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KIERKEGAARD’S THEORY OF BOREDOM AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF PERSONALITY

DISSERTATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the
College of Arts and Sciences
at the University of Kentucky

By
Luke Wadhams
Lexington, Kentucky
Director: Dr. Stefan Bird-Pollan, Professor of Philosophy
Lexington, Kentucky
2020

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

KIERKEGAARD'S THEORY OF BOREDOM AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF PERSONALITY

This dissertation examines the conception of boredom presented in the work of Søren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard is known for deriving philosophical insights into human nature from phenomenological analyses of various moods. However, while Kierkegaard provides explicit and complete accounts of anxiety, despair, and melancholy, his analyses of boredom are only ever fragmentary and dispersed. Additionally, most scholars either neglect Kierkegaard's descriptions of boredom or dismiss them as mere novelty, and, even though a few scholars analyze the concept, there is still no sustained and thorough account of the same. This dissertation advances Kierkegaard scholarship by piecing together Kierkegaard's theory of boredom from his fragmentary descriptions of the phenomenon. Through a close reading of Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Irony* and *Either/Or*, the dissertation demonstrates two main claims about Kierkegaard's theory. First, it shows that the experience of boredom can be understood in the work of Kierkegaard as expressive of the achievement of a reflective stance toward existence – a stance in which one begins questioning the meaning of one's life and the ultimate justification for one's actions. Second, the dissertation shows that, based on how Kierkegaard situates the concept of boredom within his general theory of personal development, the concept of boredom is a crucial component of his philosophical project of explaining the stages of life through which an individual passes in the development of an adequate conception of itself. Specifically, the dissertation argues that, within Kierkegaard's theory of stages of life, boredom is a central concept of his account of the aesthetic and ethical stages.

KEYWORDS: Kierkegaard, Boredom, Irony, Aestheticism, Personhood, Mood

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04/15/2020

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

In his so-called "aesthetic writings" (i.e., his set of pseudonymously published works between 1843 and 1850), Søren Kierkegaard is known for pursuing philosophical investigations into human nature through analyses of particular moods.[1] As part of his rejection of the systematic philosophy of Hegelianism, the impersonal method of which Kierkegaard considers to compromise insight into the existential aspects of human life, Kierkegaard seeks an articulation of what Vincent McCarthy calls "the wisdom of experience."[2] Kierkegaard's goal in this period of his authorship is to examine human existence as it is concretely oriented within its world. It is within this context that Kierkegaard analyzes particular moods as constitutive and disclosive of human existence in its concreteness.

The most well-known moods that Kierkegaard analyzes and upon which he founds his insights into human nature are depression, anxiety, and despair. In *Either/Or: Part II*, Kierkegaard examines depression, which he understands to be a "hysteria of the spirit," in the following sense:

> There comes a moment in a person's life when immediacy is ripe, so to speak, and when spirit requires a higher form, when it wants to lay hold of itself as spirit. [...] If this does not happen, if the movement is halted, if it is repressed, then depression sets in.[3]

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[1] For a concise synopsis of the major divisions of Kierkegaard's authorship, including an explanation of the pseudonymous period, cf. Mark C. Taylor, *Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship: A Study of Time and the Self* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 11-14. For Kierkegaard's own explanation of this period of his authorship, cf. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, trans. and ed. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 41-56.

[2] Vincent McCarthy, *The Phenomenology of Moods in Kierkegaard* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978), 2.

[3] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: Part II*, trans. and ed. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 189.

In *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard presents the mood of anxiety as the basic experience of oneself as free:

> [A]nxiety is the dizziness of freedom, which emerges when the spirit wants to posit the synthesis [of the human being as both mind and body] and freedom looks down into its own possibility, laying hold of finiteness to support itself. Freedom succumbs in this dizziness.[4]

In *The Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard analyzes a variety of forms of despair, in each one of which there is a misrelation of the self with itself, due to an inadequacy in its conception of its own nature as a synthesis of possibility and facticity: "Despair is the misrelation in the relation of a synthesis that relates itself to itself."[5] Regarding this misrelation, despair involves a willing not to be oneself; the desperate individual wills "to rid himself of the self that he is in order to be the self that he has dreamed up."[6] In each of these cases, Kierkegaard views a particular mood as one of the fundamental experiences of human being, such that an analysis of mood elucidates human existence. This consideration of mood puts Kierkegaard's investigations into human nature somewhere between rationalistic and irrationalistic perspectives; as McCarthy explains:

> Kierkegaard takes moods and the emotional life with the utmost seriousness. Thus he walks the line between the Romantics who unduly celebrate them and the intellectuals who shun them. He sees a function of moods in the life of the whole person and sets out to describe, probe, explore, and analyze.[7]

In each of the aforementioned texts, Kierkegaard examines a particular mood in an attempt to elucidate a specific way in which the nature of selfhood becomes manifest.

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[4] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, trans. Reider Thomte and Albert Anderson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 61.

[5] Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, trans. and ed. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 15.

[6] Ibid, 20.

[7] McCarthy, 2

As his analyses indicate, Kierkegaard understands moods as distinct from mere emotions. Whereas emotions are briefly experienced and environmentally triggered, Kierkegaard views moods as being more sedimented and enduring experiences that stem from the very structure of selfhood. McCarthy articulates this significance of mood in the following manner:

> The moods well up from subliminal structures of the psyche to confront the individual with the prospect of higher self-understanding to be effected by willingly passing through the mood and thus beyond it.[8]

In Kierkegaard's account, particular moods are grounded in the very structure of the self, such that, on the one hand, being in a mood is a result of the kind of self that one is and, on the other hand, one's mood reveals what it means to be that kind of self; moods are taken by Kierkegaard to be both constitutive and disclosive of the essential structures of the self, and, accordingly, an understanding of moods entails an understanding of selfhood.

While Kierkegaard views moods as revelations of selfhood, what is revealed through a mood, however, is not solipsistically oriented; moods do not reveal abstract structures of the self, but instead reveal the self in its determinate orientation within its world. As Calvin Schrag says, moods "disclose aspects of the concrete life-world as it shows itself in its existential immediacy," such that they express a "relatedness to the world."[9] He elaborates:

> Mood in its various modifications must thus properly be understood as an *intentional disclosure*. The existential self is intentionally related to a world in which mood functions as a liaison. But mood must also be thought of as a *situational determinant*.[10]

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[8] McCarthy, 120.
[9] Calvin Schrag, *Existence and Freedom* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1961), 21.
[10] Ibid.

Each mood in Kierkegaard's philosophy of human nature makes manifest a particular way in which the self is attuned to its situation, such that a given mood determines how the self experiences itself and its environing world; moods characterize the manner in which one is oriented within one's given situation. Kierkegaard does not conceive mood in the ordinary empirical sense of an environmentally triggered psychical state or feeling that one contingently experiences. Rather, Kierkegaard understands mood as a more basic feature of selfhood that conditions one's worldly experiences. McCarthy delineates this notion by exploring the etymological connotations of term. He explains:

> The term mood in Danish, *Stemning* (German: *Stimmung*), suggests "attunement." One is always "attuned," and thus always in a mood. One is always in a "frame of mind" which influences the entire emotional and psychological state of life, the extent of the influence depending upon the intensity of the particular mood.[11]

McCarthy further stresses the 'tonal' connotations of *Stemning*:

> 'Tonality' is suggestive in that it connotes a quality which pervades the personality, a quality not strictly localized. It further suggests a coloring of perceptions, rather like a filter which intensifies, minimizes and maximizes, alters percepta so that the 'objective world' is experienced through this filter and 'less than objectively.' But this filter is really a form of intensified subjectivity.[12]

Moods for Kierkegaard, then, possess an apriority, to the extent that they shape how one originally experiences one's own situatedness in the world; moods are not responsive to one's environment, such that certain worldly phenomena could induce a particular mood, but rather mood is constitutive of selfhood, in such a way that one's very experiences are determined by one's mood. An analysis of mood, then, does not so much reveal objective features of the world, as much as it reveals the more primitive experiences of being situated in a world in a determinate manner.

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[11] McCarthy, 124.
[12] Ibid, 125.

One of the primary goals of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authorship is to provide an account of the self as it finds itself in its situatedness, and Kierkegaard attempts to make this account concrete precisely by grounding it in analyses of particular moods. Specifically, Kierkegaard wants to explain how the self develops an understanding of itself as freely and responsibly situated in its world. This Kierkegaardian project has both Kantian and Hegelian underpinnings. On the one hand, Kierkegaard appropriates a Kantian understanding of personality as transcendentally free, in the sense that the person possesses "freedom and independence from the mechanism of the whole of nature," as well as "a capacity of being subject to special laws – namely pure practical laws given by his own reason," such that a person "belonging to the sensible world is subject to his own personality insofar as he also belongs to the intelligible world […]."[13] Kierkegaard situates his own theory of personality in relation to the Kantian understanding of the person as free from natural mechanism and as thereby responsible for its own self-determination.[14] Differing from Kant, however, Kierkegaard is primarily interested in explaining the process through which one becomes aware of oneself as free and responsible. Kierkegaard's philosophy operates within the understanding that, while the person is transcendentally free, this freedom cannot be deduced but can only be elucidated through a description of the way in which the person finds itself oriented in its world. Mood becomes important for Kierkegaard's philosophical project, since each mood corresponds to a particular way in which personal freedom becomes manifest.

[13] Immanuel Kant, "Critique of Practical Reason," from: *Practical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 5:87.
[14] Regarding Kierkegaard's situation of his conceptions of freedom and personality in relation to Kant, cf. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates / Notes of Schelling's Berlin Lectures*, trans. and ed. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 242.

This is also where Kierkegaard's project shares some commonality with that of G.W.F. Hegel, despite Kierkegaard's explicit criticisms of the same. As a whole, Kierkegaard's pseudonymously published works present his so-called "theory of stages on life's way." Mimicking the structure of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Kierkegaard's theory traces the development of the individual in a process toward self-knowledge and self-actualization. Each of the particular stages in this theory represents a paradigmatic shape of self-awareness, corresponding to which there are specific and unique understandings of selfhood, freedom, and responsibility. In his pseudonymous authorship, Kierkegaard seeks to explain the stages of self-development through which an individual must pass if it is to achieve an adequate conception of itself. Kierkegaard's theory, as Merold Westphal says, "embodies this double claim that the journey [through the stages] is grounded in human nature and that its goal is simultaneously the discovery and realization of one's true self."[15] Analyses of moods become important for this theory, to the extent that moods express the nature of the self at a particular stage of development. Accordingly, McCarthy says that "moods represent a rite of passage from childish illusions about the self to mature understanding which is properly a life-view."[16] Moods are "crises in the growth of the personality," such that moods correspond to particular stages in the development of personality.[17]

It is in this general context that Kierkegaard analyzes boredom as a fundamental phenomenon through which the nature of selfhood becomes manifest. Between *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates* and *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*,

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[15] Merold Westphal, *Becoming a Self: A Reading of Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1996), 21.
[16] McCarthy, 2.
[17] Ibid, 120.

which are the primary works in which Kierkegaard presents his conception of boredom, boredom is understood to be a mood corresponding to and expressive of a particular view of one's life, one's freedom, and one's situatedness in the world. In each of these works, Kierkegaard presents two conflicting views of life. There is one life-view, which Kierkegaard identifies as that of romantic irony or reflective aestheticism, wherein boredom is a defining feature. In contrast, there is another life-view, which Kierkegaard identifies as that of mastered irony or as the ethical stage of life, in which boredom has been overcome through a reevaluation of how one understands oneself as situated in one's world. The form of life characterized by boredom is one in which the self achieves a nihilistic stance toward its own existence, such that this self finds life to be without any meaning, and this lack of meaning becomes manifest as boredom. This form of life finds its characteristic boredom to be unbearable, and it seeks to overcome its boredom through distraction – by pursuing pleasures that can momentarily obscure the perceived meaninglessness of existence. To this form of life, Kierkegaard presents an alternative – one in which boredom is overcome not through momentary distraction, but through a reevaluation of one's nihilistic perspective altogether. The experience of boredom, then, is situated by Kierkegaard between two conflicting views of life and in such a way that boredom evinces a particular understanding of one's situatedness in the world.

Despite Kierkegaard's references to the experience of boredom in his project to elucidate different stages of life, scholars frequently fail to treat his conception of boredom as a philosophically interesting topic, instead tending to present Kierkegaard's analysis of the mood as mere novelty. Such scholarly neglect seems to result from the fact that, unlike despair and anxiety, each of which is the central topic of one of Kierkegaard's treatises,

Kierkegaard's account of boredom is far less sustained and explicit, and he only ever provides isolated fragments of an account. From such fragments, however, an analysis of the concept can be developed. A careful exposition of the way in which Kierkegaard describes the experience of boredom in *The Concept of Irony* and *Either/Or* indicates that boredom is not only a philosophically important phenomenon for Kierkegaard, but that boredom can also be seen as one of the central concepts of his theory of personal development, insofar as boredom relates directly to Kierkegaard's conceptions of selfhood, freedom, and responsibility.

1.2 Method

In order to resolve this gap in Kierkegaard scholarship, the present dissertation seeks to explicate Kierkegaard's conception of boredom with particular emphasis on the way in which this concept fits into his larger theory of stages on life's way. To this end, this dissertation primarily follows what Mark C. Taylor designates the "thematic approach" to Kierkegaard's writings. Distinguishing such an approach from the "biographical-psychological" approach, which primarily interprets Kierkegaard's work through the lens of his own personal development and in relation to major events in his own life, and the "historical-comparative" approach, which primarily tasks itself with explaining Kierkegaard's various ideas by situating them within their historical context, often by comparing Kierkegaard with another philosopher or theologian, Taylor understands the thematic approach as one that works "to interpret Kierkegaard's writings on their own terms, rather than by an examination of the influence of his life upon his works or by a

comparison of his arguments with other thinkers."[18] While this dissertation involves some brief historical contextualizing of ideas, it primarily follows the thematic approach, seeking "to define and to analyze a major theme with which Kierkegaard concerns himself."[19] The primary theme to be examined here is that of boredom, along with several peripheral themes that cannot be separated therefrom, such as those of negative and positive freedom, the situatedness of the self, and self-determination. These themes will be traced between Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Irony* and his first pseudonymously published work, *Either/Or*, since it is primarily in these two texts that Kierkegaard presents his theory of boredom.

1.3 Overview of Chapters and Conclusions

In order to present Kierkegaard's theory of boredom, this dissertation begins with an analysis of Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Irony*, wherein Kierkegaard situates his conception of boredom within an incomplete and unpolished theory of personal development that serves as a precursor to the theory of stages of life that is presented in subsequent pseudonymous publications. In this text, Kierkegaard briefly presents his first description of boredom, connecting the experience of boredom with the concept of irony, which he understands idiosyncratically as the shape of consciousness in which the self originally begins questioning the meaning of its life. Kierkegaard outlines two types of ironic consciousness, each of which represents a distinct stage of personal development. The first type is that of romantic irony, in which the person is unable to discover any meaning in life and adopts a nihilistic stance toward existence. Boredom is presented in

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[18] Taylor, 27, 30, 34.
[19] Ibid, 34.

this context as the mood that corresponds to this particular form of irony and as expressive of the self's alienation from its world. In this text, Kierkegaard understands boredom to be a manifestation of the nihilism of ironic consciousness; as bored, the person is disengaged from its world, finding all possible activities as pointless and uninteresting. Kierkegaard contrasts this form of consciousness, of which boredom is a dominate expression, with a second form of ironic consciousness, which involves what Kierkegaard calls the mastery of irony. Kierkegaard suggests that the nihilism and corresponding boredom of romantic irony can be overcome through a mastery of irony, whereby one achieves a more adequate conception of oneself in one's relation to one's world. Here, Kierkegaard suggests that the boredom of romantic irony can be surmounted through a shift in self-conception, although the exact manner in which this is supposed to happen is not clearly explained by Kierkegaard. Chapter I of the present dissertation examines Kierkegaard's early conception of boredom within his theory of irony, since the former cannot be understood apart from his understanding of the two forms of irony. Accordingly, this chapter focusses on explicating the two forms of irony, so as to elucidate the significance attributed to boredom by Kierkegaard within this account.

Chapters II and III of this dissertation explore the more extensive and matured descriptions of boredom provided by Kierkegaard in his first pseudonymously published text, *Either/Or*. While Kierkegaard's initial account of irony and boredom is incomplete, Kierkegaard provides a more detailed account of boredom in *Either/Or*, wherein he presents his first formal articulation of his theory of stages of life. Corresponding to the two forms of irony, in *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard presents the aesthetic and ethical stages of life, in relation to which boredom has differing significance. Chapter II of the present

dissertation examines Kierkegaard's aesthetic stage of life, which is one in which boredom is a dominant and defining characteristic. The aesthetic stage of existence is one in which a person maintains a nihilistic perspective of life, devaluing all particular courses of action and lifestyles as pointless. Boredom becomes predominant in this form of life, to the extent that the aesthete does not perceive the value of any activity, such that it becomes fundamentally disinterested in its world. Because such boredom is unbearable, the aesthete is described as constantly striving to distract itself from its existential condition.

Chapter III of this dissertation examines Kierkegaard's conception of the ethical stage of life, precisely because therein the possibility of aesthetic boredom is supposed to be undermined, such that an analysis of this view of life helps elucidate the nature and conditions of boredom. The ethical life is one in which the person views itself as being in a constant process of self-determination. In the ethical stage, one cannot be disinterested in the world, since the latter is viewed as providing the necessary means for the ethical person's project of self-determination. In contrast to the boredom of aestheticism, the ethical personality maintains a mood of earnestness, wherewith the ethical person is committed to the particular situation in which it finds itself, thereby precluding the condition for the possibility of the boredom that characterizes the aesthetic life.

This dissertation concludes with a summary explanation of how boredom is an important component in Kierkegaard's theory of stages, given the way that Kierkegaard positions his descriptions of boredom in relation to particular stages in the development of personality. Boredom is described as an essential and unique feature of the aesthetic stage of life and as expressive of the nihilism thereof. In contrast, within the ethical stage of life, which transcends aestheticism by achieving a more adequate self-conception, the

possibility of boredom has been precluded. Accordingly, the aesthetic and ethical stages can be viewed as different responses to the experience of boredom. Aestheticism involves an inadequate response to boredom, to the extent that the aesthete does not address its nihilistic stance toward its own existence, but instead merely attempts to distract itself from its nihilism and escape boredom by pursuing the cultivation of amusing situations. Contrariwise, the boredom that characterizes aestheticism is surmounted with the achievement of the ethical stage of existence, insofar as this achievement requires a shift in one's fundamental conception of oneself as situated within one's world. The ethical personality overcomes aesthetic nihilism and its corresponding expression of boredom by assuming a particular stance toward the world in which it finds itself situated – one in which the ethical person commits itself earnestly to its own particular situation as the only context within which it can enact its project of self-determination. Because of the way that Kierkegaard situates the experience of boredom between these stages of personal development, such that boredom is essentially characteristic of aestheticism and surmounted in the achievement of ethical life, boredom is a decisive concept within Kierkegaard's theory of stages on life's way.

CHAPTER 2. IRONY, LIVING POETICALLY, AND BOREDOM

2.1 Overview of the Connection between Irony and Boredom

Kierkegaard's earliest account of boredom appears in his dissertation, *The Concept of Irony*, wherein he seeks to explain the concept of irony, referring frequently to the senses of irony that are characteristic of Socrates and the German Romantics. In his dissertation, Kierkegaard explains irony as a particular stage in the development of personality. Modeling his understanding of irony off of the ways in which both Socrates and the German Romantics assumed ironic stances toward their respective cultures, Kierkegaard presents irony as a form of consciousness, whereby consciousness reflects on the validity of whatever dominant metaphysical and ethical understandings of life pertain to its given social milieu. Consciousness becomes ironic when it achieves a reflective distance from its social situation, and it is with this distance that consciousness can raise questions about the meaning and purpose of its own existence, apart from whatever understandings of the same are dominant within its society.

In Kierkegaard's theory, there are two forms of irony, each of which represents a different response to the question concerning the meaning of life, and these different responses found two different ways of living. It is in the context of these two forms of irony that Kierkegaard introduces his earliest account of boredom. One of the forms of irony finds life to be ultimately meaningless, such that this ironist finds itself irrevocably alienated from its world. This is a lifestyle that Kierkegaard presents as being permeated with boredom, due to its perception of all activity as pointless and vain. The other form of irony, in contrast, is precisely one in which boredom is overcome, because, in this lifestyle, one surmounts one's alienation by altering one's understanding of the nature of irony itself.

In his dissertation, then, Kierkegaard understands the phenomenon of boredom in conjunction with the concept of irony, such that an investigation into the latter is necessary for an exposition of the former. In order to delineate Kierkegaard's account of boredom, then, it is necessary to consider his concept of irony, which constitutes an essential component of his general theory of personality.

2.2 The General Theory of Irony

While irony is usually understood as being a kind of aesthetic activity or as style of speech, Kierkegaard understands irony idiosyncratically as a form of consciousness itself. Contrary to ordinary understandings of the concept, irony for Kierkegaard is not primarily a form of discourse, wherewith, in a speech-act, there is a disparity between what one literally says and what one intends to communicate. Instead, irony is identified as a mode of human existence, representing a particular manner in which one is conscious of both oneself and the world within which one finds oneself situated. This understanding of irony is in part influenced by the theories provided by the German Romantics, as well as by Hegel's corresponding criticisms of the same. Kierkegaard's unusual use of the term is also determined by Kierkegaard's general use of aesthetic categories; Sylvia Walsh attributes this unorthodox understanding of irony to a more widespread practice in Kierkegaard's work to view "aesthetic categories...as existential determinations" and "not merely as intellectual categories for classifying material products of art according to the artistic genres to which they belong."[20] As an existential determinant, irony is not a kind of discourse or a literary device but instead is a category intended to grasp a shape of

[20] Silvia Walsh, *Living Poetically: Kierkegaard's Existential Aesthetics* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1980), 6-7.

consciousness or a mode of existence. Kierkegaard's concept of irony does not belong strictly to aesthetics but instead is way of conceiving human existence.

It is in this existential sense that, throughout his dissertation, Kierkegaard recurrently speaks of irony as a "position" and, often more specifically, as "the position of Socrates." According to Kierkegaard, Socrates is a paradigmatic ironist, but he is an ironist not by virtue of his manner of speech, despite whatever irony – in the ordinary sense – may inhere therein; instead, Kierkegaard understands Socrates to be an ironist due to the way that he lived. Stressing this existential understanding of irony, Kierkegaard says of Socrates that "irony constituted the substance of his existence."[21] In Kierkegaard's understanding, Socrates' verbal irony is merely an expression of a more substantial existential irony. While it is common in everyday discourse to describe speech-acts or artworks as ironic, it would be entirely nonsensical to do so within Kierkegaard's conceptual framework, wherein only a person's existence is truly ironic: "Irony is a qualification of subjectivity."[22] Hence, Kierkegaard says:

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[21] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates / Notes of Schelling's Berlin Lectures*, trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 12.

[22] Ibid, 262. Many commentators are careful to make this distinction between existential and verbal irony, both of which are analyzed by Kierkegaard, albeit with different emphasis. Regarding this distinction, consider the following: Burgess, 144-145; Cross, 125-126; Hall, *Word*, 122; McCarthy, 7; Wilde, 3. Cross provides perhaps the most detailed account of Kierkegaard's analysis of verbal irony (Cross, 127-133). Kierkegaard's own analysis appears only briefly in his dissertation (Kierkegaard, *Irony*, 246-253). Cross distinguishes these types of irony by noting that verbal irony, as a particular speech-act, belongs to the set of interpersonal acts that constitute a general ironic way of life (Cross, 127, 133, *et passim*). Cross' interpretation is that irony is primarily a mode of existence and ironic speech is one manner through which this existential mode expresses itself. The two senses of irony are analogous, though, in that each expresses a disparity between the inner and the outer (Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 12, 257, *et passim*). In verbal irony, it is in an expression that one intends a meaning that is not explicitly stated. In the case of existential irony, it is a person's very existence that is not fully expressed in the world – the intentions of the ironist are not expressed in the actions of the ironist: there is a "contradiction between the mode in which he exists in his inner being and his not expressing it in his outer appearance" (Kierkegaard, *The Concluding Unscientific Postscript to 'Philosophical Fragments': Volume I*, trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 504). Cross' interpretation seems concordant with Kierkegaard's implicit account of the relation between verbal and existential irony. As many commentators note, Kierkegaard is essentially interested only in analyzing existential irony; when he does discuss verbal irony, he does so with the implicit understanding either that verbal irony is the discourse of an existential ironist or that verbal irony is analogous

> Irony is an existence-qualification, and thus nothing is more ludicrous than regarding it as a style of speaking or an author's counting himself lucky to express himself ironically once in a while. The person who has essential irony has it all day long and is not bound to any style, because it is the infinite within him.[23]

The existential ironist does not simply engage in ironic discourse occasionally or for artistic purposes; rather, this ironist's orientation in the world itself, which determines primarily all interactions within that world, is ironic. For Kierkegaard, irony is more of an existential concept than it is an aesthetic one.

With this crucial distinction between different senses of irony in mind, it can be properly considered what Kierkegaard understands by an existential irony. Kierkegaard conceives irony as one of the essential shapes of consciousness that occurs in the development of subjectivity. Kierkegaard identifies irony with the most primitive emergence of subjectivity, saying: "Irony is, namely, the first and most abstract qualification of subjectivity."[24] Moreover: "irony is the very incitement of subjectivity […]."[25] One becomes a person – in the sense of a self-aware being capable of consciously and, thereby, reflectively and responsibly enacting or neglecting various possibilities – through irony or as an ironic consciousness.[26] Such self-awareness, however, is only

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to existential irony, such that an analysis of the former informs an analysis of the latter. In either case, Kierkegaard is unconcerned with a purely aesthetic account of irony. For instance, when, in the first part of his dissertation, Kierkegaard evaluates the style of Socrates' speech, he does so entirely for the sake of expositing the nature of Socrates' subjectivity that is tacitly expressed therein, rather than for the sake of producing a theory of verbal irony.

[23] Kierkegaard, *Postscript I*, 504.

[24] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 264.

[25] Ibid, 211.

[26] This is an attempt to provide a *de facto* definition of the conception of subjectivity or personality that is operative throughout *The Concept of Irony*. Kierkegaard himself provides no explicit definition, but, at the very least, it can readily be seen that his conception is Kantian in nature, given that he situates his analysis of irony and subjectivity in relation to the theories of Kant and Fichte (cf. ibid, 242, 272-273). Kierkegaard's conception seems congruent with Kant's definition of personality: "*personality*, that is, freedom and independence from the mechanism of the whole of nature…so that a person as belonging to the sensible world is subject to his own personality insofar as he also belongs to the intelligible world" (Kant, "Critique of Practical Reason," 5:87). Kierkegaard's view of personality, however, places less emphasis on the

achieved by consciousness when it recognizes itself as distinct from its social situation. With reference to Socrates, who Kierkegaard identifies as the first ironist and, thereby, the first world-historical individual to achieve subjectivity, Kierkegaard states:

> Through irony Socrates was able to emancipate himself as an individual from the state, or established order, of his time. The introduction of irony thus marked the beginning of subjectivity, or consciousness of oneself as an individual in distinction from family and state.[27]

Subjectivity emerges through the awareness of one's being distinct from the various determinations of substantial life. Kierkegaard speaks of substantiality in various ways throughout his dissertation, and, while he does not explicitly define the concept, it is clear from his usage that he intends the concept in a Hegelian sense. The substantial world is the unconsciously accepted "established order" of one's lived situation. In more contemporary terminology, substantiality correlates to a dominant logic – to whatever understanding of the world most prevalently and pervasively permeates one's situation and that one is implicitly expected to perpetuate unreflectively in both theoretical and practical contexts. The concept of substantiality is defined – albeit merely hyponymically – by Kierkegaard in a few passages in "The Tragic in Ancient Drama Reflected in the Tragic in Modern Drama," which is an essay found in *Either/Or: Part I*, wherein Kierkegaard analyzes the relation between subjectivity and substantiality as it pertains to tragedy. In this essay, Kierkegaard refers to an individual's "substantial determinants," which are

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person's recognized independence from nature and is more concerned with the person's recognized independence from social norms. The next quotation from Kierkegaard's dissertation indicates this.

[27] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 49. As this passage indicates, Kierkegaard is concerned with the emergence of subjectivity in two distinct ways in his dissertation. On the one hand, he is concerned with the original emergence of subjectivity into human history – the emergence of what he calls "world-historical" irony. This emergence he attributes uniquely to Socrates. On the other hand, Kierkegaard is also concerned with the emergence of the ironic self-awareness in any particular person. This latter kind of emergence is of primary interest to Kierkegaard in both his dissertation and subsequent works.

grounded "in the state, the family, in fate."[28] With minor variance, he also refers to the "substantial categories of family, state, and kindred."[29] He further delineates these substantialities in the following: "Every individual, however, original he is, is still a child of God, of his age, of his nation, of his family, of his friends, and only in them does he have his truth."[30] Accordingly, substantial determinations are, in Kierkegaard's understanding, those features of one's identity that are determined by nature and society, over which one has no control; one's substantial existence is determined by the given context into which one is born. The awareness of oneself as being distinct from these substantial determinants is what Kierkegaard calls irony; irony is the awareness that one's personality is irreducible to the particular situation in which one finds oneself. The truth of irony is precisely this awareness that personality is more than just a collection of substantial determinants and that there is something irreducible to these determinations: "Just as much in life now is not actuality and just as there is something in personality that at least momentarily is incommensurate with actuality, so also there is truth in irony."[31]

In explanation of this emergence of subjectivity through irony, Andrew Cross presents irony as involving the overcoming of the "life of immediacy," which he understands as the form of life in which one unconsciously, unreflectively, and uncritically accepts some meaning of the world and of one's position within the same. Cross explains that "to live a life of immediacy is to take life as it comes, to take one's life as a kind of

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[28] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: Part I*, trans. and ed. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 143.
[29] Ibid, 149.
[30] Ibid, 145.
[31] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 253.

happening in which one finds oneself."[32] If the salient feature of personality is the ironic consciousness of oneself as transcending the mere givenness of one's self and world, then this life of immediacy is characteristic of purely latent personality; in the state of immediacy, the person does not yet recognize itself apart from substantial determinations (such as its position in the family, in the congregation, in the state, *et cetera*), nor does the person in this state of latency recognize for itself any understanding of life apart from the significance conventionally attributed to its role in its substantiality. Pre-ironically, the individual defines itself entirely through its institutionalized roles in society; the individual's identity and purpose in life are taken as already established objective certainties. In this state of immediacy, the person is unconsciously absorbed in the situation in which it happens to find itself. Such absorption involves the unconscious acceptance of the truth of one's situation; the person views the occurrences of life simply as – borrowing Cross' colloquialism – 'the way things are.' Cross characterizes this way of living in the following manner:

> One finds oneself in a given society, with certain dispositions and preferences, obligated to comply with various social norms; good things sometimes happen to one, and that's good luck, bad things sometimes happen to one, and that's bad luck.[33]

Given this absorption, the immediately qualified personality is non-ironic, to the extent that it has not achieved the conscious distinction between self and world. Such a person purports to know the world as it is and acts simply as one is self-evidently supposed to act. Irony precisely "constitutes the self's break with 'immediacy.'"[34] Irony involves the

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[32] Andrew Cross, "Neither Either Nor Or: The Perils of Reflexive Irony," from *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 136.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid.

breakdown of the unconscious acceptance of 'the way things are.' As McCarthy summarizes: "The presence of irony in the personality indicates that there has been a rift in the everydayness in which men are usually caught up."[35]

Given that irony involves the negation of the life of immediacy, negativity is clearly essential to irony. Kierkegaard explains the relation between negativity and irony in the following way: "Irony is an organ, a sense for the negative."[36] Moreover, through irony, one "perceives the nothingness of everything."[37] Such negativity has implications for both how one thinks about life and how one acts:

> We perceive here how irony continues to be totally negative in that in the realm of theory it establishes a misrelation between idea and actuality, between actuality and idea, and in the realm of practice between possibility and actuality, between actuality and possibility.[38]

That which is negated in the irony of consciousness is the particular metaphysical and ethical view that belongs to substantial life. The ironist has, as Jon Stewart says, "seen through the hollowness of traditional customs and values […]."[39] Ironically, one no longer finds the theoretical and practical dimensions of substantial life to be credible – the supposed truth of substantial life has been negated, while subjectivity concurrently posits itself as independent precisely of this substantiality from which it absolves itself. Consequently, irony represents for Kierkegaard a heightened self-consciousness, which is achieved through a negation of a previous stage of consciousness. The pre-ironic consciousness is the uncritical and non-thematic awareness of oneself merely as

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[35] McCarthy, 18.
[36] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 309.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid, 285-286.
[39] Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 173.

substantially determined. The higher stage of ironic consciousness is achieved through the ironist's awareness of itself as transcending the roles and identities ascribed to it by the institutions of its substantial situation; the ironist recognizes that there is a multitude of different ways of living, and this awareness makes the established order of the ironist's given society appear purely contingent, insofar as there is no discernable reason for which the way of life that has been institutionalized within the ironist's social milieu is to be maintained over other possible ways of life.

Given its negativity, wherewith the ironic person conceives itself in distinction from its previously accepted understanding of the way of the world, the recognition of ironic self-consciousness has some similarity with the experience of doubt, as Kierkegaard notes.[40] Ironically, one doubts both the validity of the established order of one's society and the significance that has been ascribed to the various roles and identities that constitute one's substantial existence, such as, for example, being a son, or a Lutheran congregant, or a Danish citizen. Irony, as Cross notes, is the "radical disengagement from what one has hitherto regarded as one's self."[41] In this ironic consciousness, the person ceases to identify itself completely with the substantial determinations that had once been conceived as exhaustively constituting its identity; such substantialities, which had been taken as necessary determinations of the self, are now perceived ironically as mere accidents that only belong to one by chance. Irony is the awareness that one's personality transcends simply being a son, a Lutheran, or a Dane. Accordingly, the achievement of irony involves an alteration in self-conception; ironically, one begins to doubt one's substantial identity.

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[40] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 257.
[41] Cross, 137.

In this nascent intensification of consciousness, then, the conceptions of the world and of one's place within the same lose whatever truth had been previous ascribed thereto: "actuality has lost its validity for the ironic subject."[42] Here and throughout his works, it is necessary to note that Kierkegaard uses the term *actuality* idiosyncratically as the designation for the concrete situation within which a person finds itself, with particular emphasis on the practical dimensions of that situation. Kierkegaard clarifies the sense in which he understands actuality in the following: "The word 'actuality,' however, must here primarily be understood as historical actuality – that is, the given actuality at a certain time and in a certain situation."[43] The validity of the situation in which one finds oneself is what is negated in irony. The ironist no longer identifies itself with the various features of the situation in which it happens to find itself, such that "the whole of existence has become alien to the ironic subject."[44] This alienation from one's situation is an essential feature of irony and, thereby, of the emergence of personality. Stressing the significance of alienation in Kierkegaard's account of personality, Robert Hall states that the person for Kierkegaard is in the process of "dynamically and perpetually disengaging itself from the sensuous."[45] The person is constantly aware that it is irreducible to its immediate existence – that it has a self that transcends what it means to be, for example, a son, a Lutheran, a Dane, or whatever other qualifications are inherent in one's substantial life. Kierkegaard accordingly presents irony as the self-alienating shape of consciousness: ironically, one is aware of oneself precisely as estranged from one's concrete identity and situation. The

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[42] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 259.
[43] Ibid, 258.
[44] Ibid, 259.
[45] Ronald Hall, "The Irony of Irony," from: *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Concept of Irony* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2001), 118.

metaphysical and ethical explanations of existence, in which consciousness previously believed, no longer appear justified, such that the ironic consciousness finds itself as a metaphysical and ethical stranger in the world: "the whole of existence has become alien to the ironic subject and the ironic subject alien to existence."[46] The ironic consciousness no longer endorses conventional understandings of the meaning of the world or of the moral worth of actions, but instead doubts the truth of such understandings. This estrangement is paradigmatically represented for Kierkegaard by Socrates, who, in various texts, challenges the justifications behind the beliefs and actions of Greek citizens and, thereby, becomes "alien to the actuality of the whole substantial world."[47] Accordingly, borrowing Hegelian jargon, Kierkegaard says that "irony is subjectivity's being-for-itself," in the sense that irony involves the concurrent negating of the truth of substantiality and the positing of the certainty of subjectivity, whereby the subject originally achieves recognition of itself.[48]

As previously noted, irony and doubt do exhibit some similarity, insofar as both challenge the validity of actuality and involve the estrangement of consciousness from its world. Kierkegaard, however, maintains the distinction between irony and doubt. While, ironically, consciousness can be said to doubt the truth of substantial life, irony is not identical to doubt, insofar as the latter is a purely theoretical concept, while Kierkegaard takes the former to be primarily a practical concept; Kierkegaard explains that "irony is essentially practical" and it is "theoretical only in order to become practical again."[49] The

[46] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 259.
[47] Ibid, 264.
[48] Ibid, 257.
[49] Ibid. Later, in *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard maintains this conception of doubt, but does so by contrasting the theoretical nature of doubt with the practical nature of despair (Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: Part II*, 211-212). In *Either/Or*, doubt is said to concern the intellect but not personality as a whole, insofar as doubt does not

ironic personality does not simply challenge the meaning or importance of the established order of substantial life as part of a purely scientific endeavor to achieve indubitable knowledge, but rather the ironist challenges substantiality in a way that undermines its participation in the norms that pertain to that life. Irony is the awareness that the practices and customs that normatively constitute and belong to substantial life – that is, the practices pertinent to familial, congregational, and civic spheres of existence – do not have the unconditional value that had previously been ascribed to them, albeit in a wholly unreflective manner. The ironist may be able to identify conditional reasons for which adherence to such norms is useful or beneficial – it may, for example, be useful to obey the laws that govern one's state, so as to avoid the unpleasantness and inconvenience of various forms of punishment – but the ironist fails to identify an unconditional basis for these values, and the ironist is conscious of this failure. The ironist sees no ultimate basis upon which the given way of the world is to be founded. Irony, as George Stack notes, compromises the endorsement of any "objective certainty."[50] The ethical understanding into which one is 'born' – that is, whatever normative conceptions of the world are established for one through participation in one's given family, congregation, or state – is suspended in irony, and it is suspended precisely through the awareness that such understanding has no clear justification and has only hitherto been endorsed dogmatically.

It is along these lines that Merold Westphal notes both that "irony has the teleological suspension of the ethical built into it" and that Kierkegaard's conception of

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directly relate to how one acts. This is congruent with the analysis of doubt presented in *The Concept of Irony*.

[50] George Stack, *Kierkegaard's Existential Ethics* (University: University of Alabama Press, 1977), 11.

irony is a way of expressing “the relativity of any culture, any state, any *Sittlichkeit*.”[51] Regarding this suspension of the ethical, it is crucial to note that it is not simply the case that the ironist rejects a particular value or set of values for the sake of another. For example, one might convert from Catholicism to Lutheranism, finding the latter to be a more genuine way to express one’s devotion to the divine. In this case, the basic values of one’s religious belief are maintained, and the conversion only concerns which particular sect better instantiates these core values that have not themselves been subjected to doubt. In such a case, the true irony of consciousness would not be achieved, insofar as one still retains both some affirmation of value and, thereby, some adherence to substantial life. In the mere supplantation of one set of values by another, consciousness doubts the validity of particular values but does not doubt the validity of its practical situation as a whole, which is essential to irony. Correspondingly, in such replacement of values, consciousness would be alienated from a particular facet of substantial life, but there would be no alienation from substantiality as such. Rather than any mere substitution of values, all possible values are rejected by the ironist as being equally groundless.

How irony accomplishes this total undermining of value is, according to Westphal, “through the juxtaposition of the ‘infinite’ and the ‘absolute’ requirement with the finitude

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[51] Westphal, 167. To be clear, Westphal employs the notion of a ‘teleological suspension of the ethical’ in a way that is broader than Kierkegaard’s own usage of the same expression. For Kierkegaard, the ethical is suspended specifically by a religious calling that is irreducible to ethical concerns (cf. ‘Problem I’ of *Fear and Trembling*). Westphal, however, does not limit teleological suspensions of the ethical to the religious life. In the present context, Westphal understands there to be a teleological suspension of the ethical in the following sense: the ethicality that one unreflectively endorses in the life of immediacy is suspended for the sake of a reflectively endorsed ethics. For Westphal, the ethical can be suspended for the sake of a ‘higher’ ethicality, which itself need not be religious; the *telos* that suspends the ethics of substantial life is simply a more reflective ethics. For Kierkegaard, such suspension would not be a proper instance of a suspension of the ethical, insofar as, in this instance, the ethical is not suspended for the sake of an absolute duty to God that is inexplicable in ethical terms (cf. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 59). As long as this difference in usage is understood, however, Westphal’s description is both useful and true to Kierkegaard’s account of irony.

of human existence."[52] Kierkegaard postulates that consciousness desires that there be some unconditional foundation for its world – something that explains transparently how the world is and why it is that way. Reflecting upon its own situation, however, consciousness fails to identify any necessity underlying the constitution of that situation; the moral, customary, and legal constitution of its situation appears contingent and only arbitrarily established. For the ironist, there is no apparent reason for why its situation is ultimately ordered in the way that it is, such that the ironic consciousness becomes disillusioned. Kierkegaard describes the disillusionment of the ironic subject in the following:

> Here we meet the ironic subject. For the ironic subject, the given actuality has lost its validity entirely; it has become for him an imperfect form that is a hindrance everywhere. But on the other hand, he does not possess the new. He is the one who must pass judgment. In one sense the ironist is certainly prophetic, because he is continually pointing to something impending, but what it is he does not know.[53]

By measuring one's world by this absolute requirement – that it have an unconditional basis – consciousness becomes ironic, which entails that the subject becomes disillusioned by the merely presumed validity of the way of the world.

