

## Kierkegaard: the Ethical and the Eternal

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## Kierkegaard: the Ethical and the Eternal

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### Abstract

This paper addresses Kierkegaard's theories on the formation of the self, focusing specifically on the three existential spheres that mark various stages in the development of an individual. The primary task of the paper is to evaluate Judge William's agenda in *Either/Or, Part II* to convince his friend, "A," to leave the aesthetic sphere he inhabits in order to move into the ethical sphere that the Judge champions. I will argue that, from Kierkegaard's perspective, the Judge does well to encourage the aesthete to choose to become a self in actual validity but ultimately fails in his own attempt at self-actualization: first, because he is overconfident in his ability to complete the task of becoming a self by his own efforts; and second, because he advocates a moral standard within a socially constructed ethical system instead of embracing a personal relationship with a transcendent God. This essay will also challenge the ethical sphere through the teleological suspension of the ethical, a famous paradigm found within the religious sphere and discussed in Kierkegaard's pseudonymous work *Fear and Trembling*.

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Perhaps there is no question more integral to the human condition than the question of existential purpose. A broad spectrum of thought and practice surrounds the study of the self, from pleasure-seeking hedonists to the harsh lifestyle of devout ascetics. Though many have considered at least once upon their thoughts about the meaning of human existence, it is a small few who devote their entire lives to exploring the formation of the self within its existential purpose in great depth. Søren Kierkegaard was one of those few. Kierkegaard viewed three existential modes or spheres—the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious—as different ways of becoming (or avoiding becoming) a unique individual. The process of individualization was, for Kierkegaard, the most important task of any human, yet he was also painfully aware that not all humans took up this task for themselves. For instance, Obinyan notes that "For

Kierkegaard, existing meant becoming more and more individual...the fact that someone belongs to the class of human beings does not guarantee that the person leads a human existence,"<sup>1</sup> and this is especially true for those who remain in the "aesthetic" mode of existence, as Kierkegaard defines it.

This paper, then, explores a famous ethical critique of this aesthetic sphere through an essay entitled "The Balance Between the Aesthetic and the Ethical in the Development of the Personality." This essay—written from the perspective of Kierkegaard's pseudonym, Judge William—is both a critical assessment of the aesthetic as defined in *Either/Or I* and a case for the "ethical," a more

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<sup>1</sup> Valentine Obinyan, "Nature of Human Existence in Kierkegaard's Ethical Philosophy," *International Journal of Philosophy* 2, no. 1 (2014): 3.

intentional and self-determining mode of existence.<sup>2</sup> Most of William's discourse in *Either/Or, Part II* is an attempt to convince his friend, "A," to move from the aesthetic to the ethical sphere of existence.<sup>3</sup> Where the aesthetic sphere avoids self-determination and personal development, the ethical sphere is a "concernful or an 'interested' existence,"<sup>4</sup> one that necessarily requires a responsibility of self and duty. The ethical is, in its truest form, the antithesis of the famous aesthetic cry "either/or, you will regret it either way," a cry that recommends the avoidance of all life-defining commitments.

Although I believe that some of the Judge's exhortations to and critiques of the aesthete are well placed, I will argue that he ultimately fails to see the critical flaws within the ethical sphere of being that he inhabits. In what follows, after giving a brief overview of the Judge's key definitions and his evaluation of the aesthete, I will critique several limitations of the ethical sphere that Judge William defends in *Either/Or, Part II* by using Kierkegaard's own perspectives, specifically those concerns raised by Johannes Climacus and Johannes de Silencio. I will claim that the Judge does well to remind the aesthete both of the impossibility of avoiding any concrete choice and of the importance of intentionally choosing himself in validity but that the Judge himself has ultimately chosen the wrong "absolute" and has failed to become a self in eternal validity. I will support this claim through three arguments. First, I will address Judge William's overly optimistic presumption that the task of becoming a self can be successfully completed given the desire to do so. I will pay special attention to his failure to account for the corrupting influence of sin and his avoidance of the possibility of divine

