in movements towards the *boring* and duty. For the aesthete, erotic love and marriage are mutually exclusive.

B’s take on erotic love and its relation to marital love is different. B both acknowledges what is beautiful in the erotic and aesthetic moments but recognizes them as beautiful not only themselves, but beautiful as a beginning and as a starting point for the ethical commitments of marriage and the beginning of an ethical teleology. B’s exploration of first love continues in order to understand the erotic, romantic, and aesthetic values that can be transfigured into marriage.

B develops this idea to orient himself and A in “what really constitutes marriage” and continues that “obviously, what really constitutes marriage, what is its substance, is love, or if you want to be more explicit, the being in love.”<sup>28</sup> Again, he must do this in order to attempt to protect marriage against the deconstructive efforts of A who might claim that the only “why” as to the question of marriage is that a person has mistaken duty and ethics as higher than aesthetics. B must show that the “being in love” in the ethical sense is different and higher than A’s aesthetic love.

For B, the difference in his conception of first love has a broader implication that introduces some of the core themes of the ethicist:

“[First Love] is the unity of freedom and necessity. The individual feels drawn to the other with an irresistible power but precisely in this feels his freedom. It is a unity of the universal and the singular, it has the universal as the singular, even to the verge of the contingent... The two are drawn to one another by an irresistible power and yet they enjoy in this their whole freedom.”<sup>29</sup>

For B, the first love confronts the individual with a profound either/or. The immediate erotic attraction creates a relationality in which the individual must choose how to proceed in the circumstance. The individual feels a natural attraction to another sexually, romantically, erotically. The individual must then choose either the ethical transfiguration of the erotic into the ethical or transient aesthetic enjoyment of the erotic. In some sense, this choice is only available to the ethicist as the aesthete’s understanding of the first love as arbitrary and accidental negates choice itself and thus the aesthete experiences the first love outside of this framework of choice. For A, first love and romantic experience existing in themselves and outside personal teleology, choice and selfhood. This is reflected when A makes claims like “girls do not appeal to me. Their beauty passes away like a dream and like yesterday when it is past. Either they are faithless...or they are faithful. If I found such a one, she would appeal to me from the standpoint of her being a rarity; but from the standpoint of a long period of time she would not appeal to me.”<sup>30</sup> So A negates the choice based on erotic appeal. But for B and ethics, choice and personal responsibility confront the individual in the experience of first love and marriage is the ethical answer.

This opening dichotomy in the ethical papers between the erotic and marital love helps the reader understand importance of love and love situations in the development of the ethical life view and the ethical task of how to appropriating the erotic into the marital that forms the vision of what is highest in life. Having opened this way, B must then proceed to describe



marriage and why it is higher. For marriage to be higher than aesthetics, B must convince A of the universal.

The ethical's claim over the aesthetic is the universal: "love is a union of the universal and the particular, but to want to enjoy the particular, in the sense in which you do, evidences a reflection that places the particular outside the universal."<sup>31</sup> The particular being the specific relationship or erotic moment and the universal being the ethical. Marriage merges the two and becomes that thing that is higher than the aesthetic moment:

"The ethical teaches him that the relationship is the absolute. The relationship is, namely, the universal...Ethics tells him only that he should marry, it does not say whom. Ethics explains to him the universal in the differences, and he transfigures the differences in the universal. The ethical view of marriage, then, has several advantages over every aesthetic concept of love. It elucidates the universal, not the accidental...It sees relationship as the absolute and therefore looks upon love according to its true beauty – that is, according to its freedom; it understands its historical beauty."<sup>32</sup>