Moreover, that the substantial world presents itself as meaningful appears presumptuous to the ironic consciousness, insofar as, with that presentation, the substantial world does not concurrently proffer any justification for that meaning; irony is the perception of the presumptuous nature of the established order of substantial life. As McCarthy notes: "In the consciousness which irony represents, one sees through the illusions of the actual world which implies itself to be all-fulfilling."[54] That there is any

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[52] Westphal, 167.
[53] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 261.
[54] McCarthy, 29.

presumed meaning to existence at all seems like vanity to the ironist, and Kierkegaard identifies irony precisely with the insight whereby "everything is shown to be vanity."[55] This expression, which appears frequently throughout most of Kierkegaard's aesthetic works, is borrowed directly from *Ecclesiastes*.[56] As in *Ecclesiates*, Kierkegaard presents irony as the awareness that all human effort is "vanity and a striving after wind."[57] The pessimism characteristic of the verses of *Ecclesiastes* certainly aligns with Kierkegaard's description of ironic alienation. Unlike *Ecclesiastes*, however, Kierkegaard founds the perception of the vanity of existence not upon the historical repetition of all things, the equal susceptibility to death of all people (irrespective of caste or accomplishment), and the eventual oblivion of one's reputation.[58] Instead, Kierkegaard's far more modern conception of vanity is grounded upon the insight that no unconditional foundation for the world is discernable to consciousness. In the ironic perception of this lack, all understanding and action appear to consciousness as vain.

In this perception of vanity, then, irony functions by relativizing that which is taken to be absolute. Specifically, the assumption – either implicit or explicit – that the theoretical and practical features of one's substantial life are absolute is rejected by the ironic consciousness, which cannot recognize any justification for which things are the way that they are. McCarthy notes:

> In irony, one realizes that beforehand one had been immersed in the world and believed its implicit promise of fulfillment. With the advent of irony one has

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[55] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 258.

[56] *Ecclesiastes* seems to influence Kierkegaard's philosophical thought perhaps more than any other book of the Bible; many of the themes therefrom can be seen throughout Kierkegaard's work. The two theses that are central to *Ecclesiastes* – that all effort is vanity, but that one should nonetheless be content with the simple gifts of God – noticeably parallel the central claims of *Either/Or*.

[57] Eccl. 1:14.

[58] Eccl. 1:9-11, 2:14-15, 2:16-17, *et passim*.

> broken through illusion – in experience – and initially takes up an attitude of negativity, of passionate rejection, of the actuality which deceived.[59]
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> Irony as consciousness represents the rupture of the illusions of the phenomenal world. The illusions of finitude and temporality are shattered. One realizes that that which one seeks and yearns for is not to be found in the finite and temporal. One has lived the finite and the temporal and found them incapable of making good on illusory promise. Finally one perceives the obstacle posed by finitude and temporality as such and sees the need to move beyond them.[60]

The substantial world presumes and pretends a meaning, which it cannot ultimately provide. Pre-ironically, the person believes that the world is imbued with meaning. Irony, however, "prevents all idol worshiping of the phenomenon."[61] Ironically, it becomes clear to consciousness that the world lacks fulfillment in that it cannot provide justification for the meaning of life that it espouses. Irony is the awareness that undermines the tendency of substantial life to propose itself as absolute – as if the truth or rightness of its laws, customs, practices, and institutions were beyond question and not in need of any justification. Irony makes manifest the vanity of such existence; it relativizes such presumed absoluteness.

Once again stressing the practical significance of irony, Kierkegaard identifies the relativizing quality of irony with a freedom from social obligation, and he further quantitatively correlates being free with perceiving vanity:

> In irony, however, since everything is shown to be vanity, the subject becomes free. The more vain everything becomes, all the lighter, emptier, and volatized the subject becomes.[62]

In ironic self-awareness, one perceives the vanity of the norms that belong to one's situation. Concurrent with this perception, one finds oneself no longer bound by those

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[59] McCarthy, 7.
[60] Ibid, 127-128.
[61] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 329.
[62] Ibid, 258.

norms, insofar as, once a norm is identified as groundless, it no longer exercises any obliging power over a person. The ironic consciousness knows that there is no ultimate reason to adhere to any particular norm, and, with this knowledge, the ironist achieves a kind of freedom: it finds itself liberated from the ethics characteristic of substantial life. Accordingly, the alienation of consciousness, wherewith the ethics of substantiality is suspended, can be more positively expressed as the emergence of what Kierkegaard calls "subjective freedom." This explains the quantitative correlation that Kierkegaard posits between perceiving vanity and being free; the more norms that are perceived as unjustified, the less the person feels bound to act in particular ways and the freer the person becomes. Irony undermines commitment to anything, resulting in the disillusionment with and disenfranchisement from participation in the normative structure of substantial life.

The result of irony is that the person perceives itself as free from all ethical bonds; the person no longer feels itself beholden to the expectations and precepts of substantial life. Kierkegaard says: "the salient feature of the irony is the subjective freedom that at all times has in its power the possibility of a beginning and is not handicapped by earlier situations."[63] In addition to the theoretical consequence that the ironic personality no longer believes in the presumed truth of its world, there is also the practical consequence that the same personality does not find itself compelled by the norms that belong to that world. Insofar as the ironist is freed from the norms and values that had previously determined its practical existence, Kierkegaard accordingly describes the ironist's liberation as an expression of a negative kind of freedom:

> In irony, the subject is negatively free, since the actuality that is supposed to give the subject content is not there. He is free from the constraint in which the given

[63] Ibid, 253.

> actuality holds the subject, but he is negatively free and as such is suspended, because there is nothing that holds him.[64]

The ironic consciousness finds itself not bound to act in any particular manner, insofar as every activity appears equally trivial or meaningless: "actuality loses its validity for him; he is free and above it."[65] McCarthy describes the ironist in the following way:

> The world, world-view and society of men who constitute finitude's kingdom of illusions are emphatically rejected, and one seeks to soar in freedom in search of a possible worthy object of desire.[66]

Irony involves the emergence of the subject in its negative freedom from its social situation.

This negative freedom that is salient to the ironist is totalizing. Irony does not negate a particular demand or a particular set of demands; instead, this negation is infinite – the subject is absolved of all external demands upon it.[67] Both borrowing an expression from Hegel and stressing the negativity of irony, Kierkegaard identifies irony as "infinite absolute negativity."[68] Kierkegaard explains this expression with the following:

> It is negativity, because it only negates; it is infinite, because it does not negate this or that phenomenon; it is absolute, because that by virtue of which it negates is a higher something that still is not.[69]

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[64] Ibid, 262.
[65] Ibid, 258, 253.
[66] McCarthy, 128.
[67] For this reason, Kierkegaard thinks that the irony of Socrates is not a complete expression of irony and, consequently, from the perspective of world-history, subjectivity emerges with Socrates, but it does not achieve its full expression until modernity. According to Kierkegaard, Socrates only negates the truth of the Greek world and does so in anticipation of a new truth for that world (Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 271, 264). A fully explicit irony, in contrast, negates the truth of all situations, both actual and potential.
[68] Ibid, 254. This expression is borrowed directly from Hegel, which Kierkegaard readily acknowledges: "To this extent we see the correctness of Hegel's view of irony as infinite absolute negativity" (ibid). Much of Kierkegaard's understanding of irony and his corresponding critique of Romanticism is taken from Hegel's own critical analysis of the same, which can be found in his exposition of morality in *The Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, in his presentation of German Romanticism in his lectures on aesthetics, and in his critique of K.W.F. Solger. While endorsing Hegel's analysis and criticism of Romantic irony, Kierkegaard challenges Hegel's understanding of irony in general (ibid, 275, 278, 265, *et passim*). Particularly, Kierkegaard thinks that Hegel problematically conflates all irony with Romanticism, which has the twofold consequence that Hegel fails to understand Socratic irony and that Hegel does not appreciate the value of non-Romantic forms of irony. For a detailed but purely historical account of the influence of Hegel on Kierkegaard's dissertation, consider Niels Thulstrup's *Kierkegaard's Relation to Hegel* (especially 224-242).
[69] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 261.

> If we turn back to the foregoing general description of irony as infinite absolute negativity, it is adequately suggested therein that irony is no longer directed against this or that particular phenomenon, against a particular existing thing, but that the whole of existence has become alien to the ironic subject and the ironic subject alien to existence, that as actuality has lost its validity for the ironic subject, he himself has to a certain degree become unactual.[70]

Glossing the Hegelian jargon, Kierkegaard's threefold point in using this expression is that irony undermines the conventional value attributed to actions without concurrently affirming any alternative value, the negation of irony applies indiscriminately and equally to all possible values, and this negation is not carried out for the sake of some already existing and known principle.

This totalizing perception of the vanity of ethical life, whereby the ironist devalues all actions, however, cannot entail that the ironist ceases to act, since complete inaction is impossible – even the refusal to act is nonetheless an act, and such refusal is no more defensible for the ironist than its opposite, if consciousness has truly negated the value of action absolutely and infinitely. In order to address this issue, Kierkegaard explains that it is not the case that the ironist becomes inactive with the awareness of the vanity of existence, but rather that the ironist feels indifferent to the various ways in which it does act; the ironist necessarily acts, but these actions no longer have a determinate meaning for the ironist. Kierkegaard presents the tension between having to act and having no positive reason to act in the following:

> For irony, nothing is an established order; it plays helter-skelter *ad libitum* with everything; but when it wants to declare this, it says something positive, and to that extent its sovereignty is thereby at an end. […] The difficulty here is that, strictly speaking, irony actually is never able to advance a thesis, because irony is a qualification of the being-for-itself subject, who in incessant agility allows nothing

[70] Ibid, 259.

> to remain established and on account of this agility cannot focus on the total point of view that it allows nothing to remain established.[71]

To the extent that the ironic consciousness is purely negative, the issue is that it cannot act without positing value (since an agent at least tacitly posits value whenever it chooses to act in one way over another), and, thereby, compromising its own negativity. Kierkegaard's resolution of this issue is not to claim that the ironist somehow ceases to act but is instead to claim that the ironist does not actually posit values in its actions. Kierkegaard explains this by attributing an essential vagary and insincerity to ironic consciousness. Engaged in the activity of infinite absolute negativity, the ironist cannot value any particular course of action over others. When the ironist acts, then, it does so without assuming that such action has any significance. Accordingly, the ironist acts without earnestness:

> Ultimately the ironist always has to posit something, but what he posits in this way is nothing. But then it is impossible to be earnest about nothing without either arriving at something (this happens if one becomes speculatively earnest about it) or despairing (if one takes it personally in earnest). But the ironist does neither, and thus we can also say that he is not in earnest about it. […] Therefore we can say of irony that it is earnestness about nothing – insofar as it is not earnestness about something. It continually conceives of nothing in contrast to something, and in order to free itself of earnestness about anything, it grasps the nothing. But it does not become earnestness about nothing, either, except insofar as it is not earnestness about anything.[72]

The enactment or neglect of any possible action appears arbitrary to the ironist. Since the ironist is aware of the lack of justification for acting in any particular way, there is neither conviction nor commitment in its action; the ironist acts in an arbitrary manner, because the ironist conceives all action as unjustified. Concerning the same, Cross notes that the ironist "is disengaged from his social world, in that he does not take the practices and norms

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[71] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 269.
[72] Ibid, 270.

that constitute that world seriously and does not take other individuals in that world seriously."[73] Congruently, Kierkegaard characterizes ironic action as mere play: "Irony is the infinitely light playing with nothing."[74]

Additionally and for further clarification, the vagary that characterizes irony is not due to any ignorance regarding possible actions; it is not the case that there is a particular action or set of actions that is meaningful and that the ironist acts arbitrarily because it is simply ignorant of this action or set. For Kierkegaard, irony is a recognition that concerns the nature of action itself and does not directly concern particular actions. It is not the case that there is some proper course of action – one that the ironist has simply not uncovered yet but could potentially do so with either extended or intensified reflection; instead, from the perspective of irony, every possible action – presently conceived or not – has lost its significance. What the ironic consciousness is lacking is not knowledge of a particular action but a principle in accordance with which any action could be deemed valuable; irony is founded upon ignorance of a principle, not ignorance of a particular act. If irony were merely ignorance of some action that is otherwise justified, then a complete recognition of the self in its negative freedom would not be achieved. In such a case, the self would recognize itself as still bound to a particular life-view, albeit one that it simply does not know yet. As Kierkegaard understands it, however, irony is a more encompassing recognition – one that undermines faith in the value of any possible action.

Given this understanding of irony, it is clear that consciousness does not achieve its ironic shape through a gradual and systematic procedure of negating the value of each possible course of action until consciousness has negated the totality of all possible action.

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[73] Cross, 134.

[74] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 270.

For a finite being, it would be impossible to survey the totality of actions that are or may become available to it; finite consciousness never achieves a thoroughgoing and completely transparent awareness of its ethical situation. If irony were understood in this manner, then its negativity would only ever be finite and relative; irony would only negate particular phenomena for the sake of some other phenomenon (known or otherwise).[75] As Kierkegaard understands it, however, irony is achieved with the recognition that there is no explicable and principled basis upon which one could justify acting in a particular way. It is only on the basis of this recognition that the ironist finds nothing valuable in the survey of its ethical situation. Only if irony is understood in this way can its negativity be infinite and absolute. Kierkegaard says of this distinction:

> Irony *sensu eminentiori* is directed not against this or that particular existing entity but against the entire given actuality at a certain time and under certain conditions. Thus it has an intrinsic apriority, and it is not by successively destroying one portion of actuality after another that it arrives at its total view, but it is by virtue of this that it destroys in the particular instance. It is not this or that phenomenon but the totality of existence that it contemplates *sub specie ironiae*.[76]

The recognition that there is no foundation for the justification of any possible action is the condition under which particular acts appear to consciousness as vain. One does not become conscious of the vanity of existence because particular acts appear valueless; rather, particular acts appear vain because the ironist is not aware of any foundation for

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[75] This is not to say that questioning a particular way of life is unimportant or useless for the development of personality, but this kind of questioning is sub-ironic. It also does not mean that one is being unreflective when one negates the value of a particular way of life or shifts from valuing one way of life to valuing another. Rather, it just means that this reflection has not attained irony in the full sense of infinite, absolute negativity. There is a difference between juxtaposing one way of life with another and juxtaposing having a way of life at all with the requirement that there be some unconditional basis for the same. The former juxtaposition raises the question of the meaning of a particular way of life, while the latter raises the question of the meaning of life as such.

[76] Ibid, 254.

their value. Lacking knowledge of this foundation is the reason for which the ironist cannot be confident in its acting and resigns itself to vagary.

As Kierkegaard understands it, irony makes consciousness negatively free from the truth of substantial life as a whole and not merely in part or gradually. Accordingly, most commentators identify Kierkegaard's conception of irony with nihilism. Irony is the shape of consciousness corresponding to the awareness that there is no discernable justification for the way of the world, that there is no ultimate basis for the value of actions, and that actions are unjustified. Kierkegaard notes that, for the ironist, "nothing is an established order."[77] In this sense, irony involves annihilation: "For irony, everything becomes nothing."[78] Irony is the nihilistic perspective that nothing has value and that the totality of existence is meaningless.

Developing this notion, Stack notes that irony is essentially a nihilistic awareness, which involves not so much a "discontinuity" in meaning but a "dissolution" of meaning.[79] It is not simply that the ironist is unable to discover a coherent meaning for actuality, but rather that an already established and accepted meaning becomes unbelievable. This indicates the sense in which ironic consciousness is something that is developed or achieved; irony involves conscious movement, specifically the movement from an accepted understanding of the world to a rejection – without substitution – of that same understanding. Irony is not a quality that could ever belong to the natural attitude of consciousness, which uncritically accepts the givenness of its world, precisely because irony is the negation of this attitude. One becomes an ironist, and one does so by

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[77] Ibid, 269.
[78] Ibid, 258.
[79] Stack, 24.

transcending the view that life possesses a self-evident and unquestionable meaning. Further explicating this ironic dissolution of meaning, Stack notes that irony is not to be confused with some naïve irrationalism; the irony of consciousness is not some thoughtless rejection of meaning that is produced through a lack of reflection on the meaning of existence. Rather, irony is precisely "the result of careful, critical, rational analysis."[80] The ironist has undergone the process of questioning the truth of the everyday metaphysical and ethical understandings that are constitutive of substantial life; the ironist asks why the world is the way that it is and why must one act in certain ways within that world. Far from any kind of thoughtlessness, irony is that which first of all thematizes the question of the meaning of life.[81] As such, irony expresses a reflective relation between consciousness and its world.

Given that irony is the nascent awareness of the questionability of the meaning of existence, it thereby precisely serves as the basis for ethical development, which is why the concept is deemed important by Kierkegaard. The alienating negativity of irony results in the consciousness of the uncertainty of the meaning of life. The nihilism that emerges with irony need not be terminal but can be taken as the transition to a new consciousness of meaning. It is with the loss of the apparent truth of substantial life that the possibility of reflectively and actively discovering or establishing a new meaning for one's existence arises; with the ironic negation of substantial life, a space is opened up for a higher ethicality, where ethicality is understood not as unquestioning adherence to the established norms of one's given social situation, but rather as conscientious and deliberate self-determination within that situation. The ironic insight into the vanity of everything marks

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[80] Ibid, 26.
[81] Ibid, 43.

the initiation of ethical existence, insofar as it is with irony that one breaks free from social conformity and can – with this freedom – decide for itself how to act. For this reason, Pia Søltoft describes Kierkegaard's dissertation as "a summons to a particular kind of moral life."[82] Along these lines, Stack complementarily notes:

> [Irony is] a polemical attitude towards conventional 'knowledge' or opinion, the undermining of confidence in "objective" certainties and the correlative search for self-knowledge as well as a subjective basis for ethical self-being.[83]

Irony is not simply the primitive expression of subjectivity; it is more determinately the inception of ethical subjectivity.

The negativity of irony involves the call for a higher ethical existence; by depriving the subject of any conventional understanding of life, irony puts the subject in a position wherein it must determine what is true for itself, since there is no other source of meaning available to it. Karsten Harries explains the situation of the ironist as follows:

> The immediate hold that family, country, society have on us first of all and most of the time, must be called into question if we are to genuinely commit ourselves to them, or to anything. Only the person who is at some distance from what he is committing himself to, is able to make such a commitment. It is thus important to detach oneself even and especially from those things that one takes to be most important, if one is to commit oneself to them in a meaningful manner.[84]

This transition to a state of reflective engagement in one's situation is made possible by irony precisely because irony involves the consciousness of the disparity between determinate actuality and indeterminate ideality. Kierkegaard remarks: "irony is a demand, an enormous demand, because it rejects reality and demands ideality."[85] Stack adds to this:

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[82] Pia Søltoft, "Ethics and Irony," from: *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Concept of Irony*, ed. Robert Perkins (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2001), 154.
[83] Stack, 1.
[84] Karsten Harries, *Between Nihilism and Faith: A Commentary* on Either/Or, ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn and Hermann Deuser (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 140-41.
[85] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 213.

"Irony is the antithesis of conventional actuality; it is, by implication, a condemnation of actuality and is oriented in the direction of the ideal infinity of the possible."[86] This ironic recognition of possibility is the basis for ethical development, insofar as the ironic awareness entails the recognition of the person's freedom from adherence to the way of life established by the substantial world. Through irony, one first of all reflectively confronts the possibilities of one's situation and one's responsibility for enacting or neglecting these possibilities. Consciousness becomes responsible in irony precisely because, having recognized that there is no unconditionally established way of the world, consciousness recognizes that it alone determines its activity.

This confrontation between actuality and ideality signals the beginning of ethical personality, which is the reason for which Kierkegaard's dissertation culminates in the following thesis: "Just as philosophy begins with doubt, so also a life that may be called human begins with irony."[87] Additionally, he says:

> In our age there has been much talk about the importance of doubt for science and scholarship, but what doubt is to science, irony is to personal life. Just as scientists maintain that there is no true science without doubt, so it may be maintained with the same right that no genuinely human life is possible without irony."[88]

Implicitly, Kierkegaard understands the central feature of human life to be the twofold awareness of personal freedom and responsibility. It is through irony that one attains consciousness of one's various possibilities and one's freedom in relation to the neglect or enactment of those possibilities. Ironically, various courses of action are no longer perceived as the compulsory way of the world but as possibilities for and to which one is responsible.

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[86] Stack, 8.
[87] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 6.
[88] Ibid, 326.

2.3 The Two Types of Irony and Living Poetically

Kierkegaard's analysis of irony outlines two forms of the same, each of which has a unique ethical significance. In general, irony involves the emergence of personality through the alienation of substantial or immediate existence. There are two ways, though, in which the ironic consciousness can conceive of itself in the experience of this alienation and the correlative awareness of its negative freedom. Kierkegaard's account of two forms of irony fits well with the model provided by Alan Wilde, which distinguishes between *irony* and *anirony*. Introducing this distinction, Wilde says:

> [All] irony, regarded as a perceptual encounter with the world, generates in response to its vision of disparity (or in some cases is generated by) a complementary, more conceptual vision of wholeness or singleness.[89]

To every ironic position, which presents the world in its disjunction, disharmony, and incoherence, there is a counter-position, which Wilde designates as *anironic*, that presents the world in its junction, harmony, and coherence. Kierkegaard's account can be understood as operating within this model. For him, both forms of irony recognize the meaninglessness of existence. One form of irony, however, resigns itself to this meaninglessness and recommends acting in a purely arbitrary manner, since it perceives no non-arbitrary justification for acting in any particular way. The other form of irony, in contrast, is inspired by the recognition of the meaninglessness of substantial life to discover a higher meaning for life, albeit one that does not belong to the pre-ironic consciousness of substantial life. For Kierkegaard, one form of irony embraces the disharmony of existence and terminates in nihilism, while the other form seeks to overcome that disharmony. These two types of irony, as Hall notes, found two distinct and incompatible

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[89] Alan Wilde, *Horizons of Assent: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Ironic Imagination* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1981), 30.

"pictures" of existence: there is "a picture of the self/world relation in which the self is imagined as completely *sundered* from the world and a picture of the self/world relation in which the self is imagined as dialectically *sundered from and bonded to* the world."[90] As Hall's description indicates, both forms of irony share the moment of sundering; only one form, however, transcends this sundering in a bonding moment. Using the nihilistic descriptions that Stack employs: all forms of irony are nihilistic – one form, however, resigns itself to nihilism, while the other form seeks to overcome its nihilism.

Kierkegaard primarily presents these two forms of irony as different ways of "living poetically," an expression that Kierkegaard uses to characterize the existential task of the ironist. Kierkegaard states: "irony's great requirement was to live poetically."[91] Irrespective of type, irony brings with it the demand for the person to live poetically. That is, by ironically attaining the consciousness of one's possibilities and one's freedom in relation to the enactment or neglect of those possibilities, the ironist becomes tasked with the realization of itself. This project of self-realization becomes a task for the ironic consciousness precisely because the ironist, having become aware of its own freedom and possibility, cannot appeal to any pre-established understanding of 'the way things are,' but instead can only view its life as determined by itself. The pre-ironic person – still in its latency – is not truly responsible for its way of life, insofar as this person has not achieved conscious independence from its substantial existence. Through irony, however, the person achieves this independence and becomes responsible for the way that it develops itself through the various possibilities that it enacts or neglects. The ironic consciousness

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[90] Ronald Hall, *Word and Spirit: A Kierkegaardian Critique of the Modern Age*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 118.
[91] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 280.

reflects on how it freely acts, in consequence of which it can be said to be self-realizing. In such realization, the ironic consciousness freely and reflectively creates itself or "lives poetically," which is precisely Kierkegaard's expression for any project of self-development.

Despite being a kind of poiesis, this activity of living poetically is not limited to poets, aesthetes, or any other conceivable subset of persons. Rather, what Kierkegaard calls "living poetically" is the activity of every person *qua* person. As Andrew Burgess and Sylvia Walsh both note in explanation of this concept, poetic living is the task of all persons, insofar as the work that a person puts into self-development is akin to the work that the poet puts into poetry.[92] The use of this expression, as Walsh notes, is part of that previously referenced tendency of Kierkegaard to explicate existential categories and existential issues using aesthetic terminology. Accordingly, living poetically does not concern the creation of an artwork, except in the specific sense that one's own life is considered a work of art. Walsh clarifies the meaning of the term with the following: "For it is not the fashioning of a work of art as such but a particular way of orienting ourselves to life that constitutes the essential condition for living poetically."[93] Kierkegaard's concept of living poetically concerns the manner in which one freely chooses to creatively shape one's self and one's world.

Connecting the concept of living poetically with the two types of irony, Kierkegaard notes that living poetically can be understood in two different ways; to live poetically can mean either "to compose oneself poetically" or "to be composed

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[92] Andrew Burgess, "The Upbuilding in the Irony of Kierkegaard's The Concept of Irony," from: *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Concept of Irony*, ed. Robert Perkins (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2001), 154; Walsh, 2.
[93] Ibid, 60.

poetically."[94] These two senses of living poetically correspond to two different types of ironic existence: one characteristic of "romantic irony," and another characteristic of what Kierkegaard terms "mastered irony." The first form of poetic living is a reaction to the experience of the alienation of the self that treats all actions as equally and incessantly meaningless, such that it does not matter which possible actions one enacts or neglects. The other form of poetic living responds to this experience of alienation by actively seeking some positive understanding of existence – one that is irreducible to the views constitutive of substantial life, since such views have become unbelievable for the ironic consciousness – by virtue of which one could justify the enactment or neglect of various possible actions.

2.4 The First Form of Living Poetically – Romanticism

The first form of living poetically, which Kierkegaard thinks is paradigmatically represented by German Romanticism, is a complication of the awareness of the vanity of everything.[95] Kierkegaard presents romanticism as an intensification of consciousness: while irony is the nascent expression of subjectivity, romanticism is "subjectivity in its second potency."[96] Of the romantic consciousness, Kierkegaard says the following: "It must be subjectivity raised to the second power, a subjectivity's subjectivity, which

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[94] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 280.

[95] In development of his understanding of irony, Kierkegaard analyzes German Romanticism as paradigmatically illustrative of one of the two forms of irony. Regarding the connection between irony and Romanticism, Kierkegaard says the following: "Throughout this whole discussion I use the term 'irony' and 'ironist'; I could just as well say 'romanticism' and 'romanticist.' Both terms say essentially the same thing; the one is more reminiscent of the name with which the faction christened itself; the other, the name with which Hegel christened it" (Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 275). The Romantics on whom Kierkegaard focusses attention are Friedrich Schlegel, Ludwig Tieck, and K.W.F. Solger, and the second part of Kierkegaard's dissertation includes a critical analysis of each of these Romantics. Actual figures of the Romantic movement are analyzed by Kierkegaard for illustrative purposes, though, and one need not be a member of this historical movement to be an ironist; instead, romantic irony is a form of consciousness that any person could achieve.

[96] Ibid, 242.

corresponds to reflection's reflection."[97] In irony, there is the awareness of the vanity of existence. In romanticism, this ironic awareness becomes self-affirming; as romanticism is "an intensified subjective consciousness, it quite naturally is clearly and definitely conscious of irony and declares irony as its position."[98] Romanticism, as self-affirming irony, involves a heightened consciousness of the self's alienation from its substantial life.

While the meaning of this intensification of consciousness remains fairly opaque in Kierkegaard's descriptions, the point seems to be that, in romanticism, irony is intensified in the following sense: the ironist, having seen through the vanity of everything, becomes conscious of its freedom from all bounds and, subsequently, affirms itself in its liberation from actuality and its capacity to act without restriction. Romanticism is the intensified consciousness of irony in the sense that, by actively assuming the recognition that the norms of substantial life are without foundation, the romantic consciousness recognizes itself as licensed to do anything, since it is not conscious of any prohibitions on action. Kierkegaard explains this as follows:

> But in order for the ironic formation to be perfectly developed, it is required that the subject also become conscious of his irony, feel negatively free as he passes judgment on the given actuality, and enjoy this negative freedom.[99]

Romanticism is an irony that recognizes not only the independence of personality from actuality but also the power that consciousness has in relation to actuality; the romantic ironist perceives the vanity of actuality, but it thereby also perceives the power that it possesses over actuality, insofar as, on the one hand, it is precisely consciousness itself that passes this judgment concerning vanity and, on the other hand, this judgment liberates

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[97] Ibid.
[98] Ibid.
[99] Ibid, 263.

consciousness from the bonds of actuality. In recognizing that it itself is responsible for exposing the invalidity of substantial norms, the romantic consciousness affirms its own validity. McCarthy and Stewart summarize this point well in the following:

> The individual, having risen from immersion in the actual and having broken with the age and his fellows, is "deprived" of inauthentic content and henceforth estranged, but because of this stands in sharp relief as an individual subject.[100]

> The self-positing "I" denies the truth and validity of everything in the external world and sets itself up as the ultimate judge and arbiter of truth, but this truth has no content in itself, and a given thing is true by virtue not of anything intrinsic to the matter itself but only of the fact that it is posited by the subject.[101]

The romantic consciousness views itself as the sole source of truth; its negation of substantiality is concurrent with the affirmation of its position as that which passes judgment on substantial life.

Romanticism is a self-affirming irony, and it affirms itself by maintaining the distance between itself and its world precisely by acting without concern for the normative structures of substantial life. The romantic ironist affirms both the vanity of substantial life and the validity of itself as the arbiter of truth by acting in any manner that it sees fit. Kierkegaard describes the ethical situation of the romantic in the following:

> Irony now functioned as that for which nothing was established, as that which was finished with everything, and also as that which had the absolute power to do everything. If it allowed something to remain established, it knew that it had the power to destroy it, knew it at the very same moment it let it continue. If it posited something, it knew it had the authority to annul it, knew it at the very same moment it posited it. It knew that in general it possessed the absolute power to bind and to unbind.[102]

The romantic affirms the freedom of which it becomes conscious in irony precisely by employing that freedom in any way that it chooses, irrespective of the expectations or

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[100] McCarthy, 30.
[101] Stewart, 171.
[102] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 275-276.

standards of substantial life. Such an ironist may act perfectly in accordance with the norms of its social milieu, but such accord is purely accidental; if the romantic happens to adhere to any of the norms of its ethical situation, it is not because that norm has any binding force over the romantic but because the romantic coincidentally wants to act in that manner. Romanticism "gives the arbitrary *I* free reign in ironic self-satisfaction."[103]

Since the romantic does not recognize any objective standard for action, its activity is essentially capricious. Personality, having attained an awareness of its negative freedom, finds itself not bound to act in any particular way, since there is no discernable justification for any action. However, the same personality is also aware that the courses of action that belong to substantial life exhaustively define the realm of all possible actions. While personality may recognize the vanity of its situation, it must nonetheless continue to act within this situation. The ironist is in the contentious position wherein all actions are considered meaningless, but it must, in spite of such meaninglessness, nonetheless act. The romantic responds to this tension by consciously acting in an arbitrary, playful, whimsical manner – in a manner liberated from adherence to social norms and expectations. The romantic lives however it likes, and it feels neither conviction in its acting nor commitment to its acts, insofar as the romantic consciousness conceives itself as absolved from everything in its absolute freedom.

This absolute freedom of self-development that consciousness attributes to itself in romanticism clarifies the first sense of Kierkegaard's concept of living poetically. In this first sense, living poetically means "creating oneself poetically," which Kierkegaard understands in the following way: without reference to any objective norm (since such

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[103] Ibid, 296.

norms are vain presumptions for the romantic consciousness and, thereby, lack authority), one arbitrarily develops oneself through equally arbitrary actions. This arbitrary self-development is twofold, as Kierkegaard notes; it is not simply that the romantic consciousness composes itself poetically, for, in this self-development, the romantic also composes its environing world, which serves as the context for self-development. Kierkegaard explains the poetic living of romanticism as involving a twofold activity of composition in the following way:

> But for the ironist, this context [i.e., the world], which he would call a demanding appendix, has no validity, and since it is not his concern to form himself in such a way that he fits into his environment, then the environment must be formed to fit him – in other words, he poetically composes his environment also. The ironist stands proudly inclosed within himself, and just as Adam had the animals pass by, he lets people pass before him and finds no fellowship for himself.[104]

Rather than being something to and for which consciousness is responsible in any determinate way, the world appears to the romantic consciousness merely as material that can be freely shaped in accordance with its vagary. The romantic's situation, which serves as the context for self-development, has validity only in relation to the whimsically pursued projects of the romantic. As the romantic develops itself arbitrarily, it also arbitrarily determines the meaning and value of its situation.

As Kierkegaard notes, this manner of arbitrary self-development produces a tension in the romantic view of life. In order for the romantic to live poetically through arbitrary self-determination, it must have some conception of the meaning of itself and its world, to the extent that all self-development requires some representation of who one is, who one strives to be, and how the world is constituted so as to facilitate this developmental process; for a reflective consciousness, self-development cannot happen in a thoughtless manner.

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[104] Ibid, 283.

As Kierkegaard's description of romanticism indicates, however, the romantic consciousness does not recognize anything as valid; the romantic is precisely that nihilistic shape of consciousness that denies that any course of action or lifestyle is valuable or meaningful. Accordingly, the romantic has the freedom to develop itself however it wills but has precisely denied the means through which it could develop itself. Kierkegaard poignantly expresses the precarious position of the romantic ironist as follows: "It is a potentiation, an exaltation as strong as a god who can lift the whole world and yet has nothing to lift."[105] The romantic has the capacity to live any life that it sees fit but has already denied the value of any lifestyle.

In order to overcome this tension between the need to attribute meaning to the world for the sake of self-development and the perception that the world is intrinsically meaningless, Kierkegaard claims that the romantic must freely and imaginatively create its own meaning for the world. As already noted, the romantic perceives itself as valid in its judgment regarding the invalidity of the world. This entails that the romantic conceives itself as its own source of truth and meaning. Since actuality has no binding authority over the romantic consciousness, the latter feels free to create whatever meaning in accordance with which it wishes to live; given the perceived meaninglessness of substantial life, the romantic feels justified in creating its own subjective meaning for life, which it must do in order to act at all, since action is impossible without at least the appearance of meaning.

Accordingly, romanticism – as the very name suggests – involves making existence novel, in the sense that the romantic freely creates a narrative for its own life that makes the latter appear meaningful. The living poetically of romantic irony involves the

[105] Ibid, 274.

imaginative construction of a meaning that is superimposed upon a world that is otherwise perceived as meaningless. In its novelization, the romantic does not passively accept an already established meaning from the substantial world; rather, the romantic maintains its alienation from substantiality by actively and freely creating its own meaning, with no regard for conventional understandings of life. Kierkegaard explains the nature of this poetic creation of meaning in the following:

> If we ask what poetry is, we may say in general that it is victory over the world; it is through a negation of the imperfect actuality that poetry opens up a higher actuality, expands and transfigures the imperfect into the perfect […].[106]

The romantic, liberated from conventional understandings of life, imaginatively reconstructs its world in what is taken to be a more perfect form. This poetic expansion and transfiguration of actuality, whereby the latter is novelized, is made possible by irony. Due to the twofold ironic insight into the freedom of consciousness from its situation and into ideality, the romantic is able to idealize its actual situation; the romantic ironist is able to imaginatively construct its own version of actuality – one in which its own life appears meaningful. Ironically, consciousness possesses an "infinite poetic freedom" with which it can romanticize its world in any way that it can imagine.[107]

Although it is not congruent with the terminology of Kierkegaard's dissertation, Hall provides a useful framework through which to interpret the poetic freedom that Kierkegaard attributes to the romantic consciousness. Hall frames the issue of meaning and novelization in romantic irony in terms of the death of God.[108] He describes the situation of the romantic in the following manner:

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[106] Ibid, 297.
[107] Ibid, 281.
[108] This expression is obviously not employed by Kierkegaard. However, so long as one understands this to be the death of the 'God' of substantial life, then Hall's conception is perfectly congruent with Kierkegaard's

> The romantic ironist finds herself thrust into a radically contingent but godless universe in which she has no place to stand. She lacks this place because she no longer is able to be called to it by God, having lost faith in him, and no longer able to return to the serene immediacy of a Greek (psychically qualified) "place" in the substantial order of the cosmos, having been irreversibly awakened […] to her own transcendence.[109]

The primitive experience of irony is the inability to recognize an unconditional foundation that grants validity to the way of the world, and, consequently, the way of the world becomes unbelievable for the ironist. In the wake of the death of the God of substantial life, the romantic individual sees only its own personality as having any validity. Consequently, as Hall says, the romantic deifies itself, in the sense that it takes itself to be the center of its world and the source of all truth and value:

> The romantic ironist then is a self without a world, but in need of one to be a self. She therefore sets out to poeticize her own private 'world' over which she can exercise absolute god-like power.[110]

The romantic consciousness poeticizes its world, operating under the understanding that it itself is the criterion of truth and justice within this world, which is the position that the romantic consciousness originally assumes when it passes judgment on the invalidity of substantial existence; in romanticism, consciousness becomes uncertain of the truth of substantial life, while concurrently become certain of itself as the judge of such truth. Romantically, it is the individual person who decides that a particular poetically constructed narrative adequately explains existence and that that person should live in

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account. Kierkegaard would agree that irony is the awareness of the death of the God of "Christendom" or conventional Christianity.

[109] Hall, *Word*, 127. Interestingly, this conflation of subjectivity with divinity is what Jacobi believes and fears is the ultimate consequence of the Fichtean conception of selfhood. Cf. Jacobi, Friedrich Heinrich, "Jacobi to Fichte", from *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill*, trans. George di Giovanni (Montreal & Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994), 524. In Kierkegaard's account, which recognizes the influence of Fichte upon Romanticism, the Romantics seem to realize Jacobi's fear concerning Fichte's philosophy.

[110] Hall, *Word*, 128.

accordance with the prescriptions entailed by that narrative. Given the absolute authority assumed by the romantic, Kierkegaard identifies romanticism with a "divine freedom that knows no bonds, no chains, but plays with abandon and unrestraint, gambols like a leviathan in the sea."[111] Whereas, in the life of immediacy, actuality has authority over the person, in that the former determines how the person is to live, in romanticism, consciousness assumes authority over itself, viewing itself as the sole author of its life. Having invalidated actuality, the romantic does not perceive itself as beholden to it, such that the romantic narrative for life need not correspond to actuality in any particular way.

From the romantic perspective, which posits the subject in absolute validity, actuality is reduced to the mere material from which a narrative can be freely constructed by the subject, and the romantic consciousness views actuality as having no truth except in relation to the constructions of its romanticism. Kierkegaard explains: "Everything established in the given actuality has nothing but poetic validity for the ironist, for he, after all, is living poetically."[112] The romantic consciousness perceives itself as free in such a way that it can ascribe whatever truth it wants to its actual situation. This truth is determined ultimately by the particular narrative that is under construction; something is true as it fits into the romantic's novelization of actuality. The standard of truth applied in such construction is: "whether it is poetically appropriate, whether it could do as a line in the mouth of a poetic character."[113] Something has value for the romantic, only if it contributes to the particular story that the romantic is creating of its own life. Accordingly, an essential feature of romanticism is substitution: in the poiesis of romanticism, an

[111] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 279.
[112] Ibid, 283.
[113] Ibid, 284.

imaginative construction is substituted for actuality. Kierkegaard states that "irony's special endeavor" is "to cancel all actuality and substitute for it an actuality that is no actuality."[114] As it replaces its lived-situation with a novelization of the same, romanticism posits the distinction between "the poetic actuality and the given actuality" or between "an imaginary world" and "the real world," and the romantic exploits this distinction by supplanting actuality with poetry.[115]

This project of novelization involved in the living poetically of romanticism is further connected by Kierkegaard to pleasure and enjoyment, although this connection is not developed in much detail, despite its significance for the account. Kierkegaard says that the romantic novelizes existence in whatever way it "pleases."[116] Moreover, the standard in accordance with which the romantic creates is "enjoyment, and to enjoy, after all, is to live poetically."[117] In his description of romanticism, Kierkegaard identifies romanticism with an affirmation of desire or an appeal to sensuousness, in that the romantic creates the meaning that it wants to be true, or that satisfies its desires, or that feels true. Despite its emphasis on personal freedom, then, romanticism involves what McCarthy calls a "devolution" to sensuousness.[118]

Here, there is an apparent inconsistency in Kierkegaard's description of romanticism, although this may be an inconsistency within the romantic way of life, rather than within the description of the same. The inconsistency is this: the romantic does not perceive the validity of anything but nonetheless validates both its own desires and its own

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[114] Ibid, 290.
[115] Ibid, 298, 300.
[116] Ibid, 277.
[117] Ibid, 295.
[118] McCarthy, 26.

decision to shape the world in accordance with those desires. To the extent that everything in the actual world lacks validity, it is unclear why the romantic affirms the validity of desire, so as to let desire determine the novelization of existence. Moreover, letting one's life be shaped by desire seems characteristic of immediate personality, which the ironist has precisely transcended. The tension in Kierkegaard's description of the romantic is as follows: the romantic affirms the irony of consciousness, such that it no longer recognizes any source of value or truth, but, at the same time, it affirms what it finds to be pleasant, as if pleasantness were a source of value and truth.

