

# 'Despair' in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*<sup>I</sup>

MICHELLE KOSCH\*

KIERKEGAARD'S PSEUDONYMOUS AUTHORSHIP begins with a characterization of what he calls the "aesthetic" view of life (the papers of A comprising the first volume of *Either/Or*), followed by an extended argument for the rejection of that view (the two letters of Judge Wilhelm comprising most of the second volume). The question of what the specifics of the judge's argument are has about as many answers as the work has had interpreters. Uncontroversially, the basic claim is that the aesthetic life is despair, and the ethical life (attained by "choosing oneself") offers an escape from despair. But the meaning of each of the key terms in this statement is far from obvious.

Take, for instance, the notion of an aesthetic view of life as it appears in the second volume (abstracting from the very real question about the extent to which A's idea of such a view overlaps with the judge's). The judge addresses a number of views in *Either/Or* II, only some of which bear any clear relation to the name "aesthetic." First there is immediacy (the unreflective pursuit of some goal or series of goals—paradigmatically, pleasure in some form), a series of standpoints incorporating progressively greater degrees of reflection (e.g., the pursuit of the interesting—two versions of this are outlined in *Crop Rotation* and *The Seducer's Diary*). Then there is A's position, which I take to be most closely related to some of the thoughts expressed in *Diapsalmata* (I will have more to say about that in section 4). Third, there are the views of "some of the German philosophers," a group which turns out to include the Schelling of the *System of Transcendental Idealism* (whose view might reasonably be called "aesthetic," since it is the experience of art that is supposed to provide the highest cognitive paradigm in that work), as well as Hegel as seen through the lens of the Danish Hegelians Heiberg and Martensen (a view it is harder to associate with the term "aesthetic," given that Hegel explicitly distinguished his position from Schelling's in part by criticiz-

---

<sup>1</sup> For comments on earlier drafts of this paper I would like to thank Fred Neuhouser, Wolfgang Mann, Wayne Proudfoot, Charles Larmore, and audiences at Cornell University, Miami University, the University of New Mexico, Whitman College, University College Cork and the University of Michigan.

\* Michelle Kosch is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of Michigan.

ing Schelling's emphasis on aesthetic appreciation as a cognitive model, and aesthetic presentation as a communicative model, of philosophical truth). One can list these views that the judge groups together under the rubric "the aesthetic view of life." What is more difficult is to say what they all have in common—and what exactly is wrong with whatever that is.

Of course, the judge tells us: they are all, in one form or another, despair. This is not very helpful, though, if we don't know what 'despair' means. That the word (*Fortvivelsen*) means just what it means in everyday Danish is ruled out by two of the judge's commitments: first, that nearly everyone who has ever lived has done so in despair, and second, that the vast majority of them have been unaware of that fact. Appealing to the use of the term in some other of Kierkegaard's works also has its problems, at least if one feels any respect for Kierkegaard's injunction to avoid arbitrarily mixing up the views presented by the various pseudonyms. I will eventually argue that there is a quite strong connection between the notion of despair in *Either/Or* and that in later works (in particular, in *The Sickness unto Death*), but that connection has to be established on the basis of a reading of *Either/Or*, not the other way around.

The notion of an ethical view of life also turns out to be problematic, insofar as the judge uses the expression *det Ethiske* to refer to all of the following: (1) the idea that one is a morally responsible agent (such that accepting the ethical standpoint means accepting that one is responsible for what one does), (2) the idea that one is autonomous or capable of autonomy in some sense, (3) the normative force of social and cultural institutions in general,<sup>2</sup> and (4) more specifically, that concrete set of ethical duties that he takes to apply to both himself and A in virtue of (2) and (3).

In what follows I will defend a view wherein despair, for the judge, is the conscious or unconscious assumption of a passive or fatalistic attitude toward one's existence, motivated by a misconstrual of the nature of one's agency. More specifically, the aesthetic view is despair because it is characterized by the denial of the claims of ethics in sense (1). This is apparently not the most obvious reading, and so I will begin by showing two alternatives that appear to be more intuitive to be, in fact, unacceptable (sections 1 and 2). I have chosen these because of their currency, but also because their limitations are instructive. The failure of the second alternative will point to an explanation of the link between the philosophical views the judge discusses and A's view (section 3), a link which will be an important step toward understanding the core meaning of 'despair' as it applies to views the judge labels 'aesthetic' (section 4). I will conclude by explaining two positive consequences of the view—the first, that a common line of criticism of *Either/Or* is misguided; the second, a clearer picture of the continuity between *Either/Or* and later works (sections 5 and 6).

<sup>2</sup> What I mean here is what Hegel called *Sittlichkeit*.