The universal is the greater teleology that the individual must choose, and task themselves with becoming attuned with. It is things done for the "common good." As stated, the ethical person strives to become the universal individual. Because marriage is a convention that B claims to be universal, it is a duty to marry. In other words, to identify one's interiority with the universal and the ethical, one must marry. Part of the importance of marriage for the ethicist is its interiority. In marrying, the individual aligns with the universal by obeying the state, higher authority, and social convention. But they also adopt an inward duty by which their individuality identifies with the universal by virtue of choice. This is the case with a marriage commitment and the singular commitment of love for B and what he calls "the inwardness of duty in love."<sup>33</sup> So love and marriage themselves are duties that one gives oneself in the ethical attempt to become a universal particular. In doing this, B believes that the accidental of the erotic is elevated into the realm of ethics: "For me, duty is not one climate, love another, but for me duty makes love the true

temperate climate, and for me love makes duty the true temperate climate, and this unity is perfection.”<sup>34</sup>

Because of the inwardness of B’s theory of love (by which he gives *himself* duty and aligns *himself* with the universal), B believes that his theory is resilient to the criticisms of A. For example, as discussed, A is very concerned with the boredom that infiltrates any long-term committed relationship like marriage. B refutes this with the interiority of marriage:

“You [A] are outside yourself and therefore cannot do without the other as opposition; you believe that only a restless spirit is alive, and all who are experienced believe that only a quiet spirit is truly alive...So it is with the domestic life of marriage – quiet, modest, humming. It does not have many changements (variations), and yet it is like that water, running, and yet, like that water, it has melody, dear to the one who knows it, dear to him precisely because he knows it. It is not showy.”<sup>35</sup>

Ethical love concerns itself with the quiet interiority of duty. The duty to marry, to make a commitment, to choose to align oneself with social convention. B’s defense against A’s claiming that married life is boring is that what is highest is not the circumstance outside oneself and enjoyment of it as the aesthete does with the erotic, but the interior commitment to duty and marriage.

Whether or not B is successful in refuting A’s polemic and proving the ethical to be higher than the aesthetic is left unremarked upon in the text. Again, this is Kierkegaard’s attempt to develop the subjectivity of the reader and force them into a critical stance and inward investigation. However, this was not the end of Kierkegaard’s writing on the stages of life. The religious comes next and is a response to the potentiality of despair in the ethical.

## **2b: Ethical Despair**

Developing the ethical life as that which stands in opposition to the aesthetic was not the end of Kierkegaard’s task in the pseudonymous works of 1843. Kierkegaard understood to well

that the challenges to the ethical way of life are too enormous to ignore. Particularly those challenges posed by religion. Confrontation between the religious and the ethical renders the ethical despairing.

The despair of the ethicist is different from the despair of the aesthete. Again, the aesthete despairs because they exist in immediacy. The aesthete does not have a developed interiority but rather distract themselves from existential tasks with reflection, aesthetics, eroticism, manipulations, entertainments, power, etc. B devotes a great amount of time in his essays pointing this out to A. However, B and the ethical world view hinge the entire claim to superiority over the aesthetic on choosing oneself through duty and the universal. By forsaking one's immediacy, confronting existential despair, and choosing oneself, the ethicist believes that he has escaped the existential crisis of personhood by choosing in ethics and to align oneself with the universal. Because these movements are internal and chosen, the skepticism of the aesthete cannot penetrate the personality of the ethicist. B, it seems has chosen and attained a stable personality with goals that align with the dominating normative goals of the society; having a job, being civic minded, getting married, committing to others. The ethical person creates existential grounding by belief in a teleological world order (the universal) and the idea that freedom and choice (including choosing oneself) correspond to that order. B believes that his own teleology is in line with that of the greater universal.

This life view is challenged by Kierkegaard's religious consideration. With the development of the religious life view, the certainty of the ethicist is called into question. Kierkegaard develops the religious "Knight of Faith" in *Fear and Trembling* and he seeks to show the reader that a truly religious life is something different and higher than a life of aesthetics or ethics. Ultimately, the religious life view praises subjectivity over the universal and

the individual's relationship with God (the absolute) over the relationship with ethics. And because ethics does not predicate itself on subjectivity and absolute relation to the religious, it can become enveloped in despair.