Unfortunately, Kierkegaard does not explicitly address this tension in his account of romanticism. Some indication of how this tension is resolved can, however, be found in some of his comments on Friedrich Schlegel, who is one of the three paradigmatic Romantics, whose work Kierkegaard analyzes in exposition of his theory and critique of romantic irony. In his commentary on Schlegel's novel, *Lucinde*, Kierkegaard says the following:

> The oddity about *Lucinde* and the whole trend associated with it is that, by starting from the freedom and the constitutive authority of the *I*, one does not arrive at a still higher spirituality but comes only to sensuousness and consequently to its opposite. In ethics, the relation to spirit is implied, but because the *I* wants a higher freedom, it negates the ethical spirit and thereby falls under the laws of the flesh and of drives.[119]

While ethicality is conventionally understood as a liberation of the agent from natural inclination, in that the ethical person lives life in accordance with the concepts of good and evil, rather than pleasure and pain, the romantic ironist considers the viewing of life under moral categories as unwarrantedly restricting its freedom, such that, in an effort to maintain its absolute freedom, the romantic ironist rejects the assumption of an ethical existence.

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[119] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 301.

What Kierkegaard suggests here is that the romantic resorts to sensuality in an attempt to maintain its liberation from the binding force of ethics; in the attempt to free itself from unjustified and vain convention, the romantic affirms its sensuousness. Here, Kierkegaard is presupposing a dichotomy between sensuality and ethicality; if the romantic has negated the ethics of substantial life, while concurrently withholding the affirmation of any higher ethicality (since any ethical attitude appears vain to the romantic), then, in this twofold negation of ethics, the romantic has recourse to nothing but desire in deliberating on how to live its life. Ultimately, then, the romantic novelizes its existence in accordance with its arbitrary desires, so as to maintain its subjective freedom from the restrictions of ethical life.

To the extent that the romantic creates a meaning for the world in accordance with enjoyment, the romantic is not bound to a single or even consistent meaning. That which is enjoyable is not only unique to each subject, but it is also as multiple for a single subject as that subject's desires. Given the diversity of what one may enjoy, there is "a multitude of destinies" through which the romantic can poetically live its life, and this has several consequences, according to Kierkegaard.[120]

First, what determines the particular meaning that the romantic endorses at any given moment is whatever passing mood characterizes the romantic's current emotional state. In any given moment, the romantic endorses whatever meaning feels valid, not because it actually is true, but because, by appealing to some disposition of the romantic, that meaning is momentarily believable. Kierkegaard thinks that this is illustrated well by Schlegel's *Lucinde*, wherein the erotic mood of the first and infatuous moment of love is

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[120] Ibid, 282.

emphasized to the point that the erotic is perceived to be the sole content of life, such that the pursuit of the erotic is taken to be that toward which one should exhaustively live.

Second, since there is a diversity of moods that one may experience, the novelization of romanticism has diverse and often inconsistent influences; the romantic's narrative for its existence is itself as variated as its moods, which makes its life dissolve into a series of disparate episodes. Moreover, since no singular meaning has more validity than others, to the extent that each is arbitrarily endorsed, the romantic can freely cycle through completely inconsistent and heterogeneous narratives for life: "But since for him all such destinies have only the validity of possibility, he can run through the whole scale almost as fast as children do."[121] The romantic shifts from one narrative to another based on its present mood; as the mood shifts, so too does the narrative. In one moment, the romantic may be content in the pursuit of the erotic, and, in the next, it may feel utmost devotion to a religious ideal. Kierkegaard characterizes this diversity well in the following description of the romantic person:

> At times he walks around with the proud air of a Roman patrician wrapped in a bordered toga, or he sits in the *sella curulis* with imposing Roman earnestness; at times he conceals himself in the humble costume of a penitent pilgrim; then again he sits with his legs crossed like a Turkish pasha in his harem; at time he flutters about as light and free as a bird in the role of an amorous zither player. This is what the ironist means when he says that one should live poetically; this is what he achieves by poetically composing himself.[122]

Since pleasure is what motivates the poetic self-composition of the romantic, the romantic not only has access to a multitude of ways of living, since what is pleasing to any given person is multiple, but is also committed only in a fleeting way to each lifestyle that it adopts, since pleasure itself, through either frustration, satisfaction, or supersession, is only

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[121] Ibid.
[122] Ibid, 282-283.

ever transient. There is nothing enduring in the life of the romantic; any truth that is posited one moment can be negated in the next:

> Now all existence becomes just a game for the poeticizing arbitrariness that rejects nothing, not even the most insignificant thing, but for which nothing endures, either, not even the most significant.[123]

The romantic's life, then, consists of an episodic series of radically distinct lifestyles, though which the romantic arbitrarily and non-committally cycles.

Third, insofar as there are innumerable understandings of the world that the romantic is free to adopt, it is difficult for the romantic to decide upon which narrative to follow. Correspondingly, Kierkegaard identifies in the romantic personality a tendency to let external forces to decide:

> For the ironist, everything is possible. Our God is in heaven and does whatever he desires; the ironist is on earth and does whatever he desires. But we cannot blame the ironist for finding it so difficult to become something, because when one has such a prodigious multitude of possibilities it is not easy to choose. For a change, the ironist finds it proper to let fate and chance decide.[124]

That the romantic develops itself in accordance with its supposed lot in life does not, however, undermine its negative freedom; it is still the romantic consciousness itself that decides to accept whatever it designates as fate or chance. This appeal to fatalism remains just one of several ways that the romantic arbitrarily creates itself and its world. The romantic lets the manifold of its passing moods determine how it variously develops itself, and, even when it identifies an external source for meaning, this source is nonetheless valid only due to the romantic's free endorsement of it.

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[123] Ibid, 302.
[124] Ibid, 282.

Insofar as the romantic engages in a free creation of meaning that is not necessarily tied to its actuality, Kierkegaard identifies romanticism with a "letting fantasy prevail."[125] The romantic consciousness substitutes actuality with a fantastic rendering of the same. This substitution is carried out with the intent to superimpose a meaning on an otherwise meaningless world, but this superimposed meaning exists only within the imagination of the romantic consciousness and is not grounded the lived-situation of the same. Such fantasizing, then, reinforces the alienation of consciousness from its world. The romantic loses itself in fantasies that precisely perpetuate its alienation. The romantic is fantastically distracted from its world; romanticism "lulls the deeper *I* into a somnambulate state."[126] In this state, consciousness does not find itself concerned with the world in any way: "When fantasy alone gains the upper hand in this way, it exhausts and anesthetizes the soul, robs it of all moral tension, makes life a dream."[127] This somnambulance is essential to romanticism; for the romantic, it is not the case that "living is something different from dreaming."[128]

Both the salient feature and ultimate consequence of romantic irony is the active perpetuation of the discontinuity between personality and its world. The romantic consciousness is a self-conscious and self-affirming irony; it knows and wills itself as ironic, as disconnected from its world. For the romantic, irony is a terminal position: consciousness achieves a recognized disparity between itself and its world, and, rather than seeking to reconcile itself to its world, consciousness acts so as to maintain itself in a state of discontinuity. It does this by letting fantasy prevail, such that the meaning that is

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[125] Ibid, 292.
[126] Ibid, 296.
[127] Ibid, 292.
[128] Ibid, 287.

fabricated by the romantic is always at odds with actuality, either because it does not correspond with the romantic's actual situation or because it does so only accidentally. This fantasy is determined not by the supposed truth of its situation, but by what the romantic finds enjoyable. Accordingly, this fabrication reinforces the disparity between consciousness and its world, since the latter has been substituted with a fantastic projection of the same. Kierkegaard concludes: "Therefore, the poetic is a kind of victory over actuality, but the infinitizing [of imagination] is more of an emigration from actuality than a continuance in it."[129] Existence loses its reality for the romantic:

> As the ironist poetically composes himself and his environment with the greatest possible poetic license, as he lives in this totally hypothetical and subjunctive way, his life loses all continuity.[130]

Accordingly, romantic irony may be described, following Hall, as a kind of "worldlessness."[131] The romantic consciousness finds itself alienated from a world that lacks justification for the meaning that it pretends and presumes, and the arbitrary acting and the flight into imaginative constructions that characterize romanticism only perpetuate this alienation. This self-perpetuated disparity between the self and its world is the essence of romantic irony.

As Kierkegaard emphasizes, this discontinuity between person and world is primarily ethical, insofar as the crisis of irony ultimately concerns action. The romantic ironist, in perpetuating the negation of its situation, maintains the invalidity of the normative structures of this situation; the romantic suspends "what is constitutive in actuality, that which orders and supports it: that is, morality and ethics."[132] The romantic

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[129] Ibid, 297.
[130] Ibid, 284.
[131] Hall, *Word*, 203.
[132] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 283.

rejects the truth and normativity of the world, but provides nothing substantial in its place. Kierkegaard advances this point further:

> It cannot really be said that the ironist places himself outside and above morality and ethics, but he lives far too abstractly, far too metaphysically and esthetically to reach the concretion of the moral and the ethical.[133]

Consciousness ironically embraces the disparity between itself and the world, and it romantically intensifies this disparity through the substitution of actuality with a novelization of the same, such that consciousness is doubly removed from its situation and is no longer susceptible to any demands that actuality might place upon it. Living out its life in fantasy, the romantic existence is too abstract for the demands of ethics and morality. Removed from the concerns of ethics, the romantic only concerns itself with its novel conception of life; Kierkegaard explains the romantic in the following:

> For him, life is a drama, and what absorbs him is the ingenious complication of this drama. He himself is a spectator, even when he himself is the one acting. Thus he infinitizes his *I*, volatilizes it metaphysically and esthetically, and while his *I* sometimes contracts as egotistically and narrowly as possible, at other times it flaps about so loosely and disintegratedly that the whole world can be encompassed by it.[134]

Life for the romantic loses unity, because the only thing holding such a life together is a poetically fabricated narrative of the same, over which the romantic has complete control and the details of which are determined by nothing beyond the inconsistency, vagary, and insouciance of romanticism.

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[133] Ibid.
[134] Ibid, 283-284.

2.5 The Critique of Romanticism and the Issue of Boredom

It is precisely due to its discontinuity that Kierkegaard critiques the romantic form of living poetically. Kierkegaard's critique is that romanticism presupposes an inadequate conception of self and world, which problematically results in the indefinite alienation of consciousness.[135] Kierkegaard says that, in its self-perpetuated alienation, romanticism lacks a proper "reconciliation" with actuality, and it lacks this due to a misunderstanding of selfhood and the situatedness of the same. Kierkegaard understands reconciliation in the following way: consciousness, having recognized itself in its negative freedom, achieves the further recognition that, despite such negativity, the self is nonetheless inseparably bound to its particular situation and is thereby responsible to that situation. This recognition is specifically reconciliatory to the extent that it views the self in continuity with its situation. In this recognition, there is a twofold movement. There is the first movement of irony, whereby consciousness finds itself estranged from its situation. It is in this movement that consciousness recognizes itself as liberated from the apparent necessity that is operative within its substantial life and originally achieves subjectivity. There is a second movement, however, wherewith consciousness recognizes both that, despite its freedom, it is bound to a particular situation and that it has no control over this bond. Borrowing Hall's earlier expressions, consciousness is reconciled to its situation through a twofold movement of sundering and bonding. This twofold movement is reconciliatory, to the extent that consciousness moves out of the world and back into the

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[135] For an interesting defense of Romanticism against the Hegelian and Kierkegaardian critique, consider Gary Handwerk's *Irony and Ethics in Narrative: From Schlegel to Lacan*.

same world.[136] Insofar as romanticism only maintains the alienation of consciousness from its world through its fantasizing, it does not achieve this kind of reconciliation.

In Kierkegaard's account, the limitation of romanticism is precisely that this twofold movement is only inadequately carried out. Romanticism attempts to create meaning for its life, but it fails to establish continuity between its self and its actuality through this meaning, insofar as the romantic substitutes actuality with a poeticized version of the same. As a consequence of its novelization, the romantic self can be said to achieve reconciliation with its fabricated world, in the sense that the romantic consciousness can find itself meaningfully oriented within its poetically constructed representation of the world, but this artificial reconciliation only intensifies the disparity between the self and its actual world. In his theory of irony, there are two ways in which Kierkegaard speaks of reconciliation. First, there is a real reconciliation, wherewith the self recognizes itself as necessarily bound to its actual situation, and, second, there is a merely ideal reconciliation, wherewith the self recognizes itself only as belonging to a poetically imagined version of its actual situation. Accordingly, Kierkegaard notes:

> To that extent, poetry is a kind of reconciliation, but it is not the true reconciliation, for it does not reconcile me with the actuality in which I am living; no transubstantiation of the given actuality takes place by virtue of this reconciliation, but it reconciles me with the given actuality by giving me another, a higher and more perfect actuality. The greater the contrast, the less perfect the actual reconciliation, so that when all is said and done there is often no reconciliation but rather an enmity.[137]

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[136] This language of a 'dual movement' of 'moving out of the world' and 'moving into the world' appears frequently in Kierkegaard's aesthetic works, most thematically in *Either/Or: Part II*, *Fear and Trembling*, and *Repetition*. Such terminology is used variously to express both ethical and religious processes of self-development.

[137] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 297.

In an attempt to overcome the apparent vanity of its world, the romantic ironist seeks to imbue its world with meaning by substituting its lived-situation with an imaginatively constructed one – a poetically composed understanding of actuality with no principle of construction beyond personal whim. Within this construction, the romantic self may feel at home and live according to the arbitrarily established dictates and norms of its world. For Kierkegaard, however, the standard of truth for reconciliation concerns the status of the situation to which one finds oneself connected; true reconciliation occurs when one holds oneself accountable in some way to one's lived-situation, for only thereby does one accept one's necessary connection to that situation, while only an illusory reconciliation is achieved in connection with an imagined-situation. The romantic can give life the appearance of meaning through imaginary constructions, but this meaning is only apparent; the romantic consciousness can be reconciled with an imagined actuality, but it is thereby not reconciled with the situation in which it actually lives. Søltoft explains this well in the following:

> This […] criticism of romantic irony is thus actually a criticism of its acosmism and escapism from actuality. Romantic irony is not capable of bringing about a reconciliation between the subject who has differentiated himself from himself and his circumstances and the subject who despite this differentiation would make actual the connection between himself and his circumstance.[138]

To the extent that the imaginary construction is the lens through which the romantic's lived-situation is exhaustively viewed, the novelization of romanticism not only presupposes but actively perpetuates the ironic discontinuity between self and world. The romantic perceives the vanity of the world, but the romantic's vagariously created meaning only "reinforces vanity in its vanity and makes what is lunatic even more lunatic."[139] The

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[138] Søltoft, 283.
[139] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 257.

issue is that the romantics do not attempt to make sense of their lived-situation, focusing instead only on the "unheard-of and highly improbable things that take place in their poet-world."[140] Hence, romanticism is critiqued for its characteristic acosmism (i.e., romanticism's perpetuation of the disparity between self and world) and escapism (i.e., romanticism's letting fantasy prevail over actuality).

Even though Kierkegaard critiques romantic irony for its discontinuity and its tendency to arbitrarily adopt particular views of life based on nothing more than enjoyment, Kierkegaard does identify a kind of unity to the romantic way of life, and it is with this identification that Kierkegaard introduces the concept of boredom into his analysis of irony. Viewing itself as unbeholden to any conventional view of life and as free to arbitrarily adopt any lifestyle that it can imagine, the romantic ironist lives a disjointed life: "At times he has a clear grasp of everything, at times he is seeking; at times he is a dogmatician, at times a doubter, at times Jacob Böhme, at times the Greeks, etc. […]."[141] Despite this variety and inconsistency, Kierkegaard claims that there is still a unity in the romantic life. He explains:

> But since there always must be a bond that ties these contrasts together, a unity in which the enormous dissonances of these moods resolve themselves, upon closer inspection one will reveal this unity in the ironist. Boredom is the only continuity the ironist has. Boredom, this eternity devoid of content, this salvation devoid of joy, this superficial profundity, this hungry glut. But boredom is precisely the negative unity admitted into a personal consciousness, wherein the opposites vanish.[142]

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[140] Ibid, 303. In order to illustrate this point, Kierkegaard cites various examples from Tieck's plays: "Animals talk like human beings, human beings talk like asses, chairs and tables become conscious of their meaning in existence, human beings find existence meaningless. Nothing becomes everything, and everything becomes nothing; everything is possible, even the impossible; everything is probable, even the improbable" (ibid).
[141] Ibid, 285.
[142] Ibid.

Implicitly in this account, Kierkegaard posits a connection between boredom and the enjoyment that shapes the romantic's poetic self-composition. As previously noted, what motivates the romantic ironist to adopt a particular view of its life is enjoyment; the romantic adopts that view of life that it finds pleasing in some way. On this model, what would explain a shift from one view of life to another is that a given view is no longer pleasing or that one's passion for that view has subsided, and it is in this sense that Kierkegaard introduces boredom as a kind of vital unity. Boredom, in this context, is precisely the experience of the disinterest in a particular way of life that emerges when the pleasure and passion for that particular way of life subside. When these subside, however, the romantic life loses its content and joy, and the romantic becomes bored with its existence. In such a state, the romantic is compelled to overcome its boredom by fantasizing its life anew. In one sense, the life of the romantic lacks unity; by letting whatever fantasy that it finds to be momentarily pleasing prevail, the romantic lets its life devolve into a series of disjointed narratives and projects of poetic self-composition without any consistent and overarching view of life or ultimate goal of the same. In another sense, however, the unifying feature of this life is boredom, in the sense that what motivates the romantic to adopt a life-view and to shift from one life-view to another is the experience of life as stagnant, uninteresting, and in need of reinvigoration through fantasy; boredom is what motivates the romantic to compose its life poetically. To the extent that the experience of boredom recurs whenever a particular view of life becomes unengaging and is that which motivates the romantic ironist to construct a new view of its life, the avoidance of boredom is the only consistent and unifying element in the romantic life.

Kierkegaard thinks that no life can be wholly without unity, but there are nonetheless different kinds of vital unity. Regarding these kinds, Kierkegaard posits a distinction between positive and negative unities for life, suggesting that romanticism lacks the former and possesses the latter. The romantic life is negatively unified, in the sense that its unity is determined by a repeated negation – namely, the negation of boredom – rather than by the pursuit of a lifestyle that has been posited as valuable; the romantic view of life is characterized by an avoidance of boredom, such that the self-development of the romantic ironist is motivated by negation. In this sense, boredom is the negative unity of the romantic life. In contrast, a positively unified life – which is supposed to be represented in the second form of irony – is one in which one views one's life as oriented around some goal that one takes to be worthwhile by virtue of itself and not merely as a means to avoid boredom.

In this context, Kierkegaard connects boredom essentially with the dissolution of meaning and the alienation characteristic of irony. What the romantic ironist seeks from its poetically composed narrative of life is the appearance of a meaning in accordance with which it can live. The experience of boredom shatters this appearance and evinces the meaninglessness of life that the romantic seeks to avoid in its imaginative constructions. William McDonald explains:

> Boredom arises when consciousness has no serious concern for mapping representations truthfully onto actuality. Boredom, then, presupposes, reflection. It is a mood that infects the space of consciousness between the ideal and the actual.[143]

[143] William McDonald, "Kierkegaard's Demonic Boredom," from *Essays on Modernity and Boredom*, ed. Barbara Dalle Pezze and Carlo Salzani (New York: Rodopi, 2009), 67-68.

Boredom is the mood that corresponds to the ironic shape of personality and expresses the worldlessness characteristic thereof. The experience of boredom evinces the ironist's loss of being meaningfully embedded and oriented within its lived-situation. With irony, personality surpasses the life of immediacy and achieves the recognition of itself in its freedom and possibility, but, with this achievement, personality finds itself as having lost all meaningful connection with its actual world, and this loss becomes manifest as boredom. The romantic ironist finds itself liberated from the institutionalized but unfounded understandings of the meaning and purpose of life that had dominated its pre-ironic existence, but, through the infinite, absolute negativity of its irony, the romantic has deprived itself of any meaningful relation to its lived-situation, such that its life alternates between moments of boredom, wherein the romantic is totally disinterested in its existence, experiencing the latter as devoid of content and without joy, and moments of fantasy, wherein the romantic loses itself in imaginings wherethrough life briefly appears meaningful. McCarthy characterizes the bored state of the romantic ironist in the following way:

> He is free from the deception of the present actuality, but he is left empty. And albeit he has reached a higher stage of consciousness, it provides him no support to bear the terrible realization of the absence of content and meaning in his existence.[144]

The vanity of existence and of all activity is experienced by the ironist as boredom. The romantic is bored because it finds itself as essentially alienated from its world, as being free from all bonds and as having possibilities to enact without having any reason to enact any of them. This is the sense in which, as previously noted, Kierkegaard describes the

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[144] McCarthy, 19.

romantic as being "as strong as a god who can lift the whole world and yet has nothing to lift."[145] As McDonald says:

> [Romantic irony] does not negate the actual in a way that clears a space for a new positivity, or that serves truth and reason. Instead, Romantic irony negates actuality in a way that leaves room only for bored attunement to its own vacuity. Romantic irony, reduced to boredom, has only negative motivating power through repulsion.[146]

Boredom expresses the contentlessness of the ironic life, as it is perceived as being devoid of any meaning, and this experience of emptiness motivates the romantic's perpetual project of escapism, wherewith it supplements its own situation with fantasy.

It is important to note that, given the way that Kierkegaard situates his account of boredom within his larger account of subjectivity and irony, Kierkegaard is not describing the ordinary experience of boredom. While Kierkegaard himself does not explicitly present any such distinction, most scholars who analyze the concept of boredom distinguish a multitude of varied expressions and experiences of the same.[147] Often, boredom is conceptually divided into two general categories: ordinary boredom (sometimes referred to as "situational" or "circumstantial" boredom) and existential boredom (sometimes referred to as "profound" boredom or "*ennui*").[148] The former type is ordinary, in that it is a common and frequent experience, the occurrence of which is determined by a particular situation or set of circumstances. Brian O'Connor explains that such boredom occurs in

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[145] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 274.

[146] McDonald, "Demonic," 72.

[147] Lars Svendsen provides a concise summary of various typologies of boredom (Lars Svendsen, *A Philosophy of Boredom*, trans. John Irons (London: Reaktion Books, 2005), 41-45). For an analysis of various ordinary experiences of boredom, consider Peter Toohey's *Boredom: A Lively History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011). For an analysis of existential boredom with emphasis on the historical development of articulations of the phenomenon, consider Elizabeth Goodstein's *Experience without Qualities: Boredom and Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

[148] Svendsen, 41-42; Brian O'Connor, *Idleness: A Philosophical Essay* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 105.

situations in which "we are deprived of the opportunity to do what would interest us and are forced at the very same time to do something that does not satisfy us at all."[149] In certain circumstances, one finds oneself confined for some duration of time to a situation in which one is prevented from interesting activity, which causes both time to drag and tedium to become manifest. In such cases, the cause of boredom is readily identifiable, and the bored individual can alleviate this boredom by simply finding more interesting circumstances; such boredom is readily and easily cured through a change in circumstance. This ordinary experience contrasts with existential boredom, which, as O'Connor says, cannot be "explained in terms of contingent situations or circumstances" but is determined by one's perception of existence itself.[150] This type of boredom is not conditioned by particular circumstances and the availability of interesting activity in relation to the same, but rather it is "existential" in the sense that it is conditioned by the human condition itself. O'Connor explains the experience of this type of boredom in the following:

> At certain times, we may have our judgement affected by a mood that leads us to believe that life has nothing of interest to offer us. At the same time, we do not really know what would interest us. We feel no motivation or capacity to find pleasing activities, none of which are, in any case, conceivable from within the perspective we fall into during this type of boredom.[151]

Existential boredom relates not to a particular activity, situation, or way of life, but instead concerns life as such: "the very value of life itself can seem doubtful when we are bored in this way."[152] Elizabeth Goodstein connects existential boredom with the modern problem concerning the meaning of life: "Boredom (*ennui*, *Langeweile*) names a crisis of meaning lived by the modern subject whose most fundamental relation to the world has become

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[149] O'Connor, 106.
[150] Ibid, 107.
[151] Ibid.
[152] Ibid.

problematic."[153] She adds: "Boredom […] should be seen not only as a symptom of the breakdown of older ways of being in the world but also as a locus of new possibilities."[154]

As O'Connor notes, both general types of boredom are similar in their "shared feeling of oppression connected with a frustrated wish to act."[155] However, whereas ordinary boredom can be alleviated through a simple change in circumstances, existential boredom involves a weariness of all actual and possible circumstances, such that a change in circumstance does not affect the boredom. When one is existentially bored, one does not perceive any activities, situations, and ways of life as having any value, appeal, or justification. The existentially bored individual cannot flee this boredom, since all circumstances appear equally worthless, and feels resigned to "a kind of depressing lethargy."[156] As Svendsen adds, these two types of boredom "have different symbolic modes of expression."[157] He explains that while ordinary boredom "is expressed via yawning, wriggling in one's chair, stretching out one's arms and legs, etc., profound existential boredom is more or less devoid of expression."[158] Hence, Goodstein aptly describes existential boredom precisely as "an experience without qualities."[159]

While Kierkegaard himself does not explicate his own theory of boredom through any typology of the various experiences thereof, his account nonetheless focuses on an existential type of boredom. The boredom that permeates the life of the romantic ironist and that provides negative unity thereto is by no means an ordinary phenomenon that one

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[153] Goodstein, 414.
[154] Ibid.
[155] O'Connor, 108.
[156] Ibid.
[157] Svendsen, 42.
[158] Ibid; passage amended to correct a typographical error.
[159] Ibid.

experiences in response to a particular situation or set of circumstances, wherein one is temporarily prevented from interesting activity. Rather, the kind of boredom described by Kierkegaard in this account is grounded in the more fundamental structure of the romantic self. The romantic ironist experiences boredom not in response to circumstances, but as expressive of its alienation from its lived-situation as such. Boredom is a phenomenon wherewith the person feels itself disconnected from its situation, such that life itself appears vain and empty. Additionally, unlike the ordinary type of boredom, the boredom of romanticism is not the kind that pre-ironic personality could experience, to the extent that the former is conditioned by the assumption of an ironic stance toward existence. As Svendsen notes: "Boredom presupposes an element of self-reflection, or contemplation regarding one's own placement in the world […]."[160] This boredom is not accidental but grounded in the romantic view of life itself and expressive of the alienation thereof. The mood of boredom shapes how the romantic basically encounters its world; the world appears to the romantic as devoid of meaning, such that no particular course of action arouses interest.

The discontinuous life of the romantic that is permeated by boredom is, according to Kierkegaard, founded upon an inadequate conception of the self and of the freedom and possibility essential to the same. More specifically, Kierkegaard – following Hegel's critique of the Romantics – claims that the inadequate self-conception of the romantic ironist is based on a confused understanding of the meaning of selfhood in Fichte's philosophy, whereby the transcendental and empirical selves are conflated. Kierkegaard explains:

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[160] Svendsen, 57.

> This Fichtean principle that subjectivity, the *I*, has constitutive validity, is the sole omnipotence, was grasped by Schlegel and Tieck, and on that basis they operated in the world. In this there was a twofold difficulty. In the first place, the empirical and finite *I* was confused with the eternal *I*; in the second place, metaphysical actuality was confused with historical actuality.[161]

Fichte's concept of a transcendental imagination of an absolute subject, whose imagery is supposed to constitute the various forms of experience, is misunderstood by the Romantics to entail that the empirical imagination of a finite subject is responsible for constituting the actual world. Kierkegaard's basic critical point is that there is a confused conception of selfhood underlying the romantic form of irony; the romantic ascribes to itself a conception of freedom that it does not actually possess, and this conception of freedom both obscures the sense in which consciousness is bound to its lived-situation and grounds the boredom that permeates the romantic life. In order to correct this inadequate self-conception and overcome boredom, Kierkegaard suggests that the romantic needs to master its irony.

2.6 The Second Form of Living Poetically – Mastered Irony

According to Kierkegaard, the romantic conception of the self involves a threefold inadequacy: the romantic self-conception fails to properly understand what it means to be a self, what it means for the self to be situated in its world, and what it means for a self to be free. Kierkegaard thinks that romanticism expresses an inadequate understanding of self, world, and freedom, and it is in these terms that he criticizes romanticism. This

[161] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 275. In his dissertation, Kierkegaard's critique of Romanticism focuses on Friedrich Schlegel, Ludwig Tieck, and K.W.F. Solger. Solger is notably exempted from the preceding quote, because Kierkegaard ultimately argues that, while otherwise misguided, Solger presents a less radical form of irony – one that is primarily contemplative (that is, its implications are primarily of scientific importance, rather than practical importance) and avoids any deification of the self, since it subjects subjectivity to the same scrutiny as actuality, thereby perceiving the vanity of both. Cf. ibid, 283, 309, 311 (fn). Accordingly, Solger "does not come into collision with actuality in the sense that the other ironists do, since his irony did not in any way take the shape of opposition to actuality" (ibid, 309).

inadequate understanding is specifically the result of a misconception of irony: romanticism has "overlooked the truth of irony."[162] Accordingly, the achievement of a proper conception of self, world, and freedom requires that consciousness overcome its romanticism through a re-evaluation of its irony.[163]

So long as the romantic misconception of the self is maintained, irony is not "controlled," as Kierkegaard says, but is treated inappropriately as an end-in-itself, such that the discontinuity between self and world is assumed as irreconcilable; to the extent that irony is uncontrolled, consciousness mistakenly believes that romanticism is a terminal

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[162] Ibid, 265.

[163] Some scholars present Kierkegaard's critique of romanticism differently. Cross and Walsh, for example, claim that Kierkegaard's critique is that romanticism involves an intrinsic inconsistency and is, thereby, a self-defeating position (Cross, 139; Walsh, 211). The inconsistency is supposed to lie in this: it is unclear why the ironist should take itself as the criterion of truth, rather than assume an ironic stance toward its own ironic existence. The romantic consciousness, on the one hand, affirms the invalidity of everything, while, on the other hand, it affirms the validity of the experience in which it first became aware of the invalidity of everything. The inconsistency is that the ironic self is ironic toward everything except irony, despite having no reason not to view itself and its irony *sub specie ironiae*. This argument, however, is not one that is presented by Kierkegaard in his dissertation. In his opening analysis of irony, which seeks to distinguish irony from similar activities of consciousness, Kierkegaard does distinguish irony from religious devotion by noting that, unlike irony, the religiously devout person thinks that both the substantial world and its self are vain: "if the devout mind finds everything to be vanity, it makes no exception of its own person, makes no commotion about it; on the contrary, it also must be set aside so that the divine will not be thrust back by its opposition but will pour itself into the mind opened by devotion" (Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 258). While religious devotion is self-critical, at no point does Kierkegaard explicitly critique irony for not being so. Instead, Kierkegaard merely presents religious devotion as one of several activities of consciousness that are similar to but ultimately distinct from irony. Elsewhere in his dissertation, in a discussion regarding how the romantic views its own action, Kierkegaard also does note that, due to its negativity, irony cannot affirm any value, for that would be an inconsistency for the ironist. However, rather than use this point to critique romantic irony, Kierkegaard only uses it to explain that, while the ironic person does posit values, it does so without earnestness – this, he thinks, resolves the inconsistency (cf. ibid, 269-270). While the critique of romanticism that Cross and Walsh attribute to Kierkegaard does not appear in his dissertation, a similar argument does, however, appear in *Either/Or: Part II*, where Kierkegaard uses it to critique the mystical life-view. In that context, Kierkegaard presents the mystic as similar to the ironist; in pursuit the divine, the mystic is one who has seen through the vanity of everything and denies that the material world has any value. Critically, Kierkegaard says of such mysticism: "There is always an inconsistency in this. If on the whole the mystic does not esteem actuality, it is not clear why he does not regard with the same mistrust that moment in actuality when he was stirred by something higher" (Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 247). Given similarities in their expressions, it seems that the critique of romanticism that Cross and Walsh attribute to Kierkegaard in his dissertation is actually informed by Kierkegaard's critique in *Either/Or: Part II* of the mystical life-view and that Cross and Walsh are reading this argument against mysticism into *The Concept of Irony*. In any case, however, Kierkegaard does not critique romanticism as being inconsistent regarding the validity of irony; instead, his explicit critique is that romanticism involves an inadequate conception of agency.

position – that it is the highest achievement of consciousness. In order to overcome this view, Kierkegaard recommends another way of living poetically: to let oneself be composed poetically, rather than to compose oneself poetically.[164] This requires what Kierkegaard calls the "mastery of irony." Only when irony is mastered is authentic personality possible; the proper conception of personality is expressed by the consciousness that has overcome the pure negativity of irony. In mastered irony, the alienation of consciousness is overcome, such that the person identifies itself in continuity with its world, albeit not in the unreflective and pre-positional manner of the pre-ironic acceptance of the truth of substantial life. Mastered irony develops out of romantic irony; the master of irony is further along in what Kierkegaard calls the "dialectic of life" than the romantic.[165] Romanticism, then, is presented by Kierkegaard as in an intermediate stage between pre-reflective personality and authentic personality. Kierkegaard's point about the mastery of irony advancing one along the dialectic of life is not that such advancement is necessary. It is not necessary that one transcend the romantic view of life, nor for that matter is it necessary that consciousness become romantic or even ironic at all; in Kierkegaard's theory of life, one could occupy any stage of consciousness for an entire lifetime. Kierkegaard presents these forms of consciousness as stages through which consciousness must pass, if it is to achieve an adequate self-conception, but there is nothing that necessitates this achievement. Regarding the place of romanticism within

[164] The grammatical voice of this distinction between composing oneself poetically and being composed poetically is misleading. As Kierkegaard presents this distinction, it would be oversimplified to say that one form of living poetically is passive, while the other is active. If the forms were to be described in terms of activity and passivity, the following would more accurately represent Kierkegaard's understanding: romantic irony is active, since it recognizes its radical freedom for self-creation, while mastered irony is both active and passive, since it recognizes that its radical freedom must be limited by the givenness of its situation.
[165] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 327.

Kierkegaard's dialectic of life, Goodstein explains that "the path of freedom" requires the "embrace of purposelessness as the means of subjective equilibrium."[166] The vanity of existence must be experienced as a condition for authentic selfhood, but this requires that one "rehabilitate the romantic project of rendering human life meaningful by stabilizing the anarchy of subjective desire."[167] This stabilization occurs only when the romanticism of consciousness is transcended, and this transcendence is achieved through a threefold reevaluation of the function of irony, the significance of actuality, and the nature of freedom, by which irony becomes mastered.

For Kierkegaard, irony becomes mastered when it is viewed not as in end-in-itself but as an instrument. Distinguishing the romantic and the instrumental views of irony, Kierkegaard expresses the latter in the following way: "Irony as the negative is the way; it is not the truth but the way."[168] The master of irony conceives of irony not as a terminal position to be maintained but instrumentally as the means to an end; irony is not viewed by the master as a way of living but as that through which one discovers how to live. Regarding this instrumentality, Kierkegaard explains: "Irony as a controlled element manifests itself in its truth precisely by teaching how to actualize actuality, by placing the appropriate emphasis on actuality."[169] Viewed as an instrument, irony exposes the presumptuousness of substantial life, and it does this by bringing to consciousness the awareness of what is possible for personality. The ironic recognition both of one's freedom from the apparent necessity of substantial life and of one's capacity to freely enact one's own possibilities is what teaches consciousness the "appropriate emphasis on actuality."

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[166] Goodstein, 160.
[167] Ibid.
[168] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 327.
[169] Ibid, 328.

In this way, irony is a "baptism of purification that rescues the soul from having its life in finitude even though it is living energetically and robustly in it."[170] In its first and uncontrolled moment, irony is pure negativity; it is an infinitizing movement, wherewith consciousness distinguishes itself from its actual situation by reflecting on its possibility and its freedom to enact these possibilities. If left uncontrolled, ironic consciousness would maintain itself in its infinity and would view itself as perpetually estranged from actuality. Such is the case of romanticism. If, however, irony is viewed as an instrument, its infinitizing becomes controlled, and this allows for the overcoming of alienation. Kierkegaard explains the consequence of mastering irony in the following:

> As soon as irony is controlled, it makes a movement opposite to that in which uncontrolled irony declares its life. Irony limits, finitizes, and circumscribes and thereby yields truth, actuality, content; it disciplines and punishes and thereby yields balance and consistency.[171]

Controlled irony finitizes consciousness by disclosing the possibilities that belong to a definite person, not the possibilities that one could imagine irrespective of one's concrete identity; when irony is controlled, such that consciousness does not lose itself in the infinity of possibility, it can be used as a tool to bring to consciousness the determinate possibilities that specifically belong to a given person's actual situation. As a controlled element, irony reveals the various ways that a person can actually live its life. It is in this sense that irony teaches the person how "to actualize actuality." The complete dialectic of irony has two movements: one of infinitude, and one of finitude. In romanticism, the first movement is made; in the mastery of irony, the second is made. Romanticism involves the negation of the actual world, while the mastery of irony involves the negation of this negation. In the

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[170] Ibid, 326.
[171] Ibid.

complete movement of irony, the "negative has, namely, a double function – it infinitizes the finite and it finitizes the infinite."[172]

The purpose of irony, then, is understood differently by the romantic and by the master of irony. The latter recognizes irony as a tool for self-development – a tool that shows what possibilities belong to one's lived-situation and can, thereby, be actualized. For the romantic, in contrast, irony has no purpose other than the aggrandizement of the self in its absolute freedom. The romantic only views irony in the following way:

> Irony, however, has no purpose; its purpose is immanent in itself and is a metaphysical purpose. The purpose is nothing other than the irony itself. […] [The ironist's] actual purpose still is to feel free, but this he is precisely by means of irony – consequently irony has no other purpose but is self-motivated.[173]

The master uses irony to dispel the illusory meaning that substantial life presumes so that a higher meaning for existence may be found. The romantic, however, ironically dispels substantial life not for the sake of personal development, but merely to celebrate its own liberation from the substantial world. The romantic thinks that, "when the understanding has reached its apex, its order should give way to fantasy, which now alone is to prevail and not be an interlude in the task of life."[174] The romantic uses the negativity of irony for the sake of negativity; the master uses the negativity of irony for the sake of a higher positivity, which is achieved through the negation of irony.

Kierkegaard illustrates the way in which the romantic fails to appreciate the instrumentality of irony in his critical analysis of Schlegel's *Lucinde*, which infamously challenges conventional understandings of marriage, which Kierkegaard takes to be an essential component of substantial life. According to Kierkegaard, in the novel's

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[172] Ibid, 310.
[173] Ibid, 256.
[174] Ibid, 292.

presentation of amorous relationships, irony could function as a tool by inspiring a reevaluation and reconstitution of the convention of marriage. In fact, that *Lucinde* presents marriage in a way that calls for the revision of that institution is precisely the value that Kierkegaard attributes to the novel. However, despite challenging this particular facet of substantial life, Kierkegaard thinks that Schlegel fails to provide an alternative conception of the marital relation that could be viably instantiated in the world, and, with this failure, his use of irony as a tool for ethical development is inadequate. Regarding Schlegel's use of irony, Kierkegaard explains:

> Lest an injustice be done to Schlegel, one must bear in mind the many degradations that have crept into a multitude of life's relationships and have been especially indefatigable in making love as tame, as housebroken, as sluggish, as dull, as useful and usable as any other domestic animal – in short, as unerotic as possible. To that extent, we would be very obligated to Schlegel if he should succeed in finding a way out, but unfortunately the climate he discovered, the only climate in which love can really thrive, is not a more southern climate compared with ours in the north but is an ideal climate nowhere to be found.[175]

Schlegel uses irony as a tool to present the paltriness into which the institution of marriage has devolved, and he attempts to overcome this paltriness by emphasizing the erotic aspects of interpersonal relationships. Kierkegaard thinks that this attempt fails, however, because the alternative proposed by Schlegel is too fantastic to be viably realized, in which case he has not used irony to actualize actuality – his solution is too abstracted from the lived-situation of persons to be realized. Kierkegaard's reasoning here is that Schlegel presents a conception of interpersonal relationships that fails to account for the everyday situation of lovers, wherein one cannot simply dedicate one's life solely to the infatuous moment of love but must instead balance one's amorous commitments with other existential concerns. Schlegel myopically presents a fantasy wherein the passion of love itself – simply and

[175] Ibid, 286.

purely – ought to subvert all concerns that arise in one's life and that one should let oneself be swept up in erotic passion and live a wholly erotic existence. Regarding this overly romantic depiction of love, Kierkegaard says:

> Those days are over and gone – those day when human beings lived so happily without sorrows and cares, so innocently, when everything was so human, when the gods themselves set the tone and sometimes laid down their heavenly dignity in order fraudulently to gain the love of a mortal woman, when someone who softly and secretly stole away to a tryst could fear or be flattered to see a god among his rivals – the times when the heavens high and beautiful arched overhead as a friendly witness to happy love or quiet and grave hid it in the solemn peacefulness of night, when everything lived for love alone and for the happy lovers everything in turn was but a myth about love.[176]

The issue is that Schlegel wants to imbue passion with a validity that is not adequate to the lived-situation of persons. He is trying to "reconstruct a vanished age," but actuality lacks the material to do so.[177] Schlegel isolates the first moment of the amorous relation, wherein the lovers are wholly absorbed in their passion for one another, and makes that the whole content of life, such that the pursuit and maintenance of this passion is supposed to supersede all other concerns. Schlegel wants to rehabilitate marriage but presents an alternative that is too indefinite and fantastic to be realized. His conception of amorous relationships involves "a love without any real content" and, moreover, this love "can acquire no content, in the deeper sense can have no history."[178] Schlegel's ironic exposition of the vanity of marriage does not teach one to actualize actuality, "since this love does not belong in the real world at all but in an imaginary world where the lovers themselves are lords of the storms and hurricanes."[179] Properly used as a tool, irony does

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[176] Ibid, 288.
[177] Ibid, 289.
[178] Ibid, 300.
[179] Ibid.

not merely expose the vanity of substantial life but also founds projects that can viably reconstitute the substantial world in a reflective and deliberate manner.

