

Introduction

Ryan S. Kemp and Walter Wietzke

“Recently a book was published here with the title *Either/Or!*” So Henriette Wulff reports in a letter to her friend Hans Christian Andersen. The note is dated February 20, 1843 – the day of *Either/Or*’s publication – and teems with excitement for a mysterious, new writer. “It is actually supposed to be by a Kierkegaard,” she continues. “Do you know him?”¹ This last question surely stung as Andersen had only recently been the subject of a highly critical (and strikingly personal) review article by none other than Wulff’s mysterious author. Nor, it turned out, would this be the last word of praise Andersen would have to endure. Only a month later, another Copenhagen writer writes to inform the Paris-bound Andersen, “A new literary comet . . . has soared in the heavens here.” (Pausing to clarify that, yes, while it “looks like [she] wrote ‘camel,’” she in fact means *comet*.) Ms. Læssøe goes on to emphasize the sensation surrounding *Either/Or*: “No book has caused such a stir with the reading public since Rousseau placed his *Confessions* on the altar.”²

Though, to be sure, these early pronouncements express the immediate and popular perception of Kierkegaard’s work, a more judicious appraisal – one that would unfold in the subsequent years and decades – confirms their sentiment: *Either/Or* is surely one of the most impressively original and insightful works in the history of philosophy – a comet indeed! No work in Kierkegaard’s massive oeuvre better showcases his literary agility than this, the text that officially launches his authorship in 1843. It is not just the creativity of its form – a production that engages five different pseudonyms in a grand discussion of two (or maybe three) approaches to life, nor is it the foundational importance of its central question – how ought one to live? It is Kierkegaard’s pitch-perfect dramatization of this question in the thought lives of his characters. *Either/Or*’s earliest readers saw something of the demonic in the text; this seems exactly right but for

¹ Garff (2005), pp. 216–17. ² Ibid, p. 217.

reasons Kierkegaard's prim contemporaries overlooked. It is not primarily *Either/Or's* bald reflections on suicide or seduction that bespeak devilry; it is the sheer vocal range of its author, possessed now by one tongue and now another. This in itself would have been enough to ensure Kierkegaard's literary fame; that he harnessed it to specifically philosophical ends makes *Either/Or* one of the truly great texts in the Western tradition.

At its most basic, *Either/Or* is a confrontation between two wildly divergent life approaches: on the one hand, a life centered on pleasure and the creative avoidance of boredom; on the other, a life arranged around more traditional social goods – marriage, work, and commitment to community. The fictional editor who oversees the publication of the papers is named “Victor Eremita,” or “victorious hermit.” Eremita claims to have discovered the papers in a secret compartment of a newly purchased desk and tells us that his editorial arrangement – presenting the material in two distinct parts – was recommended by the works themselves. They were written by two hands and contained markedly different content.

Eremita calls the first author “A” and collects his papers in Part I. Taken together, the papers announce a kind of melancholic poet, someone obsessed with Mozart, interested in the finer differences between ancient and modern tragedy, and invested in a sophisticated, long-suffering struggle against boredom (the last requiring a programmatic rejection of relational entanglements). A's papers end with a narrative titled “The Seducer's Diary.” A denies authorship of these scintillating tidbits (signed by a certain “Johannes”), but Eremita has his doubts.

Part II is composed of two lengthy letters written by an ethical character named “William.” While considerably less witty, William has his virtues: He loves his wife and his profession (he is a judge) and seems genuinely concerned for others, most conspicuously, A. William's long, often pedantic letters carefully and methodically pry at the aspects of A's life that appear unstable, aspects that lead to what William calls “despair.”

Presented in these two richly envisioned personas, Kierkegaard's text – its pseudonyms like “boxes in a Chinese puzzle” – invites the reader to judge for herself, to compare the respective merits of each mode of life from within and, in the process, come to identify with one or the other. Or, perhaps, neither. The book ends with a sermon by a “country parson” that threatens to upend the discussion by announcing a third possible outlook.

In addition to being the first work in Kierkegaard's official authorship, *Either/Or* also plays a key role in articulating several enduring ideas in his larger philosophical vision. Kierkegaard is deeply interested in both the

Introduction

3

range of values that lend unity to a life and how transition from one value orientation to another occurs. Kierkegaard calls these orientations “life stages” (or sometimes “existence stages” or “spheres”), and two of them – the aesthetic and the ethical – receive their most explicit and careful treatment in *Either/Or*. Many readers have also seen in the text’s final word – the so-called “*Ultimatum*” – an initial sketch of the religious view that soon becomes the central focus of Kierkegaard’s work. Understood in this way, *Either/Or* offers a self-contained introduction to the full spectrum of Kierkegaard’s existential anthropology.