The religious confronts the ethical by investigating a situation in which ethics and ethical duty, like that cherished by B, is contradictory to religious and subjective duty. This is done in *Fear and Trembling* through analysis of the story of Abraham and Isaac. Kierkegaard gestures towards the subjective rather than universal nature of religion in *Concluding Unscientific*

*Postscript*:

“For the person who with infinite passion has had the inwardness to grasp the ethical, to grasp duty and the eternal validity of the universal, no terror in heaven, on earth, and in the abyss can compare with that of facing a collision in which the ethical becomes the temptation. Yet everyone faces this collision, if in no other way, then by one's being religiously assigned to relating oneself to the religious paradigm – that is, because the religious paradigm is the irregularity and yet is supposed to be the paradigm (which is like God's omnipresence as invisibility and relation as mystery), or because the religious paradigm does not express the universal but the singular... And yet is supposed to be the paradigm.”<sup>36</sup>

For Kierkegaard, faith, like the faith of Abraham, moves incomprehensibly past ethics. The ethicist despairs when religious duty calls on the individual to act contrary to ethical duty and the individual fails, or in other words is unsuccessful making a leap out and beyond ethics into religious faith. Such was the task of Abraham who was commanded by God to kill his son, and not for ethical reasons, but for no other reason than to obey God's command. Abraham, who is the father of faith, suspends his ethical duties in order to obey God and sacrifice Isaac. He goes even further in order to escape despair by making a double movement and having faith that God will restore his finite joy to him even in renouncing his love for his son in order to kill him.

In a circumstance such as this, where a person's subjectivity is called to action contrary to ethics, then, a person like B, whose entire being is predicated on alignment with the ethical and the universal, will surely fall into despair.

### **3a: Religious Love**

*Fear and Trembling* is not a complete analytical analysis of the religious life view because its actual contents, as Kierkegaard and Johannes de silentio (the pseudonym writing about the religious life view) believe, are beyond rational analysis and even beyond understanding. *Fear and Trembling's* focus is a mode of living Kierkegaard titles the Knight of Faith. De silentio confesses to not be a Knight of Faith, but rather simply a man of infinite resignation, another mode of living examined in the text. He claims only to be capable of describing the movements of the Knight of Faith, not the actual phenomenology. The Knight of Faith, like Abraham, has moved beyond the aesthetic and the ethical spheres into the sphere of faith. Key to this is the individual's absurd leap into absolute relation with the absolute (God). Love in *Fear and Trembling*, like in *Either/Or*, serves to outline and illuminate the existential condition of the person being analyzed. In this case, in addition to other things, the theme of love and romantic relationships shows what sets a Knight of Faith apart from and higher than other spheres of existence.

Though *Fear and Trembling* is deeply concerned with the aesthetic category, it primarily sets the Knight of Faith against the existential conditions of the ethical person and a category of person called the Knight of Infinite Resignation. First, we will explore the difference between love in the Knight of Infinite Resignation and Knight of Faith.

In the dichotomy between the Knight of Infinite Resignation and the Knight of Faith, love of another represents an earthly object in which one's potential for self-actualization, reason for being, and escape from despair, is placed. For Abraham, this is how he loves his son Isaac. It is the object of the finite world in which his meaning rests. De silentio describes the difference between the two Knights by setting up a hypothetical situation in which a young man falls in love but that relationship is doomed: "A young lad falls in love with a princess, the content of his whole life lies in this love, and yet the relationship is one that cannot possibly be brought to fruition, be translated from ideality into reality."<sup>37</sup> The young lad, in this case, is the Knight and loving in the way that he does, he must risk all that he can to secure infinity for his love. But in the reality of the context, this fails. There is no hope of the love's success, and the Knight must preserve his love in whatever way that he can in order to preserve himself. And so, the Knight must make what De silentio calls the movement of infinite resignation. The Knight concentrates his passion, love, and consciousness and resigns from the finite possibility of love. By doing this

"his love for the princess would take on...the expression of eternal love, would acquire a religious character, be transfigured into a love for the eternal being, which, although it denied fulfillment, still reconciled him once more in the eternal consciousness of his love's validity in an eternal form that no reality can take from him."<sup>38</sup>