As this illustration shows, irony can be considered either as a danger, when left uncontrolled, or as a saving power, when mastered through the proper conception of it as an instrument: "Even though one must warn against irony as against a seducer, so must one also commend it as a guide."[180] That irony requires mastery does not entail that irony is some evil to be avoided or that irony is unimportant for living. Instead, Kierkegaard notes:

> To be controlled in this way, to be halted in the wild infinity into which it rushes ravenously, by no means indicates that irony should now lose its meaning or be totally discarded. On the contrary, when the individual is properly situated – and this he is through the curtailment of irony – only then does irony has its proper meaning, its true validity.[181]

The value of irony is that it breaks consciousness out of the unreflective acceptance of its situation and grants consciousness the capacity to freely and deliberately determine its self and its world. Accordingly, irony is an important stage of consciousness in the development of a reflective and free personality, since irony marks the transition from the pre-reflective existing characteristic of substantial life to the deliberate self-determination of personality; for this development of one's personality, it is "necessary to dispel the bestial miasma in which one breathed up to this point," and this is precisely what irony achieves.[182] Despite his criticism of Romanticism, Kierkegaard does praise the attempts by Schlegel and Tieck to inspire a revaluation of substantial life, even if these attempts fail; he says that, at the time of Romanticism, "The world was in its dotage and had to be rejuvenated. In that respect, romanticism was beneficial."[183] He further stresses the

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[180] Ibid, 327.
[181] Ibid, 326.
[182] Ibid, 304.
[183] Ibid.

importance of Romanticism by describing the historical context that Romanticism sought to rejuvenate:

> But it must be born in mind that Tieck and the whole romantic school stepped into or thought they were stepping into an age in which people seemed to be totally fossilized in finite social forms. […] The glorious principles and maxims of habit and custom were the objects of a pious idolatry; everything was absolute, even the absolute. One abstained from polygamy; one wore a stovepipe hat. Everything had its importance. In accordance with his station, everyone felt with nuanced dignity how much he was accomplishing, how great was the importance of his indefatigable efforts to himself and to the whole. […] Everything proceeded calmly with measured step, even the person on his way to propose marriage, because he knew, of course, that he was on a licit mission and was taking a very earnest step. Everything occurred according to the stroke of the hour. One reveled in nature on St. John's Eve, one was contrite on the fourth Friday after Easter; one fell in love when one turned twenty, went to bed at ten o'clock. One married, one lived for domesticity and one's position in society; one acquired children, acquired family worries. […] One knew something about the world and brought up children in the same understanding; one was inspired one evening a week by the poet's praises of the beauty of existence; one was also everything to one's own family, year in and year out with an on-the-dot certainty and precision.[184]

The value of romanticism is that it calls consciousness to reflect on the life that, for the most part, it thoughtlessly affirms. Irony, however, only has this value if its negative movement is curtailed, such that the idealizing activity of consciousness is directed toward its lived-situation, whereby irony functions as a tool to help one develop oneself within one's situation.

When consciousness conceives irony instrumentally, there is a shift in its understanding of the significance of actuality. For the romantic, actuality is perceived as mere vanity – it lacks any meaning or truth, and, as such, it is precisely that which is to be negated through the romanticism that makes actuality novel. The romantic consciousness does not find itself accountable to its lived-situation but, instead, due to its negative

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[184] Ibid, 303-304.

freedom, feels licensed to act in accordance with any imaginatively constructed meaning that it imposes on the world. Mastered irony, in contrast, expresses a different consciousness of the world and of one's position in the same. The consciousness that has mastered its irony understands that "actuality (historical actuality) stands in a twofold relation to the subject: partly as a gift that refuses to be rejected, partly as a task that wants to be fulfilled."[185] Personality is bound to a particular situation, and it has no control over the fact of this bond; its situation is something that is simply given to it, and it is impossible to deny or reject this gift. The master of irony precisely recognizes this givenness of actuality. This recognition, however, does not entail some kind of quietism or resignation, wherewith the master of irony simply accepts the established way of the world. The master of irony affirms its situation as that which founds the manifold of all of its possible actions, but this affirmation does not entail that the ironist must passively accept the morals, laws, and customs that conventionally pertain to substantial life. Irrespective of any acceptance or denial of the prescriptions of substantial life, the person is necessitated to act within the situation in which it finds itself. While actuality is gift that the person must necessarily accept, it is nonetheless given as a task – as something that the person must freely shape through its actions. The person has no control over the fact that it finds itself in a particular situation, but it does have control over how it acts within that situation. The master of irony recognizes that actuality is to be negated – not, however, through the substitution of actuality with a novelization but through the realization of a self-posited ideal. Mastered irony recognizes that its freedom is conditioned by its situation. The situation, however, does not undermine freedom, but provides precisely the means through which the person

[185] Ibid, 276.

can realize the self that it decides to be. Kierkegaard explains how the master of irony conceives actuality in the following:

> *Actuality hereby acquires its validity*, not as a purgatory – for the soul is not to be purified in such a way that stark naked, so to speak, it runs blank and bare out of life – but *as history in which consciousness successively matures*, yet in such a way that salvation consists not in the forgetting all this but in becoming present in it.[186]

Actuality for the master of irony consists of the set of ways in which the person can choose to give itself a definite meaning.

Mastered irony thereby acquires for personality a continuity with actuality, and it is in this way that it undermines the source of boredom in romanticism. Kierkegaard explains: "for thought, subjectivity, to acquire fullness and truth, it must let itself be born; it must immense itself in the deeps of substantial life."[187] The master of irony validates actuality by recognizing that actuality is essential for the project of self-determination. Unlike the romantic self, which tries to maintain itself in the first moment of irony, wherein the self is purely indefinite, the master of irony seeks to freely define itself through the situation in which it finds itself. Whereas the romantic self rejects its historicity, the master of irony seeks to give itself a history by freely letting itself be determined by its lived-situation. Actuality allows for the maturation of consciousness by providing the material through which consciousness can actually and determinately develop itself. In mastered irony, consciousness has seen through the vanity of substantial life, but it also grants a new validity to actuality – actuality is valid as the sole sphere within which the person can freely define itself.

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[186] Ibid, 328-329; emphasis added.
[187] Ibid, 274.

Kierkegaard further develops this conception of actuality through an explanation of the nature of ideality. In its most nascent expression within consciousness, irony is the awareness of ideality. Ironically, the person achieves the awareness of the possibilities that could be instantiated, despite the established way of the world; irony is the awareness of the disparity between how the world is and how the world could be. The romantic and mastered forms of irony, however, clearly understand the nature of ideality differently. Kierkegaard postulates that, in general, there is "a longing in every human being for something higher and more perfect."[188] However, Kierkegaard thinks that the object of this longing should not be something wholly divorced from one's lived-situation, such that its realization is impossible, undesirable, or insincere. This, of course, is the nature of romantic longing; the romantic ideal, as something produced through the whimsy of the romantic, is not bound to a lived-situation but to an imagined-situation. The romantic posits an "exaggerated and impotent ideal, which floats about like a cloud in the sky or like the cloud's shadow fleetingly flies across the ground."[189] The misrelation between the romantic ideal and reality is such that this ideal cannot be realized. Critically, then, Kierkegaard says that the person ought to long for an ideal, but "this longing must not hollow out actuality; on the contrary, life's content must become a genuine and meaningful element in the higher actuality whose fullness the soul craves."[190] Again stressing the instrumental function of irony, the ironic awareness of possibility should be employed to determine an ideal that is grounded in one's lived-situation, such that one could truly strive toward its realization. The master of irony recognizes that only those possibilities that are

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[188] Ibid, 328.
[189] Ibid, 307-308.
[190] Ibid, 328.

bound to its situation can be realized: "Possibility is not so prudish as to be unwilling to enter into actuality, but actuality is possibility."[191] For the romantic, idealization is for the sake of novelization; for the master of irony, idealization is for the sake of realization. The longing for a more perfect world that characterizes the mastery of irony is responsive to its given situation. For such consciousness, Kierkegaard says:

> Actuality, therefore, will not be rejected, and longing will be a sound and healthy love, not a weak and sentimental sneaking out of the world. The romantic longing for something higher may well be genuine, but just as man must not separate what God has joined together, so man also must not join what God has separated, but a sickly longing such as this is simply a way of wanting to have the perfect prematurely.[192]

The master of irony ideates an ideal of a more perfect world – not so as to be lost in some imaginary world but to be able to realize this perfection through its action. The value that an ideal has for the master of irony is determined through its ability to be enacted. Actuality acquires a meaning for the master of irony through the enacting of an ideal. In this sense, Kierkegaard says that "actuality acquires its validity through action."[193] The ideal world, toward the realization of which the master of irony strives, is not a fantastic and free-floating possibility; it is precisely bound to the ironist's lived-situation, in such a way that the ironist can sincerely strive toward its realization and, correlatively, define itself through this striving. The master of irony must "make his poet-life congruous with his actuality."[194] Such an ironist recognizes that, while it possesses freedom from constraint, its actions are necessarily conditioned by its lived-situation; the ironist may strive to change its situation, but such changes are themselves limited by the unique constitution of that situation.

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[191] Ibid, 325.
[192] Ibid, 329.
[193] Ibid.
[194] Ibid, 325.

The relation to actuality, then, is more complicated in mastered irony than it is in romantic irony. Unlike romantic irony, which begins and ends in a single movement of alienation from the actual world, mastered irony involves a twofold movement of sundering and bonding, but, as Hall notes, this "*sundering* effect is always in the service of bringing us down to earth."[195] The master of irony elevates itself above the world through its awareness of possibility, but it does this only to change its situation through the enactment of a possibility.

Due to its validation of actuality, mastered irony reconciles consciousness to its world, and this reconciliation has consequences for how consciousness conceives its historical existence. Since the romantic negates the validity of actuality, romanticism is essentially anachronistic; the romantic finds itself not accountable to any particular epoch, which is what allows the Romantics to idealize Greek life and the Middle Ages, critique contemporary life for failing to live up to these ideals, and to recommend projects to restore these golden ages.[196] For the romantic, "there really never was a past," precisely because it "confused the eternal *I* with the temporal *I*."[197] The master of irony, in contrast, in the affirmation of its particular situation, assumes a past:

> But when I said earlier that actuality offers itself partly as a gift, the individual's relation to a past is thereby implied. This past will now claim validity for the individual and will not be overlooked or ignored.[198]

The master of irony finds itself bound to its particular age, and its ideals must be responsive to the reality of this age.

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[195] Hall, *Word*, 204.
[196] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 277.
[197] Ibid.
[198] Ibid.

Between the romantic and the mastered forms of irony, there is a clear difference in the conceptions of actuality and of the relation between actuality and ideality. Related to this is a difference in how the two types of irony conceive freedom. Kierkegaard presents this difference in terms of the distinction between negative and positive freedom: unlike the negative freedom that characterizes romanticism, mastered irony is an expression of positive freedom. In the romantic manifestation of irony, consciousness achieves the recognition of its own freedom, but only in the sense that consciousness finds itself freed from its ethical situation – that it is not necessitated to act in accordance with any pre-established values that characterize its substantial situation. Mastered irony, in contrast, in its twofold movement, transcends the purely negative conception of freedom. The master of irony, having worked through the romantic consciousness, conceives itself as free from the prescriptions of its substantial life, such that it has "the absolute power to do everything."[199] However, to the extent that the master of irony views actuality as a gift to be received and as a task to be fulfilled, it recognizes that its freedom is not merely negative, but also positive. For mastered irony, freedom does not so much liberate personality from its situation but instead orients the person within its situation, such that the person becomes free to act within that situation; it is only in "actual history" that "the authentic individual has his positive freedom."[200] The master of irony views itself as inseparably tied to a particular situation, so whatever freedom belongs to the master must be the freedom to act within that situation; the master is free to enact or neglect its possibilities, but it is not free to decide what is possible for it. The freedom of personality is always conditioned: "I am also bound with respect to myself and cannot free myself any

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[199] Ibid, 275.
[200] Ibid, 277.

time I wish."[201] The positive freedom of mastered irony is the freedom to cultivate what is necessarily given to the ironist.

This clarifies the sense in which the master of irony lets itself be composed poetically – in its own form of living, the master of irony lets itself be determined by the particularity of its situation. Kierkegaard says:

> In other words, the poet does not live poetically by creating a poetic work…but he lives poetically only when he himself is oriented and thus integrated in the age in which he lives, is positively free in the actuality to which he belongs.[202]

Where the romantic understands the task of living poetically as exploiting a purely negative freedom in order to lose itself in imaginary constructions and insouciant behavior, the master of irony lives poetically by freely developing itself within the limited situation that has been given to it. The master of irony reflects upon its unique situation so as to understand the particular ways in which it can actually create itself: "Therefore it is very urgent for him to become conscious of what is original in him, and this originality is the boundary within which he poetically composes, within which he is poetically free."[203] The poetic living of the master is bound, and this boundary is determined by what is possible for the master given the particular determinations of its lived-situation.

That the romantic and mastered forms of ironic consciousness understand freedom differently entails that they understand responsibility differently, as well. Freedom is understood by the master of irony as the capacity to cultivate the possibilities that constitute its lived-situation; it is not viewed as the capacity to flee from this situation through imaginary constructions, which is the romantic understanding. To the extent that the

[201] Ibid, 247.
[202] Ibid, 326.
[203] Ibid, 281.

master of irony recognizes both that its freedom is tied to its particular situation and that it freely determines itself through the various ways in which it cultivates possibilities within that situation, the master of irony conceives of itself as responsible. Moreover, this responsibility is twofold: the master of irony is responsible to its situation, and it is responsible for its situation. The master of irony is, first, responsible to its situation, to the extent that it recognizes that it can only act freely within its situation and, thereby, must be responsive to the unique constitution of that situation. The master accepts its situation as that which circumscribes the sphere of realizable possibilities. Second, since the master of irony determines its situation through free activity and inactivity, the master is responsible for its situation. The master recognizes that it is responsible for the way of the world; the master cannot defer responsibility to any pre-ironic understanding of the way of the world, since it has seen through the vanity thereof, but instead, recognizing that it is free, it also recognizes that it is responsible for how it develops itself. Responsibility is essential for the mastered view of actuality; Kierkegaard says:

> But for the individual actuality is also a task that wants to be fulfilled. […] In order for the acting individual to be able to accomplish his task by fulfilling actuality, he must feel himself integrated in a larger context, must feel the earnestness of responsibility, must feel and respect every reasonable consequence.[204]

Positively conceived freedom is what allows the master of irony to overcome its alienation and achieve continuity with its situation. If personality merely views itself as negatively free from its situation, it would not perceive itself as responsible to or for its situation – it would not feel necessitated either to assume any position within its given situation or to take responsibility for what it does within that situation. The absence of responsibility is precisely what licenses the novelization of romanticism. For the romantic, there is no sense

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[204] Ibid, 279.

of responsibility, insofar as the pure negativity of romanticism entails that the romantic conceives itself just as much liberated from its own actions as from the prescriptions of substantial life. The romantic perceives the vanity of everything, and this perception extends to the entirety of actuality, including the romantic's own contributions to the same. Accordingly, how one acts is not a concern for the romantic, and, thereby, the romantic experiences neither the earnestness of responsibility nor the respect for the consequences of choices. Actuality is not a task for the romantic, insofar as the romantic does not feel any responsibility to it or respect for it.

This account of mastered irony further sets into relief the various limitations of romantic irony, which can be summarized in the following manner: romanticism does not pursue the irony of consciousness to its ultimate expression, wherewith irony itself is overcome and the reconciliation of self and world is achieved. In romanticism, irony is treated terminally, whereby consciousness, as an expression of infinite and absolute negativity, takes such negativity to be the final expression of self-knowledge. Romanticism is an extreme expression of subjectivity, whereby any substantiality is denied. Kierkegaard explains the misconception of the romantic as being the following: "he stands above his whole environment, but in order really to live poetically, really and thoroughly to be able to create himself poetically, the ironist must have no *an sich*."[205] This utter negation of the *an sich* of the romantic personality is what constitutes the discontinuity, emptiness, and corresponding boredom in the life of the same. Mastered irony overcomes the boredom of irony precisely by seeking a continuity with substantial life. The nature of mastered irony is twofold, embracing both freedom from and continuity

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[205] Ibid, 281.

with actuality, such that mastered irony expresses the in-and-for-itself of personality. Whereas romanticism is the negation of substantial life, mastered irony is the negation of that negation. Kierkegaard says of mastered irony: "its activity is to become *für sich* what it is *an sich*."[206] The master of irony sets as its task the free and reflective cultivation of its substance. For its master, irony is a tool employed to achieve a positively unified existence, such that the boredom of romanticism is undermined; when mastered, irony is viewed not as a way to perpetually obscure the perception of meaninglessness through fantasies, but as a way to live within one's concrete situation.

Mastered irony, then, does involve commitment to actuality and, thereby, bears some similarity to the pre-ironic absorption in the world. However, the difference between these two levels of consciousness lies in mediation. The pre-ironic personality, which passively accepts its situation, is, as previously noted, an immediately qualified consciousness; since it lacks the qualification of subjectivity in the strict sense, it cannot be said to posit its relation to actuality. The personality of mastered irony, however, actively accepts its situation, and it does so having already passed though the romantic shape of consciousness. In contrast to the immediacy of the latent personality, the mastered ironist has a mediated relation to its situation. Having lived through an ironic awareness of the contingency of substantial life, the person who has mastered irony affirms actuality without being unreflectively absorbed in the truth of the same, precisely because the ironic awareness prevents it from conceiving of itself as completely reducible to its substance. McCarthy explains this difference in the following way:

> In order to gain equilibrium, without sacrificing the insight and higher consciousness which it represents, irony will ultimately have to negate itself, in

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[206] Ibid.

> what is termed "mastered irony," and thus re-enter into a relation with reality, henceforth to be regarded with circumspection.[207]

Even though the mastered ironist and the unreflective person may express a similar confidence in actuality, the mediative quality of the former distinguishes it from the latter; the master of irony affirms its concrete situation, but with circumspection.

Particularly elucidative of this point is Hall's description of mastered irony as a liberation from two forms of bondage. As Hall notes, Kierkegaard's conception of self-actualization entails that one remains partially withdrawn in one's engagement with the world, such that one never feels bound to the world in any way that would undermine one's freedom. This withdrawal is absent in pre-ironic consciousness, absolute in romanticism, and relative in mastered irony. The essential feature of mastered irony is that one freely and consciously affirms one's position in the world. The emphasis, here, though, is on freedom. The mastered ironist recognizes its freedom from constraint, so that, in the affirmation of any position in the world, it cannot deny its freedom in relation to this affirmation. The mastered ironist, in awareness of its own freedom, cannot mistakenly treat any subjectively affirmed position as the objective way of the world. Irony, as Hall notes, is a "power of withdrawal" that ensures that one is never exhaustively identified with the way that one engages in the world, such that one's freedom would thereby be denied. Irony is precisely that "power that keeps our worldly bonds from being transformed into bondage."[208] Irony resists "the ever-present danger of turning bonds into bondage, of absolutizing the relative."[209] As Hall notes in his interpretation, then, irony is not simply the awareness that first of all liberates the subject from its absorption in substantial life;

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[207] McCarthy, 7.
[208] Hall, *Word*, 203.
[209] Ibid.

irony is also that which continually prevents the subject from being absorbed into the bonds to actuality that are freely chosen. That is: "Mastered irony reminds us of our transcendence by reminding us that our worldly bonds are *our own*."[210] Not only is the person irreducible to the situation in which it first of all finds itself; the person is also irreducible entirely to the commitments that the person freely chooses. The sense in which irony liberates the person from "an absolute relation to the relative" involves the recognition of the relativity of all worldly bonds, irrespective of whether those bonds are unreflectively assumed or reflectively posited. Irony is the power that in all contexts "keeps our worldly bond from disintegrating into our bondage."[211] Søltoft notes that the instrumental function of irony is "to keep the space of subjectivity open."[212]

2.7 The Limitations of the Account of Irony and Boredom

Kierkegaard's account of these two forms of poetic living is fairly undeveloped in his dissertation. On the one hand, apart from rare references to the literary characters of the Romantics, he presents both forms of living poetically abstractly, leaving it ambiguous how these particular life-views are concretely instantiated by individuals. On the other hand, Kierkegaard's explanation of the mastery of irony is largely unfinished.[213] In particular, he says little about the nature of the higher ethicality that is supposed to emerge through the mastery of irony. While Kierkegaard's uses the second part of his dissertation as an opportunity to articulate the basic structure and features of his theory of life-views,

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[210] Ibid, 204.
[211] Ibid, 205.
[212] Søltoft, 275.
[213] It is worth noting that, in contrast to the lengthy analysis of romantic irony, Kierkegaard presents his conception of mastered irony in only a few pages in the conclusion of his dissertation.

this nascent presentation leaves most aspects of that theory undeveloped, including the conception of boredom. In order to develop a full understanding of the two senses of living poetically and to more fully explicate Kierkegaard's theory of boredom, attention must be given to Kierkegaard's first pseudo- and polynymously published work, *Either/Or*, which involves the same central issues of Kierkegaard's dissertation, albeit in a far more detailed manner.

CHAPTER 3. AESTHETICISM AS THE LIFE-VIEW OF BOREDOM

3.1 Introduction to and Overview of *Either/Or*

Kierkegaard's theory of boredom receives its earliest – and also briefest – presentation in his dissertation, wherein boredom is identified as a preeminent characteristic of romantic irony. Romantic irony nihilates any meaning in life, such that all activity is perceived as pointless and unfulfilling, which the ironist acutely experiences as boredom. In an attempt to avoid its boredom, the romantic consciousness resigns itself to a project of composing itself poetically, whereby it adopts and lives in accordance with one fantastically constructed view of life after another in an attempt to perpetually negate the boredom that expresses the emptiness of such views of life. This continual effort to avoid boredom constitutes the only unity of the romantic life; rather than living for the sake of some positive goal, the romantic only lives to negate its boredom. As indicated briefly at the end of his dissertation, Kierkegaard suggests that this lifestyle and its concurrent boredom can be overcome through a mastery of irony, whereby irony is supposed to teach one how to properly relate to one's concrete situation. In his dissertation, however, Kierkegaard does not develop this theory of mastered irony in much detail, which renders his initial theory of boredom incomplete, to the extent that it is unclear how a change in one's view of life is to overcome boredom.

This nascent and unfinished theory of boredom is, however, developed in far more detail in Kierkegaard first pseudonymously published work, *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*, wherein boredom appears one of the primary themes. Although this text has few explicit references to Romanticism and to living poetically, Kierkegaard writes *Either/Or* as a matured expression of his critical analysis of romantic irony, while at the same time

presenting a clearer account of how such irony is to be mastered through an advanced stage of self-awareness. In this text, Kierkegaard presents two distinct "life-views," each with competing understandings of selfhood, freedom, morality, and beauty. These two life-views correspond to the two senses of living poetically and represent – as Walsh says – "alternative patterns for 'living poetically.'"[214] While the theory of living poetically in *The Concept of Irony* is fairly abstract and undeveloped, with little illustration of how either way of life is concretely instantiated (especially that of mastered irony, which is only briefly explained in a few pages), the theory of life-views presented in *Either/Or* works to show more determinately how one can live poetically in both senses.[215] Accordingly, consideration of the disparate lifestyles presented in *Either/Or* can further an understanding of Kierkegaard's theory of irony and, thereby, his understanding of boredom.

Whereas Kierkegaard's dissertation provides a direct analysis of living poetically, in *Either/Or*, he attempts an indirect analysis by writing the text from the perspective of personae who instantiate the different senses of living poetically. Each of the two volumes of *Either/Or* is written through a pseudonym, but Kierkegaard does not use pseudonyms merely to mask his name; instead, corresponding to each false name is an entire character created by Kierkegaard, and each of these characters expresses their own unique view of life. By writing the two volumes from the perspective of persons who live poetically in

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[214] Walsh, 64.

[215] Kierkegaard does not explicitly discuss irony and its types in *Either/Or*. That this connection between these texts is intended, however, is obvious given the similar and parallel themes that appear in the texts. Many Kierkegaard scholars have explored this connection between the two texts (cf. Burgess, 157-8; Ferguson, 54; Kosch, 147; McCarthy, 10; Stack, 33; Walsh, 64; Westphal, 31; Malantschuk, 217; Taylor, 175; Jothen, 182; Shmuëli, 14). Walsh explains this connection by noting that *The Concept of Irony* and *Either/Or* address the same issue of Kierkegaard's earliest work, *From the Papers of One Still Living*. According to Walsh, these three early works are different but complementary projects of outlining Kierkegaard's conception of a positively unified life-view.

different senses, Kierkegaard provides a more concrete expression of the notion of living poetically and resolves many of the ambiguities of his dissertation.

In *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard develops his understanding of living poetically not only through his perspectival form of pseudonymous writing, which provides concrete instantiations of the two forms of living poetically, but also by situating the concept within his larger theory of "stages on life's way," in which he typologizes the ideal personality types through which one passes in the development of one's personality.[216] The two volumes of *Either/Or* expound Kierkegaard's conceptions of the aesthetic and the ethical stages of life. The first volume is written from the perspective of an aesthete – usually addressed simply as "A" – and is a collage of essays and aphorisms that blend philosophical and literary observations on various subjects, such as love, sorrow, boredom, happiness, and freedom.[217] This first volume expresses Kierkegaard's aesthetic life-view, which takes the achievement of enjoyment to be the ultimate purpose of life. In its highest expression, this life-view mixes selfishness, hedonism, and moral nihilism, such that the aesthetic person simply acts however it pleases, refusing to be held accountable to anyone or for anything. Serving as a foil to this life-view, the second volume of *Either/Or* is written from the perspective of an ethicist – identified in the text as "B" or "[Judge] William" – and gives voice to a view of life wherein agency, duty, and personal responsibility are stressed. This volume consists primarily of two letters that have been written to A, both of

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[216] Scholars generally refer to Kierkegaard's theory of personality and its development as the "theory of stages (on life's way)." This designation is borrowed from the title of his 1845 work, *Stages on Life's Way*, although Kierkegaard rarely uses the titular term *stages* therewithin.
[217] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or I*, 9. Kierkegaard's pseudonymous editor of *Either/Or*, Victor Eremita, designates the authors of the two volumes simply as "A" and "B." The author of the second volume (B), is also explicitly named "William." Since William is further identified as a judge, most Kierkegaard scholars refer to him as "Judge William."

which work explicitly to distinguish the aesthetic and ethical life-views and to show how the latter life-view can be achieved.[218]

3.2 The General Theory of Stages on Life's Way

In order to understand the two life-views that structure *Either/Or*, it is necessary to consider Kierkegaard's general concept of a life-view. Kierkegaard first introduces this concept in one of his earliest publications – his 1837 critique of Hans Christian Andersen, "From the Papers of One Still Living." In this essay, Kierkegaard summarily critiques Andersen's novel, *Only a Fiddler*, by claiming that the quality of the novel suffers because "Andersen totally lacks a life-view" and Andersen's lack of a life-view entails that the novel itself also lacks a life-view.[219] Kierkegaard posits that the integrity of the novel is conditioned by the integrity of the author, such that a coherent view of life cannot be presented within a novel unless the author's own life is organized around a consistent and consciously defined view of life: "a life-view is, for the novelist of the class to which Andersen belongs, *conditio sine qua non*."[220] As Gregor Malantschuk explains:

> Drawing from many examples from the epic poetry of his day, Kierkegaard claims that the primary qualification of the epic poet is a solidly constructed philosophy of life as the background for his epic productions.[221]

In effect, Kierkegaard critiques Andersen for lacking the maturity and reflectiveness requisite for writing a novel. As a genre, the novel involves a representation of epic

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[218] Apart from the two letters of the text written by Judge William, there is a brief sermon written by a "Jutland Pastor" that Judge William appends to his letters. This sermon works to anticipate Kierkegaard's religious stage of existence, the conception of which is left ambiguous and undeveloped in *Either/Or*.
[219] Kierkegaard, "From the Papers of One Still Living," from *Early Polemic Writings*, ed. and trans. Julia Watkins (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 76.
[220] Ibid, 77.
[221] Gregor Malantshuck, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Existence*, trans. and ed. Howard and Edna Hong (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2003), 183.

development, or, as Walsh prefers, "life development," which "consists in forming a positive relation to actuality through striving toward a single goal in life […]."[222] The successful presentation of a character's life development within a novel requires that the author be thoroughly familiar with the life-view of that character – that the author be familiar with the single goal of that character's life and the way in which that goal animates the character's behavior. In Kierkegaard's view, however, this familiarity is achieved only by an author who possesses a thorough understanding of life itself. When this possession is lacking, the author is incapable of discerning which features are essential to a particular way of life, and this compromises the author's ability to present characters within the novel. Kierkegaard critiques Andersen's novel for failing to achieve this unity of a life-view, the result of which is that the novel consists of a series of diverse and incoherent observations that are held together merely by the book's binding, rather than an overarching and integrating view of life.

Even though his critique of Andersen revolves around the concept of a life-view, Kierkegaard only provides a few brief comments in his review regarding the meaning, acquisition, and constitution of the same. By way of definition, he says:

> For a life-view is more than a quintessence or a sum of propositions maintained in its abstract neutrality; it is more than experience, which as such is always fragmentary. It is, namely, the transubstantiation of experience; it is an unshakable certainty in oneself won from all experience […].[223]

Here, Kierkegaard identifies several essential features of a life-view. First, a life-view is not merely an abstract theory of life. This does not entail that a life-view is not theoretical, but, as Kierkegaard clarifies, a life-view is not theoretical in such a way that it could be

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[222] Walsh, 35.
[223] Kierkegaard, "From the Papers of One Still Living," 76.

maintained in "abstract neutrality," as if having a life-view were unnecessary or unimportant for one's concrete manner of living; instead, a life-view is something of interest to the individual, something in which the individual is invested. A life-view is not incidental for an individual, for the individual's own manner of living is determined by its view of life. Richard Summers summarizes this point well: "A life-view of this kind is not a merely theoretical notion, but a coherent, unifying view of reality as a whole, which gives consistency to personal life."[224] Second, Kierkegaard understands a life-view to be something that transcends particular experiences and ultimately unifies experiences in some totalizing view. In absence of a particular life-view, one's life would be thoroughly disorganized, and one's experiences would all appear to be merely incidental and unrelated. A life-view involves a "transubstantiation of experience" to the extent that it traces all experiences, which, as Kierkegaard understands them, are heterogeneous and lacking intrinsic unity, back to a central point – oneself. That experiences are transubstantiated means that they do not in themselves change, but they are given a new meaning according to their place in the total view of life; one's experiences are not random happenings but, instead, are part of an overarching conception of one's own life. In the following, Kierkegaard explains this synthesizing function of a life-view, while at the same time explaining how a life-view is acquired:

> If we now ask how such a life-view is brought about, then we answer that for the one who does not allow his life to fizzle out too much but seeks as far as possible to lead its single expressions back to himself again, there must necessarily come a moment in which a strange light spreads over life without one's therefore even remotely needing to have understood all possible particulars, to the progressive understanding of which, however, one now has the key.[225]

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[224] Richard Summers, "'Controlled Irony' and the Emergence of the Self in Kierkegaard's Dissertation," from: *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Concept of Irony*, ed. Robert Perkins (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2001), 49.

[225] Kierkegaard, "From the Papers of One Still Living," 77-78,

A life-view imbues one's life with some overarching meaning, in accordance with which one both lives and makes sense of one's living. One acquires a life-view when one works to trace individual experiences back to a single source and views one's life as a coherent totality of such experiences; a life-view is "the consolidating total survey" of one's experiences.[226] In this way, a life-view grounds and orients one in one's world; a life-view explains the occurrences in one's life, the importance or unimportance of these occurrences, and how these occurrences contribute to one's personal development.

This transubstantiation of experiences has two other noteworthy features. First, as Summers puts it, there is "an element of personal appropriation" to any life-view.[227] A life-view is produced precisely when one consciously traces the various expressions of life back to oneself, thereby making the meaning and acquisition of a life-view personal; a life-view is the product of a particular individual trying to make sense of its own life. As McCarthy notes, this appropriative element distinguishes a life-view from a worldview, to the extent that the former is a personal view of life, and the latter is an objective view of how the world is generally constituted.[228] A life-view is not supposed to be an objective or impersonal view of the world, whose truth could be measured scientifically. Instead, a life-view is simply one's personal understanding of the world and of one's place within the same. It may be the case that an individual's view of life is common or even held by most people, but what makes it a life-view is not that it is unique but that an individual has taken possession of it personally – that it has become a truth in accordance with which an individual lives. Second, this tracing-back of experience is an ongoing activity – one that

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[226] Ibid, 83.
[227] Summers, "Controlled Irony," 48.
[228] McCarthy, 136

brings about a life-view – and this indicates that a life-view develops over time. Kierkegaard confirms this, but he adds the qualification that the developmental feature of a life-view does not mean that, at any given time, a life-view does not have certain sedimented and discernable qualities.[229] Additionally, a consequence of these appropriative and developmental qualities of a life-view is that there is not a singular, universal life-view, but, rather, there is a plurality of diverse life-views. Kierkegaard distinguishes, for example, Stoic and Christian life-views, as well as comments on the possibility of arguing for one life-view over another, although he provides no such argument himself.[230]

As a representation of one's life, in accordance with which one lives, a life-view also has a practical dimension. Kierkegaard indicates this quality by explaining the role of a life-view within the novel. He says:

> A life-view is really providence in the novel; it is its deeper unity, which makes the novel have the center of gravity in itself. A life-view frees it from being arbitrary or purposeless, since the purpose is immanently present everywhere in the work of art.[231]

A life-view unifies experience and does so by viewing one's experiences in relation to some central purpose, such that various particular experiences no longer appear incidental or meaningless. A life-view is not a set of incidental, abstract, or neutral principles; instead, a life-view is that in accordance with which one makes sense of the events and actions that constitute one's practical existence. A life-view is teleological in nature; what unifies the fragmentary experiences of life is a purpose around which one's life is oriented; a life-view is how one makes sense of the underlying purpose of one's various experiences. Walsh

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[229] Kierkegaard, "From the Papers of One Still Living," 77.
[230] Ibid, 76, 80 (fn).
[231] Ibid, 81.

says: "A life-view thus provides a comprehensive center of orientation that enables one to take a firm, positive stance toward life […]."[232]

Summarily, a life-view expresses how one makes sense of one's place in the world. Life does not consist of a series of disjointed experiences; rather, each person processes and interprets individual experiences as belonging to some overarching understanding of the meaning and purpose of life, and this understanding constitutes one's life-view. In this way, a life-view is more than mere experience – it is the "transubstantiation of experience," to the extent that the meaning of an experience is determined by the significance that an experience has within the context of a total view of the meaning and purpose of life.

Even though Kierkegaard originally introduces the notion of a life-view as a means to critique Andersen's novel, the concept serves as the cornerstone of own philosophical project and is operative in both his dissertation and in *Either/Or*. In "From the Papers of One Still Living," Kierkegaard criticizes Andersen simply for having not acquired a life-view, but he does not analyze any particular life-views, instead focusing only on an explanation of the function and importance of a life-view for literary projects.[233] In *The Concept of Irony*, Kierkegaard does not explicitly discuss the concept of a life-view as such, but he does present a specific life-view – that of romanticism – and critically deconstructs this life-view through juxtaposition with another life-view – that of mastered irony. In *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard provides some brief comments on the meaning of a life-

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[232] Walsh, 37

[233] Kierkegaard makes this approach clear in his critique: "I do not seek to make one life-view valid, and Andersen another, but, uninterested in advancing any particular life-view, I seek only to combat this negative standpoint and its right to try to pass itself off as a life-view" (Kierkegaard, "From the Papers of One Still Living," 80 (fn).

view but focusses more directly on the presentation of two competing life-views, which he presents as constituting particular stages of personal development.

In *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard continues to develop his theory of life-views. In this text, he provides the following provisional definition of a life-view, which builds upon his earlier account:

> Every human being, no matter how slightly gifted he is, however subordinate his position in life may be, has a natural need to formulate a life-view, *a conception of the meaning of life and of its purpose*.[234]

On the one hand, this definition affirms the features of the earlier account used to critique Andersen – that a life view is developed and consists of a personal explanation of life with emphasis on the practical dimensions. On the other hand, though, this definition adds a new feature – that the development of a life-view corresponds to a natural need that all human beings possess. This indicates that a life-view is not merely for the novelist or the philosopher, but for anyone who lives and acts; a life-view is the way that a particular human being understands what life is and how it ought to live. The inclination to have a life-view is universal, even if the determinate features of life-views make them diverse and inconsistent with each other. To the extent that a life-view is a "a conception of the meaning of life and of its purpose," each of the views of life presented by Kierkegaard designates a general orientation toward the world, tacitly belonging to which are unique metaphysical and ethical understandings and commitments. Westphal provides a useful summary of Kierkegaard's theory by identifying each life-view as a "worldview" and explaining this concept in the following manner:

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[234]Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 179; emphasis added.

> [A] worldview is less a theory, in the sense of a set of propositions, than a perception, a habit of seeing the world in a way that gives to my beliefs and practices whatever coherence they may have.[235]

Westphal further develops this conception by stating that life-views "are not in the first instance assertions about the world but modes of being in the world."[236]

Another way in which Kierkegaard further develops his conception of a live-view in *Either/Or* is by presenting particular life-views as stages of personal development. As Mark C. Taylor notes, Kierkegaard understands each stage of life in a twofold manner: the "most adequate view of Kierkegaard's theory of the stages of existence" views the stages "as ideal personality types (or as ideal representations of various life-views) and as the stages of the development of the individual self."[237] In the first case, Kierkegaard's theory of stages is intended to typologize the views of life that persons generally instantiate. Each stage represents a paradigmatic view of oneself as oriented within one's world, corresponding to which there are unique understandings of selfhood, freedom, and responsibility. In the second case, Kierkegaard also presents his theory of stages "as descriptive of the phases of the self's development."[238] Taylor explains: "But it is recognized that these live-views are arranged so that there is a successive movement from the pleasure-seeking life of the aesthete to the devout life of the Christian."[239] These ideal personality types are presented as constituting the graduated series of stages through which the person passes in the maturation of selfhood. In this development, which is formally modeled after Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, each stage represents a particular shape

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[235] Westphal, 22. While McCarthy is previously cited as distinguishing life-views from worldviews, the two interpreters understand the latter concept differently, such that they are not actually in disagreement.
[236] Ibid.
[237] Taylor, 74.
[238] Ibid, 70.
[239] Ibid.

of self-consciousness, and one ascends to higher stages through an intensification of self-consciousness, wherewith one achieves a more adequate conception of what it means to be a self. In Kierkegaard's theory, this graduated ascension toward more complete self-knowledge involves a shift from a life absorbed in the satisfaction of natural desires to life-views that are more ethically and religiously oriented.

3.3 The Aesthetic Stage of Life and Its Types

The first life-view that Kierkegaard presents in *Either/Or* is that of the aesthetic, which is named for the centrality and primacy of sensuous experience to the lifestyle of this stage.[240] In Kierkegaard's theory, aestheticism is an empirically-oriented understanding of one's self and one's place in the world, which thereby involves the prioritization of the physical, material, and natural dimensions of personal existence. Walsh summarizes the nature of this stage in the following definition:

> In the writings of Kierkegaard "the aesthetic" is a major term signifying that condition and stage in human life where every human being begins and in which some remain, living in an immediate or reflective manner on the basis of natural inclinations and capacities in an effort to gain satisfaction and enjoyment through the senses.[241]

The aesthetic life-view is a conception of the meaning and purpose of life that culminates in the maxim: "One must enjoy life."[242] One lives aesthetically when one views the ultimate meaning and purpose of life to be the pursuit of some kind of pleasure. At higher

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240 For a brief historical explanation of this term, cf. McDonald, "Aesthetic/Aesthetics," from *Kierkegaard's Concepts: Tome I: Absolute to Church*, ed. Steven Emmanuel, William McDonald, and Jon Stewart (Burlington: Ashgate, 2013), 23-29. It is also useful to note that "aesthetic" is a polyvalent term in Kierkegaard's work, describing either (1) a theory of art, (2) a literary style (for example, Kierkegaard refers to his pseudonymously published texts as constituting his "aesthetic" authorship, which refers to the form of the texts, not the content), (3) the sensuous or empirical features of human existence, (4) a particular life-view, stage of existence, or existence-sphere, as Kierkegaard variously identifies it.