revelation, a problem raised by Johannes Climacus in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Second, I will argue that the Judge cannot become a valid self without a personal relationship with a transcendent God, who transforms us and works alongside of us in our task to become a self, a claim made by Johannes de Silentio in *Fear and Trembling*. I will continue to use Johannes Silentio's work as a critique for my third argument: that the Judge's adherence to a constructed code of ethics, specifically in regard to his treatise of the universal man, is flawed in that it does not account for a teleological suspension of the ethical, which the Judge must accept if he calls himself a Christian. Because of this, I will argue that the Judge becomes trapped within the ethical sphere, experiencing an arrested development of the self that will result in an existential despair. Finally, I argue that until the Judge has a personal encounter with God and accepts the teleological suspension of the ethical in his life, he will never achieve the formation of the self in actual validity.

### Introduction to the Aesthetic and the Ethical Critique of the Aesthetic

Before we get into the heart of the paper and attempt a critique of William's ethical sphere, we must first look at the relationship between the aesthetic and the ethical. This exposition on both spheres of existence provides an understanding of the Judge's own analysis of the failures of the aesthetic as well as a lens through which to evaluate the claims that he subsequently makes about the ethical sphere.

Volume I of *Either/Or* contains the disjointed and whimsical thoughts of the aesthete. Identified as simply "A" by Kierkegaard's pseudonymous editor, Victor Eremita, the aesthete is the individual that lives in the immediacy of the moment and seeks an "immersion in sensuous experience."<sup>5</sup> The *Diapsalmata*, a journal written by A himself, is perhaps the best account of these erratic, almost bipolar shifts. The author sinks deep into a pit of disillusionment and depression, lamenting that "Life for me has become a bitter drink, and yet it must be taken in drops, slowly, counting."<sup>6</sup> He adds, "My soul is so heavy that no thought can carry it any longer, no

<sup>2</sup> The term "ethical", when used by Kierkegaard in his works, has more than one definition. It is primarily used to denote the existential sphere of the ethical, but it is also used in its more traditional context to indicate the social norms that form the moral code of a society or cultural context.

<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting, however, before we venture too far in an analysis of the text, that although Kierkegaard is the true author of this work, his goal is not to argue personally for the ethical. Instead, his goal is to use the character of Judge Wilhelm to fully flesh out the possible existence of an individual who has completely embraced a life within the framework of the ethical.

<sup>4</sup> George Stack, "Kierkegaard: The Self and Ethical Existence," *Ethics* 83, no. 2 (1973): 4.

<sup>5</sup> William McDonald, "Søren Kierkegaard" last modified July 8, 2016. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2016/entries/kierkegaard/>

<sup>6</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or I* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987), 26.

wing beat can lift it up into the ether any more...over my inner being broods an oppressiveness, an anxiety, that forebodes an earthquake.”<sup>7</sup> However, the next moment he is thrown into passionate ecstasy: “What do I hear—the minuet from Don Giovanni...these tones are only for me; only to me do they beckon. Oh, thank you, whoever you are! Thank you! My soul is so rich, so hearty, so intoxicated with joy!”<sup>8</sup> Because the aesthete is continually seeking new and exhilarating experiences, he views boredom as his enemy and even goes so far as to orchestrate or manipulate possibilities into being (as Johannes the “Seducer” does in *The Seducer’s Diary*). The aesthete also believes that he has the power to abstain from making any choice that would result in the actualization of any of the possibilities surrounding him, priding himself on his supposed ability to live on the “spear tip of the moment of choice.”<sup>9</sup> He discusses this in his famous “either/or” ecstatic discourse: “Marry, and you will regret it. Do not marry, you will regret it either way...this, gentlemen, is the quintessence of all the wisdom of life.”<sup>10</sup> In so living, the aesthete eschews any movement towards self-development and loses himself in the possibilities and multiplicities he sees around him, overwhelmed by each new feeling and experience.