## I.

The judge's central presentation of the concept of despair (at *E/O* II 179–80/II 163<sup>3</sup>) suggests the first of the alternative readings I just mentioned. Aesthetic views, he says there, are those that place the highest importance on pleasure, satisfaction or happiness in some (apparently) ordinary sense: "[T]he popular expression [for the aesthetic life-view] heard in all ages and from various stages is this: One must enjoy life" (*E/O* II 179/II 163). And the criticism he brings seems to be that enjoyment cannot be relied upon: "*But the person who says that he wants to enjoy life always posits a condition that either lies outside the individual or is within the individual in such a way that it is not there by virtue of the individual himself*" (*E/O* II 180/II 163). The individual with an aesthetic life-view takes as his goal or standard something that is not in his power and whose attainment therefore cannot be guaranteed. The argument continues as follows: When things go awry for such an individual, he despairs, in a quite ordinary sense of that term—he feels unhappy, without hope, at a loss. But this, claims the judge, means that he was in despair *all along*. For anyone who is susceptible to despair in this way is *eo ipso* already in despair. So long as things do not go awry, he is simply in the dark about his despair (*E/O* II 192/II 174):

Let us now see why they despaired. Because they discovered that they had built their lives on something transient? But is that [*viz.*, the discovery] a reason for despair; has an essential change taken place in that on which they built their lives? Is it an essential change in the transitory that it manifests itself as transitory, or is it not rather something accidental and inessential about it that it does not manifest itself this way? Nothing new has supervened that could cause a change. Consequently, when they despair, the basis of it must be that they were in despair beforehand. The difference is only that they did not know it. . . . (*E/O* II 192/II 173–74).

The judge lists a number of goals (hedonistic pleasure, honor, wealth) that depend on conditions "outside the individual" and one (cultivation of one's talents) that depends on conditions "within the individual in such a way that [they] are not there by virtue of the individual himself." Such goals admit of failure—due to impossible circumstances, to bad luck, or to one's own mistakes. But since one cannot be assured of success, the view seems to be, one cannot really enjoy life in the way the aesthetic individual pretends. The possibility of failure casts a pall over the entire project, and this pall is despair in the implicit sense.

This is a quite standard and intuitive interpretation of the judge's argument, and a version of it is given, and endorsed, by Poul Lübcke. According to this view, "despair is a normative concept, referring to a life that has the *possibility* of despair in a *psychological* sense."<sup>4</sup> The judge's claim is that one should be risk-averse with respect to one's main goals in life. "This is probably the central argument in the whole letter—and in Kierkegaard's philosophy too. If you have a goal in your life

<sup>3</sup> Parenthetical page references to *Either/Or* are to the Hongs' (English) translation (Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, trans. H. Hong and E. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 2 volumes) and to the first edition of the (Danish) collected works (Søren Kierkegaard, *Samlede Værker*, eds. A. B. Drachmann, J. L. Heiberg and H. O. Lange, 14 vols., Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1901–6).

<sup>4</sup> Poul Lübcke, "An Analytical Interpretation of Kierkegaard as Moral Philosopher," *Kierkegaardiana* 15 (1991), 99.

that can be missed, and if you look upon this goal as an absolute goal, as a *conditio sine qua non* for the fulfillment of your life, then you are living in despair regardless of your being a success or the opposite."<sup>5</sup> The ethical individual, then, escapes despair by choosing a goal (the ethical goal) that is assured of success. This requires, of course, that the ethical goal be unmissable, and Lübcke's interpretation of the judge's ethics is informed by this requirement. He argues, for instance, that ethics for the judge must be deontological (for the possibility of miscalculation of outcomes threatens to make the ethical goal missable for a consequentialist as well) and that the judge must be an egalitarian about potentials for ethical success (for if fulfilling ethical demands required a special talent, out-of-the-ordinary strength of character, or anything else that someone might lack, then the ethical life would be despair in precisely the sense that the aesthetic life is), and his conclusions are informed by this reading of the argument from despair.

This line of interpretation relies, though, on a reading of "implicit despair" that we cannot accept. Take the judge's formulation of the most popular expression of the aesthetic life-view: that one must "enjoy life."<sup>6</sup> How is the risk of failure supposed to interfere with this project? There seem to be only two possibilities: (1) One cannot enjoy life (in the everyday sense) in the present because one cannot be certain that one will always do so in the future. But, extremes of paranoia aside, one can perfectly well enjoy oneself, in the *everyday* sense, knowing that the causes of one's enjoyment are contingent and transitory. (2) One cannot reckon oneself a success in some sort of whole-life sense unless one knows that no misfortunes (or bouts of boredom) will befall one in the future. But the possibility of future misfortunes affects only one's ability to know now whether one will have been a success in this sense, and does not affect the question of whether one will in fact have been a success in this sense.

If this is the judge's argument against taking the aesthetic view of life (here, again, defined as the pursuit of enjoyment or fulfillment in one of the senses outlined), then it is a remarkably weak one, for it fails to answer the obvious question of why assurance of success should be the first criterion for a life-view's acceptability.<sup>7</sup> That this reading of implicit despair is also frankly inconsistent with important aspects of what Kierkegaard says in later works is also clear enough. It will suffice to note that if this is what despair is, then the religious individual, who

<sup>5</sup> "An Analytical Interpretation," 97.

