

Kierkegaard's Aesthetic Sphere of Existence

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Introduction

In answer to the question 'why should I be good?' I'm going to argue that the alternative, simply pursuing our own immediate wishes and desires, is subjectively unsatisfactory and leads to despair. At the outset, I point out that there does seem to be a Platonist assumption lurking behind the question 'Why should I be good?' It seems to beg the question, and have assumed that there is an ethical reason why one should be good. I will explain that we cannot have certainty about this question. Only motivating answers to the question are available to us.

In seeking to answer the question it seemed appropriate to me to draw on the philosophy of the Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard. This is because the personal pronoun appears in the question and Kierkegaard is unusual among philosophers for focusing on subjectivity rather than objectivity. Subjectivity means inwardness. It's not that Kierkegaard doesn't think that objectivity matters, but rather that objectivity is a very limited category. Aiming to achieve an objective standpoint might be appropriate to the natural sciences such as my academic background in Physics, but science, of course, cannot find an objective ground for ethics. Kierkegaard has been credited as being the first philosopher to realise that enlightenment efforts to ground ethics on reason could not succeed.

Kierkegaard thought that good and evil are real things and that ultimately the ground of the moral ought is God. However, he agreed with Kant that reason cannot establish God's reality, and he went further than Hume in dismissing the persuasiveness of empirical historical evidence with respect to Christianity. So according to Kierkegaard, if God is real then he cannot be found through collective human enquiry. Nietzsche's madman who announced the death of this publicly accessible God is spot on.

His major philosophical work, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, consists effectively of two books, the first a short one about objectivity, and the second a very long one about subjectivity.

For Kierkegaard, subjectivity encompasses almost everything that is most important to us as human beings. Kierkegaard said that we can have a system of logic by means of abstraction, but that we cannot have a system of existence. He thought that only God could have the system (if there is one), but that we cannot. So according to him, we are stuck with subjectivity.

Kierkegaard rejected the idea which goes back to Descartes that philosophy is about getting certainty and of building up knowledge from a firm foundation. Instead, he thought that consciousness is the place where beliefs and doubts necessarily reside together. He also thought it vital to hold on to paradox since paradox shows us that there are limits to what reason, and also language, can do. Kierkegaard's insights come from self-analysis and so his philosophy is to some extent autobiographical. Kierkegaard was a devout Christian who came into serious conflict with the Danish state church. He detested both complacent Christianity and Hegel's philosophy which seemed to be made for each other.

Kierkegaard used pseudonyms extensively in his philosophical writings. There are various reasons for this. But perhaps most importantly, he wanted to provoke his readers to think for themselves. If a book is written by a pseudonym, then the reader can be pushed to take responsibility for interpreting the text and also to reflect on their own life. It can be unsettling. This is a Socratic method. Kierkegaard was a huge admirer of Socrates and sought to emulate him. He recognised that getting people to change their minds about their commitments is not an easy task.

I'll give you an example of pseudonymous authorship from the main book which I shall draw on:

Either/Or

The papers of which the book is formed were found by Victor Eremita in a secret compartment in an old desk that he had bought second hand. They were grouped into 2 obvious bundles by Eremita: Papers of A and Papers of B. Eremita writes a Preface before publishing everything after a suitable interval of time. A is a young man and an aesthete. Among A's papers was 'The Seducer's Diary' written by someone called Johannes. B is Judge Vilhelm who is an exemplar of Hegelian morality: married and a pillar of the community. He does everything his society expects of him. B's papers are letters to A. However, these papers also include a sermon written by someone else.

Either/Or is an important book in the history of philosophy. *Either/Or* presents two different kinds of life: the aesthetic and the ethical and it is left to the reader to decide which is most attractive. Crucially, reason alone cannot sort this out. Rather, we are invited to reflect for ourselves and choose between the aesthetic and the ethical - without having certainty.