But why is the aesthete so unwilling to actualize himself past the whims of the moment?<sup>11</sup> The Judge provides a valuable insight: the aesthete, like all humans, must eventually come to a place where he is blocked from seeing himself in full transparency.<sup>12</sup> The Judge emphatically notes that this is one of the primary differences between the aesthete and the ethical. Where the aesthete is afraid to see himself in full transparency, this is the very thing the ethical strives to do: “The ethical individual is transparent to himself...the person who lives ethically has seen himself, knows himself, penetrates his whole concretion with his consciousness.”<sup>13</sup> This is the necessary prerequisite to becoming the ethical individual, for without this self-knowledge, the individual does not possess the self-awareness necessary to take any

meaningful steps towards the formation of the self. In the case of the aesthete, the issue that prevents full transparency is his fear of becoming a self. The aesthete sees freedom and power in his ability to surround himself with countless possibilities, because the thought of actualizing himself through choice appears to be the end of this freedom. As such, any significance that may be attached to an intentional choice is rendered meaningless because of the inevitable loss associated with either choice. The aesthete instead becomes enthralled by the possibilities around him, always seeing the either/or choice, yet never choosing, always immersing himself in experiences, yet never actualizing his existence. For the aesthete, it is better to not choose at all and have a chance at retaining what he already has.

Here is one of the Judge’s first substantial critiques of the aesthete. The aesthete cannot, he argues, refrain from choice entirely. The failure to choose *is itself* in fact a choice, which will ultimately result in the “personality or the obscure forces within it” choosing for the individual unconsciously.<sup>14</sup> In other words, the tighter the aesthete clings to his freedom, the further it slips from his grasp. The self by nature pulls itself towards actualization, and the Judge argues that the aesthete would be better off using his freedom of choice to determine these choices himself instead of being passively formed into an aimless individual. Kierkegaard, through Judge William, warns that it is possible for an individual to embody this escapist, almost nihilistic mode of being for an entire lifetime, never reaching beyond the possible into the realm of actualization. Unsurprisingly, Kierkegaard is not satisfied with this as a valid response to the question of human existence. There must be a push into the realm of choice and actualization—and for Kierkegaard, this next step is embodied in the sphere of the ethical.

### The Task of the Ethical Sphere

Judge William’s task is not simply to critique the aesthete. He is primarily interested in convincing the aesthete of the validity of the ethical sphere as a specific means through which to become a self. The Judge has not arbitrarily chosen this task—he has embraced it as no less than a divine command: “For William, his givenness is a gift from God which thereby becomes his task.”<sup>15</sup> It is also an “open-ended” task,

<sup>7</sup> Kierkegaard, *Either/Or I*, 25

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>9</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988), 258.

<sup>10</sup> Kierkegaard, *Either/Or I*, 38.

<sup>11</sup> Here, Kierkegaard uses the term “actualize” to mean movement towards the development of the self.

<sup>12</sup> Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 258.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 258.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>15</sup> George Connell, “Kierkegaard and Confucius: The Religious Dimensions of Ethical Selfhood,” *Springer Netherlands* 8, no. 2 (2009): 144.

requiring a lifelong commitment to the development and transformation of the self.<sup>16</sup>

If the act of choosing oneself before God is important, the *way* that one chooses oneself before God is equally so.<sup>17</sup> For the Judge, this choice must be made in “eternal validity.”<sup>18</sup> The Judge doesn’t provide a single concise definition of this phrase, but for our purposes, the “eternal” here implies a constant that transcends the whims of human experience or emotion: “...myself in its eternal validity is myself situated, by my own choice, in such a way that changes in fortune (thus the temporal) are no longer able either to overthrow or to elevate me.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, for the soul to have “eternal validity,” the self must become solidified or “actualized” in the action of choosing itself definitively by taking up the formation of the self as a task. As George Leone notes, “...in choosing the self in despair, one chooses the self absolutely... That is, one chooses only the self, for one cannot choose the object as self.”<sup>20</sup> This is what the Judge calls viewing oneself in one’s “absolute validity.”