<sup>6</sup> We should probably take living for honor, say, or the cultivation of talents, to be simply less "popular" ways of living in aesthetic immediacy, as the judge clearly intends to treat all such cases analogously, and one can substitute any one of these in the discussion that follows, though in the case of some (e.g., honor) only consideration (2) might be applicable.

<sup>7</sup> One further problem with this reading has to do with its scope: it has *prima facie* applicability only to the ways of life unreflectively oriented toward the pursuit of some good or other. The sort of second-order enjoyment of pleasure and pain, success and failure, practiced by Johannes the Seducer and theorized about in *Crop Rotation* does not seem to be exposed to this sort of risk. In fact, it seems designed precisely to avoid this risk. Although we do hear in *Crop Rotation* that boredom will eventually catch up with one, and that one has a boredom-induced death to look forward to no matter what—dying of boredom or shooting oneself out of curiosity (*E/OI* 289/I 260–61)—the second of these two options looks, at least, like an escape. Hartmut Rosenau has pointed out the difficulty of these two sections of *Either/Or I* for interpretations that conflate the problem of the aesthetic life-view with the problem of immediacy. See Hartmut Rosenau, "Wie Kommt ein Aesthet zur Verzweiflung? Die Bedeutung der Kunst bei Kierkegaard und Schelling," *Kierkegaardiana* 16 (1993): 94–106.

is after all expected to exist in a state of the most extreme insecurity—"over 70,000 fathoms of water"—is surely in despair as well.<sup>8</sup>

## 2.

If the problem with the aesthetic view is not the instability of its goals, then perhaps the problem is an intrinsic unsuitability of its goals. That is, perhaps the problem with "enjoying life" is that it is simply inadequate as a human goal, that the fulfillment of this sort of goal is not a plausible way to seek human satisfaction to begin with. This alternative is suggested in the many places where the aesthetic life is described as "relating oneself absolutely to relative ends." It requires a different reading of the judge's complaint that the aesthetic life "posits a condition that either lies outside the individual or is within the individual in such a way that it is not there by virtue of the individual himself," but there is a plausible alternative available: what is needed is not a condition that is within one's control, but rather one that is within one's nature, as it were. There is something in himself, some intrinsic ethical *telos*, that *A* is thwarting in living as he does. Despair is a dissatisfaction arising not from the risk of failure, but from the inability even of success, according to aesthetic criteria, to provide genuine satisfaction.

A number of attempts have been made at reconstructing the judge's argument in this manner. Among the more current is the view, due to Anthony Rudd,<sup>9</sup> that a prerequisite for a meaningful and fulfilled life is a stable sense of self, and that this requires having roots in a particular set of social structures, and seeing oneself as subject to the duties and standards that go with these.

[A] stable personal identity can only be achieved through commitment to social roles and relationships which carry with them objective standards of assessment. One must become a participant in communities and the traditions which define them, and must develop the virtues necessary for such participation. The failure to do this will render one's life quite literally pointless. Without any unifying *telos*, one's life collapses into a series of disconnected moments, and to live in this way . . . is to live in despair.<sup>10</sup>

As Rudd's language suggests, this is a line of interpretation influenced by contemporary communitarianism. But it is not for that reason viciously anachronistic. For the source of the contemporary view it echoes is Hegel's conception of ethical life, and it is a fact that Hegel may be the source of much of what the judge says about what living ethically entails. In fact the judge often seems to be relying quite heavily on some behind-the-scenes justification of his account of ethical duties (in which family, professional vocation and friendship figure prominently). He cer-

<sup>8</sup> This is particularly important because Kierkegaard's point against the aesthetic life is made primarily in *Either/Or*. If arriving at the religious life-view meant giving up the judge's criticisms of the aesthetic life, we would be left largely without such criticisms.

<sup>9</sup> See Anthony Rudd, *Kierkegaard and the Limits of the Ethical* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), and "Reason in Ethics: MacIntyre and Kierkegaard," in *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre*, eds. J. Davenport and A. Rudd (Chicago and LaSalle, Illinois: Open court, 2001), 131–50.

<sup>10</sup> Rudd, "Reason in Ethics," 139.

tainly offers no explicit justification of it himself. And given the historical context and the set of duties involved, Hegel is indeed a plausible candidate.<sup>11</sup>

But this raises a difficulty. For in the very middle of the judge's condemnation of the aesthetic view of life, we see the first appearance of a claim that will be reiterated throughout the pseudonymous works and that should, on this interpretation, come as a surprise: that the position of "the German philosophers"—and it is clear from the discussion that the German philosophers in question are none other than Hegel and his school—is yet another form of despair (*E/O II 212/II 190*). In fact, the judge explicitly links *A*'s position with that of "the philosophers"—in the following way:

The polemical conclusion, from which all your paeans over existence resonate, has a strange similarity to modern philosophy's pet theory that the principle of contradiction is canceled. I am well aware that the position you take is anathema to philosophy, and yet it seems to me that it is itself guilty of the same error; indeed the reason this is not immediately detected is that it is not even as properly situated as you are. You are situated in the area of action, philosophy in the area of contemplation. As soon as it is moved into the area of practice, it must arrive at the same conclusion as you do, even though it does not express it the same way (*E/O II 170/II 154*).

