

KIERKEGAARD AND RATIONAL JUSTIFICATION OF MORALITY
-A CRITIQUE OF MACINTYRE'S ACCOUNT-

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Abstract:

This essay is the critique of MacIntyre's thesis that Kierkegaard isn't trying to justify morality at all. Using MacIntyre's account of Kierkegaard's work *Either/Or*, and comparing his interpretation to Kierkegaard's works, I aim to show that MacIntyre's conclusions are wrong. In doing so, I will provide a different interpretation of *Either/Or*, while arguing that it is possible to use later Kierkegaard's works in that interpretation. Contrary to MacIntyre's assertion, Kierkegaard does not change his characterization of the ethical in his later works, but outlines in *Either/Or* the same problems he will deal with in *Fear and Trembling*. The foundation of his conception of the ethical lies in his conception of the self, given in *The Sickness unto Death*. Analyzing this conception of self through Kierkegaard's account of the forms of despair, I will argue that the significance of morality lies in delivering the self from various forms of despair. As Kierkegaard's thesis on the ubiquity of despair provides a horizon for the debate between the aesthetic and the ethical individual, we can say that the concept of despair provides a basis for his justification of morality.

Key words: Kierkegaard, the aesthetic, the ethical, despair, self, justification of morality.

Introduction

In his work *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre asserts that the interminability of contemporary moral debates and the domination of emotivism are the results of the failure of the Enlightenment project to rationally justify morality. As a „third way“ between a morality that refers to universal criteria (e.g. Kantian reference to the concept of practical Reason) and a morality that refers to individual criteria (e.g. emotions or attitude of the speaker), MacIntyre offers a contextualistic *virtue ethics* based on a „specific interpretation of aristotelian tradition and a functional concept of good“¹.

I won't attempt to estimate whether MacIntyre

rightly ascribes negative value to this development of ethics – to do so would require a thorough examination of MacIntyre's view that there cannot exist any concept of good outside a tradition and tasks which that tradition prescribes to its inheritants. I will focus our attention to a specific part of his critique of the Enlightenment project of rational justification of morality. Namely, after providing an account of the attempts to found morality given by the philosophers of Enlightenment, such as Hume, Diderot and Kant, MacIntyre turns to Kierkegaard's work *Either/Or*, in which, according to MacIntyre, we can find the first expression of a modern stance „which envisages moral debate in terms of a confrontation between incompatible and incommensurable moral premises and moral commitment as the expression of a criterionless choice between such premises, a type of choice for which no rational justification can be given“². Such an understanding of *Either/Or* will lead MacIntyre to argue that „Kierkegaard no longer attempts to *justify* morality at all“³. The aim of this essay is to show that this MacIntyre's assertion cannot hold. To show that, I will present the basic traits of MacIntyre's account of Kierkegaard, argue against it using the very text of *Either/Or*, and finally, referring to the structure of self that Kierkegaard gives in his later works, attempt to defend the thesis that Kierkegaard does not give up on rationally justifying morality.

After Virtue and Either/Or

MacIntyre commences his interpretation of *Either/Or* by distinguishing its three central features. The first is the connection between its mode of presentation and its central thesis: „the authors“ of the book are „A“, „B“ and their editor, Victor Eremita. „A“ expresses and argues for the aesthetic view of life, the essence of which, as MacIntyre sees it, is „the attempt to lose the self in the immediacy of

¹ E. Tugendhat, „Etičko protuprosvetiteljstvo: Hegel i Riterova škola; *After Virtue* Alasdera Mekintajera“ u *Predavanja o etici*, naklada Jesenski i Turk, Zagreb, 2003, p.181 (E.Tugendhat, *Lectures on Ethics*)

² A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, 1984. p. 39.

³ *ibidem*, p 52

present experiences⁴. Contrary to that, „B“ commends the ethical way of life, which is characterised by accepting obligations through time and connecting the present with the past and future (Kierkegaard refers to marriage as the paradigm of the ethical). How is one to evaluate the reasons that can be stated for either of these views of life? According to MacIntyre, in order for a reason to be convincing for a person, he or she must previously accept the view of life supported by that reason. In other words, the domain of a reason's validity is the very position it supports - it is worthless outside that position. Although MacIntyre admits that it is hard to establish what Kierkegaard's position is, he tends to identify it in B's thesis that „anyone who faces the choice between the aesthetic and the ethical will in fact choose the ethical; for the energy, the passion of serious choice will, so to speak, carry the person who chooses into the ethical“⁵. According to MacIntyre, this is a false assertion, for a serious and passionate aesthetic choice can be made - his example are the young men who have survived the massacres of World War I and decided after that that nothing will matter to them anymore.