The primary way the Judge takes up the task of viewing himself in absolute validity is through the development of his social and civic duties, a discussion that takes up a significant part of his discourse as a whole. The Judge comments on this subject: “The ethical is defined as duty, and duty in turn as a multiplicity of particular rules, but the individual and duty stand out-

side each other.”<sup>21</sup> For William, duty is not something that the ethical person takes up external to himself as a necessary service or responsibility to those around him. If this were the only qualifier, he notes, “a life of duty such as that is very unlovely and boring... it would always be very difficult to champion it against the aesthetic.”<sup>22</sup> The ethical strives for a deeper connection to duty, one that is born of the natural desire of the self to fulfill its best function. Hoping to appeal to the romanticism of the aesthete, William champions marriage as a prime example of one such duty in an essay entitled “The Esthetic Validity of Marriage.” In it the Judge states: “In order to divest oneself of every unsound and despicable idea of comfort, this is the idea one must first and foremost link to the home, that it is a task. Even in the husband’s enjoyment there ought to be an element of task...”<sup>23</sup> Because of the synthesis between duty and self-actualization in relation to the universal, the ethical individual does not grow tired of performing his duties; rather, they flow out of his natural self-expression as a result of the actualization of his ethical self. Duty is no longer an external responsibility but a natural symptom of the condition of the self. In other words, the self does not choose the good because of a sense of duty; the self has *become* the good as defined by “the series of the universals that clothes him.”<sup>24</sup> Within this ethical system, the task is the same for every human in that it is the work of transforming oneself “into the universal individual” through fulfillment of one’s duties.<sup>25</sup> When the individual realizes that it is his task to become a self through fulfillment of his individual duties and also realizes that it is a universal calling for each of his fellow humans to fulfill their specific duties, he has seen what it means to be the universal individual—and in this “constant” as well, the Judge argues, the ethical life can be found.

Satisfied that he has made a good case for the ethical existence, the Judge assumes that when presented with the right conditions for selfhood, the aesthete as well will be convinced to abandon his despair and move decisively towards the ethical existence: “If one can only bring a person to the point where he stands at the crossroad, so that there is no way out for him except to

<sup>16</sup> Connell, 139.

<sup>17</sup> Here the Judge cautions the aesthete that there are multiple ways to choose to become a self—even warning him that many of them can have disastrous consequences. He comments on an individual who has chosen himself “like Narcissus,” writing that once he is aware of his eternal validity, he becomes overwhelmed by this realization and begins to believe himself “within the category of necessity.” The Judge cautions that “his mistake is that he has not chosen in the right way” and warns that this has, at times, led to suicide (see *Either/Or II*, 231). The Judge’s claim that there is a “right way” to choose oneself is important, but, as I will argue later, he is unfortunately blind to the existential flaws in his own arguments.

<sup>18</sup> Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 214.

<sup>19</sup> Norman Lillegard, “Judge William in the Dock: MacIntyre on Kierkegaardian Ethics” from *International Kierkegaard Commentary, Either/Or Part II* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1995), 97.

<sup>20</sup> George Leone, *Kierkegaard's Existentialism*, (Bloomington: iUniverse, 2014), 19.

<sup>21</sup> Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 254.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 254.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>24</sup> Obinyan, “Nature of Human Existence,” 5.