This equation is highly instructive. For it tells us that we should view the problem with speculative philosophy discussed in the second letter as somehow of a *piece* with the problem of *A*'s view. But what is this conclusion that both *A* and "the philosophers" would have in common, were the latter to address the "area of practice"?

### 3.

What the judge says is that for both, "life comes to a halt" (*E/O II 171/II 155*). What he means, I propose, is the following: The justification Hegel thought one

<sup>11</sup> Another candidate is Aristotle. The list of immediate goals the judge considers (and the order in which he considers them) recalls the list Aristotle considers and rejects as accounts of happiness in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (see, e.g., I.5 1095b15–1096a10). But there are problems with the view that the judge is presenting a broadly Aristotelian defense of the ethical life over the aesthetic life. First, he never redefines happiness along eudaimonistic lines in the way that would be appropriate were this the idea. He does not argue that satisfaction is really the fulfillment of duty, or is virtue, or is in general to be thought of in terms of higher (moral) ends. In fact where he argues that there are various satisfactions associated with the fulfillment of one's duties, he concentrates on what he himself labels aesthetic satisfactions (for instance in the "aesthetic defense of marriage"). He also allows that those immediate individuals for whom nothing has gone awry "were indeed happy" (*E/O II 192/II 173*). Such individuals succeed according to aesthetic criteria, are satisfied, enjoy themselves—and they are in despair. Another problem with this interpretation is the judge's claim that those who replace "the meaning of life is to enjoy oneself" with "the meaning of life is sorrow" are subject to the very same criticism (at *E/O II 235/II 211*). This suggests that it is not the specific content of the aesthetic conception of human satisfaction that is at issue.

Another plausible figure to see in the background of the judge's discussion is Kant. Jörg Disse has argued that the judge's view is Kantianism shorn of Kant's account of practical reason. See Jörg Disse, "Autonomy in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*," in Giles, ed., *Kierkegaard and Freedom* (New York: MacMillan, 2000), 58–68 and Jörg Disse, *Kierkegaards Phänomenologie der Freiheitserfahrung* (Freiberg/Munich: Karl Alber, 1991). Of course the sorts of duties the judge most emphasizes (e.g. to get married) are not moral duties at all for Kant. I have argued that Fichte is a better match for the judge's characterization in "Kierkegaard's Ethicist: Fichte's Role in Kierkegaard's Construction of the Ethical," forthcoming.

could give for the ethical validity of the concrete social structures in place in the early-19<sup>th</sup> century relied on seeing them as the results of a history that is the self-development of world-spirit in human consciousness and its social forms—a development toward a social situation characterized by objective rationality and individual self-determination. But history can be understood in this way only from a unique historical perspective, and only in virtue of being philosophically reconstructable according to its necessity (in a sense to be specified). The justification thus presupposes a sort of historical determinism—not the determinism of the billiards table, exactly, but rather the determinism of reason in history. This story, Kierkegaard wants to claim, is an answer to the question “What am I supposed to do?” that renders the question itself senseless. If I am a mere moment of reason in history, then ethical questions have no real sense, for I face no genuine choices. “Philosophy,” the judge writes, “sees history under the category of necessity, not under the category of freedom, for even though the world-historical process is said to be free, this is in the same sense as one speaks of the organizing process in nature” (*E/O* II 175/II 158).

Now it seems that the correct response to this claim is to say that the philosophers in question (Fichte, Hegel and the early Schelling) do not give up on “the category of freedom” at all. Instead they hold a sophisticated compatibilist position according to which freedom is compatible not (or: not directly) with mechanism but rather (in the first instance) with a total teleological orderliness of the nature and process of things (including, but not limited to, the nature and history of humanity)—a position that had its source in Kant’s third *Critique*. But this is precisely the object of the judge’s complaint. In the first letter, the judge paraphrases a passage from the *System of Transcendental Idealism*,<sup>12</sup> Schelling’s conception of freedom as subjective assent to and participation in the objective order of things, and he describes it as expressing “the highest in aesthetics”:

Here I am at the summit of the aesthetic. And in truth, he who has humility and courage enough to let himself be aesthetically transformed, he who feels himself present as a character in a drama the deity is writing, in which the poet and the prompter are not different persons, in which the individual, as the experienced actor who has lived into his character and his lines is not disturbed by the prompter but feels that he himself wants to say what is being whispered to him, so that it almost becomes a question whether he is putting words in the prompter’s mouth or the prompter in his, he who in the most profound sense feels himself creating and cre-