241 Walsh, 19.

242 Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 179.

levels of development, the aesthetic life-view, with its commitment to the pursuit of pleasure, is characterized by the romantic priority of imagination and poetic creation over actuality, an ironic and ultimately nihilistic stance toward social order, convention, and relations, which involves the subordination of ethical concerns to personal enjoyment and amusement, an emphasis on individuality to the point of egotism, and an aversion to boredom so severe that it is the primary determinant of aesthetic praxis.

Presentations of Kierkegaard's general theory of stages of life often outline three stages – the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious – as being mutually exclusive in such a way that it appears as through an aesthete cannot have ethical commitments or religious beliefs. This, however, is a misleading simplification. The aesthete can be an upstanding citizen and congregant; an aesthetic life is not necessarily devoid of ethical and religious dimensions, but it is a life in which such aspects are subordinated to the pursuit of enjoyment. What distinguishes these stages from each other is what is taken to be of primary importance, around which beliefs, values, and activities are oriented. As Westphal explains:

> The identity and integrity of each stage – its essence, if you like – is the criterion it offers for successful living. Each stage is an answer to the question, What is the good life? In the classical sense in which it is equivalent to the question, Where is true happiness to be found?[243]

Despite being a life that prioritizes pleasure, the aesthetic need not be a life of depravity, immorality, or atheism. An aesthete, for example, could live perfectly in accordance with the customs of its society or could affirm a set of religious convictions, but, since enjoyment is central to this life-style, such social or religious commitments would be affirmed either because they are pleasing to the aesthete or in such a way that their value

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[243] Westphal, 22.

is subordinated to what the aesthete otherwise finds pleasing. When Kierkegaard distinguishes life-views in accordance with a singular quality (e.g., the pursuit of pleasure), it is not the case that Kierkegaard thinks that particular forms of life are myopically focused on a single goal and lacking any intrinsic complexity; rather, it is just a matter of identifying the primary concern that around which others revolve or to which others are subordinated.

To the extent that aestheticism prioritizes the pursuit of enjoyment, aesthetic views of life have an empirical orientation, such that what is identified as the meaning of life and the condition for happiness is purely mundane. The aesthete "considers personality in relation to the surrounding world, and the expression for this in its recurrence in the personality is enjoyment."[244] Kierkegaard further explains this empirical orientation in terms of external and internal conditions for satisfaction:

> *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.*[245]

Any life that revolves around desire has its condition outside of itself, insofar as desire is empirically determined; the aesthetic life is lived in pursuit of some goal that is accidental to the individual or is not posited by the individual itself, to the extent that the goal is dictated by nature or circumstance. For example, one might be born with a talent for music and might view the purpose of life as the development of this talent. In such a life-view, the goal of life – the development of the musical talent – is determined by one's innate capacity. An aesthete views its own life as meaningful only in relation to an external condition, such that it finds fulfillment solely in the possession of this condition.

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[244] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 229.
[245] Ibid, 180.

Due to its empirical orientation, Kierkegaard considers aestheticism to be a life of immediacy. Kierkegaard states of aesthetic life-views: "all stages still have the essential similarity that spirit is not qualified as spirit but is immediately qualified."[246] Kierkegaard understands spirit to be qualified immediately when a person inadequately conceives itself or when personality has not become transparently manifest to itself. The aesthetic life-views each represent an incomplete self-awareness, such that none of these views is able to "penetrate personality itself, which remains in its accidental immediacy."[247] The condition for this adequate and transparent self-apprehension, which is presented in Kierkegaard's analysis of the structure of ethical personality, is that the self is understood as something freely and responsibly created through its own deliberate actions. Self-determination is the unique characteristic of the ethical life and of the qualification of the spirit as spirit, but this is precisely that which is absent in the aesthetic life. Self-determination involves a mediation of the self, in the sense that, as self-determined, one's identity is mediated through one's actions. The aesthetic view of selfhood is not that one's identity is created through action, however, but that the self is static and determined by nature, such that one simply is what one is; the aesthete "spontaneously and immediately is what he is" – the aesthete "immediately is the person he is."[248] Taylor explains this immediacy in the following:

> What a person is "immediately" (i.e., unmediatedly) is a function of that which does not result from his own decisions. One's body, mental ability, physical talents, family, etc. would be examples of such aspects of the self. The aesthete, therefore, is what he is by virtue of circumstances that lie outside the realm of his self-determination.[249]

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[246] Ibid.
[247] Ibid, 190.
[248] Ibid, 178, 225.
[249] Taylor, 129

This immediacy does not entail that the aesthete does not develop over the course of life; rather the aesthetic personality simply develops in accordance with what is taken to be its innate or intrinsic nature: "From this you see what esthetic development signifies; it is a development just like that of a plant, and although the individual becomes, he becomes that which he immediately is."[250] Related to its empirical orientation, the aesthete views selfhood as something that is merely produced and determined by nature, such that "the spirit is still not qualified as spirit but as gift."[251] Moreover: "All the [aesthetic] stages have this in common, that the reason for living is that whereby one immediately is what one is, because reflection never reaches so high that it reaches beyond this."[252] Each aesthetic life-view represents an inability to achieve a proper conception of personality as self-determining; in this inability, consciousness does not yet recognize itself apart from purely empirical determinations – it does not recognize itself as free and, thereby, responsible for its manner of existence.

Accordingly, Kierkegaard thinks that the aesthete is primarily committed to the pursuit of enjoyment as a result of a limited awareness of what it means to be a self – one that perceives the self merely as a determined product of nature. This limited self-awareness does not entail that aesthetes are otherwise ignorant or unreflective. To the contrary, certain forms of aestheticism require remarkable degrees of reflectiveness to satisfy their projects of enjoyment. Kierkegaard says that aesthetes are reflective, "yet this reflection is always only a finite reflection, and the person remains in his immediacy."[253] Aesthetic personalities do not reflect beyond their physical, material, and sensuous

[250] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 255.
[251] Ibid, 181.
[252] Ibid, 191.
[253] Ibid, 183-184.

existence, insofar as their primary goal in life is the pursuit of a purely worldly satisfaction. In the aesthetic stage, one's reflective capacities are oriented around the pursuit of an object of pleasure.

While the first volume of *Either/Or* is written consistently from the perspective of a highly developed and reflective aesthetic personality, such that a single form of aestheticism is expressed therein, the second volume of the text provides what Kierkegaard calls a "vivisection" of the aesthetic life-view, delineating this stage of life into a graduated series of sub-stages.[254] This variety of aestheticism is explained by the fact that there are various ways in which the aesthetic maxim regarding enjoying life could be interpreted, due to the diversity of enjoyable things and to subjective preferences regarding the same. Given this variety, Kierkegaard typologizes the aesthetic life-view into seven paradigmatic types, distinguishing each in accordance with what is taken to be the primary object of enjoyment in that life-view, such that each type possesses a unique understanding of how to enjoy life, and each of these understandings correlates to different degrees of reflectiveness and self-awareness. The stages of aestheticism are presented in a graduated series, advancing from a "total absence of sprit to the highest level of brilliance, but, even in the stage where brilliance manifests itself, the spirit is still not qualified as spirit but as gift."[255] The series of aesthetic life-views represent different degrees of self-awareness, advancing from largely unreflective forms of life to the highly reflective stage of romantic self-consciousness. For this reason, the lower stages are presented by Kierkegaard as more innocent and simpler than the higher stages.[256]

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[254] Ibid, 129.
[255] Ibid, 180-181.
[256] Ibid, 183.

In each of the first three stages of aestheticism, the pursuit of pleasure is directed toward a particular object of desire, such that the attainment or maintenance of this object is viewed as the highest purpose in life. The first and lowest stage of aestheticism perceives health or beauty as the highest good, such that one is to enjoy life through the appreciation of one's health or beauty.[257] At this stage, personality "is immediately qualified, not mentally-spiritually but physically."[258] In other words, this type of aesthete possesses self-consciousness, but only to the extent that it recognizes itself in its purely physical existence, such that the body "is the most precious good, is that around which everything revolves."[259] Happiness in this life-view is determined entirely by the condition of one's body, which in turn is determined by nature and circumstance. The second stage of aestheticism consists of those life-views in which "wealth, honors, noble birth, etc. are made life's task and its content."[260] Such life-views are materially oriented, similar to the first stage, but the material whose possession is supposed to constitute the highest in life is more abstract and intangible than the body, as it corresponds to one's station in life. The maxim to enjoy life at this stage is determined by the maintenance of what one has by virtue of the social position or class into which one is born. The third stage revolves around talent – for example, "a talent for practical affairs, a talent for business, a talent for mathematics, a talent for writing, a talent for art, a talent for philosophy."[261] Similar to the foregoing stages, talent refers to innate or naturally determined capacities, such that the satisfaction of this life is conditioned by something "not posited by the individual himself."[262]

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[257] Ibid, 181.
[258] Ibid.
[259] Ibid.
[260] Ibid, 182.
[261] Ibid, 183.
[262] Ibid, 182.

Kierkegaard explains the purpose of life in this view as follows: "Satisfaction in life, enjoyment, is sought in the unfolding of this talent."[263]

Kierkegaard distinguishes these first three forms of aestheticism from the remaining ones by virtue of the former's simplicity. Each of these first stages revolves around a single object, like health or honor, and a life at one of these stages is satisfied so long as this object is maintained. This simplicity makes the first set of life-views more internally unified and consistent:

> Just as all of these life-views have their esthetic nature in common, so they also resemble one another in having a certain unity, a certain coherence, the one particular thing around which everything revolves. What they build their lives upon is something simple, and therefore this life-view is not fragmented as is the life-view of those who build upon something intrinsically multiple.[264]

In contrast to this simple orientation, each of the four remaining stages of aestheticism becomes more complex, as well as more multifaceted and fragmented, insofar as each one revolves around a more abstract and thereby more nuanced understanding of enjoyment – one that requires a higher development of self-awareness.

Rather than perceiving the meaning of life to be the maintenance of some particular quality or status, the fourth life-view "teaches 'Enjoy life' and interprets it as 'Live for your desire.'"[265] Whereas the foregoing forms of aestheticism all revolve around a singular object – health, beauty, wealth, honor, nobility, talent – the remaining forms of life are conditioned by something "intrinsically multiple." In the case of the fourth aesthetic life-view, this multiplicity stems from the nature of desire: "desire per se is a multiplicity, and thus it is easy to see that this life splits up into a boundless multiplicity […]."[266] At any

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[263] Ibid, 183.
[264] Ibid.
[265] Ibid.
[266] Ibid.

given moment, one always has numerous desires that one could work to satisfy, and this multiplicity itself constantly changes over time. Kierkegaard notes that it is at this stage that the aesthete is significantly "within the sphere of reflection" and is so precisely due to the multiplicity of desire. To live a life for the satisfaction of desire, one must be able to reflect on oneself, so as both to be able to recognize the various objects of one's desire and to be able to choose which desires are worth pursuing. This pursuit of enjoyment requires a degree of reflection that is unnecessary for the simpler pursuits of the lower stages. At this stage, one must be able to represent to oneself the manifold of one's desires and be able to evaluate these desires, so as to prioritize them. This reflection, however, is "always only a finite reflection, and the person remains in his immediacy," to the extent that this type of aesthete reflects only on its naturally conditioned desires.

The fifth stage develops from the recognition that a life dedicated simply to satisfying desire "cannot be carried out, and for that reason it is not worth the trouble to embark on it," insofar as one's desires are endless and no enduring satisfaction could be achieved by this lifestyle.[267] Kierkegaard identifies this fifth life-view as that of epicureanism, since there is a reflective shift from enjoying life to the maxim: "'Enjoy yourself; in enjoyment you are to enjoy yourself.'"[268] This shift represents "a higher reflection," to the extent that one no longer simply pursues whatever is pleasurable, but is instead concerned with achieving self-contentment by regulating this pursuit of pleasure by also striving to avoid pain and distress, which requires a more nuanced understanding of different types of pleasures (such as bodily and mental pleasures, as well as immediate and mediated pleasures) and their consequences.

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[267] Ibid, 190.
[268] Ibid.

The sixth stage is a slight variant of the former, to the extent that both involve a more reflective form of self-enjoyment. Kierkegaard identifies the sixth stage as that of cynicism, which teaches "'Enjoy yourself by continually discarding the conditions.'"[269] The cynic pursues enjoyment through the ascetic denials of all that is superfluous to existing, which allows the cynic "to rejoice in his lightness […]" – to enjoy life in a state of liberation from distress.[270] Similar to the preceding stage, cynicism requires a heightened reflective capacity, since self-knowledge is the condition for the ascetic's task of "hollowing himself out," but this reflection is still finite, in that it concerns the purely empirical features of the self.[271]

The seventh stage of aestheticism – "the finest and the most distinguished of them all" – is that of reflective aestheticism, and it is from the perspective of an aesthete at this stage of development that the essays of the first volume of *Either/Or* are written.[272] It is at this stage that the aesthete becomes conscious of its aestheticism as a way of life. Whereas lower stages of aestheticism involve – in different degrees – an awareness of one's desired goal in life and how to satisfy this desire, reflective aestheticism possesses a thematic consciousness of its life-view, which entails that this type of aesthete is not only capable of representing to itself its own desires, but it is also aware of its life-view as such and can raise evaluative questions concerning the same.

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[269] Ibid, 191.
[270] Ibid, 192.
[271] Ibid, 191.
[272] Cf. ibid, 193-194.

3.4 Reflective Aestheticism – Despair, Nihilism, Boredom, and Amusement

Reflective aestheticism differs from the lower stages of the same to the extent that the reflective aesthete possesses a thematic awareness of its own life-view as aesthetic. Due to this more complete self-knowledge, however, Kierkegaard designates this stage of aestheticism as that of despair, to the extent that it is at this stage of self-awareness that the commitments of aestheticism begin to founder and the aesthete becomes weary of its own way of life, albeit without possessing knowledge of any alternative way of living. Kierkegaard says:

> This last life-view is despair itself. It is an esthetic life-view, because the personality remains in its immediacy; it is the final esthetic life-view, for up to a point it has absorbed the consciousness of the nothingness of such a life-view.[273]

In this highest stage of aestheticism, the aesthete is capable of reflecting on its own life-view, whereby the aesthete begins to doubt the validity of a life dedicated to the pursuit of enjoyment. At lower stages of aestheticism, individuals simply live their lives absorbed in the pursuit of some form of enjoyment, and, to the extent that they reflect on life, their reflections are at the service of their pursuit of enjoyment: they reflect on what they find enjoyable and on how to achieve their enjoyment. At these stages, aesthetes do not question the worthwhileness of their lifestyles as such, but instead focus only on how best to realize their maxim of enjoying life. At the higher stage of reflective aestheticism, however, the aesthete not only reflects on how to live aesthetically, but it also reflects on the significance of the aesthetic life-view itself, questioning the meaning and justification of the same. Through this questioning, the aesthete realizes that it has lived for the sake of enjoyment by default and becomes aware of the "nothingness" of its own life-view. With

[273] Ibid, 194.

this awareness, the aesthete becomes desperate, because, on the one hand, the aesthete finds no justification for living for the sake of enjoyment and thereby loses conviction in its way of life, but, on the other hand, the aesthete knows of no other way of living except to pursue enjoyment. The aesthete feels inescapably immersed in a way of life that has become unfulfilling, and, in this despair, the reflective aesthete already lies "somewhat beyond the esthetic realm," precisely because it is no longer satisfied with this life-view.[274]

While Kierkegaard presents a full analysis and typology of despair later in *The Sickness unto Death*, his 1849 treatise dedicated solely to that goal, such analysis is only nascently present in *Either/Or* when Kierkegaard critiques aestheticism as a life of despair. This nascent account only presents two forms of despair, both of which are characteristic of different forms of aestheticism, such that this account is comparatively simple and limited in scope. Similar to the mature account of despair in *The Sickness unto Death*, the earlier account in *Either/Or* presents despair as stemming from an inadequate conception of selfhood, but this inadequacy is explained directly in terms of the aesthetic life, such that only aesthetes are in despair. Kierkegaard characterizes despair in the following manner: "But every life-view that has a condition outside itself is despair."[275] He elaborates: "it is always despair to have one's life in something whose nature is that it can pass away."[276] Since it is the essential quality of aestheticism to have an empirically oriented life-view, one that places its highest goal in something determined by nature or circumstance, which is thereby something transient, Kierkegaard concludes that "every

[274] Ibid, 180.
[275] Ibid, 235.
[276] Ibid, 236.

esthetic view of life is despair, and that everyone who lives esthetically is in despair, whether he knows it or not."[277]

Kierkegaard identifies two basic types of despair. First, there is a worldly despair, which can be suffered by any form of aestheticism. This despair is occasioned by some worldly object, such that one despairs in the unattainment or loss of this object. Kierkegaard illustrates:

> If I imagine an artist, for example a painter who goes blind, he perhaps – unless there is something more profound in him – will despair. He despairs over this particular matter, and if his sight is restored again, the despair would terminate.[278]

In this case, the despair is conditioned entirely by a particular object whose attainment or maintenance has been deemed to be essential for living a fulfilling life. In contrast to this worldly-oriented despair, there is a personal despair, which is conditioned by one's self-perception, rather than by some mundane object. To the extent that this despair requires intensive self-knowledge, it is suffered uniquely by the reflective aesthete. Such despair emerges not from an inability to acquire the means for aesthetic enjoyment, but from a discontent with the aesthetic life-view itself. In the following passage, Kierkegaard describes the reflective aesthete in a state of personal despair:

> You still have in your power all the elements for an esthetic life-view. You have financial means, independence; your health is undiminished; your mind is still vigorous; and you have never been unhappy because a young girl would not love you. And yet you are in despair. It is not a despair involving something actual but a despair in thought. Your thought has rushed ahead; you have seen through the vanity of everything, but you have not gone further. Occasionally you dive into it, and when for a single moment you abandon yourself to enjoyment, you are also aware that it is vanity. Thus you are continually beyond yourself – that is, in despair. Therefore, your life lies between two enormous contradictions: at times you have colossal energy, at times an equally great indolence.[279]

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[277] Ibid, 192.
[278] Ibid, 194.
[279] Ibid.

The reflective aesthete, in assessment of its own life-view and in recognition of the "nothingness" of its living for the sake of enjoyment, despairs over itself. This despair is not tied to any worldly possession or condition; this aesthete may possess various worldly goods, but having "seen through the vanity of everything," these possessions appear worthless and the aesthete cannot find satisfaction in them. In this despair over itself, life appears meaningless to the aesthete, who lives a life that it does not value but also does not know how to escape. This despair is caused by the aesthete's being continually beyond itself, in that it has undermined confidence in its own life-view without being able to replace it with another view of life.

The reflective aesthete is aware that "all is vanity" – that the purported value of the goals and objects of enjoyment that characterize aestheticism is illusory – but does not know how to overcome to this disillusionment. The aesthetic pseudonym comments: "I have lost all illusions. In vain do I seek to abandon myself in joy's infinitude; it cannot lift me, or, rather, I cannot lift myself."[280] This loss of direction and purpose constitutes one of the fundamental characteristics of aestheticism: nihilism. The aesthetic pseudonym reflects:

> My life is utterly meaningless. When I consider its various epochs, my life is like the word *Schnur* in the dictionary, which first of all means a string, and second a daughter-in-law. All that is lacking is that in the third place the word *Schnur* means a camel, in the fourth a whisk broom.[281]

The aesthete has lived life in pursuit of various pleasures, but, now, perceiving such pursuit as vain, the aesthete cannot attribute any meaning or value to its life, such that "life has lost reality […]."[282]

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[280] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or I*, 41.
[281] Ibid, 36. Cf. ibid, 29, 31.
[282] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 196.

Furthermore, this nihilism of aestheticism is not merely theoretical but has serious practical consequences. Up to this stage of aestheticism, the aesthete oriented its activity around the pursuit of various sources of enjoyment, such as health, wealth, status, and the like. Having seen such pursuits as lacking any justification and as thereby being unfulfilling, the aesthete can no longer derive enjoyment from them. The aesthete recognizes no other maxim than to enjoy life but now has no clear object toward which to direct its will. This nihilism is practically paralyzing, as indicated by the aesthetic pseudonym's own self-reflections:

> I don't feel like doing anything. I don't feel like riding – the motion is too powerful; I don't feel like walking – it is too tiring; I don't feel like lying down, for either I would have to stay down, and I don't feel like doing that, or I would have to get up again, and I don't feel like doing that, either. *Summa Summarum*: I don't feel like doing anything.[283]
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> The most ludicrous of all ludicrous things, it seems to me, is to be busy in the world, to be a man who is brisk at his meals and brisk at his work.[284]
>
> It takes a lot of naïveté to believe that it helps to shout and scream in the world. […] Now I never shout anymore.[285]
>
> I feel as a chessman must feel when the opponent says of it: That piece cannot be moved.[286]

This perception of the pointlessness of activity is what effects the "great indolence" of aesthetic despair. The aesthete struggles to act, due to the difficulty in finding reasons to justify particular actions: "Ordinarily I have so many and most often such mutually contradictory reasons. It also seems to me that with cause and effect the relation does not

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[283] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or I*, 20.
[284] Ibid, 25.
[285] Ibid, 33.
[286] Ibid, 22.

hold together properly."[287] Lacking clear and definite reasons to act, the aesthete becomes resigned to a state of indolence.

Despite having no reason to act in any particular manner, however, the aesthete must nonetheless act, since it is impossible to live without acting in some manner. In consequence of its need to act coupled with its nihilistic perception of activity, the aesthete adopts an understanding of choice that emphasizes the triviality of action and an indifference toward the same. Illustratively, the aesthetic pseudonym writes:

> Marry, and you will regret it. Do not marry and you will also regret it. Marry or do not marry, you will regret it either way. Whether you marry or you do not marry, you will regret it either way. Laugh at the stupidities of the world, and you will regret it; weep over them, and you will also regret it. Laugh at the stupidities of the world or weep over them, you will regret it either way. Whether you laugh at the stupidities of the world or weep over them, you will regret it either way. Trust a girl, and you will regret it. Do not trust her, and you will also regret it. Trust a girl or do not trust her, you will regret it either way. Whether you trust a girl or do not trust her, you will regret it either way. Hang yourself, and you will regret it. Do not hang yourself, and you will also regret it. Hang yourself or do not hang yourself, you will regret it either way. 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.[288]

Since particular acts are not perceived as contributing to the realization of any justified life-view, every possible action appears trivial, and the aesthete is indifferent toward both its actions and the consequences of the same. Since life cannot be lived without acting, the aesthete necessarily acts, but it does so arbitrarily, since no action is perceived as being ultimately justified. Accordingly, in response to the perceived vanity of all activity, the aesthete simply lives "with as little teleology as possible."[289] There is no ultimate purpose

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[287] Ibid, 25.
[288] Ibid, 38-39.
[289] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 195.

toward which the aesthete strives: “My life achievement amounts to nothing at all, a mood, a single color.”[290]

The nihilism of aestheticism and the consequent disinterest in activity founds one of the most paradigmatic experiences of the aesthetic life: boredom. Because action is perceived as pointless, such that it does not matter what one does, the aesthete is incapable of finding fulfillment in life. The pursuits that originally evoked pleasure for the aesthete have become mere reminders of the triviality of existence, and the aesthete no longer knows how to enjoy its life. In the absence of activities that would produce enjoyment and thereby make the aesthetic life fulfilling, the aesthete suffers boredom:

> How dreadful boredom is – how dreadfully boring; I know no stronger expression, no truer one, for like is recognized only by like. […] I lie prostrate, inert; the only thing I see is emptiness, the only thing I live on is emptiness, the only thing I move in is emptiness. […] I am dying death. And what could divert me? Well, if I managed to see a faithfulness that withstood every ordeal, an enthusiasm that endured everything, a faith that moved mountains; if I were to become aware of an idea that joined the finite and the infinite. But my soul’s poisonous doubt consumes everything.[291]

The aesthete acts with indifference and goes through the motions of living, but this lifestyle is unfulfilling, such that the passage of time seems to drag and living becomes tedious: “Time passes, life is a stream, etc., so people say. That is not what I find: time stands still, and so do I.”[292] The course of life itself is condemned by the aesthete, to the extent that it consists in the tedious repetition of all things, devoid of all interest:

> Wretched fate! In vain do you prink up your wrinkled face like an old prostitute, in vain do you jingle your fool’s bells. You bore me, it is still the same, an *idem per idem*. No variation, always a rehash. Come, sleep and death; you promise nothing, you hold everything.[293]

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[290] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or I*, 28.
[291] Ibid, 37.
[292] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 26.
[293] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or I*, 29-30.

The aesthete seeks enjoyment but, having seen through the vanity of everything, cannot find any object toward which to direct its attention and effort, such that the aesthete is resigned to a state of indefinite yearning: "I lack the patience to live. […] It is said that our Lord satisfies the stomach before the eyes. That is not what I find: my eyes are surfeited and bored with everything, and yet I hunger."[294] In this state, life simply continues in an aimless and tedious manner: "Life has become a bitter drink, and yet it must be taken in drops, slowly, counting."[295]

Within the aesthetic life, boredom is coextensive with and expressive of the nihilistic perception that devalues all possible actions, leaving the aesthete in a state of perpetual unfulfillment, in which it does not know how to direct its attention and its will. The aesthete not only cognizes the vanity of life, it also experiences this vanity as boredom. Boredom is the mood that makes manifest to aesthete that it is alienated from its situation; boredom reveals the aesthetic personality in its disengagement from its world. As bored, the aesthete does not know how to direct its will, since no activities appear meaningful to it; boredom expresses the aesthete's disinterest both in living and in ordinary sources of enjoyment. Accordingly, boredom evinces a frustration of willing, but this is a frustration of second-order volition: when bored, the aesthete does not desire the attainment of some particular object, as much as the aesthete desires for there to be some object worth pursuing at all. The aesthete futilely desires for there to be some source of enjoyment in its life, and this futility becomes manifest as boredom.

Moreover, this mood of boredom not only makes manifest the aesthetic self in its nihilism and alienation, but also determines how the aesthete perceives its environing

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[294] Ibid, 25.
[295] Ibid, 26.

situation. Boredom is described by the aesthete as a sensation of "emptiness." As bored, the world seems devoid of meaning and importance, such that the aesthete is inclined to disregard it. As Calvin Schrag explains, a mood like boredom not only reveals features of the self but should "also be thought of as a situational determinant," in the sense that boredom reflects how the self is attuned to its given situation.[296] In its boredom, the aesthete finds its world to be dull, providing nothing that arouses the interest of the aesthete; the world places no hold upon the aesthete, who perceives its world as providing a manifold of pointless and worthless activities.

Ordinarily, boredom is considered to be an emotion that one occasionally and briefly experiences in response to uninteresting circumstances. One might feel bored, for example, during a ten-minute wait for a bus, when one has nothing to do but sit on the bench by the side of the road. As indicated by the foregoing analyses, however, this ordinary conception of boredom is not what is described by Kierkegaard in *Either/Or*, to the extent that boredom is not accidental to the aesthetic life, nor is boredom an occasional or brief experience for the aesthete. Boredom is an essential feature of the aesthetic life-view, grounded in the aesthete's nihilism and indicative thereof. Rather than being occasional or fleeting, boredom is the default condition of the aesthetic life; having seen through the vanity of everything, the aesthete experiences life as essentially tedious and empty, and it is only during interludes of distraction that this fundamental boredom is obscured. However, even when the aesthete does overcome boredom through distractions, its boredom is always lurking under the surface, recurring whenever the distraction fails or subsides. Similar to the account provided in *The Concept of Irony*, the boredom described

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[296] Schrag, 21.

by the aesthetic pseudonym in *Either/Or* is existential in nature, to the extent that boredom is described in this text as grounded in the individual's fundamental view of life, rather than in particular circumstances in which there is momentarily nothing that interests the individual. As Schrag notes, the aesthete suffers a boredom, "in which there is no particular object or person with which one is bored, but simply one's self and one's being in the world."[297]

The reflective aesthete cannot find satisfaction in the kind of pleasures that concerned the lower stages of aestheticism, having seen through the vanity of such lifestyles. Concurrently, the nihilistic view of the reflective aesthete, which perceives all activity as vain and thereby unfulfilling, results in an unbearable boredom, but this boredom incentivizes the aesthete to find distraction from its own unfulfilled and frustrated state of existence. This shift in the aesthetic life from the pursuit of particular pleasures toward distraction is highlighted by Kierkegaard in his commentary on Goethe's *Faust*, the titular character of which epitomizes the reflective aesthete's disillusionment with mundane pleasure. Throughout *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard often references literary characters in depiction of particular forms of aestheticism. Most predominantly, he presents Mozart's Don Giovanni as a fairly unreflective aesthete and Goethe's Faust as an exemplar of reflective aestheticism. Whereas an aesthete like Don Giovanni may be content with the perpetual expansion of his catalogue through the endless pursuit of mundane pleasure, Faust expresses a more complex relation to pleasure. Kierkegaard presents Faust's relation to pleasure in the following manner:

> Faust is a demonic figure just like Don Juan, but a superior one. Sensuousness does not acquire importance for him until he has lost a whole previous world, but the consciousness of this loss is not blotted out; it is always present, and therefore he

[297] Schrag, 83.

> seeks in the sensuous not so much pleasure as distraction. His doubting soul finds nothing in which it can rest, and now he grasps at erotic love, not because he believes in it but because it has an element of presentness in which there is a momentary rest and a striving that diverts and that draws attention away from the nothingness of doubt.[298]

As Harries notes, Faust pursues enjoyment precisely in order to "forget his despair."[299] Faust does not seduce Gretchen because he believes that such a pursuit is itself valuable, but because he hopes through this pursuit to divert his attention away from the despair and boredom that had inclined him toward suicidal ideation at the beginning of the play. More than anything else, the reflective aesthete desires distraction from its nihilism. This desire for distraction emerges from having "lost a whole previous world," which, as David Stern explains, is precisely the world of immediate pleasure – the world found to be the source of enjoyment by unreflective aesthetes like Don Giovanni.[300] The reflective aesthete, having lost the ability to find enjoyment in this world, due to having seen through the vanity thereof, no longer seeks pleasure in this world, but instead desires distraction from its own nihilistic perception ("the nothingness of doubt") and corresponding state of dissatisfaction and boredom. With the aesthete's loss of the world of immediate pleasures, the need to recover pleasure in a more sophisticated manner emerges.

This disillusionment with immediate pleasure and corresponding tendency toward distraction introduces an important distinction between what Ryan Kemp designates as first- and second-order enjoyment, the latter of which is unique to the reflective form of

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[298] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or I*, 206.
[299] Harries, 130.
[300] David Stern, "The Ties that Bind: The Limits of Aesthetic Reflection in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*." *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Either/Or: Part I*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1995), 260.

aestheticism.[301] Between the stages of aestheticism, Kierkegaard distinguishes sensuous pleasure, which is derived from particular mundane objects, from reflective pleasure, which is derived from the poeticized representation of some situation or experience. Kierkegaard's following description of the reflective aesthete outlines this distinction between types of enjoyment:

> The poetic was the plus that he himself brought along. This plus was the poetic he enjoyed in the poetic situation of actuality; this he recaptured in the form of poetic reflection. This was the second enjoyment, and his whole life was intended for enjoyment. In the first case, he personally enjoyed the esthetic; in the second case, he esthetically enjoyed his personality. The point of the first case was that he egotistically enjoyed personally that which in part actuality has given to him and which in part he himself had used to fertilize actuality; in the second case, his personality was volatized, and he then enjoyed the situation and himself in the situation. In the first case, he continually needed actuality as the occasion, as an element; in the second case, actuality was drowned in the poetic.[302]

First-order enjoyment is aesthetic in the sense that is it sensual and immediate – it is the pleasure that is produced by an actual experience. As Kemp illustrates, a first-order enjoyment would be "the feeling one gets when tasting something sweet as opposed, say, to the feeling one gets when *recollecting* (or *imagining*) the experience of tasting something sweet."[303] Kemp explains that first-order enjoyment is characterized by a twofold immediacy. First, as the preceding example indicates, it is immediate to the extent that "it is directly grounded in sense experience."[304] A first-order enjoyment is the pleasure that arises from the experience of some actual object. Second, first-order enjoyment is immediate to the extent that it is "non-self-referential," in the sense that this enjoyment is perceived as coming from the object itself, rather than the representation of some object;

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301 Ryan Kemp, "'A' the Aesthete: Aestheticism and the Limits of Philosophy," from: *Kierkegaard's Pseudonyms*, ed. Katalin Nun and Jon Stewart (London: Routledge, 2015), 4.
302 Kierkegaard, *Either/Or I*, 305.
303 Kemp, 4.
304 Ibid.

such enjoyment is conditioned by actuality, which serves as the source of the pleasure.[305]

Kemp illustrates this distinction in the following:

> I can, on the one hand, simply and immediately enjoy all the idiosyncrasies of the beloved – the way the beloved's face looks under the light of the moon, the beloved's charming wit, and so on. On the other hand, I can enjoy the *idea* of being in love. The object of this second, more reflective, pleasure is the thought that I find myself in such-and-such a situation.[306]

In the enjoyment experienced at the sight of the face of the beloved, it is the face itself that is pleasing, and this face is sensibly given and is itself taken to be the source of the pleasure. Whereas first-order enjoyment is an immediate and sensuous pleasure, second-order enjoyment is reflective, such that it has a more mediated relation to experience. The former is the satisfaction one experiences from something actual, like the taste of sweet food or the sight of a beautiful face. Second-order enjoyment, in contrast, is the satisfaction one experiences reflectively, such that the source of the pleasure is not actuality but the representation of actuality. Second-order enjoyment is unique to this highest stage of aestheticism, because it requires highly developed reflective capacities combined with the disinterest in sensual pleasures that arises therewith.

Having become disillusioned of the value of first-order enjoyment, what the reflective aesthete desires is to make life interesting, so as to distract itself from its nihilistic perception and consequent boredom. What the reflective aesthete desires is not so much a sensuous pleasure, but to be able to view life as interesting. Kierkegaard understands interest to be self-referential and artificial. Interest is self-referential, in the sense that a situation is interesting when the individual is able to reflect on its own position within that

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[305] Ibid.
[306] Ibid.

situation: “the interesting always involves a reflecting on oneself.”[307] Harries adds: “The interesting depends on a movement of reflection that enables the individual to detach himself from his engaged being in the world in order to enjoy it […].”[308] Kierkegaard illustrates this detachment in the following way: “How beautiful it is to be in love; how interesting it is to know that one is in love.”[309] Interest is not a quality that objectively inheres in a given situation; rather, interest is produced in the representation of a situation. Relatedly, Kierkegaard understands interest to be artificial, albeit not in the sense of being unreal or ineffectual, but simply in the sense of being something created. Interest is something with which consciousness imbues the situation through its representation thereof; it is not an objective and given quality of a situation, but is something created by the perception of oneself in that situation.

The disillusionment with mundane pleasure compels the aesthete to the pursuit of second-order enjoyment in the interesting, and precisely herein lies the second aspect of aesthetic despair – its “colossal energy.” As previously noted, in its form of personal despair, the aesthetic life oscillates between the two extremes of “great indolence” and “colossal energy.” The aesthete is resigned to indolence when overtaken by the nihilistic perception of the vanity of existence, wherewith the aesthete is totally disinterested in activity and suffers boredom. This indolence is momentarily interrupted, however, in moments of colossal energy, whereby the aesthete, unable to bear its boredom and frustration, is compelled to distract itself from the consciousness of its own existential condition.

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[307] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or I*, 339.
[308] Harries, 97.
[309] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or I*, 334.

3.5 The Rotation of Crops – A Theory of Boredom and Its Solution

In the reflective form of aestheticism, boredom becomes the most pressing issue for the aesthete, which is indicated textually by the fact that the most explicit ethical system presented in the first volume of *Either/Or* revolves around the commitment to avoiding boredom. This system is presented in the penultimate essay of the first volume of *Either/Or*, tiled "The Rotation of Crops: A Venture in a Theory of Social Prudence," which is a manual explanatory of the best method through which to avoid boredom and thereby maintain an interest in life. While the composition of such a manual certainly appears satirical and facetious – and there are such elements in the essay – of all the essays constitutive of the first volume of *Either/Or*, this one best exposes the essence of aestheticism, which it does by revealing both the primary goal of reflective aestheticism and the corresponding ethics to which the aesthete adheres in pursuit of this goal.

Before considering different strategies for avoiding boredom, this essay begins with an analysis of boredom, presenting it as both a pervasive and motivating experience, both of which indicate how serious the issue of boredom is from the aesthetic perspective. The aesthetic pseudonym highlights both qualities in the following hyperbolic representation of the biblical narrative concerning the creation of the world:

> The gods were bored; therefore they created human beings. Adam was bored because he was alone; therefore Eve was created. Since that moment, boredom entered the world and grew in quantity in exact proportion to the growth of population. Adam was bored alone; then Adam and Eve were bored together; then Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel were bored *en famille*. After that, the population of the world increased and the nations were bored *en masse*. To amuse themselves, they hit upon the notion of building a tower so high that it would reach the sky. This notion is just as boring as the tower was high and is a terrible demonstration of how boredom had gained the upper hand. Then they were dispersed around the world, just as people now travel abroad, but they continued to be bored. And what

> consequences this boredom had: humankind stood tall and fell far, first through Eve, then from the Babylonian tower.[310]

First, boredom is presented in this passage as an essential feature of existence, recurring with and imposing upon each generation. From the aesthetic perspective, boredom is a ubiquitous phenomenon. The aesthetic pseudonym stresses this point with the following statement: "Boredom is the demonic pantheism."[311] This vague expression is explained in the following way:

> Pantheism ordinarily implies the qualification of fullness; with boredom it is the reverse: it is built upon emptiness, but for this very reason it is a pantheistic qualification. Boredom rests upon the nothing that interlaces existence; its dizziness is infinite, like that which comes from looking down into a bottomless abyss.[312]

Boredom is not only ubiquitous; it is also expressive of the emptiness of existence. Harries explains this juxtaposition of fullness and emptiness as pantheistic qualities:

> While the pantheist senses the presence of God in everything, and thus finds everything infinitely significant, the bored person because he senses the nothingness pervading everything, finds nothing worthwhile.[313]

Boredom is the experience of an all-pervading emptiness that evinces the perceived worthlessness of all activity. The nihilism of aestheticism is manifest here; from the aesthetic perspective, boredom is pervasive, because existence and the activities of living appear meaningless, such that the aesthete is disinterested in them. Second, and more importantly for the practical aspects of this theory, in this retelling of the story of creation, boredom is presented as a source of motivation, to the extent that boredom is cited in explanation of the generation of humanity and the erection of the Tower of Babel. The

[310] Ibid, 286.
[311] Ibid, 290.
[312] Ibid, 291.
[313] Harries, 91.

aesthete stresses this motivational aspect of boredom in the following claim: "Boredom is the root of all evil; it is that which must be held off."[314] This holding-off evinces the primary effect that boredom has in life: boredom is "not merely repelling but infinitely repulsive" and constitutes an "infinite momentum for making discoveries."[315] While bored, one is precisely not in a state of contentment but feels the constant urge to dispel one's boredom; boredom is understood to be a source of motion to the extent that boredom impels one to cease to be bored, or, positively expressed, the experience of boredom impels one to seek amusement and to make "discoveries" in this sense.

The identification of boredom and evil is certainly presented in a hyperbolic manner, but, from the aesthetic perspective, there is truth to the identification. In the aesthetic life, there is a subordination of all pursuits to that of enjoyment, such that, as Harries notes, "The polarity [of] good and evil has here been replaced with that of the interesting and the boring."[316] To a life that is primarily dedicated to the pursuit of the interesting, boredom, as the state in which interest is absent and living becomes burdensome, is the greatest evil, in the sense that it is to be avoided above all else. Boredom is precisely the state in which life is not being enjoyed, which is the foremost concern of the aesthetic personality.

These two observations – that boredom is ubiquitous and a source of motivation – ground the practical dimensions of the essay on crop rotation; this essay is primarily concerned with an exploration of strategies through which boredom can be avoided, and the aesthetic pseudonym presents an ethical system revolving around this avoidance. The

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[314] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or I*, 289.
[315] Ibid, 285.
[316] Harries, 89.

guiding maxim in this aesthetic ethics is that one ought to "conquer" or "escape" boredom.[317] Positively expressed, this means that "one ought to amuse oneself."[318] This ethics is more complicated than a straightforward pursuit of amusement, however. As Kemp notes, the maxim that one ought to amuse oneself "develops out of crisis: pleasure depends on novelty, and novelty is a finite resource."[319] Given the finitude of novelty – that there are limited novel experiences that one can pursue and that the novelty of experiences diminishes – the aesthete adopts an economic view of the pursuit of amusement. The guiding practical question of the reflectively aesthetic life is: what is the most successful means through which a being with limited resources can amuse itself throughout its entire life? Employing an agrarian metaphor, the aesthete suggests that what is needed to overcome the evil of boredom is the "rotation of crops."[320] Just as the farmer must use certain techniques in order to maximize the yield of crops, so too must aesthete carefully pursue enjoyment, so as to maximize its pleasure.