So, what is a self? Kierkegaard's answer is given in *The Sickness unto Death* by Anti-Climacus. From his journals we know that Kierkegaard essentially agrees with Anti-Climacus but felt unworthy to pen this particular pseudonymous book under his own name.

The Kierkegaardian Self

"A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of possibility and necessity... A synthesis is a relation between two factors, a human being is not yet a self... man is spirit... spirit is the self... The self is a relation which relates itself to its own self." (Anti-Climacus, *The Sickness unto Death*)

The self (or spirit) sits above this first order synthesis in a second order volitional relationship of striving and willing – a bit like Nietzsche's Will to Power. The self is not static but is in a process of becoming throughout our life and only becomes fixed at our death.

Judge Vilhelm the ethicist gives a warning:

"Do you not know that there comes a midnight hour when everyone has to throw off his mask? Do you think you can slip away a little before midnight in order to avoid this? Can you think of anything more frightful than that it might end with your nature being resolved into a multiplicity, that you might become many, become, like those unhappy demoniacs, a legion, and thus would have lost the inmost and most holiest thing of all in a man, the unifying power of personality?" (Judge Vilhelm, *Either/Or*)

Nietzsche thought that a human being is like a community of competing drives and you can see here that Kierkegaard takes a similar view. The danger is that pursuing all our drives unbridled could resolve us into a multiplicity rather than a unified self.

Despair

The concept of despair is analysed within *The Sickness unto Death*. Simply put, despair is a loss of hope. This can be a very varied psychological experience. Despair is always a sign that something is wrong. Note that despair may be conscious or suppressed. Kierkegaard is a depth psychologist like Nietzsche. Kierkegaard wants to help people see their own barrenness and emptiness for what it is, and then change their lives.

Spheres of Existence

The most significant books for understanding Kierkegaard's stages, or spheres of existence, are *Either/Or* and *Stages on Life's Way*. There are 3 spheres of existence: the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious. The ethical and the religious stand together in contrast to the aesthetic. The aesthetic is the focus of this talk and is the sphere of immediacy. The ethical is the sphere of requirement. Elsewhere he called the basic norms of ethics 'the universal', but beyond this, he located 'the absolute', a much more demanding transcendent norm. The spheres, or stages, are a kind of model of how a human life might develop. But there is nothing inevitable about it. Each sphere has different criteria for measuring what constitutes a successful life and people must reflect on them from within. Each answers the question 'what is the good life?' differently. The ethical answer is only one possible answer.

The Ground of the stages is human nature. And the Goal of the stages is the discovery and realisation of one's true self. But there is no psychological or logical inevitability about it. The task is not made easier by others having done the task or by living in a later age. The stages are like modes of being in the world or world views. They represent different ways that people may seek to centre their lives.

Whilst Kierkegaard has a cognitivist ethics, he has a non-cognitivist meta-ethics. So, for Kierkegaard, we are able to talk about the universal and mean what we say. However, he thought that the absolute, and the eternal truth of ethics, is beyond the reach of reason and human enquiry, and cannot be accessed on Platonist assumptions. Whilst Nietzsche called Christianity 'Platonism for the people', Kierkegaard showed that this is deeply mistaken.

Kierkegaard referred to Christ as the 'absolute paradox'. Christian Theology has never been able to make fully adequate philosophical sense of the idea that Christ is both God and a human being combined in one person. The idea of Christ is paradoxical. This paradox explains why Kierkegaard has a religious sphere beyond the ethical sphere. For him, the ground of ethics and the absolute is beyond the reach of theoretical reason. In the religious sphere reason must become practical. On his view, there is no overall theory of ethics that we can find. What Kierkegaard has to say about the religious sphere is immensely interesting and insightful, but all that would be another talk!

The Aesthetic Sphere

"Anyone who, when he is 20 years old, does not understand that there is a categorical imperative – Enjoy – is a fool." (Johannes, *Stages on Life's Way*)

The aesthetic is the default kind of existence for a human being and some people never progress from it. The aesthetic is the sphere of immediacy and in it an individual is focused on their own immediate wishes and desires. The childlike "I want it now" is what immediacy means.