<sup>12</sup> The Schelling passage is the following:

If we think of history as a drama, in which everyone who takes part plays his role entirely freely and according to his pleasure, then we can conceive of a rational development of this confused play only if we think that a single spirit speaks in everyone, and that the playwright, whose fragments (*disjecti membra poetae*) are the individual actors, has already harmonized the objective outcome of the whole with the free play of each individual, in such a way that in the end a rational outcome must actually emerge from it. Now, if the playwright actually *were* independent of his drama, then we would be mere actors who speak the lines he has written. If he *is* not independent of us, but rather reveals and discloses himself only successively through the play of our freedom itself, such that without this freedom he himself would not *be*, then we are co-authors of the whole, and creators of the particular roles that we play. . . . The absolute acts through each individual intelligence. That is, their action is *itself* absolute, and to that extent neither free nor unfree, but rather both together—*absolutely* free, and for this very reason also necessary. (F. W. J. Schelling, *Sämmtliche Werke*, ed. Manfred Schröter [Munich: Beck und Oldenbourg, 1927] Volume I/3, 602.)

ated, who in the moment he feels himself creating has the original pathos of the lines, and in the moment he feels himself created has the erotic ear that picks up every sound—he and he alone has brought into actual existence the highest in aesthetics (*E/O* II 137/II 124–25).

The highest in aesthetics: the view that it is in principle possible for the individual will to be entirely reconciled with objective necessity, or, as the judge puts it earlier in the first letter, the affirmation of the “unity of freedom and necessity,” wherein “the individual feels drawn by an irresistible power . . . but precisely therein feels his freedom” (*E/O* II 45/II 42). The cunning of reason in history has the same function in Hegel that the image of the dramaturge deity has in Schelling’s *System of Transcendental Idealism*. Both attempt to interpret individual existence by grounding it in a teleological world order and to explain freedom as participation in and comprehension of this order.

But Kierkegaard is an incompatibilist, both in the guise of the judge and throughout the pseudonymous works. The fact that philosophy sees history under the category of necessity “accounts for its incapacity for having a person act, its inclination to let everything come to a standstill, for what it actually demands is that one must act necessarily, which is a contradiction” (*E/O* II 175/II 158–59). Kierkegaard relies here upon the familiar distinction between freedom as a capacity to act as one intends and freedom as a capacity to form intentions that are independent of determination by prior events. The claim is that if we are willing to affirm freedom only in the first, but not in the second sense, then we might take the aesthetic, but cannot take the ethical standpoint—for only freedom in the latter sense supports attributions of responsibility.<sup>23</sup> This point is argued directly in the second volume, in the words of the judge; indirectly in the first volume, in the portrayal of *A* and his situation.

#### 4.

This situation is that of an individual stymied by his own refusal to believe that anything is up to him. The judge characterizes *A*’s attempt to see himself as a spectator in life rather than a participant in it (see *E/O* II 171/II 155: *A* is “not a participant;” he is “outside”) as the aesthetic attitude made explicit. This is not simply the judge’s characterization; it is *A*’s self-characterization as well. “My soul,” *A* writes in *Diapsalmata*, “has lost possibility” (*E/O* I 41/I 25), as a result not of leading a hedonistic life, but of leading a life ruled by the injunction to see oneself from the standpoint of the necessary order of things: “It is not merely in isolated moments that I, as Spinoza says, view everything *aeterno modo*, but I am continually *aeterno modo*” (*E/O* I 39/I 23).<sup>24</sup> The result is that he feels “as a chess-

<sup>23</sup> What, one might ask, about the compatibilist who is in fact deeply committed to moral responsibility? There is no place in the judge’s view for such an individual. In fact, he seems to assume that no one could make such a claim in good faith. To choose oneself according to one’s necessity, he writes, is to take the ethical choice “aesthetically in vain” (*E/O* II 231/II 207); the compatibilism of “the philosophers” amounts to a sort of fatalism, no better from the ethical perspective than the fatalism made explicit by *A*’s position.

<sup>24</sup> In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Climacus describes “the speculative result” in the same way: “the existing subject, thinking, wants to abstract from his existing and wants to be *sub specie aeterni*” (Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, trans. H. Hong and E. Hong [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992], 81).



man must feel when the opponent says of it: that piece cannot be moved" (*E/O II 22/II 6*).<sup>15</sup> It is little wonder, then, that *A* finds time senseless (*E/O I 29/I 13-14*), existence tedious (*E/O I 25/I 9*), and nothing meaningful (*E/O II 31/II 15*).