The second feature of *Either/Or* is a deep internal inconsistency between the concept of radical choice and the concept of the ethical. Namely, if the ethical should have any authority, it must be supported by reasons. The choice of the ethical should be founded on reasons, and the ultimate reason that Kierkegaard gives us is the very act of choice.

The third feature is the conservative and traditional character of the ethical as Kierkegaard presents it. Once we make that radical choice that B and, according to MacIntyre, Kierkegaard himself incite us to, there is no dilemma about the principles that we are to choose – they are the very principles that Kierkegaard had „received“ during his lutheran upbringing: promiss-keeping, truth-speaking, benevolence etc. Thus, states MacIntyre, „Kierkegaard is providing a new practical and philosophical underpinning for an older and inherited way of life“⁶.

I will try to show that these three central features of *Either/Or* are a result of MacIntyre's false assumption that *Either/Or* can be taken independently from other Kierkegaard's works. The arguments that MacIntyre uses to support this assumption are not very convincing – he confronts Kierkegaard's later interpretation of his own works with

the text and pseudonyms of *Either/Or* as the best testimonies of the ethical stances of Kierkegaard at the time (the year in question is 1842). This would be legitimate if MacIntyre's interpretation of the structure of *Either/Or* could actually find support in the very text. However, that is not the case – apart from the pseudonyms that MacIntyre specifies („A“, „B“ and Victor Eremita), *Either/Or* has two more authors: Johannes the Seducer, the author of *The Seducer's Diary* and a pastor from Jylland, the author of *Ultimatum*, the final chapter of the book. Now it is more difficult to maintain MacIntyre's thesis that *Either/Or* is about A commending the aesthetic, B commending the ethical view of life, and Victor Eremita - being the editor refraining from judgement – arguing that it's impossible to end this debate being that the premises of the debaters are incommensurable. If that were the case, what would be the role of these two pseudonymous authors that MacIntyre intentionally omits? What does the structure of *Either/Or* tell us once we decide to move out of MacIntyre's *back yard*, out of which he decided to exclude two Kierkegaard's pseudonyms that couldn't fit into his interpretation? First of all, a third, religious view of life emerges, and is, for now, characterized only by its guiding thought that we are always in the wrong in relation to God⁷. Of course, one could say that it's not a moment of great importance, because the debate between the presented positions still remains interminable and the premises incommensurable. That objection is in place, but the significance of introducing the religious perspective lies elsewhere: while the ethical individual posits himself, as well as good and evil⁸, the religious individual has his authority outside of himself. That is the same conflict that continues in *Fear and Trembling*, a works that was published by Kierkegaard a year after *Either/Or*. According to MacIntyre, Kierkegaard's characterization of the ethical had by then undergone a radical change⁹. At first glance, that seems to be the case: while the ethical is presented in *Either/Or* as founded by a radical choice through which the individual chooses himself as a self, in *Fear and Trembling* it is presented as a set of socially established norms that claim universal validity. We can show that Kierkegaard didn't change his characterization of the ethical by means of his characterization of the aesthetic provided in *Ei-*

⁴ *ibidem*, p. 40.

⁵ After *Virtue*, p. 41.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 43.

⁷ S. Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, Part II, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 1987, p. 339

⁸ *Ibidem*, p 224.

⁹ After *Virtue*, p 41.

ther/Or. First of all we need to point out that MacIntyre’s interpretation misses the essence of the aesthetic view of life. In his example concerning the young men of WWI that passionately choose the aesthetic way of life, MacIntyre displays an obvious misconception of the aesthetic. Kierkegaard’s aesthetic individual is not able to experience anything that is so shocking as to force him to resolutely make a choice that would be a choice for life – for him, each moment has just enough value to be revoked at any time, to be forgotten so that he could start over, not taking into account the previous resolutions he had made. The reason that MacIntyre makes this mistake lies exactly in his reduction of *Either/Or*’s structure to a simple conflict between the aesthetic and the ethical.