The aesthetic stage is best defined as an attempt to define and live the good life without reference to good and evil. The aesthetic is the name for criteria for successful living that are pre-ethical. In the aesthetic people are dedicated to creating their own identity in relation to their own desires. This could include living in the world of the intellect so we should not be surprised to find some philosophers there. In fact, Kierkegaard calls Kant and Hegel philosophers of the aesthetic. The aesthetic life is usually devoted to a temporal goal – power, money, sex, status, career, hobbies etc.

In the aesthetic there are 2 divisions: the sensual and the reflective. The sensual is the basic one as it is most natural. In *Either/Or*, the character Don Juan from Mozart's opera Don Giovanni is given as an example high in the sensual division. He has a voracious sexual appetite and so far, has accumulated 1003 mistresses. Aesthete A and Johannes (the author of the Seducer's Diary) are given as examples in the reflective division. High up in the aesthetic, in both divisions, the level of sickness increases until it reaches an extreme: the demonic.

Don Juan, Aesthete A, and Johannes are unmediated by ethical considerations. For example, Aesthete A observes: "a bad conscience can indeed make life interesting." So, the value of conscience is to help make life interesting. For Aesthete A, all guilt is false guilt, since conscience has no normative significance. It is to be accounted for simply in terms of psychological and sociological mechanism.

The aesthetic does not force a link to either the beautiful or the arts even if many people in the aesthetic are interested in those things. The dominant category in *Either/Or* is the interesting not the beautiful. For example, the analysis of tragedy given by Aesthete A comes down to the central question "How is the dramatic interest to be produced?" Johannes seeks to be faithful to the aesthetic and asks the overarching question "Has the interesting been preserved at all times?" For him, this is the litmus test.

In the aesthetic, boredom is perhaps the central problem in life to be solved. Crop rotation is an agricultural metaphor used for strategies for keeping boredom at bay and is the title for a whole

section of *Either/Or* written by aesthete A. Here is the basic 'slash and burn' strategy for avoiding boredom:

Crop Rotation

"One is tired of living in the country, one moves to the city; one is tired of one's native land, one travels abroad; one is tired of Europe, one goes to America... one burns half of Rome to get an idea of the conflagration at Troy." (Aesthete A, Crop Rotation, *Either/Or*)

A more sophisticated method is that of cultivating arbitrariness artistically such as "You see the middle of a play, read the third part of a book." etc. Aesthete A advises that it is vitally important to avoid personal commitments, particularly marriage and having children, since these curtail one's ability to roam around aimlessly.

The pursuit of pleasure itself becomes boring but the aesthete tries to solve this from within aestheticism. They create a world of exotic bohemian sensuality of the spirit. They have not yet realised that boredom is actually a manifestation of despair.

Now Judge Vilhelm acknowledges that aestheticism embodies a philosophy of self-choice but since it focusses on immediate interests (the whim of the moment) this results in an unstable self. By contrast the ethical self is also free but chooses itself with respect to the difference between good and evil. Judge Vilhelm has put his finger on something that is potentially worrying for A. A is indeed blown about all over the place. He is not on a journey to anywhere in particular.

Problems

"The existing person is the driver, that is, if existing is not to be what people usually call existing, because then the existing person is no driver but a drunken peasant who lives in the wagon and sleeps and lets the horses shift for themselves." (Johannes Climacus, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*)

In the aesthetic people are subject to momentary whims, interest, and fancy. They are also subject to the vagaries of fate. they are unable to self-analyse or understand where they are going. So aestheticism cannot provide a true form of selfhood. Rather, it is a form of alienation from selfhood.