<sup>25</sup> Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 261.

choose, then he will choose the right thing.”<sup>26</sup> Unfortunately, as Kierkegaard’s own metacritiques of the Judge will show (below), this claim is not congruent with the beliefs of the Judge’s own self-proclaimed Christian faith: namely, that sin has a distorting influence on human choice and reason. Indeed, W.S.K. Cameron notes that for Kierkegaard (through his pseudonym Johannes Climacus), humans, even when presented with the truth, do not reliably, or even readily, choose it.<sup>27</sup> Still, within the universal, the Judge stoutly believes the aesthete will find an answer to his overwhelming multiplicity, his existential despair, and his crushing finitude. Satisfied that he has completed the task of selfhood, become “the good,” and convinced the aesthete of the merits of actualizing as a self, the Judge resides in a sort of complacency that begins to emerge as one of the defining marks of the ethical sphere. With a better understanding of both the aesthetic and ethical spheres of existence, we can now begin our task—to evaluate the Judge’s attempt to actualize himself with eternal validity.

### The Limits of the Ethical in Acquiring Selfhood

Ultimately, the Judge must answer to three major problems if the ethical sphere (as he conceives it) is to stand as a legitimate process by which to become a self. The first is the overconfidence with which he assumes that he can successfully engage in the continuous task of becoming a self for his entire lifetime. The second is his unwillingness to engage in a personal relationship with God, who is a necessary part of the process of self-formation. The third is his adherence to an ethical standard that is found within a universal social moral code. We turn our attention to the first problem now.

William presumes that given the gift of selfhood, ethical people have the “power to fulfill the ethical demands placed on them if they choose” and need only the *will* to become a self in order to become one.<sup>28</sup> Although the Judge does consider, as mentioned above, the process of becoming a self to be an ongoing task, there is very little in his life that practically reflects this ongoing transformation: “The Judge presents things as if he

‘found himself...immanently’ in or through despair, and ‘that by enduring the despair the individual would win himself.’ This depends upon holding that self-discovery is ultimately a matter of *will*; put another way, the Judge’s view is predicated on self-sufficiency.”<sup>29</sup> Instead, he seems content with becoming the universal human through duty, leaving the process to continue to manifest itself in his life. Evans writes, “The Judge in fact holds a wildly optimistic view of human nature. He claims that when a person attains this moral standpoint, that person invariably chooses the good.”<sup>30</sup>

In order to make a comprehensive critique of the Judge and find a way out of the stagnation of the ethical sphere, we must look to another of Kierkegaard’s spheres of existence—that of the religious. Johannes Climacus’s writings in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* provide this religious lens through which to critique the Judge’s attempt to actualize as a self. Climacus is not a Christian himself, but he frequently advocates a religious consciousness of self that stands in stark contrast and even direct opposition to that of the Judge in Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous works. Climacus agrees with the Judge that the task of becoming a self must be done over the course of a lifetime, but he strongly cautions against the Judge’s confidence in his ability to successfully do this task well. Indeed, Climacus is adamant that the self is, from the very beginning of the self-actualization process, necessarily flawed: “Even at the moment the task is assigned, something is already wasted...a bad beginning has been made and that the beginning must be made by becoming guilty, and from that moment the total guilt, which is decisive, practices usury with new guilt.”<sup>31</sup> Climacus argues that our attempts to self-actualize will not be adequate as long as we underestimate our sinful nature—so how can the Judge be successful in his task of becoming a self?

Climacus provides an answer to this question with his response to the Judge’s second problem, which is his lack of a personal relationship with God. The task of becoming a self, for Climacus, must be done *in relation to God*, who is not affected by the disrupting influence of sin. Even the way that Climacus labels the two approaches to becoming a self (ethical sphere and religious existence) indicates his conviction that God

<sup>26</sup> Scott Cameron, “[Writing] About Writing About Kierkegaard,” *Philosophy Today* 39, no.1 (1995): 6; Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 168.

<sup>27</sup> Cameron goes even further to write that “the consequence of sin is that we are radically disoriented. We are not approaching Truth asymptotically, ‘but going away from it’; we are ‘untruth.’” “[Writing] About Writing About Kierkegaard,” 61.

