

# Kierkegaard's idea of choice and self in 'either or'



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In *Either/Or*, Søren Kierkegaard seeks to elucidate the contrasts and interrelationships between the aesthetic and the ethical modes of existence. Within the essay, Kierkegaard confronts the readers with a choice between two forms of existence: the aesthetic, which regards pleasure as the highest value of life, and the ethical, which views the world in terms of civic duty. It is apparent that Kierkegaard thought that both the aesthetic and the ethical had their place as servants of the religious. Contrary to what the title might imply, Kierkegaard doesn't intend for the audience to make a choice between the aesthetic and the ethical by the end of the essay; instead, there is no absolute choice between aesthetics and ethics at all.

Kierkegaard demonstrates that the essence of human existence is the freedom to make choices and the power of introspective faith. The essay is not published under Kierkegaard's own name, but rather under one of several pseudonyms. The aestheticist, who expresses his views through various literary forms, is "A." In the second part, the ethical thinker, who bears the pseudonym of Judge William, is "B." A is an existential possibility, highly gifted in wit and poetic style, who nevertheless remains unable to commit himself to decisive action; "Whether you hang yourself or do not hang yourself, you will regret it either way. This, gentlemen, is the quintessence of all the wisdom of life... I am continually *aeterno modo*..." (44). A, the quintessential example of purely aesthetic living, is never able to choose an action or way of life that perseveres beyond the initial hedonistic response of pleasure, and thus never exists at all in the true sense. B, on the other hand, represents the ethical person whose whole life is transformed into inwardness, passion, and commitment; "an ideal husband is not one

who is ideal once in his life but one who is that every day... a cross-bearer who takes up his cross every day can never be portrayed in either poetry or art, for the point is that he does it every day..." (68). If aesthetic truth is theoretical and abstract, ethical truth is existential and concrete. Given that the ethical is the existential reality of having to make choices, human existence is therefore necessarily ethical. For Kierkegaard, the self is continually under construction.

Kierkegaard feels that beliefs like Hegel's and institutions like the church claim to provide answers to people's troubles, but in reality are simply providing excuses to avoid self-examination; " Now, if a person could continually keep himself on the spear tip of the moment of choice, if he could stop being a human being, if in his innermost being he could be nothing more than an ethereal thought,... if that were the situation... there could be no question of choice at all.." (72). Kierkegaard argues that this type of philosophy dehumanized life by denying personal freedom and choice through the neutralization of the ' either/or'. Kierkegaard saw this as a denial of true selfhood and instead advocated the importance of personal responsibility and choice-making. The self is not an object that can be abstractly defined as having a permanent or fixed nature. Unity is achieved, not given. The way the self achieves or attains its unity and integrity in Kierkegaard's Either/Or is through choice.

Choosing or not choosing ways of living or means of existing is an impossible test. However, that is not to say the Kierkegaard denies the power of choice; " for I choose absolutely, and I choose absolutely precisely by having chosen not to choose this or that. I choose the absolute... It is myself in my eternal

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validity" (79). There isn't actually an either/or choice between the aesthetic and the ethical: both are necessary. Choice liberates the self both from the immediacy of pleasure and from the immediacy of reflection or pure thought and makes possible the discovery of genuine selfhood. Through choice and faith, an "Absolute beginning" is made possible. Kierkegaard has no patience with the dogmas of traditional religion; he believes first in himself, but also believes in God. Kierkegaard focuses on how we live here and now, not how we think we should be. Contradictory to Hegelian philosophy, Kierkegaard's emphasis is on being, not merely thinking. Either way, however, an individual can go too far in these realms and lose sight of his or her true self. Only through faith can the individual be rescued from these opposing realms; The divine in him lies in this, that he himself, if he so chooses, can give this history continuity... What is enviable about human life is that once can assist God, can understand him, and in turn, the only worthy way for a human being to understand God is to appropriate in freedom everything that comes to him... (80) Neither the aesthetic life nor the ethical life is complete without religion.

Religion is the third dimension beyond the ethical: choosing religion is choosing the infinite. Kierkegaard argues that only God is in the right, and to approach God requires introspective faith. The only escape from this conflict is to take a personal approach to religion. Kierkegaard made the actual either/or a choice between the human aesthetic and ethical on one hand, and the religious on the other. Three stages of life are defined throughout Either/Or: the aesthetic and pleasurable life, the ethical and dutiful life, and

the life of faith and religion. Between these three lives, one must choose, and through one's choices, one creates who one is.