It is also little wonder that *A*'s maxim is not to begin anything, not to *will* at all (*E/O I 39/I 23*). But this is an impossible intention to carry out, as the judge points out (with the ship's captain analogy at *E/O II 164/II 149*). More than that, it is an incoherent intention to have. The judge's claim is that *A*'s view is self-defeating, because the decision to believe that he is not a responsible agent is itself an act of freedom. This is an early manifestation of one of Kierkegaard's commitments about cognitive agency: one must exercise one's freedom in order to deny or try to escape one's freedom. In reaching the point of active denial, the judge thinks, *A* has entered an unstable situation.<sup>16</sup>

Generally speaking, a person cannot despair at all without willing it, but in order truly to despair, a person must truly will it; but when he truly wills it, he is truly beyond despair. When a person truly chooses despair, he has truly chosen what despair chooses: himself in his eternal validity (*E/O II 213/II 191*).

I will say in a moment what we should take "himself in his eternal validity" to mean. First, though, note that *A* is not yet "beyond despair," but rather in a state like the one the judge describes at *E/O II 239/II 215*: "The personality is . . . seen . . . within the categories of necessity, and there is left only enough freedom to be able, like a restless dream, to keep the individual half-awake and to lead him astray into the labyrinth of sufferings and vicissitudes, where he sees himself everywhere and yet cannot come to himself." This state, rather than some state of (actual or potential) disappointment, should be the prime candidate for the psychological aspect of despair.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Indeed, *A* uses the word "freedom" in *Either/Or I* exclusively in the sense of freedom of action, never in the sense of freedom of will. A paradigmatic example is at *E/O I 297/I 268*: "If an individual is many [i.e., is weighted down by wife or friends], he has lost his freedom and cannot order his riding boots when he wishes, cannot knock about according to whim."

<sup>16</sup> Here we should take a clue from the discussion of doubt and despair at *E/O 212-13/II 190-91*: Doubt and despair (*Tvivl og Fortvivlelse*) are not parallel movements in different spheres. Rather, one is "a much deeper and more complete expression" of something of which the other is also the expression. The judge calls that something "the personality" and remarks that "The time is not far off when we shall experience . . . that the true point of departure for finding the absolute is not doubt but despair." This is, I believe, an early and still confused expression of a point made rather more explicitly in the interlude of *Philosophical Fragments*, to the effect that doubt and belief are expressions of will and voluntary in some sense—a view according to which belief in determinism is self-defeating (*PF 81-84/IV 245-48*).

<sup>17</sup> Here I should note a similarity of my view to the reading presented by Mark Taylor (Mark C. Taylor, *Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975]). Taylor also thinks that "the most fundamental characteristic of the aesthetic stage of existence is the absence of decision" (128), but he and I disagree about what exactly Kierkegaard finds wrong with that. According to Taylor, failure to decide results in a lack of integration of personality that is equivalent to failure to be a self in Kierkegaard's terms (129). The aesthete is inauthentic (181-82), out of balance (183), "becomes 'multifarious' either as an array of conflicting sensuous desires or as a collection of incompatible possibilities" (184). What, though, is wrong with being multifarious? Why, according to Taylor, should one want to be a self in Kierkegaard's sense? Because to fail to be a self in that sense is to fail to be fully developed—to remain in some sense a child (75). This is where Taylor and I disagree, and the disagreement is fundamental. Taylor sees the relation between the different life-views in the pseudonymous authorship largely in developmental-psychological terms (75), with the result that the deficiencies in one stage are visible only from the (more advanced) standpoint of the

The conversion to an ethical standpoint is, in the judge's characterization, equivalent to the acceptance of choice, the taking up of responsibility. This is also, in the judge's view, an exercise of freedom. And this fact has been the source of some confusion, for it results in formulations that sound like those one would use if choosing were something *A* had so far successfully avoided doing (which, according to the view as I have reconstructed it, would be impossible). The specific way in which the judge characterizes the choice that is the ethical has also caused confusion. To choose, says the judge, is in the first instance to choose oneself: "But what is it then, that I choose—is it this or that? No, for I choose absolutely, and I choose absolutely precisely by having chosen not to choose this or that. I choose the absolute, and what is the absolute? It is myself in my eternal validity." (*E/O* II 214/II 192) It is easy to take "choosing oneself" to be a way out of the difficulties pointed to by the two interpretations I looked at above. But the primary meaning of this injunction to choose oneself in one's eternal validity is not: choose a *standard* or *set of goals* that is somehow more secure or more adequate. For look at how the judge cashes out the notion of choosing oneself (immediately following the above): "But what is this self of mine? If I were to speak of a first moment, a first expression for it, then my answer is this: It is the most abstract of all, and yet in itself it is also the most concrete of all—it is freedom" (*E/O* II 214/II 192). The "choice of oneself" is in the first instance a choice of oneself as agent, not the choice of a set of characteristically ethical values over a set of more or less hedonistic ones.