Based on an ambiguity in the metaphor itself, the aesthete presents two possible methods of crop rotation to avoid boredom. The first method, which the aesthete suggests is the one based on "popular opinion," is the more obvious but also the weaker of the two strategies.[321] This method "consists in continually changing the soil."[322] One way in which the farmer could try to maximize the yield of crops is by planting crops in a new field every season. The aesthete understands this cure for boredom to consist of a 'change in scenery,' by which one seeks amusement in ever-novel experiences. This strategy is supposed to be

[317] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or I*, 291.
[318] Ibid, 290.
[319] Kemp, 5.
[320] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or I*, 291.
[321] Ibid.
[322] Ibid.

effective under the presupposition that the source of boredom lies in surfeit or repetition – that what makes a given situation boring is that the particular experiences therein have been enjoyed overindulgently or have been repeated to the point that they have either temporarily or permanently lost their appeal.[323] The obvious method to avoid such boredom of surfeit or repetition is to find novel experiences – ones that have precisely not been excessively or repetitiously experienced. When, for instance, one has already spent an entire afternoon shopping at the mall, visiting yet another store becomes tedious, but this tedium dissipates simply with one's leaving the mall and doing something else. Of this strategy, the aesthete provides the following two sets of examples:

> One is weary of living in the country and moves to the city; one is weary of one's native land and goes abroad; one is *europamüde* and goes to America etc.; one indulges in the fanatical hope of an endless journey from star to star. Or there is another direction but sill extensive. One is weary of eating on porcelain and eats on silver; wearying of that, one eats on gold; one burns down half of Rome in order to visualize the Trojan conflagration.[324]

With this method of crop rotation, one attempts to overcome boredom by constantly seeking what is new, either by finding completely novel experiences or by modifying usual experiences to make them novel. Accordingly, this is identified as the "extensive" strategy of crop rotation, since it "depends upon the boundless infinity of change, its extensive dimension."[325] Regarding this infinity, the aesthete says, referencing a Hegelian concept: "This method cancels itself and is the spurious infinity."[326] This strategy represents a "spurious infinity," in the sense that it consists of an endless progression that perpetually postpones the final moment; to avoid boredom through this method, one constantly changes

[323] For further elaboration on this form of boredom, cf. Cheshire Calhoun, *Living with Boredom* (SOPHIA, 2011), 274-277.
[324] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or I*, 291-292.
[325] Ibid, 291.
[326] Ibid, 291-292.

one's situation by either going to new places or modifying usual experiences so as to continually delay the tedium otherwise introduced through surfeit and repetition.

The foregoing proposed means to avoid boredom and attain amusement is based on the belief that the novelty of an experience is what overcomes boredom. While the aesthetic pseudonym affirms this belief, he is nonetheless wary of the extensive method's ability to maintain novelty, concluding: "This rotation of crops is the vulgar, inartistic rotation and is based on an illusion."[327] The illusory base of this strategy is the belief that the process of finding ever-new experiences is actually productive of amusement. Certainly, one can easily dispel momentary boredom by changing one's situation in some manner, but, as a life-long project requiring endless variation to one's situation, this strategy of overcoming boredom is criticized by the aesthetic pseudonym due to its unsustainability. Projects of amusement that consist merely of finding new experiences are dismissed as impractical, insofar as both one is limited in one's means to be able to fill a lifetime with ever-new activities and – more importantly – the activity itself of finding new and amusing activities will inevitably become boring and, thereby, self-defeating. On the one hand, the extensive method fails because, as Kemp says, "its returns quickly diminish."[328] One can, for example, travel to America when one tires of Europe, and then move on to another continent when one loses interest in America, but, with each trip, the novelty of travelling to a new land itself wears off, such that travel decreasingly mitigates against boredom. On the other hand, the activity of finding novel experiences itself would inevitably become tedious and make life boring. Even if one could always find novel experiences, the work of this finding becomes increasingly tedious.

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[327] Ibid, 291.
[328] Kemp, 5.

Given the self-defeating nature of the extensive method, the aesthete recommends that this method be supplanted by an alternative and more effective method of crop rotation, which "seeks relief not through extensity but through intensity."[329] Rather than seeking to maintain amusement merely through an endless procession of novel experiences, this intensive method is founded on the understanding that one is best amused though the reflective cultivation of the quality of experience. This intensive solution is presented as analogous to the method of crop rotation actually employed by farmers, who do not try to maximize the yield of crops by simply continually finding new fields for farming: "The method I propose does not consist in changing the soil but, like proper crop rotation, consists in changing the method of cultivation and the kinds of crops."[330] One can best amuse oneself not by pursuing ever-new experiences, which becomes an increasingly tedious and self-defeating process, but by cultivating the manner in which one reflects on one's experiences. The extensive strategy problematically presupposes that one could indefinitely postpone boredom through the perpetual pursuit of novelty, ignoring the fact that the pursuit itself loses novelty and its returns diminish. The intensive strategy attempts to avoid this limitation, to the extent that it recognizes that boredom does not arise so much from a particular situation, as if boredom were an objective property, such that certain situations would be universally and necessarily boring, but is instead conditioned by one's own perception of a given situation. Shifting focus from the quantity of experiences to the subject's perception of experience effects what John Hale appropriately calls "a kind of

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[329] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or I*, 292.
[330] Ibid.

Copernican revolution" in strategies intended to avoid boredom.[331] This intensive approach is meant to solve the problem of boredom, insofar as overindulged or often repeated experiences can be made amusing depending on how one views them. As Kemp notes: "Instead of casting one's lot with the external world, the aesthete must learn to use actuality as a 'sounding board' (*Resonansbund*) for the rich and boundless world of inner experience."[332]

Whereas the extensive strategy involves as change in one's situation, the intensive strategy involves a change in oneself. To this end, the aesthete advises: "The eye with which one sees actuality must be changed continually."[333] Congruent with the Romantic praxis, this continual change is supposed to be accomplished through a project of "living artistically," whereby one views one's own life as an artistic project.[334] Louis Mackey describes the aesthetic task as follows:

> The aesthete wants enjoyment, but enjoyment cannot simply be had, it must be arranged. Life must be made an art, but the art of living requires a total detachment from everything merely given and possibly unpleasant, as well as a disinterested arbitrariness in the concoction of actual pleasures.[335]

In order to accomplish this project of living artistically, what is essential is not that one seek new experiences; rather, it is essential that one find ways to view everyday experiences as interesting. One makes experiences as interesting as possible by recasting them poetically. The aesthete's recommended solution to boredom is a self-directed poiesis; as Mackey explains: "His medium is not words, but himself: he is the living *poiesis*

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[331] John E. Hare, "The Unhappiest One and the Structure of Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*," from: *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Either/Or: Part I*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1995), 99.
[332] Kemp, 5-6.
[333] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or I*, 300.
[334] Ibid, 292.
[335] Louis Mackey, *Kierkegaard a Kind of Poet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), 14.

[…]."[336] One lives artistically by orienting one's decisions, beliefs, and activities around the fulfillment of a poeticized narrative of one's existence.

Congruent with the romantic prescription that life should be lived poetically, the proposed method of crop rotation is founded upon the distinction between one's actual life and the narrative that one constructs to make sense of that life; the aesthete's intensive solution to boredom exploits this distinction so that one's actual experiences, which tend to be boring, can be imaginatively recast as interesting, such that the aesthete can achieve pleasure without the self-defeating work of constantly finding new experiences. This poetic narrative is a way of representing one's actual life, albeit in a highly idealized manner, such that it becomes interesting. The aesthete's recommendation is that one assume a poetic stance toward oneself by imaginatively constructing a narrative for one's life that is only partially informed by one's everyday experiences. Following the prescriptions of the Romantics, the aesthete suggests that one romanticize one's existence or make one's existence novel – that one quite literally model one's life after a novel, the content of which is whatever one finds amusing. For the sake of avoiding boredom, it is recommended both that one view oneself as if one were a character in a novel and that one view one's life-development as the achievement of some apparently profound goal, such that one's otherwise mundane experiences assume new meaning, depending on how they are viewed as contributing to this development. This poetically composed narrative is not simply an impotent story that one tells oneself about one's life; rather, this narrative is the representation of life in accordance with which the aesthete organizes its goals and

[336] Ibid, 15.

activities; the aesthete views life as the unfolding of this narrative, such that the latter has practical import.

In order to make life interesting, this poetic re-conception of one's life must strike a balance between ideal and real elements, insofar as the extremes of pure fantasy and pure realism are equally boring. Pure fantasy is boring, firstly, because, due to the severe disparity between one's actual life and the poetic narrative of the same, one's everyday experiences would be constant reminders of the illusory nature of the narrative, and one would thereby be constantly reminded of the tedium of one's actual life, which would defeat the purpose of the narrative. Secondly, since the imagination is essentially reproductive rather than productive, the material from which one imaginatively constructs can only come from actuality, such that a pure fantasy that ignores that which is given in one's actual situation would have limited resources for poiesis, and such limitation would create repetitive and eventually boring narratives. On the other hand, pure realism is boring, because life itself is tedious from the aesthetic perspective, and, if the narrative that one creates is simply an accurate representation of that tedium, then the narrative would not provide any distraction from the boredom that permeates life but would instead leave one wholly susceptible to the same. In order to avoid the issues with such extremes, the recommended solution is precisely a balance of reality and ideality; the narrative that one imaginatively constructs must be grounded in one's actual life, albeit only loosely; one should assume one's actual experiences but reimagine those experiences into some idealized narrative.

This balance between actuality and ideality is supposed to be achieved through the manipulation of what the aesthetic pseudonym designates as "the relation between

recollecting and *forgetting*."[337] This artistically lived life involves the imaginative construction of experiences by mixing the recollection of an experience with a forgetting of the same. It is important to note that the aesthetic pseudonym uses neither of these terms in the ordinary sense. Both recollection and forgetting are presented as "arts" and, as such, are deliberately employed faculties and capable of cultivation.[338] In the context of Kierkegaard's theories, recollection is not understood to be the same as memory.[339] Whereas the faculty of memory is intended to produce representations of past experiences, the accuracy of which may be compromised unintentionally, recollection is deliberately selective and involves a "mixture of fiction and truth."[340] Recollection is understood to be a faculty through which one creatively reimagines past experiences. Recollection is not simply identical to memory, but it could be thought of as a poetic memory. The aesthetic pseudonym says: "Recollection is a means not only of conserving but also of augmenting; something that is permeated by recollection has a double effect."[341] On the one hand, recollection does preserve some past experience by recalling it to consciousness. On the other hand, recollection modifies that memory by reimagining it in some fashion. Within the theory of crop rotation, this capacity of recollection is complemented by the "art of forgetting," which is also understood idiosyncratically by the aesthetic pseudonym. Forgetting is neither an inability to recall nor an unconscious suppression of certain experiences, rather it is the capacity to deliberately annul or ignore aspects of one's experience, so as to be able to poetically reimagine the same. Whereas recollection

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[337] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or I*, 292.
[338] Ibid, 294.
[339] Cf. Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*, 9.
[340] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 16.
[341] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or I*, 343.

conserves and augments, forgetting eliminates and obscures. In the construction of the poetic narrative for one's life, "forgetting is the scissors with which one snips way what cannot be used, but, please note, under the maximal supervision of recollection."[342] This forgetting is co-constitutive of the selectivity operative in the poetic representation of one's life; through recollecting and forgetting, the aesthete selects only certain features from actual life – those features that are able to be recast into an interesting narrative – and ignores the rest.

In the ordinary understanding of these faculties, recollecting and forgetting are associated solely with the past – one either recollects or forgets a past experience. In the theory of crop rotation, however, these faculties are employed not simply to create representations of past experiences; rather, they have both retrospective and prospective intentions and are used to ideate one's own life across all temporal modes. For instance, the aesthete says: "But to forget is an art that must be practiced in advance. To be able to forget always depends upon how one remembers, but how one remembers depends on how one experiences actuality."[343] David Stern summarizes this point well: "This cultivation and creation of possibility can be seen as a constant writing or fictionalizing of experience for present enjoyment and a rewriting or editing of it for future use and remembrance."[344] Recollection and forgetting are used to create a narrative of one's whole life and thereby need to produce an explanation of the past experiences that shape one's present identity and that will determine how future experiences will be processed and adapted to fit this narrative. This poetic narrative accounts for who one has been, but it must be constructed

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[342] Ibid, 295.
[343] Ibid, 293.
[344] Stern, "Ties," 262.

in such a way that new experiences can be seamlessly assimilated into this fabricated identity.

These two capacities are requisite for being able to freely poeticize a narrative of one's life that only partially reflects actuality; recollection and forgetting together effect a conscious refining of one's experiences, such that certain aspects are filtered out and others are preserved. Such a poetic reconstruction involves the simultaneous preservation of an experience through recollection – the actuality of some experience must be posited, so as to provide the content of the reconstruction – and annihilation of that experience through forgetting – the actuality of the experience must be negated, so that it can be poetically reconstructed. Both of these elements are necessary for the poetic construction: recollection provides the poet with the content of the poetic construction, and forgetting liberates the poet from the mere representation of its actual experiences.

This novelization of life only overcomes boredom with the proper balance of recollecting and forgetting. The creative interplay of recollecting-forgetting works to produce an "inexhaustible variation" within one's experiences, such that boredom does not set in.[345] Through this interplay, one is able to maximally cultivate amusement and interest in one's various experiences; analogous to the farmer, one becomes increasingly resourceful with one's experiences with this interplay. This rotation method culminates in the following: "When an individual has perfected himself in the art of forgetting and recollection in this way, he is then able to play shuttlecock with all existence."[346] Through this poeticizing, existence is made interesting – one reimagines even the most boring situations so as to be amused by the same. Every experience can be made interesting

[345] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or I*, 298.
[346] Ibid, 294.

through this poetic recollecting-forgetting, and boredom can be avoided through this project of romanticizing existence.

When properly enacted, this twofold art of recollecting and forgetting maintains the balance between pure fantasy and pure realism, but thereby evinces a particular perception of and relationship to actuality. A disproportionate employment of either art would compromise this balance: excessive forgetting in the absence of recollecting would tend toward fantasy, while recollecting without a concurrent forgetting would produce an overly realistic representation. In the balance of these arts, actuality assumes a particular position; the aesthete does not feel bound to view its life and its experiences as they actually are, such that the intensive form of crop rotation requires a disengagement and disregard for actuality. Recollecting and forgetting are precisely means of distancing oneself from actuality, so as to be able to freely recreate it. Successful crop rotation, accordingly, involves a depreciation of actuality, such that the aesthete feels no respect toward the same:

> Thus *nil admirari* [marvel at nothing] is the proper wisdom of life. 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.[347]

Actuality is invalidated within this strategy of crop rotation, to the extent that the former is viewed only as providing the material for the aesthete's poiesis. The aesthete feels no obligation to represent life as it actually is; instead, one's actual experiences are only raw material to be freely recast or ignored in the imaginary construction, and such experiences represent "inexhaustible material for amusement."[348] Here, the worldlessness characteristic of romanticism is present; the aesthetic method of crop rotation involves an

[347] Ibid, 293.
[348] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 159.

ironic relation to actuality, such that one's concrete situation is acknowledged only on the condition that it is interesting. Harries notes:

> Implicit in the search for the interesting is thus a rejection of the place we have been assigned by the situation in which we find ourselves. The search for the interesting is essentially a flight from reality. Reality furnishes only the point of departure, only the occasion.[349]

The disparity between the poetic construction and the actual world is not a concern for the aesthete, to the extent that the latter is dedicated solely to amusement.

For the aesthete, the metric that determines the successful application of these faculties of forgetting and recollecting is not the accuracy of the narrative, for one's actual life tends to be boring and an accurate representation of such a life would be just as boring; rather, since the purpose of the intensive method of crop rotation is to avoid boredom, the successful application of the arts of recollection and forgetting is indicated by the amusing nature of the narrative. Successful crop rotation produces a narrative of one's own life that makes living interesting. Moreover, it is not simply life as a whole that becomes interesting through this method; particular experiences and activities become interesting corresponding to the way that they are perceived as contributing to this total narrative.

While the purpose of the narrative is to make life enjoyable, this enjoyment is not achieved simply through forgetting unpleasant experiences and recollecting pleasant ones. Regarding this point, the aesthetic pseudonym is careful to note that such an approach would be both an inartistic application of these capacities and one that would actually compromise enjoyment. While forgetting the unpleasant and recollecting the pleasant seems appropriate, the aesthetic pseudonym notes that, when retrospectively apprehended, even pleasant experiences become unpleasant: "the pleasant as a bygone, specifically as a

[349] Harries, 97.

bygone, has an intrinsic unpleasantness with which it can awaken a sense of loss […].”[350] Accordingly, the aesthete suggests that forgetting “ought to be related to the pleasant just as much as to the unpleasant.”[351] More to the point, though, the aesthetic pseudonym does not intend for these capacities to produce enjoyment simply by recalling pleasant experiences and ignoring unpleasant ones; instead, forgetting is supposed to purify experiences of all qualities. David Stern explains:

> Experience must be carefully controlled and manipulated so that it is relieved of any intrinsic meaning or significance it might have and becomes wholly the product of our cultivating activity.[352]

Forgetting is supposed to provide the poetic consciousness with unqualified material, which it can recollectively shape into whatever form is amusing. Actual experiences are only supposed to be the raw materials used to construct the amusing narrative of one’s life. Forgetting involves a purification of actuality, stripping away any significance from actual experiences (including their original pleasantness), so that they can be poetically imbued with a new meaning; “forgetting is the right expression for the proper assimilation that reduces experience to a sounding board.”[353]

Given its reflective nature, the intensive method of crop rotation is conditioned by the distinction between first- and second-order enjoyment. That the aesthetic “eye must be changed out” suggests that boredom is best avoided not through the endless pursuit of first-order enjoyments, which would eventually become boring, but through the cultivation of one’s reflective and poetic capacities, which constitute the organ for second-order enjoyment. As Harries notes, the intensive method of crop rotation is founded on the belief

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[350] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or I*, 294.
[351] Ibid.
[352] Stern, “Ties,” 261.
[353] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or I*, 294.

that interest is not an objective property of a given experience, but rather "interest is something with which the individual endows the situation."[354] Moreover: "The situation furnishes only the occasion. The interesting is thus a meaning discovered in what is in itself meaningless."[355] The intensive method seeks to achieve enjoyment by endowing the situation with interest through the creation of a poeticized story of one's life. What the intensive method of crop rotation recommends is not the pursuit of first-order enjoyment, which would be tied to changes in place or in activity, but a second-order enjoyment achieved through the self-referential and reflective project of composing oneself poetically.

That the intensive method is designed for the achievement of second-order enjoyment indicates that it has utility and importance only for the reflective aesthete, since, prior to reflective aestheticism, there is no consciousness of the meaninglessness of existence, of the boredom that arises therefrom, and of the concurrent desire for more reflective pleasure. Moreover, this strategy of poetically reimagining experience is viewed as necessary for the reflective aesthete's commitment to enjoying life, to the extent that ordinary experience is incapable of providing enjoyment. Kierkegaard says the following of the aesthete:

> And there is nothing to divert you; all the worldly pleasures are meaningless to you, and even if you envy the simple their foolish joy in life, you do not go in pursuit of it. Pleasure tempts you not.[356]

The aesthetic pseudonym confirms a preference for second-order enjoyment, saying: "Real enjoyment consists not in what one enjoys but in the idea."[357] He adds:

> My soul has lost possibility. If I were to wish for something, I would wish not for wealth or power but for the passion of possibility, for the eye, eternally young,

[354] Harries, 96.
[355] Ibid.
[356] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 205.
[357] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or I*, 31.

> eternally ardent, that sees possibility everywhere. Pleasure disappoints; possibility does not. And what wine is so sparkling, so fragrant, so intoxicating![358]

The intensive method stems from the need to recover an interest in the world that has been lost, as previously intimated in relation to Kierkegaard's comments on Faust. Having become disillusioned by the life of immediacy, the aesthete cannot be satisfied by the pursuit of first-order pleasures. The necessity and urgency of the intensive method stems from both the aesthete's inability to experience pleasure through first-order enjoyment and the correlative desire for some higher form of pleasure; the experienced insufficiency of immediate enjoyment, which stems from the nihilism of aesthetic consciousness, necessitates the rotation method for the production of more reflective enjoyment. It is with the disillusionment of first-order pleasure that the need to recover pleasure in a more sophisticated and artificial manner emerges. David Stern explains this transition as follows:

> The "whole previous world" lost to the aesthete is, of course, the naive and innocent enjoyment of what the world affords us, in the absence of which *poiesis* – the reflective pursuit of activity devised by the will or ego as a means of creating a second immediacy – comes more and more into the foreground.[359]

The intensive method of crop rotation is a strategy of recovery. In accordance with this method, one does not seek pleasure through immediate experiences; rather, one seeks pleasure in the poetic reconstruction of experience. This shift to reflective enjoyment evinces the Faustian need for distraction; the poiesis through which the world is reimagined precisely distracts one away from one's nihilistic perception of the world as empty. The

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[358] Ibid, 41. The aesthetic pseudonym also laments the paltriness of ordinary pleasures at ibid, 22, 27-28, 29.
[359] Stern, "Ties," 260-261.

sensuous world in its immediacy is insufficiently satisfying, but the fantastic world that the aesthete poetically constructs from it is not.

This calculating pursuit of secondary enjoyment distinguishes reflective aestheticism from more immediate forms of the same. Adherence to this rotation method makes it clear that the reflective aesthete, despite living for enjoyment, does not recklessly or unselfconsciously pursue the satisfaction of immediate desire; rather, as Mackey notes, this sophisticated aestheticism requires strict self-discipline: "The art of living is neither an impossible self-denial nor a prodigal self-squandering, but the most fastidious self-discipline."[360] The achievement of balance between recollecting and forgetting in the novelization of existence requires the careful application of what the aesthete calls the "principle of limitation."[361] Living artistically is only successful if one limits the quantity of recollection and forgetting involved in the construction of the narrative for one's life. Just as the farmer must limit agrarian activities so as to only cultivate certain crops at certain times, the aesthete must also limit what is recollected and what is forgotten in its experiences, in order to best overcome boredom. This is why recollection and forgetting are presented not simply as mental faculties but as arts – recollection and forgetting require technique. The decisions regarding what is recollected or forgotten require that one become a "meticulous observer" of one's own life, carefully weighing the poetic potential of each experience.[362]

While this method involves strict self-discipline, it does not require complete control over one's circumstances. To the contrary, the aesthetic pseudonym encourages

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[360] Mackey, 10.
[361] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or I*, 292
[362] Ibid.

openness to the accidental occurrences in life. What makes the accidental so appealing to the aesthete is the unpredictable nature of the same. One's concrete situation provides the raw material of the poetic construction. Accordingly, the more diversity in this situation, the more content for creation. The aesthete strives to be open to any situation: "By seizing the occasion – *any* occasion – and turning it to capricious ends, he makes and unmakes his situation as it pleases him."[363]

Furthermore, both this self-discipline and openness to accidental occurrences requires a guardedness against all interpersonal relationships, which further explains the aesthetic distancing from actuality; not only must one distance oneself from actuality through recollecting and forgetting, one must also distance oneself from others and avoid ethical commitments in order to avoid boredom. Specifically, the aesthetic pseudonym recommends against forming friendships, getting married, or assuming an official post.[364] The issue with such committed social relationships is twofold. First, commitment to other persons obliges one to act in certain ways, thereby limiting one's freedom and independence, which, in turn, compromises one's ability to spontaneously and arbitrarily "play shuttlecock with all existence." The aesthetic pseudonym explains:

> One must always guard against contracting a life relationship by which one can become many. [...] 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.[365]

Second, through such relationships, one often "falls into a very deadly continuity with custom."[366] Interpersonal relationships tend to be structured around predictable and

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[363] Mackey, 11.
[364] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or I*, 295, 296, 298.
[365] Ibid, 297.
[366] Ibid.

repetitious activities, which quickly become boring. For these reasons, avoiding social commitments is recommended for the facilitation of crop rotation.

To be clear, it is not the case that the aesthete recommends the complete and lasting avoidance of interpersonal relationships, especially since the latter are obviously often sources of enjoyment and amusement. The aesthetic pseudonym explains:

> But just because one stays clear of friendship, one will not for that reason live without contact with people. On the contrary, these relationships can take a deeper turn now and then, provided that one always – even though keeping the same pace for a time – has enough reserve speed to run away from them.[367]

If one is to be able to use interpersonal relationships as a source of amusement while avoiding the boredom that tends to arise therefrom, one must maintain such relationships in such a way that one could always flee from them: "The experienced farmer lets his land lie fallow now and then; the theory of social prudence recommends the same thing."[368] To minimize boredom, one must be able to preserve one's freedom and independence, so as to avoid the obligating and customary consequences of interpersonal relationships. The goal of such preservation is to avoid "foundering in any particular relationship in life […]."[369] The aesthete views the ethical life precisely as one of boredom:

> The ethical is just as boring in scholarship as in life. […] Under the esthetic sky, everything is buoyant, beautiful, transient; when ethics arrives on the scene, everything becomes harsh, angular, infinitely *langweiligt*.[370]

Avoiding such relationships allows one to live arbitrarily, which is key for avoiding boredom. Explaining the aesthetic dismissal of ethical relations, Harries says:

> [T]he bored individual is essentially amoral, not immoral. To be moral or immoral we have to recognize certain claims. We have to have a sense that certain actions ought to, or ought not to be done. To the bored individual the world does not

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367 Ibid, 295-6.
368 Ibid, 296.
369 Ibid, 295.
370 Ibid, 367.

present such oughts. It is silent. That is why he is an amoralist. Everything is allowed and nothing is worth doing.[371]

To the aesthete, the world seems devoid of all meaning, and the aesthete does not feel obligated to act in any particular way in the world, taking itself to be instead licensed to pursue amusement however it pleases.

While Kierkegaard's essay on crop rotation does not include detailed illustrations of the intensive strategy, such illustration is provided by the final essay of *Either/Or: Part I*, "The Seducer's Diary."[372] This diary is preceded by a brief introduction by the pseudonymous author of the first volume of *Either/Or*, in which the author denounces having written the diary, claiming instead to have simply found it and transcribed its content.[373] The diary itself, titled "*Commentarius perpetuus no. 4*," is written by a man named "Johannes" (no doubt an allusion to Don Giovanni/Juan), who is a reflective aesthete that has clearly mastered the art of crop rotation: "his life has been an attempt to accomplish this task of living poetically."[374] In this diary, Johannes outlines his carefully constructed project of amusing himself through the seduction of a girl named "Cordelia Wahl," combining narrative of and commentary on the events contributing to the seduction.

Because Johannes' aestheticism is reflective, his commitment to seduction is far from ordinary. Whereas a less reflective aesthete like Don Giovanni would view the goal of seduction as sexual conquest, Johannes is disillusioned by such immediate pleasure and

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[371] Harries, 93.
[372] Regarding this connection between the two essays, cf. Kemp, 6; Stern, "Ties," 263.
[373] The pseudonymous editor of *Either/Or*, Victor Eremita, says the following regarding the authorship of the diary: "The last of A's papers is a narrative titled 'The Seducer's Diary.' Here we meet new difficulties, inasmuch as A does not declare himself the author but only the editor. This is an old literary device to which I would not have much to object if it did not further complicate my own position, since one author becomes enclosed within the other like the boxes in a Chinese puzzle" (Kierkegaard, *Either/Or I*, 8-9).
[374] Ibid, 303, 304.

instead seduces for the twofold goal of avoiding boredom and achieving amusement; he says: "I fear neither comic nor tragic predicaments; the only ones I fear are the *lanweilige* ones."[375] Correlatively, Johannes is committed to the seduction of Cordelia, because such seduction furnishes him with interesting content that can accommodate his primary project of living poetically. Highlighting his difference from a Don Giovanni, Johannes explains: "I do not care at all to possess the girl in the external sense but wish to enjoy her artistically."[376]

At no point is Johannes concerned with his relationship with Cordelia, rather, as Taylor notes, Johannes "seeks to bring about *interesting* situations that he can observe […]," and it is for the sake of such observation that this aesthete strives at all.[377] Prior to even becoming involved with Cordelia, Johannes has already projected some idea what it would take to make the relationship interesting for him. He is not interested simply in seduction or in sexual conquest. Instead, he devises a complicated plan for his relationship with Cordelia. First, he wants to become engaged to Cordelia without himself proposing to her. He accomplishes this by befriending Cordelia's guardian (i.e., her aunt) and explaining to her his difficulty in finding a suitable partner, in response to which the guardian suggests that Johannes marry Cordelia and arranges their engagement. Second, once they are engaged, Johannes wants Cordelia to freely decide to break off the engagement, while at the same time fully devoting herself to him. He accomplishes this by leaving books of poetry at her house that emphasize the erotic dimensions of love, knowing that she will peruse these books in his absence, by taking her to parties for

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[375] Ibid, 328.
[376] Ibid, 372.
[377] Taylor, 168.

engaged couples, knowing that such parties showcase the paltriness of the institution of marriage, and by even arguing with her about the importance of marriage, albeit designing his arguments to fall flat and thereby serve to convince Cordelia of the unimportance of the institution. Johannes does all of this in an attempt to subtly influence Cordelia to come to the belief that "love does not need an external bond, which is only a hindrance," at which point he hopes that she will break off the engagement out of her unhindered love for him.[378] Johannes works to bring all of this about for no other reason than that he happens to find this series of events interesting for reflection.

Johannes is not committed to the seduction of Cordelia because he finds the activities and results of seduction themselves to be interesting; rather what is interesting is the narrative of his own life that he composes for himself from out of the elements of his actual relationship, and it is for the sake of acquiring material for this narrative that he is committed to the project of seduction. Westphal explains: "But the diarist is so highly reflective that most if not all of his delight in seducing Cordelia comes from watching himself do it and writing himself up."[379] Accordingly, Johannes does not view seduction simply as a way to attract a woman; rather, as Mackey explains, seduction for Johannes "is a kind of *poiesis* worked in the medium of woman's sexuality."[380] For this reason, Johannes denounces being called a seducer, saying instead: "I am an esthete, an eroticist […]."[381] Kierkegaard explains: "he was much too endowed intellectually to be a seducer in the ordinary sense."[382]

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[378] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or I*, 425.
[379] Westphal, 23.
[380] Mackey, 26.
[381] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or I*, 368.
[382] Ibid, 306.

That Johannes' account of his seduction is presented in the form of a diary is not incidental but is paramount to the kind of enjoyment he seeks. Peder Jothen notes: "The form of the text is crucial: it is a diary, meaning its aesthetic genre is itself an imaginative retelling of the seductive acts […]."[383] Johannes pursues a reflective enjoyment in the poetic perception of the relationship, and the diary itself is the manifestation of this enjoyment. The first-order enjoyments of the seduction are the particular conversations, exchanged love-letters, encounters, caresses, and so on. The second-order enjoyment, with which Johannes is primarily concerned, is the self-observation maintained during the seduction – it is Johannes' poetic reflection upon himself in the act of seduction. It is for the sake of this second-order enjoyment that Johannes seduces Cordelia; the seduction facilitates a project of living poetically, through which the seducer makes his life interesting for himself and thereby avoids boredom. It is precisely his perception of the relationship – informed just as must by his imagination as by actual events – that is pleasing to Johannes.

To the extent that the diary is a manifestation of Johannes' poetic imagination, it is by no means an accurate representation of the relationship: the "diary is not historically accurate or strictly narrative; it is not indicative but subjunctive."[384] The diary is not simply a retelling of events that constitute the seduction of Cordelia; instead, the diary represents Johannes' poetic consciousness over the course of the seduction. Johannes possesses a "poetic nature, which is not abundant enough or, if you please, not deficient enough to separate poetry and actuality from each other."[385] Moreover: "With a sharply developed

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[383] Peder Jothen, *Kierkegaard, Aesthetics, and Selfhood: The Art of Subjectivity* (Burlingon: Ashgate, 2014), 176.
[384] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or I*, 304.
[385] Ibid, 305.

organ for discovering the interesting in life, he has known how to find it and after having found it has continually reproduced his experiences half poetically."[386]

Appropriate for the intensive method of crop rotation, there is no ethical concern for Cordelia. David Stern explains her role within Johannes' project:

> At this extreme development of aesthetic reflection, Cordelia the individual seems no longer needed, no longer even genuinely present. For Johannes, the radically active ego, it is not Cordelia as such, not the actual person encountered in lived experience, who is of interest. Rather it is the activities – Johannes' plans, schemes, tactics, campaigns, etc. – that are crucial […].[387]

Johannes exhibits no ethical concern for anyone described in the diary, but instead he is wholly concerned with creating interesting situations; the primary question guiding his life is the following: "Has the interesting been preserved at all times?"[388] Johannes maintains a poetic distance from actuality, viewing it merely as the source of material for his poetic invention; in this way: "He did not belong to the world of actuality, and yet he had very much to do with it."[389]

Johannes is a reflective aesthete who employs the intensive method of crop rotation to avoid boredom through numerous amorous drifts; his life is lived artistically through a narrative of love. Amorous relationships never become boring for this seducer, because every affair fulfills a different poetically constructed narrative. The goals of the Johannes' various affairs are not uniform; rather, each affair has a unique goal based on the kind of fulfillment that Johannes is inclined to pursue at a given moment. Johannes writes in his diary:

> The art is to be as receptive as possible to impressions, to know what impression one is making and what impression one has of each girl. In that way, one can be in

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[386] Ibid, 304.
[387] Stern, "Ties," 266.
[388] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or I*, 437-438.
[389] Ibid, 306.

> love with many girls at the same time, because one is in love in a different way with each one. To love one girl is too little; to love all is superficiality; to know oneself and to love as many as possible, to let one's soul conceal all the powers of love inside itself so that each receives its specific nourishment while the consciousness nevertheless embraces the whole – that is enjoyment, that is living.[390]

The task of this seducer is to maximize amusement by carefully constructing romantic narratives for each potential affair. In this way, each additional affair continues to be interesting. The main story of seduction in the diary does not culminate so much in the sexual consummation of the relationship between Johannes and Cordelia, but in the fact that Cordelia maintains her love for Johannes despite having broken their engagement herself. The reflection upon the structure of the relationship is what Johannes finds pleasing.

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[390] Ibid, 361. This is probably an allusion to *Don Giovanni*, *Lucinde*, or both. In *Don Giovanni*, the titular character says: "It's all love; whoever is faithful only to one is cruel to others; I, who feel such ample sentiment in myself, love all of them; and since women don't comprehend things, they call my natural goodness deceit" (Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *Mozart's Don Giovanni*, trans. Ellen H. Bleiler (New York: Dover, 1964), 67). In *Lucinde*, Julius (one of the novel's protagonists) says: "Actually, one ought to play at loving all women. […] Now, listen carefully to what I'm saying; not actually all of them, but only those who are lovable and whom one happens to run across" (Friedrich Schlegel, *Lucinde and the Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 73).

CHAPTER 4. THE ETHICAL LIFE-VIEW AND THE OVERCOMING OF AESTHETICISM AND ITS BORDOM

4.1 Overview of the Aesthetic and Ethical Views of Life

The reflectively aesthetic life, with its pervasive boredom and desperate compulsion to seek distraction through a form of poetically living that involves total subordination of ethical concerns to amusement, is sharply contrasted by the life-view presented by Kierkegaard in the second volume of *Either/Or*. This volume is written from the perspective of an ethicist – identified in the text as "[Judge] William" – and expresses Kierkegaard's ethical life-view.[391] The second volume of *Either/Or* consists of letters written specifically to the aesthetic pseudonymous writer of the first volume; through his pseudonymous character of Judge William, Kierkegaard attempts to explain to this aesthete how the aesthetic life involves an inadequate form of self-consciousness and how the ethical life-view constitutes an alternative lifestyle to that of aestheticism. In addition to critically analyzing aestheticism, the Judge advances his own ethical view of life in his letters. This life-view revolves around a conception of self-determination that accentuates personal freedom and responsibility and ultimately constitutes an alternative cure to boredom – one that requires a fundamental shift in self-perception, rather than a mere masking of the experience through distracting fantastic representations of one's life. The ethical volume of *Either/Or* has a twofold goal of providing a description of the aesthetic life-view that in part diagnoses the source of aesthetic despair, depression, and boredom and of showing how the ethical life-view overcomes the limitations of aestheticism. Indirectly, this presentation of the ethical life-view also clarifies the sense in which irony

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[391] Following the general trend in Kierkegaard scholarship, the term *ethicist* refers to both one who prescribes the adoption of an ethical life-view and one who instantiates such a life-view – Judge William is both.

is to be mastered, insofar as it outlines the proper relation to actuality that the individual person is supposed to maintain in order to overcome nihilism and alienation.

In explication of the ethical life-view, Kierkegaard presentatively juxtaposes the ethical view of life to that of aestheticism, advancing the ethical view with a simultaneous critical analysis of reflective aestheticism. Incorporating elements from his dissertative critique of Romanticism, Kierkegaard suggests that aestheticism represents an inadequate view of selfhood, which, more determinately, includes an inadequate view of freedom, possibility, action, and responsibility. To the extent that the aesthete misunderstands these essential features of selfhood, the aesthetic person lives a life characterized by despair, depression, and boredom. In Kierkegaard's account, the aesthetic life-view stems from a hyperbolic conception of agency – one that overemphasizes the negative moment of freedom, wherewith the person is liberated from acting merely in accord with its natural and social order. The aesthetic individual has achieved an awareness of itself as free, such that it recognizes itself as possessing the capacity to act contrary to natural tendencies or socially determined norms, but the aesthete has not found any positive justification for acting in any particular way and is left in a state of emptiness. The aesthetic personality revolves around a nihilistic perception that all activity is ultimately pointless, such that it does not matter how one acts, and this nihilism evinces a specific conception of freedom: the aesthetic person perceives itself as free from any source of obligation, such that action becomes pointless. The aesthete conceives of freedom purely negatively, attributing to itself a freedom from all compulsion but failing to recognize any positive reasons for acting. As Kierkegaard notes, this conception of freedom has consequences for how the aesthetic personality orients itself in its world. Since the aesthete views itself as free from

all sources of obligation, it does not recognize itself as bound to its actual situation in any decisive way. Furthermore, it does not even perceive itself as responsible for its own actions, since it considers itself free from that as well. The aesthete does not admit any responsibility for its life or for its deeds.

The ethical pseudonym argues that this aesthetic life-view results in despair, depression, and boredom, insofar as the aesthetic life has no integrity and consistency. In the ethicist's view, a life has integrity and consistency only when it is positively oriented around particular projects, but having such projects requires commitment, which the aesthete avoids. There is no integrity and consistency in the aesthetic life, because the aesthetic individual does not accept any responsibility for how it shapes itself and its world through its actions, preferring instead to maintain a distance from all forms of commitments, so as to be able to freely pursue amusement. Since the aesthete submits to no sense of obligation or responsibility, all actions are viewed as trivial, and, consequently, the aesthete is bored with existence. Because life is boring, the aesthete yearns for another way of living but cannot see a reason to commit to anything, the result of which is depression. Kierkegaard understands depression as precisely the feeling of being constrained or trapped by one's own life-view.[392] Finally, the aesthete despairs; given the pervasive experience of boredom and depression, the aesthete no longer wishes to be itself.[393]

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[392] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 188-189.
[393] Ibid, 218-219

4.2 Self-Choice and Ethical Personality

Kierkegaard presents the ethical views of life and of action explicitly in contrast to the views advanced in the first volume of *Either/Or*. The aesthete views actions as pointless and inconsequential, claiming that "the quintessence of all the wisdom of life" is the recognition that it does not matter what one does, insofar as every course of action is equally pointless and terminates in a regret for having chosen at all.[394] In Kierkegaard's assessment, this view stems from a misunderstanding of the nature of selfhood – a misunderstanding that is corrected in the ethical view of life, such that the latter represents a more advanced stage of personal development by expressing a more adequate conception of what it is to be a self. The aesthetic understanding of action as trivial renders choosing or not choosing to be a matter of indifference, culminating the following belief, which highlights the indifference of action and the consequent boredom: "I can either do this or do that, but whichever I do is equally absurd – *ergo*, I do nothing at all."[395]

In contradistinction to the aesthetic belief in the triviality of action, the ethical pseudonym emphasizes the importance of action for projects of self-development. The ethicist's theory of agency revolves around the concept of "self-choice," which is presented both to critique aestheticism and to found the ethical life-view. In the ethical theory of action, there is, as Taylor notes, a distinction between two "levels" of choice that constitute the agency of personality.[396] At one level, there is what is ordinarily understood as a choice: "the deliberate resolution to attempt to realize one's possibilities, or to strive to achieve some goal."[397] At this level, one might choose to travel to Berlin or stay at home,

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[394] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or I*, 39.
[395] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 170.
[396] Taylor, 186.
[397] Ibid, 195-6.

for instance. Kierkegaard views such particular and concrete decisions as grounded in a more fundamental kind of choice – one in which one is said "to choose oneself." This self-choice is not a choice of one particular self from out of a manifold of possible selves; at this level, it is not that one chooses *this* self or *that* self, but instead it is a decision to be the self that one is – it is a choosing to be oneself. Taylor explains this conception of self-choice in the following:

> This is the permeation of the self's concrete actuality through self-reflection and the acceptance of that self as one's own. It involves the self's recognition of one's strengths, weaknesses, evil, and one's close connection with the surrounding world.[398]

While the reflective or recognitive aspect that Taylor highlights makes self-choice appear similar to mere self-knowledge, Kierkegaard considers self-choice to be more than an act of contemplation. He explains the difference between self-knowledge and self-choice in the following manner:

> The ethical individual knows himself, but this knowing is not simply contemplation, for then the individual comes to be defined according to his necessity. It is a collecting of oneself, which itself is an action, and this is why I have with aforethought used the expression "to choose oneself" instead of "to know oneself."[399]

The choice of self involves not only a knowledge of the various properties that constitute one's identity, but also a conscious and freely enacted acceptance or affirmation of oneself as having those properties, such that self-choice has a decisional dimension that is absent is mere self-knowledge. Kierkegaard understands this self-choice to ground the ordinary type of choice, to the extent one that can deliberately strive to realize one's possibilities if

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[398] Ibid, 195.