The sensual division of aestheticism is hard to maintain over long periods for obvious reasons (e.g., getting fat, or catching STDs) so a committed aesthete is likely to move on to the reflective. But since the reflective is a step removed from natural sensual pleasures it is possible that they may eventually find this unsatisfactory. However, a reflective aesthete may become highly resourceful in maintaining their world view and commitment by embracing melancholy, suffering, and tragedy. Aesthetes may feel superior and get aesthetic pleasure from their misery.

The ethical can, however, intrude on the aesthetic. To give an example, Johannes expresses discomfort about the idea of making a false promise of marriage in order to seduce a woman, but then later does this very thing to seduce his victim Cordelia before abandoning her. I'll give another example of the ethical intruding upon the aesthetic at the end of this talk.

The Demonic

In this picture you can see a single individual is about to choose to go through the dark gates and into the abyss, perhaps never to return.

Within the aesthetic, Kierkegaard describes an unusual extreme: the demonic. This can occur at the top of either the sensual or reflective division. It involves defiance and involves a higher level of self-consciousness. Defiance is a Kierkegaardian term which is reserved for a refusal/inability to acknowledge goodness and/or truth. Within the demonic, individuals may reject all ethical norms and become a law unto themselves (e.g., a mafia-boss, following Machiavellian principles, or a sexual predator like Jimmy Saville). This kind of existence takes a lot of mental strength and does lead to being a kind of (evil) self, but deep down it is despairing. This is the highest reach of the aesthetic and is the most sick.

People here sink into their own despair and will not let go of it. It's almost impossible to break out of this. They have something which Kierkegaard calls 'inclosing reserve' = a turning inwards, to depend on themselves alone, and to find their own identity in opposing themselves to the universal - or even the divine.

"By means of the demonic the individual would thus aspire to be the single individual who as the particular is higher than the universal... The demonic can also express itself in contempt for men... his strength is his knowledge that he is better than all those who pass judgement on him." (Johannes *de silentio*, *Fear and Trembling*)

In other words, they feel exceptional and superior and place themselves beyond good and evil.

Kierkegaard thinks that it does require great strength of mind to be in the demonic and that it results in a kind of consistent self – an evil self. An individual may invest so much in this that they would rather live in hell than change their identity. To change would be to destroy the very identity that they have so painstakingly built up.

Moving on to the ethical sphere

An individual may choose to leave aestheticism and enter the ethical sphere of existence where they commit themselves to other/s and to the 'universal'. For Kierkegaard, the ethical stage of life is characterised by freely chosen commitment to other people and moral norms. In this stage an individual starts to become a consistent self. This is a progression, a step forward on "life's way". For many people this happens during entry into adulthood when commitments naturally arise.

When he was out and about one day Johannes the seducer observed a couple who were in love. In this encounter, the ethical intrudes into the aesthetic for Johannes.

"There goes a couple who are destined for each other. What rhythm in their step, what assurance, built on mutual trust, in their whole bearing, what pre-established harmony in all their movements, what self-sufficient solidarity. Their positions are not light and graceful; they are not dancing with each other. No, there is a permanence about them, a boldness that awakens a hope that cannot be deceived, that inspires mutual respect. I wager that their view of life is this: life is a road. And they seemed destined to walk arm in arm with each other through life's joys and sorrows." (Johannes, *Either/Or*)

There seems to be no irony here from Johannes. The metaphor that “life is a road” perfectly expresses the ethical life. It implies that life is a journey and that there is a destination. This gives human life continuity and a goal. Johannes can’t help but be attracted to what he sees and does not have. So, it seems that there is hope for Johannes after all. Perhaps he will recognise his despair and move on out of the aesthetic and into the ethical.

Conclusion

Finally, to sum up, I have explained why there are a number of problems that arise within the aesthetic sphere. Whatever the aesthete does, despair results. So, in answer to the question ‘why should I be good?’ I offer the motivating answer that the alternative, living in the aesthetic sphere of existence, simply pursuing our own immediate wishes and desires, is subjectively unsatisfactory and leads to despair. Since reason alone cannot decide between the aesthetic sphere and the ethical sphere, only motivating answers to this question are available to us.