It has been possible to misunderstand the argument (in the ways I outlined in sections 1 and 2 above) in part, it seems to me, because the judge presents not one but two exclusive disjunctions in the second letter of *Either/Or* II, and these are not clearly distinguished. The first is the either/or of incompatibilism in this fairly ordinary sense: either freedom or necessity; either an active, ethical attitude or a passive, contemplative, aesthetic attitude. The second is the either/or of specifically moral choice that appears if one accepts the first term of the first disjunction: either good or evil; either a moral life or an immoral one. It is easy to conflate these two, such that one takes the judge to be arguing for a moral life (first term of the second disjunction) over an amoral one (second term of the first). In other words, it is easy to take the second letter as an attempt at an answer to the question, "Why should one live a moral life (as opposed to an immoral one)?" (and for each specific aspect of the judge's moral picture, so: "Why should one get married?" etc.), rather than the more modest question, "Why should one take oneself to be a moral agent (as opposed to a piece of deterministic mechanism)?" The second letter's formulations invite this conflation because we are meant to attribute to the judge a broadly Kantian commitment to a link between "the ethical" in the first and second senses I distinguished above—to use the terms of Kant's *Groundwork* III, a commitment to the view that the negative concept of freedom as absence of determination by alien causes gives rise to a positive concept of freedom as self-determination (which in turn gives rise to a law which

---

succeeding stage. Thus on his view, the aesthete's failure is measurable only against a model of selfhood foreign to the aesthetic point of view. On my view, the aesthetic standpoint is intrinsically unstable, because it requires the aesthete to take a contradictory stance toward his own agency. And this is as it should be—else how could the Judge's criticism carry any weight with *A*?

gives content to the moral life). This aspect of the view is not clearly spelled out, though, because Kierkegaard himself did not endorse this move: in every later work the two notions of freedom are kept separate, the former retained and the latter rejected.

## 5.

The characterization I have given so far—of the ethical as defined in the first instance by affirmation of the possibility of choice and the aesthetic as defined in the first instance by the denial of it—calls into question what has historically been the most popular reading of the position enunciated by Kierkegaard in *Either/Or* as a whole. This is the view according to which Kierkegaard puts before the reader two separate and self-standing ways of life—the aesthetic, characterized by enjoyment, and the ethical, characterized by duty—and asks the reader to choose between them. It is characteristic of this interpretation that part of Kierkegaard's point in the work is to show that there are no grounds for choosing one way of life over the other. The choice is an arbitrary one, not informed by any set of values to which the chooser could appeal, but rather positing with it an entire set of values that then gives meaning and coherence to the life thus led. Not only the form of the work, but also several comments made by the judge himself are taken to support this reading. He does, for instance, place before A the choice of two types of life: "either a person has to live aesthetically, or he has to live ethically" (*E/O* II 168/II 152)—and he does seem to sever this choice from any possible value judgment: "Rather than designating the choice between good and evil, my either/or designates the choice by which one chooses good and evil or rules them out. Hence the question is under what qualifications one will view all existence and personally live" (*E/O* II 169/II 153).

MacIntyre is one proponent of this reading, and has based upon it some equally popular criticisms of *Either/Or*.<sup>18</sup> One points to the excessively abstract characterization of the chooser—"devoid of desires, goals, and needs prior to the presentation of the two cases"—that would be required by this view: "But who is this 'I' who chooses? And for such a being what can hang in any case upon choosing in one way rather than in another?"<sup>19</sup> Another, legitimate given this reading, is that the only life that can be thus led is the aesthetic life, for actually leading an ethical life requires a conviction that the values it embodies are the true ethical values—i.e., that these are precisely *not* based on the arbitrary choice of the individual bound by them.<sup>20</sup>

Now, the characterization I have given of the ethical as the embracing of choice and the aesthetic as denial of choice cannot be made to cohere with this reading, for the simple reason that no sense can be made of a choice *between* fundamental approaches to life, if one of those approaches is defined by the denial of the possibility of choice. The idea of a choice of the aesthetic life is, on the reading I have given, an incoherent one—incoherent according to the aesthetic view, which

<sup>18</sup> See especially Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics* (New York: MacMillan, 1966), 215–17, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984) 40–41, and, "Once More on Kierkegaard," in *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre*, eds. Davenport and Rudd, 339–55.

<sup>19</sup> MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*, 217.

<sup>20</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 42.

denies the possibility of choice, and incoherent according to the ethical view, to which such a way of life must appear not as a choice at all, but rather as a refusal to choose. The judge says explicitly that the commitment to one life or the other is not a matter of choice in the strictest sense. In fact, the presentation of the purported choice between two different sorts of life—"either a person has to live aesthetically, or he has to live ethically"—is followed immediately by just this condition:

Here . . . it is still not a matter of a choice in the stricter sense, for the person who lives aesthetically does not choose, and the person who chooses the aesthetic after the ethical has become manifest to him is not living aesthetically, for he is sinning and is subject to ethical qualifications, even if his life must be termed unethical. You see, this is, so to speak, the *character indelibilis* of the ethical, that the ethical, although it modestly places itself on the same level as the aesthetic, nevertheless is essentially that which makes the choice a choice. (*E/O* II 168, II 152–53)

The aesthetic and the ethical are not placed on an equal footing—just the opposite—and given this fact it is not at all clear why one should conclude that the reader is asked to choose between them with no grounds for a choice one way or the other. This reading of *Either/Or* is implausible, and the criticisms based upon it misguided.