[399] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 258.

one knows and accepts who one is generally: "The original choice is forever present in every succeeding choice."[400]

For Kierkegaard, self-choice is the decisive and preeminent condition for personhood, such that one becomes a person only by recognizing that one is free and by correlatively assuming responsibility for oneself. He explains:

> Just as an heir, even if he were heir to the treasures of the whole world, does not possess them before he comes of age, so the richest personality is nothing before he has chosen himself; and on the other hand even what might be called the poorest personality is everything when he has chosen himself, for the greatness is not to be this or that but to be oneself, and every human being can be this if he so wills it.[401]

> The choice is crucial for the content of the personality; through the choice the personality submerges itself in that which is being chosen, and when it does not choose, it withers away in atrophy.[402]

For Kierkegaard, one can never passively or immediately be a person, but rather one must freely and deliberately choose to be a person and thereby assume responsibility for oneself. For this reason, he implies that the aesthete is not a person in the strict sense but possesses latent personality. Kierkegaard understands self-choice as a recognition and acceptance of oneself as being both a free agent and responsible for one's agency: "If you consider [a person] ethically, you consider him according to his freedom."[403] Personality is achieved when one assumes responsibility for oneself, and this assumption entails the free recognition and acceptance of one's self, which is why Kierkegaard calls it a "self-choice."

This self-choice is the origin of a properly ethical life-view, which, for Kierkegaard, is not achieved through adherence to certain maxims, but rather it is achieved by maintaining a certain perception of and relation to oneself. In advancing his conception of

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[400] Ibid, 219.
[401] Ibid, 177.
[402] Ibid, 163.
[403] Ibid, 273.

an ethical way of life, Kierkegaard is not at all interested in recommending or prohibiting particular actions; instead, his emphasis is on viewing oneself as the sole author of one's actions; in explanation of the self-choice, he says that "it is not so much a matter of choosing between willing good or willing evil as of choosing to will [...]."[404] Kierkegaard thinks that the achievement of the ethical life-view depends upon how one considers one's actions, rather than on what one does. As George Connell explains: "One does not become virtuous by and through particular virtuous actions; rather, one chooses to be ethical and only then is one able to carry out particular ethical actions."[405] Consequently, considered in terms of their particular actions, the ethically qualified person may not appear any different from the aesthetic person: "the person who lives ethically may do exactly the same as one who lives esthetically [...]."[406] The only difference between ethical and aesthetic individuals is how they view themselves as agents, not what they do. For Kierkegaard, the ethical is not a lifestyle dedicated to adherence to particular maxims or to making objective judgments concerning the moral quality of actions. Rather, the essence of the ethical life-view is the assumption of responsibility for who one is. Mackey explains: "Ethics, for Judge Wilhelm, is not a matter of values but of being. It is not in the first place a question of following a certain set of moral rules; it is the determination to become a certain kind of person."[407] Connell adds, the ethical life-view is concerned more with character formation, and it views "character formation as a basic action [...]."[408]

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[404] Ibid, 169.
[405] George B. Connell, "Judge William's Theonomous Ethics," from: *Foundations of Kierkegaard's Vision of Community: Religion, Ethics, and Politics in Kierkegaard*, ed. George B. Connell and C. Steven Evans (London: Humanities Press, 1992), 57.
[406] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 257.
[407] Mackey, 56.
[408] Connell, 58.

The self-choice, then, is primarily an appropriative act, whereby the person assumes authority over itself and its actions. Accordingly, the ethicist's theory of personality involves a strong conception of autonomy. While, in moments of deliberation, the ethical person may be influenced by various external forces, such as natural inclination or social pressure, this person nonetheless takes itself to be responsible for its submission to the influence of any external force. Borrowing Kantian terminology, through the self-choice, an individual adopts the view of its will as being pathologically affected, but not pathologically necessitated: while the person may be influenced by natural or social forces, the person is nonetheless free to act in accordance with these external incentives or not.[409] In Kierkegaard's theory, the person who has chosen itself consciously and freely takes possession of itself and thereby views itself as tasked with determinately shaping itself by negotiating the various influences upon its will; the person is aware of its influences and must decide how to act in relation thereto. Regarding the person who assumes this self-relation, Kierkegaard says:

> He then possesses himself as an individual who has these capacities, these passions, these inclinations, these habits, who is subject to these external influences, who is influenced in one direction thus and in another thus. Here he then possesses himself as a task in such a way that it is chiefly to order, shape, temper, inflame, control – in short, to produce an evenness in the soul, a harmony, which is the fruit of the personal virtues.[410]

Once personality takes responsibility for itself, it cannot excuse its behavior by appealing to the influence of external forces, since it is responsible for choosing to let itself succumb to any such force. The ethical personality views all of its actions as unambiguously belonging to it by virtue of its recognition of freedom: "when the passion of freedom is

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[409] Regarding this distinction, cf. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), A534/B562; "Critique of Practical Reason," 5:32.
[410] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 262.

awakened, it is jealous of itself and by no means allows what belongs to a person and what does not to remain unspecified and confused."[411] The ethical personality views itself as the sole author of its life, such that it alone is responsible for its activity and inactivity.

Furthermore, in this appropriative self-choice, one does not choose oneself in a finite manner, in the sense that one chooses oneself under certain qualifications or that one affirms certain properties at the exclusion of others. Rather, as Connell notes, the ethical personality emerges through an unconditional and total affirmation of oneself:

> [I]n choosing oneself, it is not the particular characteristics that one has that motivate the choice, it is the simple fact that one has them. It is not the "content" of the choice – that one is rich or poor, clever or slow – that matter in the first instance, it is that those features stand in a certain formal relation to the self: that the self can say of them: "mine." To choose oneself is to take up a stance of responsible attention toward oneself as one finds oneself.[412]

One does not choose oneself because one is rich or healthy or the like; rather, in the self-choice, one takes responsibility for oneself as such, irrespective of the particular qualities that are possessed by that self. All of one's properties – for better or worse – are appropriated in the self-choice, such that the ethical personality assumes responsibility for them all.

4.3 The Ethical Conception of Selfhood – The Natural and Spiritual Selves

The enactment of the appropriative self-choice involves a significant shift in the person's conception of itself and of its actions. Prior to the self-choice, one perceives one's identity as being dictated by circumstance, by the various life-events that befall oneself, and by external forces over which one has no control. The ethically accentuated

[411] Ibid, 223.
[412] Connell, 60.

personality, however, takes responsibility for these accidental features; the adoption of an ethical attitude toward oneself involves taking ownership of one's life, such that one considers oneself as solely responsible for one's existence, even though one did not create oneself. Peter Mehl summarizes this point in the following: "Shaping one's self self-consciously…is the core of the ethical."[413] Kierkegaard stresses this by explaining that the distinction between accidental and essential properties assumes a new significance for the ethical personality. Of the ethical person, he says:

> Everything that is posited in his freedom belongs to him essentially, however accidental it may seem to be; everything that is not posited in his freedom is accidental, however essential it may seem to be.[414]

The individual becomes ethical "not by brushing off his accidental qualities, but by remaining in them and ennobling them. But he ennobles them by choosing them."[415] The ethical person views its identity as self-determined: its essence is not simply dictated by nature but determined through one's freedom. The ethical identity is determined by what it freely and deliberately posits as its own.

In explanation of this shift in self-perception, Kierkegaard outlines two different conceptions of selfhood – the natural and the spiritual. Prior to the ethical choice, one perceives one's self merely as a product of nature, whereby one's identity is necessarily determined. This natural self is determined by one's body, one's physical and temporal location in the world, one's innate capacities and talents, and so on – whatever properties one has naturally. In this view, one's identity is considered simply to be a "specific product

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[413] Peter J. Mehl, *Thinking Through Kierkegaard: Existential Identity in a Pluralistic World* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 159.
[414] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 260.
[415] Ibid, 262.

of a specific environment."[416] Corresponding to this perception of oneself merely as a natural product is a mundane form of living, wherewith "a person is bound up with all the earthly life […]."[417] To the extent that the self is viewed purely naturally, being a self entails simply taking care of one's natural needs and desires. Kierkegaard says that, for such a personality, "spirit," that is, the state of selfhood wherein one posits oneself as free and responsible, "is not qualified as spirit but is immediately qualified."[418] When spirit is immediately qualified, the ethical personality is only latently present in the individual; this individual has the capacity to choose itself, but this appropriation has not yet been enacted. In this state of immediacy, being oneself is considered to be a purely natural occurrence, rather than as something that one achieves through an assumption of responsibility, such that, in this immediacy, "spirit is still not qualified as spirit but as a gift."[419] From the natural perspective, being a self is seen as gift from nature, which entails that one's identity is viewed as something already produced, rather than as something that one is to produce.

To this natural conception of selfhood, Kierkegaard juxtaposes a spiritual one, wherewith one freely and deliberately chooses to be the self that one is. As spirit, one takes responsibility for the self that one naturally is, which entails that the self is precisely no longer viewed as a mere product of nature, but as something over which one has authority and for which one is thereby responsible: "As a product [a person] is squeezed into the forms of actuality; in the choice he makes himself elastic, transforms everything exterior into interiority."[420] When the individual engages in this self-appropriation, "he possesses

[416] Ibid, 251.
[417] Ibid, 188-9.
[418] Ibid, 180.
[419] Ibid, 181.
[420] Ibid.

himself as posited by himself – that is, as chosen by himself, as free […].”[421] Through this act of self-positing, whereby one takes responsibility for oneself, spirit emerges. Kierkegaard describes this self-positing in the following manner: “whereas nature is created from nothing, whereas I myself as immediate personality am created from nothing, I as free spirit […] am born through my choosing myself.”[422] In self-choice, one does not create oneself from nothing but posits oneself, in the sense that one accepts authority over a self that one did not oneself create. In the state of immediacy, one’s identity is a dispersed set of empirical determinations that belong to one naturally. To achieve spiritual unity, the person has “to gather itself together out of this dispersion, so to speak, and to transfigure itself in itself […].”[423] This gathering and transfiguration is achieved when the self chooses to view itself as something that it freely determines and for which it is responsible for determining.

Whereas the natural self views its identity as being necessarily determined by nature, the spiritual self recognizes that it determines its own identity through its choices, such that self-determination is the defining feature of ethical personality. Kierkegaard uses this distinction to highlight the difference between aesthetic and ethical conceptions of self. Whereas the aesthetic forms of life maintain a natural view of the self, to the extent that they view the meaning and purpose of their lives as determined by natural circumstance, the ethical form of life is achieved through the self-positing of spirit, whereby one takes responsibility for one’s own self-determination. In the ethical life, it is precisely through one’s deliberate activity and inactivity that one develops oneself: “Here his task is not to

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[421] Ibid, 222.
[422] Ibid, 215-16.
[423] Ibid, 189.

form himself but to act, and yet he forms himself at the same time [...]."[424] By assuming responsibility for itself, the ethical person views "the process of actualizing himself" to be its preeminent task or duty, to which all others are ancillary: "he possesses himself as a task that has been assigned to him, even though it became this by his own choosing."[425] The primary goal of the ethical life is self-determination, and this task determines all subordinate goals, in the sense that the latter are viewed as particular ways in which one determines oneself. For example, an individual's particular choice to travel to Berlin in order to study philosophy is a manifestation of who that individual is as a person; this choice to travel is self-determining.

Despite the shift from the natural conception of selfhood to the spiritual one that is effected by the appropriative self-choice, Kierkegaard paradoxically says that the self changes but is the same: the ethical person "does not become someone other than he was before, but he becomes himself. The consciousness integrates, and he is himself."[426] In the self-choice, it is precisely the self that one already is that is chosen, yet this self assumes new significance:

> This self that he chooses in this way is infinitely concrete, for it is he himself, and yet it is absolutely different from his former self, for he has chosen it absolutely. This self has not existed before, because it came into existence through the choice, and yet it has existed, for it was indeed "himself."[427]

One becomes a "free spirit" when one consciously and responsibly accepts the natural self that one already is. In this way, the self must already exist before the choice, but, in another sense, it is also brought into existence through the choice:

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[424] Ibid, 263.
[425] Ibid, 259, 262. Regarding this notion of being oneself as a task, cf. ibid, 251, 260.
[426] Ibid, 177.
[427] Ibid, 215.

> What I choose, I do not posit, for if it were not posited I could not choose it, and yet if I did not posit it by choosing it then I would not choose it. It is, for if it were not I could not choose it; it is not, for it first comes into existence through my choosing it, and otherwise my choice would be an illusion.[428]

Because this self-choice involves an affirmation of one's self, albeit in a way that imbues that self with a new significance without thereby changing its qualities, Kierkegaard speaks of self-choice as a "transfiguration."[429] Of the ethical person, he explains: "He remains himself, exactly the same that he was before, down to the most insignificant feature, and yet he becomes another, for the choice penetrates everything and changes it." A person may be, for example, a brother or a Danish citizen, and these properties are determined by one's birth. When such a person chooses himself, he does not thereby cease being a brother or a Dane, but he does view these properties in a new way – not as merely accidental features of his identity that have been determined by some external force, but as properties that he freely affirms and for which he takes responsibility. He may or may not be a loving brother or upstanding citizen, but, either way, through the self-choice, he makes himself responsible for those social relationships. Through self-choice, these properties are no longer viewed as determined by nature, but as being posited by oneself. Before and after the self-choice, one has the same properties, but the significance of those properties has changed. In this sense, the self-choice involves a transfiguration of oneself.

Kierkegaard uses this notion of a freely chosen appropriation of oneself primarily to distinguish the aesthetic and the ethical stages of life. The ethical life-view involves a self-choice, through which one takes responsibility for the self that one is. This entails that

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[428] Ibid, 213-214.
[429] Ibid, 189, 210, 223, 229, 253, 271.

the ethical personality views self-development as a deliberate and imputable process, which is precisely rejected by the reflective aesthete. Kierkegaard explains:

> What is the esthetic in a person, and what is the ethical? To that I would respond: the esthetic in a person is that by which he spontaneously and immediately is what he is; the ethical is that by which he becomes what he becomes.[430]

Even though the reflective aesthete recognizes itself as negatively free, it does not view self-determination as its task. Without having taken responsibility for personal development, the aesthetic individual does not think that it determines its identity through its action, but instead views itself as liberated from everything, including its actions and the consequences of the same. Only by assuming responsibility for self-development does one advance beyond an aesthetic life-view and attain an ethical existence. With the self-choice, the ethicist recognizes that one's actions determine oneself, such that activities have significance for the ethicist that they do not possess for the aesthete. While the aesthete does compose itself poetically, it does so for amusement and not for the purpose of self-development; the aesthete maintains distance between itself and its activity, and, since it does not view itself as committed to its own actions in any decisive way, it does not engage in genuine self-determination.

Stressing the significance of activity for the ethical life, Kierkegaard says that it is only through the self-choice that one's life takes on ethical qualifications, such that one views one's own actions as good or evil. The ethical pseudonym explains:

> Rather than designating the choice between good and evil, my Either/Or[431] designates the choice by which one chooses good and evil or rules them out. Here the question is under what qualifications one will view all existence and personally live.[432]

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[430] Ibid, 178.
[431] Kierkegaard's Judge often speaks of the self-choice as an "Either/Or," in the sense that one can either choose oneself or not.
[432] Ibid, 169. Cf. ibid, 178.

When the individual chooses itself ethically, it takes responsibility for itself, "so that every movement he makes is accompanied by a consciousness of responsibility for himself […]."[433] Accordingly, as Connell says, "the original choice is the choice to exist in a moral universe. All individual moral actions are in essence reaffirmations and applications of that fundamental choice."[434] Lower levels of aestheticism view life through the categories of pleasure and pain, while reflective aestheticism views life through those of interest and boredom.[435] In general, the aesthete lives in "the realm of pre-ethical norms," according to Wesphal; for the aesthete, "Ethical categories are simply inoperative."[436] The categories of good and evil only become decisive qualifications of life for a personality that has made the self-choice, since only this personality takes responsibility for itself and thereby for how it chooses to act. Actions are imbued with moral significance through the self-choice; "the ethical […] nevertheless is essentially that which makes the choice a choice."[437] Accordingly, the ethical theory presented by Kierkegaard is not concerned with determining which actions are good or evil, but rather it is concerned with explaining how personality develops so as to become ethically significant.[438] He says: "Therefore, it is not so much a matter of choosing between willing good or willing evil as of choosing to will, but that in turn posits good and evil."[439] Moreover: "Therefore, the point is still not that of

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[433] Ibid, 248.
[434] Connell, 57.
[435] Taylor, 168 (fn).
[436] Westphal, 22, 23.
[437] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 168.
[438] The pseudonymous author explicitly states: "It was never my purpose to present a doctrine of duty. What I wanted to do was to show how the ethical in the mixed territories is so far from depriving life of its beauty that it expressly gives it beauty" (ibid, 323).
[439] Ibid, 169.

choosing something; the point is not the reality of that which is chosen but the reality of choosing."[440]

4.4 Absolute Choice and the Eternal Validity of the Self

Kierkegaard further explicates this theory of self-choice by stating that the choice is "an absolute choice, for only by choosing absolutely can one choose the ethical."[441] Despite whatever philosophical and religious connotations are associated with notions of absoluteness, Kierkegaard understands the absolute choice merely to be the affirmation of one's person as an unconditioned value, to which all else is subordinated. Kierkegaard's position is that an absolute choice is central for ethical existence, since it is in this choice that one recognizes and affirms one's inherent dignity as a person. Kierkegaard understands the self-choice to be absolute in a twofold manner, which he explains in the following manner:

> 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.[442]

First, the choice of self is absolute in the sense that one is not choosing oneself in a determinate manner, but rather, on a more fundamental level, one is choosing to be a freely and responsibly acting self; the self-choice is absolute because it is not limited to choosing the particularity of the self, but involves the person choosing simply to affirm its validity as an agent, whereby particular choices become significant for that person. The ethical pseudonym explains: "The Either/Or I have advanced is, therefore, in a certain sense

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[440] Ibid, 176.
[441] Ibid, 177.
[442] Ibid, 214.

absolute, for it is between choosing and not choosing."[443] Second, the choice is described as absolute because its object is absolute. In this context, Kierkegaard explicitly and repeatedly identifies the self that one chooses as the absolute: "I myself am the absolute; I posit the absolute, and I myself am the absolute."[444] What is chosen in the choice is the self, albeit in a specific sense – as absolute. John Elrod summarizes this notion of an absolute choice well in the following:

> One merely chooses to choose. That is to say, the individual does not choose himself as something in particular, e.g., a teacher, husband, politician, musician, revolutionary, or whatever, but he chooses himself in the much more abstract sense of being a finite being who is faced by an absolute and infinite ethical requirement. […] It is the acceptance of oneself as radically free and responsible for oneself […].[445]

In the self-choice, personality does not choose itself in a purely finite way, but instead chooses itself as absolute.

This notion of an absolute self as the object of an absolute choice is clarified by Kierkegaard's connecting absoluteness with his conception of inner teleology: "The personality appears as the absolute that has its teleology in itself."[446] In explanation of this latter concept, Kierkegaard says the following:

> Now, when I say that the individual has his teleology within himself, this may not be misinterpreted to mean that the individual is central or that the individual in the abstract sense is supposed to be sufficient unto himself […]. The individual has his teleology within himself, has inner teleology, is himself his teleology; his self is then the goal toward which he strives.[447]

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[443] Ibid, 177.
[444] Ibid, 212; cf. ibid, 219, 224, 263, 265.
[445] Elrod, John, *Being and Existence in Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Works* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 133.
[446] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 263.
[447] Ibid, 274.

One has inner teleology and is thereby absolute when being oneself is one's ultimate goal – when being oneself is taken as the unconditional task of one's existence. Personality is absolute when it "is its own objective."[448] This "autotelic" self, as Harries calls it, is described as being absolute because striving to be oneself is a value that is not determined relative to anything beyond itself.[449] Kierkegaard's designation of the self as absolute in this context just means that it is viewed as an end-in-itself. While a person can be used as a means for particular ends, from the ethical standpoint, it nonetheless retains an intrinsic and inexhaustible dignity.

Being such an end-in-itself imbues the self with what Kierkegaard variously calls the "absolute" or "eternal validity of the personality."[450] This validity is absolute, because it is not conditioned by anything. It is eternal, because one strives to be oneself perpetually, which is to say that this validity is not limited by or to any temporal condition; when one chooses oneself, "he then has himself as his task under an eternal responsibility."[451] While the use of this terminology may sound as if this self-choice has religious significance, in this context, Kierkegaard speaks of this eternality in a non-religious manner. The ethical personality views itself as having eternal validity, in the sense that one's identity has a worth that is not limited or determined by one's temporal existence (either in whole or in part).

Accordingly, this conception of eternal validity is introduced as another way to distinguish the ethical and aesthetic evaluations of life. Edward Mooney explains the concept in the following way:

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[448] Ibid, 265.
[449] Harries, 127.
[450] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 219, 214. Cf., ibid, 189, 190, 206, 209, 210, 211, 213, 266.
[451] Ibid, 270.

> This validity does not vary with time and place and so is deemed 'eternal.' The moral values animating everyday practices, and the moral self that they underwrite, will have a depth and duration greater than the instant to instant transitoriness or whimsy of 'merely' immediate, aesthetic experience.[452]

With his conception of an absolute self possessing an inner teleology, Kierkegaard is distinguishing two ways of orienting one's life toward its fundamental goals. In the case of ethical personality, one takes oneself as having absolute value, such that one's worth is not determined by anything that is accidental or transient: "there is something within him that in relation to everything else is absolute […]."[453] The aesthetic life-view serves as the foil to the foregoing conception of the intrinsic dignity of personality. The aesthetic person has an external teleology or is heterotelic, to the extent that its ultimate value and goal reside in something other than the self; the self for the aesthete is only extrinsically dignified, and the aesthete does not perceive or affirm its personal worth as absolute, instead viewing its life as only being conditional valued. In general, personality is not posited as absolute when anything other than being oneself is taken as the fundamental goal or as determining the value of one's being. Such is the case of all aesthetic ways of life, and, in his analysis of various forms of living aesthetically, Kierkegaard presents a variety of ends to which the value of personality tends to be subordinated, including health, physical beauty, wealth, honors, nobility, the development of a given talent, the satisfaction of desire, contentment, and amusement. In each of these cases, wherein something other than the self to taken to have absolute value, one wills to be oneself only on the condition that one of these other goals can be realized, such that personality is valued relative to

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[452] Edward Mooney, "Kierkegaard on Self-Choice and Self-Reception: Judge William's Admonition," from: *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Either/Or II*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1995), 11.
[453] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 214.

something else. For instance, in one of the lower forms of aestheticism, one wills to be oneself so long as one is wealthy, and when that wealth is lost, so too is the person's perception of self-worth and willingness to be oneself; this aesthetic individual does not choose to be itself, but instead chooses only to be a wealthy self. In the aesthetic form of personality, the self has dignity conditionally – only to the extent that the self possesses certain qualities, such as wealth. When the aesthete no longer has these qualities, it no longer considers itself to have dignity, and it despairs. In such instances, the aesthete treats its own self as a mere means for some external goal; it exists, for example, only to be wealthy. The aesthete does not recognize itself as having eternal validity, precisely because it determines its value in relation to something transient – in relation to "something whose nature is that it can pass away."[454] In contrast, that the personality is taken to be absolute in the ethical choice entails that personality is not conditioned by anything; for the ethical personality, being a person is an end in itself and not an end for anything else. Should the ethical person lose its wealth or anything else, it nonetheless wills to be itself. The ethical person has an identity that transcends empirical determinations, and it perceives itself as valuable, even if it is not healthy, beautiful, wealthy, talented, contented, or amused. Even if the ethicist is dissatisfied by a loss of wealth, for instance, and wishes to rectify this loss, it does not thereby devalue itself. The ethical personality views itself as eternally valid – as having a value uncorrelated to any temporal status or possession.

[454] Ibid, 236.

4.5 Continuity in the Ethical Life – Repentance and Duty

With its emphasis on absolute choice and eternal validity, Kierkegaard's theory of ethical life appears extremely abstract. However, Kierkegaard intends the self-choice to be one of concretion. To this end, he describes the self-choice as consisting of a twofold movement, wherethrough one affirms not only one's freedom, but also one's concrete situation as a condition for acting freely. Kierkegaard presents the two moments of the choice as those of isolation and continuity. The first moment of the absolute choice is that by which the individual gains an apprehension of itself apart from its naturally and socially determined identity. This moment is identified as one of isolation, since, through it, one recognizes one's personality in isolation from empirical determinations – as being more than just a product of nature and society. Kierkegaard explains this in the following:

> The first form the choice takes is complete isolation. That is, in choosing myself, I separate myself from my relations to the whole world, until in this separation I end in an abstract identity. Since the individual has chosen himself according to his freedom, he is *eo ipso* acting. Yet his action has no relation to anything in the surrounding world, for the individual has completely exterminated this and is only for himself. The life-view that appears here is, however, an ethical view.[455]

This first movement terminates in the affirmation of an identity that is abstract, in the sense that the individual is affirming one's dignity and freedom, irrespective of any empirical determination. This movement of isolation involves "the maturing of one's personality," since, through it, one achieves an understanding of one's freedom for self-determination and value as a person as being irreducible to empirical conditions.[456] It involves the recognition of the self as "a power in a human being that can defy the whole world."[457] Through this movement of isolation from one's empirically determined situation, one

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[455] Ibid, 240.
[456] Ibid, 162.
[457] Ibid.

discovers one's negative freedom, such that this movement involves finding one's will not to be pathologically necessitated. What Kierkegaard describes here as the movement of isolation is precisely what is described in his dissertation as the infinite, absolute negativity of irony; it is the consciousness of the person's irreducibility to its empirical situation.

The abstraction of this first moment of the absolute choice, wherewith the self is drawn away from its concrete situation, however, is conditioned by the concurrent second moment, wherethrough one affirms continuity with one's situation. This movement corresponds to the mastery of irony, and Kierkegaard's account of the former helps elucidate the nature of the latter. This second moment of self-choice involves the integration of one's personality with its empirical determinants, thereby overcoming the abstractness of the moment of isolation. Kierkegaard says:

> The true concrete choice is the one by which I choose myself back into the world the very same moment I choose myself out of the world. That is […] I collect myself in all my finite concretion, and when I have thus chosen myself out of the finite in this way, I am in the most absolute continuity with it.[458]

While, in the first moment, the individual recognizes itself as negatively free, the individual also recognizes that it can only manifest its freedom and thereby develop its personality within a concrete situation. The ethical personality recognizes that it is responsible to its specific situation, since this situation provides the only means for self-development and self-expression: "The ethical does not want to wipe out this concretion but sees in it its task, sees the material with which it is to build and that which it is to build."[459] To the extent that the ethical person is dedicated to self-determination, it must also be dedicated to the specific situation in which it finds itself, since the latter dictates the particular ways

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[458] Ibid, 249.
[459] Ibid, 253.

in which the ethicist can actually determine itself. Genuine self-determination does not occur in contemplation or in imagination but through action, and possible actions, through the realization of which one determines oneself, are available only in the concrete situation in which one finds oneself. The movement of continuity involves the recognition of one's positive freedom – the recognition that the expression of freedom is conditioned by one's own given situation. In this moment of the self-choice, the person affirms itself as pathologically affected – as having a freedom for self-determination that is conditioned by its given situation. Accordingly, Kierkegaard states that "when you choose yourself absolutely, you will easily discover that this self is not an abstraction or a tautology."[460] Instead, the self that one chooses is one's empirical self in all of its concreteness; "This self contains in itself a rich concretion, a multiplicity of qualities, of characteristics."[461]

For the ethicist, these two movements belong essentially together in the choice of self: "the absolute isolation here is identical with the most profound continuity."[462] Kierkegaard explains this identity in the following manner:

> In the moment of choice, [the ethical person] is in complete isolation, for he withdraws from his social milieu, and yet at the same moment he is in absolute continuity, for he chooses himself as a product. And this choice is freedom's choice in such a way that in choosing himself as a product he can just as well be said to produce himself.[463]

The absolute choice is the twofold affirmation of oneself as pathologically affected but not necessitated; that is, it is the affirmation that, while one is not compelled to act on any particular empirical incentive, one is nonetheless necessitated to choose which empirical incentives to endorse or neglect. The choice that initiates the ethical personality is one that

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460 Ibid, 222.
461 Ibid.
462 Ibid, 217.
463 Ibid, 251.

posits the self as conditionally free – as free to act within a certain situation. Through the self-choice, the ethicist posits both its freedom and its connection with the situation in which it finds itself: "The person who has ethically chosen and found himself possesses himself defined in his entire concretion."[464]

Kierkegaard further characterizes the concretizing aspect of the absolute choice by saying that the person "gains a history" in the choice of self. Naturally, this is not intended to suggest that, prior to the self-choice, the person had maintained an ahistorical existence; rather, the absolute choice initiates a change in the person's perception of and relation to its own historical existence. Rather than viewing history as an external series of events that determine one's identity to various degrees, the ethicist views history as a condition for selfhood and as something that must be affirmed in the self-choice. Stressing the importance of such a perception of history, Kierkegaard says the following:

> A human being's eternal dignity lies precisely in this, that he can gain a history. The divine in him lies in this, that he himself, if he so chooses, can give this history a continuity, because it gains that, not when it is a summary of what has taken place or has happened to me, but only when it is my personal deed in such a way that even that which has happened to me is transformed and transferred from necessity to freedom.[465]

In the affirmation of one's own historical existence, there is a shift in the perception of one's historicality, since this deliberate affirmation makes history one's own deed, rather than a series of events that necessarily determines the individual. The ethical personality views history as the process of one's deliberate self-development.

This acceptance of the historical dimensions of the self is essential for the self choice, to the extent that these dimensions give the self its determinant content; the

[464] Ibid, 262.
[465] Ibid, 250.

historical situatedness of the self provides the manifold of material for self-development. Kierkegaard explains the ethicist's apprehension of this manifold in the following:

> Now he discovers that the self he chooses has a boundless multiplicity within itself inasmuch as it has a history, a history in which he acknowledges identity with himself. This history is a different kind, for in this history he stands in relation to other individuals in the race and to the whole race, and this history contains painful things, and yet he is the person he is only though this history.[466]

Contrary to the aesthetic self, which finds itself irrevocably alienated from its concrete and historical situation, the self that is affirmed in the ethical choice "is not an abstract self that fits everywhere and therefore nowhere but is a concrete self in living interaction with these specific surroundings, these life conditions, this order of things."[467] It is not possible for the ethical individual "to discard his actuality, for if he wants to be the absolute in that way, he is a nonentity, an abstraction."[468] The only way that one can posit self-development as an unconditional goal is if one affirms the materials with which one develops oneself, and these materials are provided by one's historical situation and must be appropriated therefrom. Ethical self-affirmation is the choice of the specific self that one is, which entails that it is an acceptance of the historical situatedness of that self. The ethicist gains a history in the sense that it deliberately accepts its historical situatedness as a condition for being able to realize its possibilities through action, rather than in its imagination. Self-choice requires that one deliberately assimilate one's concrete existence: "It is not, as said before, a matter of exterminating the concrete in an abstract and contentless assault but of assimilating it."[469]

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[466] Ibid, 216.
[467] Ibid, 262.
[468] Ibid, 265.
[469] Ibid, 257.

As indicated by this notion of gaining a history, temporality becomes decisive for the ethical personality in a way that it is not for the aesthete. The aesthetic project "to play shuttlecock with all existence" through the intensive method of crop rotation involves a disregard for the temporal structure of one's life; for the sake of generating interest and thereby making life amusing, the aesthete recommends an interplay of recollection and forgetting, such that one's past and future are distorted within the atemporality of the poetic imagination, which freely and arbitrarily recreates one's past and projects a future informed not by one's actual situation but by whatever fantasy one finds to be amusing. The aesthete maintains a loose relation to its historical situation, since it views being bound to its situation as contributing to its boredom. However, since one's situatedness is temporally determined, in the assumption of responsibility for its concrete situation, the ethical personality thereby takes responsibility for its past and its future. Mackey connects the temporal aspects of the self-choice with the notions of repentance and duty that Kierkegaard develops throughout the second volume of *Either/Or*: "a man *chooses himself absolutely* when in repentance he takes his whole past and in duty his whole future under the lordship of his freedom."[470] Moreover: "In the *present* resolution of self-choice a man takes all of his *past* into his freedom (repentance) and freely programs his entire *future* (duty)."[471]

Despite its usual religious connotations, in this context, Kierkegaard understands repentance in a primarily ethical manner.[472] He explicitly connects the concept of

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[470] Mackey, 89.
[471] Ibid, 52-53.
[472] In one place, he specifically refers to this concept as "Ethical repentance" (Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 248).

repentance directly to that of self-choice, saying that "to choose oneself is to repent oneself."[473] He adds:

> But a person can choose himself according to his freedom only when he chooses himself ethically, but he can choose himself ethically only by repenting himself, and only by repenting himself does he become concrete, and only as a concrete individual is he a free individual.[474]

Repentance is an act through which one takes responsibility for one's past, and, since one's identity is determined by one's past, one cannot take responsibility for oneself without thereby precisely repenting. Through repentance, the ethical person receives concretion:

> But the person who chooses himself ethically chooses himself concretely as this specific individual, and he achieves this concretion because this choice is identical with repentance, which ratifies the choice. The individual, then, becomes conscious as this specific individual with these capacities, these inclinations, these drives, these passions, influenced by this specific environment. But as he becomes aware of all this, he takes upon himself responsibility for it all.[475]

Repentance is an acceptance of responsibility for the entire historical situation that determines one's concrete identity. The history for which one assumes responsibility in Kierkegaard's account consists of both one's personal past but also anything else that has contributed to the constitution of the identity of the individual. In the self-choice, one takes responsible for one's past actions, one's natural inclination toward evil, one's family and race (i.e., humanity), and the total series of events that contributed to one's coming into existence.[476] Furthermore, Kierkegaard connects repentance directly with the two moments of self-choice – isolation and continuity:

> Here repentance appears in all its profound meaning, for while in one way it isolates me, in another way it binds me indissolubly to the whole human race, because my

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[473] Ibid.
[474] Ibid, 247.
[475] Ibid, 250-251.
[476] Ibid, 216, 224, 239.

> life does not begin now and with nothing, and if I cannot repent of the past, then freedom is a dream.[477]

Repentance requires a distancing of oneself from one's situation, such that one can affirm one's freedom in relation to that situation, but it also involves the establishment of continuity with that situation, insofar as one views oneself as responsible for it, since one's situation is constitutive of one's self.

Corresponding to this appropriation of one's past through repentance, the ethical person also takes responsibility for its future by considering the way that its actions shape the self that it is becoming therethrough. In the moment of deliberation, in which the person must decide how it will act, the ethical person surveys what possibilities are available to it within its concrete situation and views these possibilities as particular ways that it can determine the person that it will become. For the ethical personality, these possible courses of action are viewed as tasks that one has the duty to realize for the sake of self-determination:

> In other words, the person who lives esthetically sees only possibilities everywhere; for him these make up the content of future time, whereas the person who lives ethically sees task everywhere. Then the individual sees this, his actual concretion, as task, as goal, as objective. But in seeing his possibility as his task, the individual expresses precisely his sovereignty over himself.[478]

The primary duty of the ethical person is to become itself, but Kierkegaard makes it clear that, while the ethical life revolves around duty, it is not what is usually understood as "a life of duty" or a "living for the performance of one's duties."[479] In explication of his view of duty, Kierkegaard distinguishes two conceptions of the same: the external and the internal. There is a mistaken view of the ethical life, wherein the "ethical is defined as

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[477] Ibid, 239.
[478] Ibid, 251.
[479] Ibid, 254.

duty, and duty in turn as a multiplicity of particular rules, but the individual and duty stand outside each other."[480] In this view, duty is understood as external – as something that is simply imposed upon the agent from some external source. Kierkegaard clarifies the other conception of duty in the following:

> It is curious that the word "duty" can prompt one to think of an external relation, since the very derivation of the word suggests an internal one; for that which is incumbent upon me, not as this individual with accidental characteristics but in accordance with my true being, certainly has the most intimate relation with myself. That is, duty is not something laid upon but something that lies upon. When duty is regarded in this way, it is a sign that the individual is oriented within himself. Then duty will not split up for him into a multiplicity of particular stipulations, for this always indicates that he has only an external relation to duty. He has put on duty; for him it is the expression of his innermost being. When he is thus oriented within himself, he has immersed himself in the ethical, and he will not run himself ragged performing his duties. Therefore, the truly ethical person has an inner serenity and sense of security, for he does not have duty outside himself but within himself.[481]

For the ethical personality, duty is not viewed as an external imposition, but as something that the agent freely imposes upon itself, such that "it is the expression of his innermost being." This internal sense of duty is grounded in self-choice, since only one who has assumed responsibility for oneself will view duty as self-imposed: when the individual "has chosen himself absolutely, has repented of himself, he then has himself as his task under an eternal responsibility, and in this way duty is posited in its absoluteness."[482]

Self-determination is the primary duty of the ethical personality, and every other duty is conditioned by this one. Because Kierkegaard views duty as internally related to personality, he suggests that particular duties are not universal but unique to each

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[480] Ibid.
[481] Ibid, 244.
[482] Ibid, 271.

individual; he says: “I never say of a man: he is doing duty or duties; but I say: He is doing his duty; I say: I am doing my duty, do your duty.”[483] Mackey explains:

> The principle duty can be stated in a form applicable to every man without exception: Thou shalt become thyself. But particular duties cannot be defined in theory, they can only be discovered in situation. Particular duties arise, for each person, out of the exigencies of his particular nature and the particular circumstances in which he finds himself.[484]

Universally, ethical persons have the duty of self-determination, but the particular actions through which this duty is satisfied is unique to the concrete situation of a given ethical person. Connell summarizes this twofold point in the following manner:

> It is out of this formal relationship of the self to itself that particular duties arise. Although all ethical selves are formally identical (they relate in the same way to their given characteristics and situations), they are materially diverse (their given characteristics and situations vary). In taking responsibility for its given aspects, each self find itself faced with a unique set of duties.[485]

For the ethical person, “it is not a matter of the multiplicity of duty but of its intensity.”[486] Moreover: “When a person has felt the intensity of duty with all his energy, then he is ethically matured, and then duty will break forth within him.”[487] Because the ethical personality feels the intensity of duty, it views its possible courses of action not simply as possibilities but as tasks. Through the acceptance of its own duty to be itself, the ethical personality assumes a relationship to its future possibility; it views itself as tasked with becoming itself.

As Michelle Kosch persuasively argues, this conception of duty is largely inspired by the ethical theory of J.G. Fichte, rather than by the theories of Kant or Hegel, such that

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[483] Ibid, 263.
[484] Mackey, 55.
[485] Connell, 60-61.
[486] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 266.
[487] Ibid.

"Fichte was in fact the main historical model for Kierkegaard's ethicist […]"[488] In matters of practical deliberation, Kierkegaard's ethicist does not, like Kant, evaluate the validity of maxims by testing their categorical nature, nor does this ethicist emphasize adherence to social norms, as does Hegel. Rather, Kierkegaard's conception of practical deliberation is in line with that of Fichte; Kosch explains this connection by identifying two key claims, on which Kierkegaard and Fichte agree:

> They are: 1) the claim that duty is always situation specific, and that one's concrete situation has priority over abstract principles in the determination of one's duty; and 2) the claim that, although duty should be discussable and ultimately an object of inter-subjective agreement, subjective conviction (rather than social consensus or any other sort of external authority) is the final arbiter of duty.[489]

In Fichte's moral theory, an agent's fundamental project of self-determination is conditioned by the situation in which it finds itself. This entails that, in moments of moral deliberation, an agent must survey its specific situation, so as to develop an awareness of what actions are possible for it; this survey produces a "manifold of what is possible" for the agent, but this manifold of possibilities itself is determined by "the initial standpoint occupied by each person."[490] After surveying this manifold of possible actions, the agent acts on whichever possibility is confirmed by its own conscience.[491] Kosch summarizes this theory in the following:

> So for Fichte moral decision-making is not in the first instance a matter of applying a universal rule to a set of maxims generated by desires (whatever they happen to be) together with background beliefs and circumstances, but instead a matter of extracting from the conjunction of the moral end, background beliefs and circumstances a concrete imperative with a universal character. One knows one has reached the correct determination of what to do in a given circumstance by the

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[488] Michelle Kosch, "Kierkegaard's Ethicist: Fichte's Role in Kierkegaard's Construction of the Ethical Standpoint," *Archiv. f. Gesch. d. Philosophie 88*, Bd., S (2006), 262.
[489] Ibid, 266.
[490] Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *The System of Ethics*, trans. Daniel Breazeale and Günter Zöller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 197, 199.
[491] Ibid, 164.

> presence of a feeling of certainty, a subjective conviction about one's duty. This is the voice of conscience, which is in each case determinate and specific to our situation […].[492]

Accordingly, Westphal explains that we should not think of Kierkegaard's ethical life-view "in Platonic or Kantian terms as involving the apprehension of an abstract, formal principle by an intellect that has somehow become pure reason."[493] Duty for Kierkegaard is not produced through a categorical imperative or through social convention, but rather is produced through a personal conviction regarding how to determine oneself within one's own concrete situation.