Namely, the aesthetic is not a homogeneous category. There are three paradigms (of various sub-stages) of the aesthetic: Don Juan, Johannes the Seducer and „A“. Don Juan is the paradigm of an immediate aesthete and, which is not irrelevant, the only one of these paradigms that even in the book itself figures as an imaginary character, a character from a work of fiction. As Louis Mackey notices¹⁰, Don Juan represents a lament of „immediacy hopelessly lost in reflection“¹¹. While writing about Don Juan, A laments the impossibility of actualizing the purest idea of the aesthetic embodied in Don Juan. Just like Benji of Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, crying over a meadow he doesn’t recall owning, but only losing, A, a „reflexive aesthete“ attempts to replace the never-owned, but always-already-lost innocence of the aesthetic with other forms of aesthetic existence, like poeticizing his own life, or as Mackey says, „If he cannot make immediacy his life, he will make life itself an art“¹². He avoids obligations, does not bring passion to any of his enterprises, does not make decisions that have lasting consequences. In other words, he lives just like MacIntyre’s aesthetes. But now comes a significant difference between Kierkegaard’s account of aesthetic existence and MacIntyre’s interpretation: *enter* Johannes the Seducer. He lives by the same „principles“ as A: not attaching to anything perma-

nent, he plans to seduce a girl, seduces her, gets engaged with her, breaks off the engagement and then dishonors and leaves her. But if his actions are not to be judged according to ethical standards, but exclusively aesthetic ones, how come that A, who is also an aesthete, can say things about him such as: „the contriving heart of that corrupt man“¹³, „he has suffered from an *exacerbatio cerebri* (exacerbation of the brain), for which actuality did not have enough stimulation, at most only momentarily“, or finally „and the evil in him lay in this“¹⁴. These assessments are more likely to be expected from the pen of B, and that fact seriously challenges MacIntyre’s assertion of an incommensurability of premises of the aesthetic and ethical view of life. What we’re actually dealing with is a sort of „evolution“ in the conception of the aesthetic view, that is to say, in the self-conception of the aesthetic individual. Kierkegaard starts with the immediate aesthetic and the impossibility of actualizing it, and arrives to the final consequences of the poetization of life, where the aesthete realizes that the aesthetic view of life does not suffice to describe all the phenomena that he is dealing with – the novum that A is trying to cope with is conscience, a category which belongs to the ethical. It could seem that this sudden appearance of conscience is used by Kierkegaard as a sort of *deus ex machina*, but such an objection would assume that the aesthetic sphere of existence precedes the ethical sphere, which can be true in an empirical sense, but not in a transcendental one. Much like in Kant’s work, where the categorical imperative is presented *a priori*, in such a way that every immoral act we commit is actually an act of disobedience to the moral law, there are passages in *Either/Or* that can lead to a conclusion that all aesthetic existence is rather a refusal to assume responsibility for one’s own self than a „natural state“ from which one can advance to the ethical. B says: „the person who chooses the aesthetic after the ethical has become manifest to him is not living aesthetically, for he is sinning and is subject to ethical qualifications, even if his life must be termed unethical“¹⁵. Although Kierkegaard’s examples are mostly empirical, he is interested neither in anthropology nor in the empirical moment in which a person can become capable of moral judgement. What he wants to point out is that once the moment occurs, that person cannot

¹⁰ L. Mackey, „The Poetry of Inwardness“, in J. Thompson (ed.), Kierkegaard, a Collection of Critical Essays, Doubleday Anchor Books, Garden City, NY, 1972., p. 1-102.

¹¹ L. Mackey, „The Poetry of Inwardness“, in J. Thompson (ed.), Kierkegaard, a Collection of Critical Essays, Doubleday Anchor Books, Garden City, NY, 1972., p. 4.

¹² Ibidem, p. 8

¹³ S. Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, Part I, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 1987, p. 303.

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 306.