## 6.

I would like to conclude by drawing the promised parallel between the discussion of despair in *Either/Or* and the discussion in *The Sickness unto Death*. *Either/Or* merges several views under the general term 'aesthetic' with the aim of showing that they are all despair, and equally so. In the quasi-developmental-psychological framework employed in *The Sickness unto Death*, on the contrary, the point is not to assimilate but to distinguish among more specific forms of despair. Between these two works lies most of the pseudonymous authorship, where the notion of despair comes to encompass an ever-widening set of views, such that an understanding of the first articulation of the concept, given by the judge, leads upon further consideration to a wider articulation, given by Climacus, and finally to the most fully worked out version in *The Sickness unto Death*. There it is quite clear that what is at issue in despair is not at all the legitimacy of goals or conceptions of satisfaction of the despairing individual so much as the legitimacy of his conception of and attitude toward his agency. It is also clear that despair is in the first instance an act, not a psychological state. This is the import of the insistence that despair is always a sickness one has brought on oneself, that "every moment [one] is in despair he is bringing it upon himself" (*SUD* XI 130<sup>21</sup>). There is indeed a characteristic psychological state that is associated with despair, but the problem to which Kierkegaard addresses himself is not that of getting out of this state, but rather that of freeing oneself from the false self-conception that gives rise to it.

An "unconsciously" despairing individual (*E/O* II 191–92/II 173) is discussed in *The Sickness unto Death* as well as in *Either/Or* II. Anti-Climacus describes uncon-

<sup>21</sup> Parenthetical page references to *The Sickness Unto Death* are to the Hongs' translation (Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. H. Hong and E. Hong [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980]) and to the first Danish edition of the collected works (*Samlede Værker*).

scious despair as a sort of ignorance of the fact that one is a self to begin with, and in fact as a sort of innocence: "one could humanly be tempted almost to say that in a kind of innocence it does not even know that it is despair" (SUD 42/XI 154–55). "The self is bound up in immediacy with the other in desiring, craving, enjoying, etc., yet passively; in its craving, the self is a dative, like the 'me' of a child" (SUD 51/XI 163). This state is that of having "no conception of being spirit" (SUD 43/XI 155), in which the self regards itself as "an indefinable something" and, instead of seeing itself as an individual source of capacities and locus of responsibilities, "vaguely rests in and merges in some abstract universality (state, nation, etc.)" (SUD 46/XI 158). "The appearance of such words as 'self' and 'despair' in the language of immediacy is due, if you will, to an innocent abuse of language, a playing with words, like the children's game of playing soldier" (SUD 51/XI 163). The generality of Anti-Climacus's pronouncement upon this self is the same as that of the judge: "every such existence, whatever it achieves, be it most amazing, whatever it explains, be it the whole of existence, however intensely it enjoys life aesthetically—every such existence is nevertheless despair" (SUD 46/XI 158).

To the conscious despair of the immediate individual (E/O II 192/II 174) corresponds the first form of Anti-Climacus's conscious despair, the sort brought about by some external blow. "This form of despair is: in despair not to will to be oneself. Or even lower: in despair not to will to be a self. Or lowest of all: in despair to wish to be someone else, to wish for a new self" (SUD 52–53/XI 165). Such despair is possible, Anti-Climacus claims, only if one is both in some sense aware of having a self and nevertheless views this self as an externality that can be changed, "as easily as one changes clothes" (SUD 53/XI 165).

To the fatalism *A* expresses when he complains that his soul "has lost possibility" (E/O I 41/I 25) likewise corresponds a discussion to this effect in *The Sickness unto Death*: "To lack possibility means either that everything has become necessary for a person or that everything has become trivial. The determinist, the fatalist, is in despair, and as one in despair has lost his self, because for him everything has become necessity" (SUD 40/XI 152). The determinist "cannot breathe, for it is impossible to breathe necessity exclusively, because that would utterly suffocate a person's self" (SUD 40/XI 153).

The relevant idea in these, as in all the instances of despair described in *The Sickness unto Death*, is that the person in despair has the wrong conception of himself as agent. It is because one's conception of oneself is always in some sense voluntary that despair can be described as not *willing* to be a self at all, or not willing to be the self that one is—willing to be more or less than one is as a self. Despair in the most general sense is the unwillingness to accept human agency with all of its conditions—among them that the self is not its own master or creator. What Kierkegaard places under the category of the aesthetic in *Either/Or*, however, is the state of refusing to be responsible, refusing to accept one's agency, *simpliciter*. Since a refusal is also a choice, the aesthetic is described as way of life that can, in some sense, be chosen. But this choice is self-defeating. This self-defeating quality is what Kierkegaard indicates by the term 'despair' in a general sense: if the characterization one would give of one's own agency is on the whole self-defeating, then one is in despair—whether one knows it or not.