That is the movement of infinite resignation. It is a spiritual step that develops eternal consciousness by preserving the passion of the finite in eternal consciousness. His love is thus preserved, but only spiritually. Thus, "he has grasped the deep secret that even in loving another one should be sufficient unto oneself. He pays no further finite attention to what the princess does, and just this proves that he has made the movement infinitely."<sup>39</sup> This is the Knight of Infinite Resignation's response to love in its finitude. To resign from the world in order to preserve the passion of love and to save himself from despair in the finite. The Knight of Faith

makes this same movement of resignation and abandons the finite love for its preservation and growth in the spiritual. But, the Knight of Faith makes one movement beyond the Knight of Infinite resignation.

The movement of resignation is a rational movement. Resignation secures eternal consciousness because the finite object of love cannot be lost. It secures the Knight's love of the princess in the realm of spirit, outside the failures of finitude. The Knight of Faith's final move transgresses the bounds of the rationality of infinite resignation. The final move of the Knight of Faith in this situation is a leap back into finite love through the faith that through God, the love will exist in the finite world because through God, on the strength of the absurd, all things are possible:

“By my own strength I can give up the princess, and I shall be no sulker but find joy and peace and repose in my pain, but with my own strength I cannot get her back again, for all that strength is precisely what I use to renounce my Claim on her. But by faith, says the marvelous knight, by faith you will get her on the strength of the absurd.”<sup>40</sup>

The Knight of Faith returns the Knight into the immediacy of finitude with a double movement. That of resignation in order to gain eternal consciousness and that of belief and faith that all will be well in finitude.

The movements of the Knight of Faith require passion, reason, and a leap into the absurd. The love of the Knight of Faith begins with the passion of immediacy like an aesthete but unreflective and not focused on individualistic please. And after making the movements of faith, the love returns to the world with a new immediacy: “Faith is therefore no aesthetic emotion, but something far higher, exactly because it presupposes resignation; it is not the immediate inclination of the heart but the paradox of existence.”<sup>41</sup> Through faith the Knight receives their passions back again, but they are transformed. And this new immediacy is something different

from aesthetics and ethics. And where, in response to despairing immediacy, Pseudonym B would suggest a commitment to the universal, the religious model pushes through the movements of resignation and faith into a new sphere of existence: “The first immediacy is the aesthetic, and here the Hegelian philosophy may well be right. But faith is not the aesthetic or if it is, then faith has never existed just because it has existed always.”<sup>42</sup> The life of the Knight of Faith diverges from the aesthetic in its eternal commitments and from the ethical in from where it receives its maxims and how it relates to subjective passions.

In the case of the young lad who has fallen in love with a princess, the aesthete would either lack the genuine passion of love (for seduction and reflection are most important objects) or would resign from the circumstance having gleamed all they could from it and exist in the eternity of pain. The ethicist would view the passion of the young lad, who has put all his eggs in one basket, the princess, as outside duty. The ethicist would argue that the circumstance of the love was not in line with the universal, for a princess does not become the partner of merely anyone. The social order and normative hierarchy must supersede the silly passion of the young lad. The ethicist negates the subjective passion of the young lad and demands that he take a more ethical path. But in the movements of a Knight of Faith, there is necessary a teleological suspension of the ethical by which the individual becomes higher than the universal: “For faith is just this paradox, that the single individual is higher than the universal, though in such a way, be it noted, that the movement is repeated, that is, that having been in the universal, the single individual now sets himself apart as the particular above the universal.”<sup>43</sup> It is the same with Abraham. By ethical standards he was a child murderer, but by elevation of his subjectivity over the ethical, he became a Knight of Faith.



For the young lad, love for the princess is allowed without despair after obedience to the duty to God and subjectivity. The same is true for Abraham. His love of Isaac is trumped by duty to God, but also rewarded after the movements of faith. So, imbedded in the movements of faith and the obedience to God's command is the trust that all the love of the finite will be returned.