<sup>28</sup> Connell, 145.

<sup>29</sup> John Lippitt, *Humor and Irony in Kierkegaard’s Thought* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2000), 75. See also *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 257-58.

<sup>30</sup> Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 96.

<sup>31</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 526.

must be a part of self-formation.<sup>32</sup> He calls the ethical approach to becoming a self “action-victory,” evoking the confidence of such individuals in their “power to fulfill the ethical demands placed on them if they choose,” while he labels the religious existence “suffering,” an acknowledgement of the struggle to become a self—with God’s help—despite constant sinful movements away from this formation.<sup>33</sup> The Judge, in contrast to this ideology of suffering, thinks of sin as “simply a human weakness that can be overcome through strength of will and a clearer intellectual understanding of the moral good.”<sup>34</sup> Climacus instead urges the individual to recognize his true condition in relation to God, which for him is fundamentally predicated on the belief that in relation to God, *humans are always in the wrong*.<sup>35</sup> This idea is also found, ironically, in a sermon by an unnamed country parson at the end of *Either/Or Part II*, the central theme being “The Upbuilding that Lies in the Thought that in Relation to God We are Always in the Wrong.”<sup>36</sup> With this mindset, Climacus (as well as the country parson) avoids William’s overconfidence in his ability to fulfill the task of becoming a self and circumvents the major obstacles to becoming a self that sin presents in a simple re-posturing.<sup>37</sup> From Climacus’s perspective, all the Judge can do is acknowledge that the complete formation of a self is exactly that task that he *cannot* complete on his own. He writes, “The discrepancy is that the ethical self is supposed to be found immanently in despair, that by enduring the despair the individual would win himself...but if I do this I cannot come back by myself. It is in this moment of decision that the individual needs divine assistance.”<sup>38</sup> Robert Perkins adds that “The Judge is offered as a moral and

religious exemplar, but one who has no sense of his radical need for divine grace.”<sup>39</sup> This is, then, the second failure of the Judge—after so much talk of self-transparency, he is ultimately blind to the nature of his own fallenness, and is unwilling to accept God’s help, which guides us in our self-development despite our sinful condition.

This adherence to an ethical system that is dictated by and found within the “universal” is where we encounter the third problem of the ethical sphere. Within the universal, the “ethical” choice (or, moral obligation) is to fulfill the duties and responsibilities as determined by the collective ethical standard. Actions are made according to the collective morality of a social group. In the Judge’s context, this collective morality is determined by Christianity, but this is not necessarily true for any given universal ethical system. If the Judge claims to be a Christian, which he does, then his duty is necessarily first to God, not to becoming the universal human—which means that at times, he may be called to respond to a divine command that falls outside of the bounds of the universal ethical of his context.

Kierkegaard was deeply concerned about the reduction of faith to ethics. This was, in part, due to his social environment, where he found “Hegel’s philosophy as the dominant view among his intellectual peers...[Kierkegaard] saw it as an intellectual expression of the kind of society he saw around him in Europe, the society that he called ‘Christendom.’”<sup>40</sup> Kierkegaard was frustrated primarily by people like Judge William who called themselves “Christians” because they had “actualized ‘the ethical’ in the sense of [Hegel’s] *Sittlichkeit*.”<sup>41</sup> As a result, he considered much of his work, especially *Fear and Trembling*, to be the “introduction of Christianity into Christendom.” *Fear and Trembling* is, therefore, an important—perhaps the most important—text for us to consider in our critique of the ethical sphere, as it is at the heart of what Kierkegaard saw as his most important criticism of society in his time. Through his pseudonym Johannes de Silentio, Kierkegaard challenges Judge William’s problematic reduction of God to be within the limits of the ethical universal. In order to redeem God’s rightful transcendent place over our constructed ethical

<sup>32</sup> Stephan Evans, introduction to *Fear and Trembling* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), xxiv.

<sup>33</sup> Connell, 145.