Through the self-choice, with its moments of repentance, which grounds the self in its historically determined existence, and duty, which projects the self toward its future goal of becoming itself in a determinate way, the ethical person assumes a temporal orientation in its world, such that it achieves what Kierkegaard identifies as continuity with its concrete situation; the latter says:

> Not until a person in his choice has taken himself upon himself, has put on himself, has totally interpenetrated himself so that every movement he makes is accompanied by a consciousness of responsibility for himself – not until then has a person chosen himself ethically, not until then has he repented himself, not until then is he concrete, not until then is he in his total isolation in absolute continuity with the actuality to which he belongs.[494]

The ethical person takes itself to be bound to its particular situation, such that it is responsible for and responsible to this situation; the ethicist views its situation as the sole context within which it can realize its primary task of self-determination, and, consequently, in the realization of this task, the ethicist cannot distance itself from its situation through imagination and poiesis, but must instead cultivate a knowledge of its

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[492] Kosch, "Fichte's Role," 268.
[493] Westphal, 24.
[494] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 248.

specific situation, and it must ultimately affirm its situatedness in its activity. Kierkegaard describes the ethicist in the following manner: "He is well aware that every human being develops in freedom, but he is also aware that a person does not create himself out of nothing; that he has himself in his concretion as his task […]."[495] Moreover, in contrast to aesthetic alienation, this awareness entails that the ethical personality is "reconciled with existence […]."[496] The ethicist views itself as necessarily bound to its situation, the result of which is described by Kierkegaard in the following: "only when life is considered ethically does it take on beauty, truth, meaning, continuance […]."[497]

4.6 The Critique of Reflective Aestheticism – Self-Choice and Self-Creation

The ethical personality establishes continuity with its world by accepting its project of self-determination as conditioned by the particular historical situation in which it finds itself. Kierkegaard uses this sense of continuity as a way of critiquing the reflectively aesthetic life-view. In his assessment, this aesthetic life precisely lacks continuity with its concrete situation due to its nihilism, and this lack is reinforced by the aesthete's subordination of its determinate actuality to the content of its poetic imagination. The aesthetic poiesis maintains distance between personality and its situation, such that the aesthete is "a stranger and alien in the world."[498] For the sake of avoiding boring situations, the aesthetic personality distances itself from its concrete situation and is always willing to

[495] Ibid, 332.
[496] Ibid.
[497] Ibid, 271.
[498] Ibid, 83.

ignore both its actual past and the way in which this past determines its future in favor of its atemporal imaginings. The ethical pseudonym says to the aesthete:

> [T]he capacity of soul that is actually wanting in you is memory, that is, not of this or of that, not of ideas, witticisms, or dialectical intricacies – far be it for me to make that claim – but memory of your own life, of what you have experienced in it.[499]
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> The person who lives ethically has a memory of his life (to recall an earlier expression); the person who lives esthetically does not have it at all.[500]

It is not simply that the aesthetic life lacks continuity, but that it actively works to enforce this discontinuity through its application of the arts of recollection and forgetting that constitute the intensive method of crop rotation. Mackey describes the aesthete's view of its concrete situation in the following:

> To reproduce one's experience in the medium of poetry may, in the hands of a master, be the way to create works of excellence. But if a man's life consists of this reproduction, then he betrays experience by reducing it to the occasion of his creativity, prefers his own appetite for pleasure to the demand for responsible action, and inverts the order of reality by confounding the essential (ethical) with its accidental adornment (aesthetic).[501]

Kierkegaard notes that there is a kind of continuity achieved through the aesthetic poiesis but that this continuity is achieved in thought, not actuality:

> As far as poetry and art are concerned, may I remind you of what I mentioned earlier, that they provide only an imperfect reconciliation with life, also that when you fix your eye upon poetry and art you are not looking at actuality, and that is what we really should be speaking about.[502]

Because the aesthete does not maintain the genuine – that is, the ethical – view of its situation, whereby one establishes continuity with one's situation for the sake of self-determination through action rather than imagination, the aesthete remains discontinuous

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[499] Ibid, 197.
[500] Ibid, 230.
[501] Mackey, 44-5.
[502] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 273.

with its situation: “To say it in other words, the individual has not chosen himself ethically. He therefore has no connection with actuality […].”[503] The ethical pseudonym says to the aesthete: “if there is to be meaning in it life must have continuity, and this your life does not have.”[504] The aesthete, however, not only lacks continuity, but also deliberately tries to avoid continuity in its attempt to negate boredom, insofar as continuity is viewed as contrary to the aesthetic project of avoiding commitment and embracing arbitrariness, such that continuity with life is thereby perceived as a source of boredom.

Kierkegaard stresses this distinction between the ethical and the aesthetic relations to actuality through a distinction he makes between two similar concepts: self-choice and self-creation. The consistent refrain throughout Kierkegaard’s explication of the ethical life-view is that the self-choice that establishes this life-view requires the acceptance of one’s concrete identity. That this self-choice is supposed to be one of appropriation culminates in the insight that the ethical personality emerges through the free and deliberate acceptance the self that one is with all of its historical determination. Kierkegaard thematizes this point through a distinction that he introduces between self-choice and self-creation, maintaining that ethical existence is initiated through a choice of self, rather than a creation of self. Kierkegaard explains that, in the acceptance of one’s situatedness, the ethical person “does not assume that the world begins with him or that he creates himself.”[505] Moreover, he describes the ethicist in the following way: “He is well aware that every human being develops in freedom, but he is also aware that a person does not create himself from nothing […].”[506] Connecting this distinction with his conception of

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[503] Ibid, 250.
[504] Ibid, 195.
[505] Ibid, 258.
[506] Ibid, 332.

freedom as conditioned by a concrete situation, Kierkegaard says the following of the ethical person: "But since he has not created himself but has chosen himself, duty is the expression of his absolute dependence and his absolute freedom in their identity with each other."[507] This distinction between self-creation and self-choice relates to Kierkegaard's distinction between the natural self and the spiritual self; the attainment of spirit requires an acceptance of one's natural self, which already exists prior to the self-choice; while spirit emerges through this choice, the self that one chooses is not thereby created from nothing, but instead must already exist in some manner so that it can be chosen.

Whereas self-choice entails a proper conception of one's freedom as situationally conditioned, Kierkegaard understands self-creation as entailing an inadequate and exaggerated conception of freedom. In the self-creational model of identity, Kierkegaard understands freedom not simply as the capacity of the person to choose which courses of action to enact from the available manifold of actions that belong to that person's specific situation; rather, self-creation entails that one is not at all bound by one's historical situatedness. This notion of self-creation, which Kierkegaard uses as a foil to his ethical theory of identity, involves a conception of personality as freely created, irrespective of its situation. The consequence of this conception of freedom, as well as how it is expressed by a person, is that there is no real sense of responsibility either for one's situation or to persons (oneself and others). This is why the ethical pseudonym accuses the aesthete of maintaining this inadequate conception of freedom, which founds the former's criticisms of the irresponsibility of the latter. Regarding the choices made by the aesthete, Kierkegaard says that the aesthete has "not actually chosen at all" or has only "chosen in a

[507] Ibid, 270.

figurative sense."[508] This is because what is lacking in the actions of the aesthete is any commitment to the action and relatedly any assumption of responsibility for the same. Stressing its negative freedom, the aesthete perceives itself as independent from everything, including its own actions, such that it does not take responsibility for what it does, nor does it conceive itself as being determined by its choices, since such a notion of self-determination would require that one's identity be conceived as bound to one's choices. The ethical pseudonym says that "if one does not choose absolutely, one chooses only for the moment and for that reason can choose something else the next moment."[509] From the ethical standpoint, the aesthetic choice is not a choice in a rigorous sense, "because the self-determining aspect of the choice has not been ethically stressed […]."[510] The aesthetic personality overestimates its freedom, emphasizing the abstract and negative moment of freedom divorced from the concrete and positive moment, the result of which is that the aesthete conceives itself as radically liberated from its situation and from its own actions.

It is for this reason that Kierkegaard views the ethical stage of life as an advancement upon the aesthetic one. With its purely abstract or negative conception of freedom, the aesthete maintains an inadequate conception of itself as free. Kierkegaard finds the conception of freedom underlying the theory of self-creation to be inadequate for two reason. First, persons simply do not find themselves with a capacity to create themselves absolutely from nothing. As indicated in his analysis of history and choice, Kierkegaard thinks that individuals find themselves as having come into existence within

[508] Ibid, 166.
[509] Ibid, 167.
[510] Ibid.

a particular natural and social situation, and they have no control over which situation they come to be in or how that situation conditions their identity. While individuals find themselves capable of shaping their situation and their identity, at no moment do they find themselves responsible for having created that situation or one's concrete self *ex nihilo*. One's "life does not begin now and with nothing," even though it assumes an original significance through self-choice.[511] What the aesthete has confused is a freedom of imagination or thought, which is precisely not situationally bound, with a freedom of action, which is determined by the agent's actual situation. Second, Kierkegaard thinks that a purely negative conception of freedom is self-defeating; in its attempt to maintain a purely negative freedom, Kierkegaard thinks that the aesthetic person has thereby precisely compromised its freedom:

> If one believes that at some moment a person can keep his personality completely blank and bare or that in the strictest sense one can halt and discontinue personal life, one certainly is mistaken. Already prior to one's choosing, the personality is interested in the choice, and if one puts off the choice, the personality or the obscure forces within it unconsciously chooses.[512]

The aesthete wants to maintain its freedom by assuming a "state of indifference," wherein there is no commitment to its activity. However, it is impossible for a person not to act and not to thereby determine itself through its action; even the refusal to act is itself an act for which an agent is responsible. If the aesthete does not actively and consciously define itself, then it will be passively determined by whatever unconscious impulses impel its activity. Kierkegaard finds the purely negative conception of freedom to be inadequate, since it results in a kind of unfreedom; in the refusal to commit to its own project of

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[511] Ibid, 239.
[512] Ibid, 164.

autonomous self-development, the identity of the aesthete is ultimately determined heteronomously.

The conception of freedom that founds the theory of self-choice differs significantly from the conception that founds the theory of self-creation. Whereas the latter entails a wholly original creation of one's own person not informed by its situatedness, Kierkegaard understands self-choice more modestly as an appropriation of something already existent – namely, oneself. Something original does come into existence through the self-choice, but not from nothing – the self as spirit is grounded by the natural self. As previously noted, the concrete self already naturally exists, but, through the appropriative choice of this self, spirit emerges. Kierkegaard carefully maintains that, in the affirmation of one's person and freedom, "the individual comes to stand higher than every relationship, but from this it in no way follows that he is not in that relationship […]."[513] The choice of self brings one into continuity with one's given situation. When one makes the self-choice, it is not any self that is chosen; instead, one chooses precisely the self that one already is – namely, a self with certain features and embedded within a certain situation.

The ethical personality emerges through an acceptance of one's freedom and possibilities as limited to a particular situation, to which the person is responsible for the sake of its project of self-development. Kierkegaard rejects the notion of choosing oneself in isolation or abstractly; instead, the ethical choice is always determined by a specific situation.[514] Accordingly, Mackey describes the ethicist as dependently free and contingently absolute:

> He does not create himself as a natural and historical being: in this sense he is not absolute but relative, not independent but contingent. But he is free with a

[513] Ibid, 275.
[514] Ibid, 251.

> dependent freedom and he becomes a contingent absolute just insofar as he is able to get hold of himself as a whole.[515]

The ethical personality acknowledges a limited freedom: even though it can choose to take responsibility for itself, it cannot choose itself in the sense of creating itself absolutely. The ethical personality does not, for instance, choose its epoch, its parentage, its capacities or talents, its social milieu, its body, and so on. The ethicist recognizes that it is created with certain features and within a certain situation, over which it has no control. The ethical choice is simply the choice that takes responsibility for this situatedness and affirms these concrete features of one's identity as the basis for freely acting in the world. Kierkegaard explains this conditional freedom through a useful metaphor: the ethical personality is the "editor" of its identity, not the creator of the same.[516] This highlights the sense in which the ethical person is merely shaping already existent materials, rather than creating something unqualifiedly original.

Corresponding to this view of freedom as limited, Elrod explains that the ethical personality views its possibility as grounded in its concrete situation, whereas the aesthete views possibility in terms of whatever it can imagine. According to Elrod, possibilities for the ethical personality are "existential possibilities" because they are "rooted in existence."[517] He explains:

> Now ethical ideality is the ideality of the self's existential reality. The ideality of ethics does not soar beyond man as a formal absolute abstractly conceived and formulated. On the contrary, ethical ideality proceeds from the ideality inherent in the self's given reality.[518]

Elrod further explains the source of ethical ideality in the following manner:

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[515] Mackey, 54.
[516] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 260.
[517] Elrod, 116.
[518] Ibid, 115.

> The relation between reality and ideality is not one in which reality is confronted by a formal, abstract ideality to which it is morally subject. Ethical ideality emerges not through abstract thinking, contemplation, or intuition but through the unconditional requirement upon the individual to be himself. If ideality were derived in this former manner, reality would be directed toward an ideal alien to it, whereas, for Kierkegaard, the ideal is discovered in the real.[519]

Ideality is precisely ideated by the ethical personality through a survey of its concrete situation – one that examines both the capacities of the agent and the possible courses of action that are realizable to that agent given its specific situation. Mehl explains how the ethical person becomes aware of its possibilities in the following manner:

> If one is sincere about strong autonomy one will inevitably pursue and practice some set of ethical considerations as best one can construe them given one's full life conditions. What these conditions are will depend on who one is, on what configured one in the past, on what one self-consciously pursues subsequent to the choice of oneself, in short, on how the process of self-definition unfolds. But whatever the content turns out to be, it is not as crucial as the universal possibility of autonomous engagement, for the essential thing about a person is the capacity for maintaining distance from our ends and interests, and hence binding ourselves into a coherent and constant whole.[520]

In order to develop itself through action, in moments of deliberation, the ethicist only considers those possibilities that it can actually enact; the ethicist is always concerned with how it should act in a particular circumstance.

In contrast to the ethical view that possible paths for self-determination are dictated by the personality's concrete situation, the aesthete's possibilities are precisely divorced from its situation; the aesthete views its possibilities as whatever it can imagine, irrespective of its particular situation. Since its possibilities are not existentially grounded, Harries notes that aesthetic ideals are false, in the following sense: "The ideal of poetic life

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[519] Ibid, 116.

[520] Peter J. Mehl, "Moral Virtue, Mental Health, and Happiness: The Moral Psychology of Kierkegaard's Judge William," from: *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Either/Or: Part II*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1995), 165-166.

is false because it fails to do justice to what the human being is, i.e. a finite individual, tied to a particular situation […].”[521] In the aesthetic view, the person takes itself to have more possibilities than the person would in the ethical view. Obviously, though, not all of these aesthetic possibilities can be realized through action, such that they cannot be viewed as genuine tasks for the individual, as Elrod says: “It is true that aesthetic and intellectual possibilities can confront the individual as tasks, but they are not genuine tasks because they are not genuinely possible.”[522] Because the aesthetic possibilities are not grounded in the aesthete’s actual situation, not all of them are enactable by the aesthete, and some remain fantasies for which the aesthete can wish but not truly will. Kierkegaard comments on these imaginarily constructed possibilities in the following way:

> There is only one thing I do not want to fail to stress, that as soon as the ethical person’s gymnastics become an imaginary constructing he has ceased to live ethically. All such imaginary gymnastic constructing is equivalent to sophistry in the realm of knowledge.[523]

Furthermore, this difference between imaginary and actualizable possibilities explains why Kierkegaard thinks that decisions and actions are more significant for the ethical personality than for the aesthetic one; he says:

> Therefore, the ethical choice is in a certain sense much easier, much simpler, but in another sense it is infinitely more difficult. The person who wants to decide his life task ethically does not ordinarily have such a wide range; the act of choosing, however, is much more meaningful to him.[524]

Choice is more significant for the ethical personality, because the ethicist only chooses what it is capable of enacting and it chooses with the understanding that what it enacts determines its actual identity.

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[521] Harries, 146.
[522] Elrod, 116.
[523] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 253.
[524] Ibid, 167.

One of the primary ways that Kierkegaard explains his views on freedom and ideality in the distinction between self-choice and self-creation is by invoking the concept of God, albeit in a fairly restricted manner compared to his theories pertaining to the religious life-view. The ethical view of life is achieved through an acceptance of the limitations of one's freedom and possibilities; one attains an ethical life-view to the extent that one perceives oneself as merely appropriating and shaping an already existent identity, both the features and possibilities of which are determined by the situation in which one merely finds oneself. This means that the ethical choice requires the acknowledgement that one is not self-creating but has instead come into existence through the work of another, and this other is identified by Kierkegaard as God; the ethical choice requires that one acknowledge that one is not self-created, and Kierkegaard frames this as a recognition of God as the creator of what is appropriated in the absolute choice. God creates the natural self, which later achieves spiritual significance through the choice of itself. In the self-choice, one is not "supposed to reject the existence, the actuality, in which God has placed him."[525] When God is identified as the creator, the ethical person acknowledges that it has not created itself from nothing and is admitting that the empirical features of its self are established by some external force, such that the only thing that a person can do is accept those features or deny them. Whereas the aesthete thinks of its given situation as trivial and inessential, the ethical person is supposed to view it as a gift from God:

> Therefore, temporality does not exist, if I dare speak this way, for the sake of God, in order that he, to put it in mystical terms, can test and try the one who loves, but it exists for the sake of humankind and is the greatest of all the gifts of grace.[526]

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[525] Ibid, 244.
[526] Ibid, 250. Cf. ibid, 123, 238.

The ethical person needs God to be able to choose its self, "because he chooses it absolutely from the hand of the eternal God."[527] Moreover, only on the condition that "he finds himself in God" can one choose oneself absolutely.[528] God is important for the ethical life-view, because a person becomes ethical only by taking ownership of something that it did not create – its self in all of its natural and social situatedness. The ethical person takes responsibility for what God has created. The recognition of God, then, is part of the recognition of oneself as self-choosing, not self-creating. This is why the acknowledgement of God is so important for the ethical project – if the individual recognizes God as responsible for creation, then the individual can only view itself as capable of appropriating itself, thereby transcending the aesthetic life-view.

While Kierkegaard explicitly identifies the recognition of God as a condition for self-choice, given the features and purpose of this theory, what is necessary here is that the ethicist recognizes and accepts its unfreedom in relation to its situatedness. While the ethical pseudonym articulates this recognition in religious terms, the religious dimension is ultimately inessential to the denial of self-creation. In order to maintain the distinction between self-creation and self-choice, the person must recognize that its freedom is conditioned by its being situated in a place that it does not create but that it must nonetheless affirm as the condition for its own project of self-development. Kierkegaard says the following of the ethical person:

> He has his place in the world; in freedom he himself chooses his place – that is, he chooses this place. He is a specific individual; in the choice he makes himself into a specific individual: namely, into the same one, because he chooses himself. An individual thus chooses himself as a complex specific concretion and therefore chooses himself in his continuity.[529]

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[527] Ibid, 217.
[528] Ibid, 216.
[529] Ibid, 251.

Additionally, referencing the two moments of the absolute choice, Kierkegaard says of the ethical person that "at the same time as he seems to be isolating himself most radically he is most radically sinking himself into the root by which he is bound up with the whole."[530] For one to overcome the issues of aestheticism by achieving a proper self-conception, what is essential is that one accept one's preestablished place in the world – that one accepts being rooted in this place. Only on the condition of this acceptance can one properly choose oneself. By accepting the particular place in which one finds oneself, one acknowledges that one is not free to be anyone but can only be the self that one is. In order to overcome aestheticism and affirm oneself, there only needs to be the choice to take responsibility for a self and a corresponding situation, neither of which have been created by the one who is choosing. The role that God serves in this account is that God is the one who puts one in one's place; God is the one who binds the individual to a particular situation by creating the individual therein. While the ethical pseudonym maintains a fairly robust account of autonomy, personal freedom does not extend to one's belonging to a concrete situation. Instead, one's given situation is given precisely by a force outside of the individual's control. The person is not free to create its place; it is only free to accept its particular place as a condition for its projects of self-development.

4.7 The Issue of Continuity – Boredom and Earnestness

What is clear from the foregoing analysis of the aesthetic and ethical stages of life is that the notion of continuity is primary in Kierkegaard's account of boredom. The relation between personality and actuality – the continuity or discontinuity of these relata

[530] Ibid, 216.

– is what is decisive for the kind of boredom that Kierkegaard describes in his theory of stages on life's way. On the one hand, the lack of continuity within the aesthetic life accounts for its pervasive boredom, which the aesthete can temporally mask but cannot altogether avoid. On the other hand, the ethicist's commitment to its given situation establishes continuity between ethical personality and its actual situation, such that the boredom that characterizes the aesthetic life is thereby precluded in the ethical life.

As previously explained, the foundation of the boredom that pervades the aesthetic life is the aesthete's nihilistic stance toward its existence; as Harries summarizes the point: "The foundation of boredom then is nihilism."[531] The aesthete is bored because it finds all possible courses of action and ways of life available within its situation to be pointless and vain. The aesthetic experience of boredom evinces the aesthete's alienation from its actual situation; having seen through the vanity of its earlier pursuits of enjoyment, the reflective aesthete perceives its world as meaningless and incapable of providing fulfillment, such that the aesthete is bored with existing. Such boredom is precisely what drives the aesthete to distract itself from its life through projects of fantasy and amusement. Because such boredom is founded in the aesthete's life-view itself, this boredom is existential, rather circumstantial, in the sense that the boredom that the aesthete identifies as "evil itself" stems from the structure of the aesthetic self and not from a particular set of circumstances in which the aesthete happens to find itself at a given moment.[532] Aesthetic boredom is determined not by given circumstances, but by the life-view that perpetually divests the world of its significance.

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[531] Harries, 93.
[532] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or I*, 290.

To some extent, the aesthetic pseudonym does recognize the existential nature of his boredom. In the critique of the extensive method of crop rotation and correlative prescription of the intensive method of the same, the aesthete recognizes that the source of boredom lies not in particular circumstances, but in himself. It is from this understanding of boredom that the aesthete recommends not variation in one's experiences, so as to make them novel, but instead recommends that one "continually vary oneself."[533] The aesthetic pseudonym does intimate the genuine resolution of his boredom by recommending that individuals turn attention away from external circumstance and toward themselves, but his emphasis on continually changing oneself compromises the success of his strategy. The aesthete is not bored because it fails to represent its experiences to itself in a sufficiently poetic manner; instead, the source of aesthetic boredom is the disparity between self and world, which the aesthete freely perpetuates through its poiesis. The recommended method of crop rotation not only does not resolve the alienation of the self from its actual situation, but instead precisely reinforces this alienation by shifting attention away from one's situation and encouraging one to lose oneself in fantastic novelizations of life, in accordance with which one is to live in a non-committal manner, such that the aesthete's "life will amount to nothing but tentative efforts at living."[534] Accordingly, the application of this method of crop rotation continually reproduces the conditions for boredom. While the aesthete may momentarily distract itself from its nihilism and alienation through its self-directed poiesis, it thereby merely masks its fundamental boredom. Because the aesthete misunderstands the nature of its own boredom, its recommended cure for the same results in the perpetuation precisely of the conditions for its boredom. Even though its

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[533] Ibid, 298.
[534] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 7.

intensive method improves upon the extensive one by shifting focus from external circumstance to the individual person, the aesthete nonetheless considers the nature of personality in an inadequate way. The aesthetic pseudonym fails to understand the nature of his boredom, to the extent that he thinks that he can overcome boredom through novelization, rather than through a reevaluation of his basic relation to his actual situation.

From the ethical perspective, there is truth to the aesthete's criticism of the extensive method of crop rotation, and the correlative position of the intensive strategy does come close to the genuine resolution of boredom, to the extent that the aesthete views boredom not as stemming from particular situations but as induced by the manner in which one perceives one's existence. The reflective aesthete properly recognizes that its boredom is not merely circumstantial, to the extent that it understands that simple changes in circumstance do not thereby bring an end to its boredom. Despite this insight, however, the aesthete fails to understand how essentially grounded its experience of boredom is in its own life-view. In order to truly overcome boredom, what is needed is a change in how one more fundamentally orients oneself in one's world – there needs to be a change in how one understands one's freedom, possibilities, and responsibility as situationally conditioned, rather than a change in how one poetically represents one's particular experiences. Because the aesthete does not possess an adequate enough conception of itself to understand that its boredom stems from its own life-view, the aesthetic response to its boredom is one of flight. The aesthete tries to avoid boredom by shifting its perception of actuality, not by effecting a more fundamental shift in its self-conception. This solution is merely a distraction from boredom, not a resolution of it; the aesthete does not address its

perception of life as meaningless, but instead tries to obscure its nihilistic outlook by fantastically reconstructing how it views its life.

In contrast, the ethical life is one in which the boredom that perpetually and ubiquitously dominates the aesthetic life is surmounted, to the extent that, within the ethical life-view, the person establishes continuity with its actual situation. Boredom arises from the aesthete's inadequate self-conception, such that both the extensive strategy of pursuing ever novel experiences and the intensive strategy of producing imaginary constructions that only momentarily distract from boredom are equally flawed, insofar as neither strategy addresses the source of boredom, which is the aesthetic life-view itself. If boredom is to be overcome, then the individual "cannot relate himself negatively to the world around him […]."[535] As Kemp, explains, the aesthete maintains a negative relation to the world by shunning all commitments to both its situation and anything therewithin. He clarifies this point in the following:

> While there is certainly a sense in which [the aesthete] is committed to avoiding boredom, there is nothing in particular (no object or person or choice) that he takes to be valuable independent of its ability to provide pleasure.[536]

The aesthetic life is characterized by a rejection of the situation in which the aesthete finds itself. Harries says:

> Implicit in the search for the interesting is thus a rejection of the place we have been assigned by the situation in which we find ourselves. The search for the interesting is essentially a flight from reality.[537]

The aesthetic pursuit of amusement and avoidance of boredom involves a discontinuity with its given situation. Boredom is overcome by the ethical personality, insofar as the

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[535] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 274.
[536] Kemp, 17.
[537] Harries, 97.

latter establishes continuity with its specific situation. This continuity is established when the person commits itself to a project of self-determination and, recognizing that situatedness is a condition for such a project, concurrently commits itself to the particular situation in which it finds itself.

In order to transcend the negative relation to the world and thereby advance beyond the stage of aestheticism, the person needs to achieve a certain receptivity to its world in its self-choice. In explanation of this receptivity, Mooney notes that, contrary to popular but mistaken interpretations that inappropriately attribute common existentialist ideas to Kierkegaard's work, the ethical self-choice that Kierkegaard presents in *Either/Or* "is not radical Sartrean choice."[538] Mooney adds that, contrary to existentialist theories of self-development, which tend to presuppose a "choice model of volition," Kierkegaard presents a "receptivity model of volition."[539] By this, Mooney means that Kierkegaard's theory of self-choice emphasizes the sense in which one must consciously accept the givenness of one's situation in order to define oneself at all. It is this receptive dimension of self-development that ultimately distinguishes the ethical from the aesthetic stages of existence. Mooney says:

> Assuming responsibility for self presupposes that I can be more or less transparent to myself, responsive to my deepest inner promptings, and morally attentive to my context and historical location.[540]

Far from being an arbitrary matter of radical self-creation, the ethical self-choice involves taking responsibility for the self that one already is, which entails that one take

[538] Mooney, 13.
[539] Kierkegaard's account does explicitly stress receptivity; for example: "the I chooses itself or, more correctly, receives itself" (Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 177).
[540] Mooney, 26.

responsibility for the context within which one's self emerges and continues to develop.[541] This is exactly Kierkegaard's point when he describes the following effect of the self-choice:

> The individual, then, becomes conscious as this specific individual with these capacities, these inclinations, these drives, these passions, influenced by this specific social milieu, as this specific product of a specific environment. But as he becomes aware of all this, he takes upon himself responsibility for it all.[542]

Contrary to the acosmism of aestheticism, the ethical personality is aware of the way in which its existence is necessarily shaped and conditioned by its environing situation, from which it cannot completely sever itself and over which it has no absolute control. Regardless of the particular manner in which one wishes to develop oneself, the available possibilities that one may neglect or enact in any process of self-development are dictated by one's concrete situation, not whatever situation is poetically constructed through the romantic imagination. As Mooney puts the matter: "Resources for self-acquisition are conferred by tradition, by community, even by a deeper Source."[543]

Ultimately, in order to overcome aestheticism and its boredom, Kierkegaard's ethicist is not advocating that one have a particular set of values or that one act in certain ways that are supposed to be objectively good; rather, it is recommended that one live with some awareness of the way in which personal identity is unavoidably shaped by one's situation. The existential boredom of reflective aestheticism arises from the established disparity between self and world, which the aesthete actively perpetuates by employing the intensive strategy of crop rotation. While the aesthete may momentarily obscure this disparity through its projects of amusement, boredom is a perpetual problem for its way of

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[541] Ibid, 27.
[542] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 251.
[543] Mooney, 28.

life, and it is an experience that will recur every time the aesthete's projects inevitably cease to be amusing. The person overcomes boredom not through distraction, but through a more fundamental reorientation of its life-view. Ethical personality adopts a life-view in which the disparity between self and world, which is the condition for aesthetic boredom, is resolved through a reevaluation of the sense in which the ethical self is unfreely embedded within its given situation. The ethical person's situation is not viewed as meaningless or as providing content for the imagination merely for the sake of the production of amusing representations of life, but instead it is understood as the concrete context within which one necessarily determines oneself through one's deliberate choices.

When one's situation is understood as the sole and necessary context in which one has possibilities and within which one can determinately shape one's existence, one is not disinterested in and disengaged from one's situation, but instead approaches it with what Kierkegaard calls "the earnestness of spirit." Requisite for the shift from the aesthetic to the ethical life-view is that the person becomes earnest about its existence. Kierkegaard says: "Only the ethical individual gives himself an account of himself in earnest and is therefore honest with himself […]."[544] For the ethical personality, actuality does not represent something to be ignored, forgotten, or reimagined, but is instead that determinate space within which the self can pursue is project of self-determination; in the ethical view of life, the situation in which one finds oneself is not perceived as meaningless, but as a necessary condition for its primary task of self-determination. In order to overcome its boredom, what the aesthete needs is not a more amusing perception of its life, but "to become awakened to the earnestness of the spirit."[545] It is for this reason that Kierkegaard

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[544] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 261.
[545] Ibid, 219. Cf. ibid, 168.

says that the ethicist is the one who "is truly living poetically […]"[546] Such truly poetic living involves the understanding that "we are not to read about or listen to or look at what is the highest and the most beautiful in life, but are, if you please, to live it."[547]

[546] Ibid, 138.
[547] Ibid, 139.

CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION

From the foregoing analysis of the way in which Kierkegaard describes boredom and contextualizes this mood within his theory of personal development through stages of self-awareness, it is clear that the type of boredom that Kierkegaard examines is far from the ordinary one. As it is ordinarily understood, boredom is a common and fairly minor occurrence in one's life, experienced whenever one finds oneself in a particular situation in which the various activities that are available therewithin do not interest one, such that one is for some duration of time prevented from doing what one finds interesting. The kind of boredom whose description concerns Kierkegaard, however, is not an ordinary experience, but is instead uniquely characteristic of a highly reflective stage of personality, one in which the person actively struggles with the meaning of its life. Between *The Concept of Irony* and *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard is not at all concerned with an explication of what could be designated as "ordinary" or "simple" boredom; instead, he is committed to a description of existential boredom – the rarer experience that does not stem from a momentary disinterest in one's current circumstances, but instead evinces a more fundamental struggle to find oneself meaningfully oriented within one's world at all.

In Kierkegaard's account, not every individual is capable of experiencing this type of boredom; the experience of boredom is conditioned by one's having become critical of the meaning of one's life, such that the ability to experience the kind of boredom that Kierkegaard describes is indicative of an achievement of a heightened consciousness of one's existential condition. The way that Kierkegaard situates the experience of boredom within his theory of personal development significantly indicates how he understands this particular mood. On the one hand, to be capable of such boredom entails that one has

transcended the life of immediacy, such that one no longer merely dogmatically presupposes that there is some objective and obvious meaning and purpose for one's life. In the life of immediacy, which is represented by Kierkegaard as the pre-ironic life or as the six pre-reflective substages of aestheticism, the individual does not experience existential boredom, because the individual does not reflect on its understanding of life, but instead takes the meaning and purpose of life to be obvious, such that the individual is only ever concerned with how best to live in accordance with this dogmatically accepted understanding. The experience of boredom is an expression of one's having become liberated from the presumptuous metaphysical and ethical understandings of existence that belong to the unreflective stages of life, such that one has correlatively assumed a critical stance toward such understandings. The ironic and reflective aesthete liberates itself from the dogmatic and unconscious commitment to an understanding of the meaning and purpose of life, but, in this state of liberation, it finds itself in a world that has lost all meaning and value, such that the aesthete finds itself alienated from its world. Given how Kierkegaard understands the condition for the possibility of becoming existentially bored, the reflectively aesthetic stage of personal development is the only one in which such boredom is experienced, since it is only in this stage that the person finds itself alienated from its world through the assumption of a nihilistic stance toward its existence. In the less reflective stages of existence, the individual person does not at all question the meaning of its existence, such that whatever boredom it does experience cannot be a manifestation of its struggle to find itself meaningfully oriented within its world. If one is to experience what Kierkegaard describes as boredom, then a more sophisticated stage of consciousness is necessary – one in which one recognizes that one's previous understanding of existence

has no discernable justification and that one had only dogmatically accepted such an understanding. On the other hand, in the higher stage of ethical existence, one has precisely reconciled oneself to one's world through a shift in self-conception, whereby one achieves a more adequate understanding of what it means to be a person, such that the possibility of the boredom that characterizes reflective aestheticism is thereby precluded. Accordingly, Kierkegaard understands boredom to be an experience that is unique to persons at a particular stage of development – a stage at which the person finds itself alienated from its world through a nihilistic perception that the world is devoid of all significance.

Within the aesthetic stage of life, boredom is a dominant and illuminating experience; boredom evinces the essential features of aestheticism. It is not simply the case that the aesthete is bored, but instead this boredom figures into the aesthetic life in a decisive manner. Boredom is the manifestation of the aesthete's acosmic discontinuity with its concrete situation, its escapist commitment to distraction that reinforces this acosmism, and its negative unity of life.

First, boredom is a manifestation of the nihilism that essentially characterizes the aesthetic stage of life. Having achieved a recognition of the vanity of the various understandings of the meaning and purpose of life that pertain to substantial existence, the aesthete adopts a nihilistic stance toward its life. It finds all possible actions and ways of living to be pointless and unfulfilling, such that the aesthete becomes bored with existence. The world is viewed by the aesthete as divested of value, such that the former appears empty, and boredom is the experience of such emptiness.

Second, boredom is not just an expression of the aesthete's struggle to engage meaningfully with its world; boredom also determines the aesthetic praxis. As explicated

in the theory of crop rotation, through which the aesthetic individual attempts to accomplish its task of enjoying life, boredom in effect functions as the fundamental source of motivation for the aesthete. The aesthete is indifferent to all possible actions, viewing them as equally pointless and unfulfilling. Such nihilism makes the aesthete indolent and ultimately bored with living. This boredom, however, is precisely what motivates the aesthete to activity. The experience of boredom is "infinitely repulsive," driving the aesthete out of its indolence and into pursuits of amusement, where such amusement is intended to distract the individual from its own experience of the meaninglessness of existence. Because the aesthete is no longer satisfied with the pursuit of ordinary pleasures, having seen through the vanity of the same, it must develop more sophisticated means through which to make its life interesting and thereby enjoyable. Such is the purpose of the theory of crop rotation, in which the aesthete experiments with various ways of poetically composing its life, albeit without substantial commitment to or any assumption of responsibility for such composition.

Finally, because the aesthetic project of distraction maintains the aesthete's discontinuity with its world, its life loses positive unity, devolving into a disjointed and disparate series of projects. Rather than being positively unified around the enactment of possible ways of living that it deems to be valuable for its general project of self-development, the aesthete unifies its life only negatively through the constant negation of boredom in the pursuit of any course of action that it finds amusing enough to distract it from the state of its own existence. The aesthete is not committed to any course of action but is instead just concerned with avoiding boredom, such that boredom provides the only sense of unity within the aesthetic life.

In Kierkegaard's account, such boredom is unique to reflective aestheticism, and the higher stage of ethical personality precisely overcomes such boredom when it transcends the aesthetic life-view. Consequently, between the stages of reflective aestheticism and ethicality, Kierkegaard in effect outlines two possible responses to the boredom that becomes manifest when consciousness assumes a critical stance toward its life by questioning the validity of the meaning of the same. There is, on the one hand, the momentary resolution of boredom through distraction, when the aesthete employs its method of crop rotation so as to create amusing representations of its life. On the other hand, there is a more radical resolution of boredom – one that undermines the very condition for its possibility and involves a shift in one's basic view of life. To overcome boredom in this way, what is necessary is that one attain a more adequate conception of oneself as conditionally free. While the reflective aesthete achieves an understanding of itself as negatively free, it is only in the ethical stage that the person recognizes the way in which its freedom is conditioned by its determinate situation, and this recognition is expressed by the ethicist in its acceptance of responsibility to and for its situation. Summarily, Kierkegaard's account of how boredom is situated in relation to these particular stages of life indicates the conditions under which boredom is experienced but can also be surmounted; boredom can be inadequately surmounted through distraction, which ultimately perpetuates the condition for boredom, or the possibility of boredom can be altogether precluded through a reevaluation of one's life-view.

The aesthetic response to boredom is one of obscuration; rather than getting to the root of the problem, which is the aesthetic life-view itself, the aesthete works merely to divert its attention away from the issue. The aesthete finds its boredom to be unbearable,

such that it is motivated to escape from it through its method of crop rotation. In such an attempt to avoid boredom, the aesthete may temporarily mask its boredom, but it concurrently perpetuates the condition for its boredom – namely, its discontinuity with its world. In its attempt to overcome boredom and as a result of its unresolved nihilism, the aesthete views its world merely as a source of amusement. The aesthete does not feel bound to its concrete situation in any particular way but takes itself as free to act within its world in whatever way that it pleases. It is in this sense that Kierkegaard says that the aesthete "has no connection with actuality."[548]

The ethical response, in contrast, involves eliminating the condition for the possibility of boredom. The existential kind of boredom that Kierkegaard describes is conditioned by the discontinuity of personality with its world. Unlike the aesthete, who maintains such discontinuity, the ethicist achieves "absolute continuity with the actuality to which he belongs."[549] This continuity is established precisely through the self-choice, wherewith the ethicist chooses to take responsibility for the free and deliberate shaping of the self that it concretely is. This self-choice involves a receptivity to one's world, which, along with one's agency, is co-constitutive of one's project of self-determination, since it is precisely the determinate situation in which one finds oneself that furnishes one with the possible means for self-determination. With this receptivity, the person becomes earnest about its situation, and this earnestness can be seen as the opposite of boredom; as bored, the person experiences its world as devoid of value, but, as earnest, the person experiences its world as essential for its project of self-determination. The ethical personality expresses this earnestness when, rather than distancing itself from its situation through fantasy and

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[548] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 250
[549] Ibid, 248.

arbitrary activity, it chooses itself, where such choice involves commitment to the concrete situation in which the personality has been and will continue to be defined. Here, the emphasis is not on living a particular life-style or enacting certain possibilities, but on viewing oneself as integrated with one's situation, such that one is responsible to that situation, in the sense that one can only determine oneself through the particular materials provided therewithin. The emphasis, here, is not on what one does, but on how one does it. Since, as Kierkegaard says, "the person who lives ethically may do exactly the same as one who lives esthetically," boredom is not overcome by engaging in particular actions which are supposed to be objectively meaningful and fulfilling.[550] Instead, the person surmounts its boredom by reevaluating its basic view of life, where such reevaluation involves recognizing not only that one is free to determine oneself, but also that such free self-determination is situationally conditioned.

Boredom is a central concept of Kierkegaard's theory of stages on life's way, precisely because of the way that the experience elucidates the aesthetic and ethical stages of existence. On the one hand, the experience of boredom exposes the threefold constitution of the reflectively aesthetic life. First, boredom evinces the essential nihilism that is achieved in reflective aestheticism, whereby the aesthete is alienated from its world. Second, boredom founds the aesthetic praxis, to the extent that the unbearability of boredom is what motivates the aesthetic project of poetic self-composition. Third, boredom constitutes the only unity maintained by the aesthetic life, insofar as the aesthete rejects committing itself to anything except the continual avoidance of boredom. Summarily, boredom characterizes the nature of this aesthetic life-view, in which there is

[550] Ibid, 257.

no continuity with the world. On the other hand, Kierkegaard's conception of boredom sets into relief the features of the ethical stage of existence, emphasizing the differences between the latter and the aesthetic stage. That boredom is an essential feature of aestheticism and is founded by the latter's nihilistic discontinuity between self and world indicates the importance of the notion of continuity in Kierkegaard's understanding of the development of personality. In the ethical stage of life, the person surmounts boredom by establishing continuity with its concrete situation by viewing that latter as essentially co-constitutive of the person's project of self-determination. Accordingly, Kierkegaard's conception of boredom crucially defines the aesthetic and ethical stages of personal development, setting into relief the essential constitution of both stages.

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