¹⁵ S. Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, Part I, p. 168.

undo this capability, so that every attempt he or she makes to live in aesthetic terms cannot avoid ethical assessment – this person is, so to speak, in a state of „self-incurred immorality“. Thus, the conflict between the aesthetic and the ethical view of life is not, as MacIntyre sees it, a conflict between two opposed ways of life, but can be seen either as a conflict between the ethical and refusal of the ethical (not an ethically indifferent refusal) or as a pedagogical relation between a person that has become capable of ethical judgement and the one that hasn't become ethically „mature“ yet. Of course, this is not to say that MacIntyre first objection doesn't work on another level: once we have chosen the ethical, there is still the choice of substantial ethical principles. As MacIntyre notes, Kierkegaard accepts without question the principles of his own moral tradition. But it is no longer the case that Kierkegaard isn't trying to justify *morality* as such, but only an inherited set of moral norms – a particular *Sittlichkeit*.

Let us now return to the MacIntyre's problematic assertion that Kierkegaard's characterization of the ethical in *Fear and Trembling* differs from the one given in *Either/Or*. If we look at Kierkegaard's exposition of the ethical in a similar way we did with the aesthetic view, where *The Ultimatum* would have a role similar to the one that *The Seducer's Diary* has for the aesthetic view, we will notice that Kierkegaard's account of the ethical changes in the very text of *Either/Or*. Namely, B states in the chapter *The balance between the Esthetic and the Ethical in the Development of the Personality* that the task of ethics is achieving the universal¹⁶, while in the chapter *The Ultimatum*, he forwards to A a letter of a pastor from Jylland in which two moments are already present, moments that will be developed again in *Fear and Trembling*: a thought that there are situations that are inherently singular, that is to say, situations where ethical demands are not applicable, and a thought that one cannot apply categories of reason, i.e. moral judgement on God. Just like A, B changes his view of the ethical from accepting a Kantian test of morality by way of applying the form of universality and necessity, to an observation that every Christian culture accepts exceptions from this rule, or, as Kierkegaard puts it in *Fear and Trembling*, there is a teleological suspension of the ethical. In other words, Kierkegaard points out that there is an inconsistency in the Christian philosophical thought which remains unrecognized in the philoso-

phies of Kant and Hegel. The result of that lack of recognition is the gap between Christianity and that which Kierkegaard calls Christendom, and which is characterized by the so-called „aesthetic delusion“ that one is made a Christian just by being baptised or by being a member of a Church (and that couldn't be avoided in Denmark at the time) and the „speculative delusion“ that Christianity could be adequately represented through terms of hegelian philosophy. As references to that inconsistency can be found from the beginning of Kierkegaard's writing career to the retrospective explanation of his entire production, given in *A point of view of my work as an Author*, it is hard to defend MacIntyre's distrust in that explanation and his isolated account of *Either/Or*.

The structure of self and justification of Morality

In the previous section I have tried to show two things: first, that MacIntyre is wrong to see the subject of *Either/Or* as an interminable conflict between the aesthetic and the ethical way of life and Kierkegaard's giving up on offering any justification of morality, and second, that there is no gap between Kierkegaard's conception of the ethical in *Either/Or* and in his later works. Thus I have provided legitimacy for my future references to later Kierkegaard's works in attempting to present what I believe to be the foundation of his justification of morality. That primarily concerns his conception of the structure of self given in his work *The Sickness unto Death*.

Analyzing the forms of despair, as a distinctly human phenomenon, Kierkegaard finds the cause of despair in an inadequate relation of the self to itself. Self is a relation that involves multiple factors: „Man is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity“¹⁷, and as a synthesis, it relates on one hand to itself, and on the other hand to „the Power which constituted it“¹⁸. Hence, self is „a relation which relates itself to its own self, and in relating itself to its own self relates itself to another“¹⁹. What is the place of morality in a thus presented structure of self? The easiest way to find it is to present in short a „map“ of the forms of despair. First of all, Kierkegaard offers two possible divisions of despair: the first is a division seen „under the category of con-

¹⁶ S. Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, Part I, p.255–7.

¹⁷ S.Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, Princeton University Press, 1941, p.9.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 11.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p.10.

sciousness"²⁰, while the second concerns a moment of synthesis of self. According to the first division we can discern:

- a) „The Despair which is unconscious that it is Despair, or the Despairing Unconsciousness of having a Self and an Eternal Self“²¹
- b) The Despair that is conscious of being a Self, but does not want to be itself (that is, does not want to be an authentic Self)
- c) The Despair that is conscious of being a Self and wants to be itself, but resolved of the relation with „the Power that posited it“.