<sup>34</sup> Obinyan, 5.

<sup>35</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 13-15.

<sup>36</sup> Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 346.

<sup>37</sup> This is why Climacus characterizes the religious existence as one marked by suffering—the desire to fulfill the task set out for oneself is inevitably corrupted by humanity’s sinful nature. (Connell, 145.)

<sup>38</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript vol.1* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 258.

<sup>39</sup> Robert L. Perkins, “Either/Or/Or: Giving the Parson His Due,” from *International Kierkegaard Commentary, Either/Or Part II* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1995), 219.

<sup>40</sup> Evans, intro to *Fear and Trembling*, xxii.

<sup>41</sup> Evans, xxiii.

systems, Kierkegaard suggests that true faith must allow for a “teleological suspension of the ethical.” *Fear and Trembling* deals primarily with one of the most famous examples of this paradox—the biblical story of Abraham.<sup>42</sup>

Johannes makes three major claims in the text, two of which are relevant here: first, that there must be a “teleological suspension of the ethical” if Abraham is to be considered a “knight of faith” and not a “tragic hero”: “Johannes argues that if Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac is justifiable or admirable, then one must affirm that there is indeed such a thing as a ‘teleological suspension of the ethical’ and that Abraham does indeed have an absolute duty to God that trumps his ethical duty.”<sup>43</sup> His second claim is that we are called, like Abraham was, to “an absolute duty to God,” which requires that “a relationship with God must be ‘the highest good’ for the sake of which the socially assigned roles that make up ‘the ethical’ are relativized (theologically suspended). There can be duties to such a God that are not reducible to the duties given by one’s human social relations.”<sup>44</sup> In light of these two claims, it quickly becomes clear that the Judge is self-contradictory—he claims to be a Christian, yet he does not demonstrate a faith that allows for a divine call that may fall outside of the bounds of his socio-ethical reality. Neither does the Judge accept the possibility that this divine revelation is a necessary part of his self-formation. The ethical perspective is, therefore, not ethical in that it may, in the course of fulfilling duties to state (the universal), disobey or come into direct opposition with a command from God.

<sup>42</sup> Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son at God’s request, despite his ethical and social duty to protect his offspring, has long been considered one of the most challenging biblical passages. For Silentio especially, this passage is distressing. As Evans notes in his introduction to *Fear and Trembling*, “Faith is said to be absurd from the perspective of ‘worldly understanding’ and this leaves open the possibility that things look different from the perspective of faith. Since Johannes himself repeatedly says that he does not possess faith, this may explain why Johannes has so much difficulty in understanding Abraham.” (xiii).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, xx.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, xix, xxiv.

## Conclusion

The ethical sphere—as conceived by Judge William—is successful in a few significant areas: there are important developments made within the sphere that contribute to the process of self-actualization (namely, the commitment to becoming a self and the acknowledgement that it must occur over time), and it does mark the choice to become a self as the individual moves from the aesthetic to the ethical sphere. However, the Judge is ultimately overconfident in his self-contained ability to actualize as a self, and his insistence that the entire development process can be found within the social and civic duties of the universal ethical ultimately collapses under the burden of its own claims. Despite claiming an active Christian faith, the Judge lacks a personal encounter with a transcendent God, discounting the necessary role that God’s revelation plays in the formation of a self. Instead, he places the burden of revelation and self-development within immanent capabilities of the self and within a constructed universality of human thought. This subjugation of the divine appears to be among Kierkegaard’s primary concerns not only in the writing of *Fear and Trembling*, but also, and preeminently, in *The Sickness unto Death*. Thus, it is both the Judge’s presumptuous certainty that he can successfully take up the task of becoming a self and his adherence to an ethical standard of universality that results in a stagnation of his development—he has succeeded in moving past the whims of the aesthetic sphere, but here his movement is arrested; he is no more successful in actualizing as a self than the aesthete.



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