Religious love exists in finite immediacy. However, it has gone through the movements of infinite resignation and the leap into faith and is predicated by the absolute duty to God and the passion of consciousness required for resignation. That passion is resigned, then directed at God, then returned to the finite. It can exist any way in the world because it is not necessitated by aesthetic desire or ethical duty. But it must have made the movements and is thus the highest.

#### **4: Conclusory comments**

*Either/Or* and *Fear and Trembling* are profound tools for thinking existentially about the phenomena of love and despair. The dialectic that is mounted in the pinning of the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious against and between each other present the reader with an opportunity to explore their innermost identity. The movements between the aesthetic and the ethical remain timeless, for human subjects must always reconcile their own existence and desires with the realities of society, the ideals of philosophy, and the necessity of positive human relations not predicated on individualistic pleasure. Contemplating love in these spheres results in a weighing of the value of one's own pleasure against the ethical realities of existence among others and within an ideological ethical framework. Kierkegaard's conception of the religious presents a notion of subjectivity that relates the individual both an eternal entity and to finite immediacy. Love in this sphere has attained a balance between purity and absurdity, certain failure and spiritual preservation, subjectivity and divine reassurance. Love in the religious sphere relinquishes the worries and despair of the aesthetic and the ethical and elevates the subjectivity

that is worked for through the difficult and absurd movements of faith to the highest station. This station secures for the individual an existence free of despair that is substantiated by the innermost part of a subjectivity's connection with the eternal.

Kierkegaard's early aesthetic works are unique and bizarre. These books are forever interpretable and have no decisive thesis. Yet, their insight into the human experience is profound and illuminating. This paper was meant to highlight certain aspects of each pseudonymous account's philosophy pertaining to love and despair and the ways in which these philosophies affect each other.

---

 Bibliography:

- <sup>1</sup> Kierkegaard, Søren. *Works of Love*. Translated by Howard Hong and Edna Hong. Harpercollins Publishers Inc, 2009., 144
- <sup>2</sup> Kosch, Michelle (2006). 'Despair' in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*. *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 44 (1):85-97.
- <sup>3</sup> Kierkegaard, Søren. *Either/Or*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna V. Hong. Vol. II. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Pr., 1987, 498
- <sup>4</sup> Kierkegaard, Søren. *Either/Or* (Trans. Hong and Hong) Vol. II 194
- <sup>5</sup> Kierkegaard, Søren. *Either/Or: Fragment of Life*. Translated by Alastair Hannay. (Penguin, 1992.), 503
- <sup>6</sup> Kierkegaard, Søren. *Either/Or: Fragment of Life*. (Trans. By Hannay.) 505-506
- <sup>7</sup> Kierkegaard, Søren. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992, 253
- <sup>8</sup> Kierkegaard, Søren. *Either/Or*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna V. Hong. Vol. I. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Pr., 1987, 35
- <sup>9</sup> Kierkegaard, Søren. *Either/Or*. (Trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna V. Hong.) Vol. I, 38
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 24
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 28
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 29
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 26
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 36
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 285
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 287
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 293
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 294
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 295
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 297
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* 298
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 305
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 306
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 303
- <sup>25</sup> Kierkegaard, Søren. *Either/Or*. (Trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna V. Hong.) Vol. II, 511
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 261
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 8
- <sup>28</sup> Kierkegaard, Søren. *Either/Or: Fragment of Life*. (Trans. By Hannay.), 399
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 404
- <sup>30</sup> Kierkegaard, Søren. *Either/Or* (Trans. Hong and Hong) Vol. I, 29
- <sup>31</sup> Kierkegaard, Søren. *Either/Or* (Trans. Hong and Hong) Vol. II, 90
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* 305
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* 152
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* 147
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* 144
- <sup>36</sup> Kierkegaard, Søren. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*. (Trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong), 259
- <sup>37</sup> Kierkegaard, Søren. *Fear and Trembling*. Translated by Alastair Hannay. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2006, 46
- <sup>38</sup> Kierkegaard, Søren. *Fear and Trembling* (Trans. By Hannay), 49
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* 50
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* 56- 57
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* 53
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* 99
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* 63