According to the second division, we can discern:

- a) The Despair of infinitude
- b) The Despair of finitude
- c) The Despair of possibility and
- d) The Despair of necessity

Michael Theunissen notices in his *Kierkegaard's Concept of Despair* that the forms of despair that Kierkegaard is naming actually represent stages of a process through which an individual alienates himself from his own self²². In the concept of despair that is unconscious of having a self we can easily recognize the characteristics of the aesthetic individual. And here we can begin with mapping the *locus* of morality: morality is necessary to deliver us from this form of despair. Actually, although morality itself does not suffice to deliver us from all forms of despair (faith is required for that), it has an irreplaceable part in delivering us from several forms of despair. The first form is already mentioned: in order to start our „delivering process“ from despair in general, we need the consciousness of having a self. Therefore, the transition from the aesthetic to the ethical stage isn't commended, as MacIntyre claims when suggesting the second central quality of *Either/Or*, by merely referring to a „radical choice“ between the aesthetic and ethical, but, as he later acknowledges, by referring to despair which is „everyone's negative Prime Mover“²³. The ubiquity of despair, a thesis that Kierkegaard advocates in *The Sickness unto Death*²⁴ provides a common context that enables a dialogue between different spheres of existence.

²⁰ Ibidem, p.28.

²¹ Ibidem, p.44.

²² M. Theunissen, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Despair*, Princeton University Press, 2005, p.17.

²³ A. MacIntyre, „Once more on Kierkegaard“, in J.Davenport & A.Rudd (eds), *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre: Essays on Freedom, Narrative and Virtue*, Open Court, Chicago and La Salle, Illinois, 2001, p. 346.

²⁴ S.Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, p. 20.

The despair that is unconscious that it is despair is not the only one that can be overcome through morality. In the despair of infinitude the self becomes abstract. „The self thus leads a fantastic existence in abstract endeavor after infinity, or in abstract isolation“²⁵. By bonding with a community and its *Sittlichkeit* and by agreeing to subsume one's self under the universal, the common *telos*, one is prevented from falling into this form of despair (although without that ability of abstracting, this bonding can produce the opposite form of despair – the despair of finitude. A similar case is with the despair of possibility: „Now if possibility outruns necessity, the self runs away from itself, so that it has no necessity where to it is bound to return – then this is the despair of possibility. The self becomes an abstract possibility which tries/tires? itself out with floundering in the possible, but does not budge from the spot; nor get to any spot, for precisely the necessary is the spot“²⁶. MacIntyre would probably agree with this – without a starting point that's placed within a tradition, without the ethical that bonds us to a community there is neither a possibility to assess or accept any other *Sittlichkeit*, nor – and that is what matters to Kierkegaard – anything to transcend every *Sittlichkeit*, or even the very sphere of ethics.

The rationality of Kierkegaard's justification of morality

Justification of morality, or the ethical, as Kierkegaard calls it, is not direct - being that the ethical itself can not deliver us from despair, we can only refer to it as a necessary step leading towards final deliverance from despair. However, the ethical is not like the Wittgensteinian ladder that we can toss away once we're done with the climbing. The ethical is a constitutive moment of the self, and its validity does not cease even when it is teleologically suspended. Belonging to a community, accepting its tradition, its values, its *Sittlichkeit* is an essential trait of self if it is to be authentic. Of course, one can have further objections to this justification of morality, but MacIntyre's claim is not that Kierkegaard fails in providing a justification of morality, but that he isn't trying to provide it at all. The question now, is whether this justification is rational? The attempts of justifying morality before Kierkegaard were based on a reference to a self that was conceptualized either in a naturalistic way (by referring to its desires and passions), as is the case with Diderot and

²⁵ Ibidem, p.32

²⁶ Ibidem, p. 36.

Hume, or an idealistic way (by referring to reason) as is the case with Kant. Kierkegaard in a way continues the Kantian line of argument, ultimately presenting morality as a necessary step toward an universally desirable *telos* – deliverance from despair. If morality, as the key for winning a self, is necessary for achieving that goal, it is expected that a rational agent should consider its demands not only appealing, but also compelling.

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