The reception of *Either/Or* in the English-speaking literature is a story unto itself. By offering an outline of that story here, we look to position the reader to appreciate the aims of this current volume of essays, a collection of work that we hope will reinvigorate engagement with this, Kierkegaard’s most ambitious text.

The Anglophone reception of *Either/Or* has followed a path replete with surprise and controversy that befits the initial stir it created in the Danish literary and intellectual scene.³ Early twentieth-century English translations were incomplete, focusing on more sensational, standalone pieces, such as “The Seducer’s Diary.” Consequently, early philosophical appreciations of the English translation were limited in scope – if there was any such appreciation at all – as the first English reviewers of *Either/Or* presented it primarily as a work of Danish literature. M. A. Stobart, for example, praised the “Diary of a Seducer” as “the literary gem of Kirkegaard’s [*sic*] masterpiece.”⁴ Elsewhere, an early edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* describes the book as the work on which Kierkegaard’s reputation (as a literary writer) rests. Such compliments are not undeserved, of course, but by the 1930s a growing acknowledgment of Kierkegaard’s intellectual talents changed the course of readers’ appreciation.

By this time Kierkegaard was also becoming known for his religious writings. This fact, along with certain biographical details, was brought to bear in more nuanced – if still limited – interpretations of *Either/Or*. Now, for example, “The Seducer’s Diary” could be appreciated not just as a fictional exploration of some prurient predator but as a strategic attempt by Kierkegaard to defend his former fiancée, Regine Olsen, from the scandal he created by breaking off their engagement: All of Copenhagen could

³ Details surrounding the early Anglophone reception of the text are indebted to Leonardo Lisi’s (2008) informative review.

⁴ Stobart (1902), p. 57.

now see he was a scoundrel unworthy of marriage.⁵ These early episodes remind us of the theme with which *Eremita* opens the work, to raise doubts about the thesis that “the outer is the inner and the inner is the outer.” What a reader thinks she knows about the book will only be upended as she follows the trail of biographical bread crumbs to the text’s hidden heart. It is only with the complete English translation of the book by Walter Lowrie and David Swenson in 1944 that we finally see a move away from the erotic and esoteric toward more serious philosophical engagement.

The earliest of these engagements were largely glancing, as discussions of *Either/Or* remained limited to its place within the overall method and sweep of Kierkegaard’s philosophy.⁶ It would be many years before a more comprehensive analysis of the text on its own would appear. The first major scholarly works that focused exclusively on *Either/Or* were published in 1995, with the *International Kierkegaard Commentary* series devoting separate volumes to both parts of the book.⁷ In the *Commentaries*, one can see certain patterns of interpretation emerge that have remained central to discussions of the work. One approach has been to address one of the text’s more disturbing aspects, which had already been highlighted in the initial Danish reaction to the book: the portrayal of women either as unwitting objects of seduction or as subservient domestic partners. Both volumes of the *International Kierkegaard Commentary* included contemporary feminist perspectives on *Either/Or*’s account of sex and gender and treatment of women.⁸ Another basic orientation toward the text has been to analyze its relation to German Idealism, tracing various lines of influence between the positions taken by the text and their basis in the thought of Kant, Hegel, Fichte, and Schelling.⁹ This line of analysis serves as more than just historical contextualization, as Kierkegaard inevitably absorbed the ideas of these German predecessors in the general intellectual milieu of the Danish Golden Age. What we find in his work is an attempt not just to incorporate this philosophy into his own but to innovate and expand it in his own unique way.

⁵ Walter Lowrie (1938) goes further than this, claiming that the entire book is an apology to Regine.

⁶ For example, see Swenson (1941) and Malantschuk (1971). Mackey (1971) recalls the early appreciation for Kierkegaard by claiming that Kierkegaard’s uniqueness as philosophical thinker lies in his literary talent, especially as it is displayed in *Either/Or*.

⁷ Perkins (1995a, 1995b).

⁸ For examples of this approach, see Berry (1995a, 1995b), and Leon (1995, 2008).

⁹ For examples of this approach, see Green (1995), Stewart (2003), Kosch (2006), and Kemp and Iacovetti (2020).

A return to the basic premise of *Either/Or* (i.e., the choice between two divergent value orientations) sets up the most noteworthy period of scholarship and discussion of *Either/Or* to date: namely, Alasdair MacIntyre's reading of *Either/Or* in his classic work *After Virtue* (1981). There, MacIntyre declares modern moral philosophy, with its goal of justifying morality on strictly rational grounds, a failure. One symptom of this failure is the rise of emotivism: a view that explains moral judgments as expressions of personal preference. MacIntyre identified *Either/Or* as the first clear example of this trend in post-Enlightenment philosophy, singling out Judge William's declaration that the aesthete's decision to embrace an ethical life is, on deeper inspection, a choice for which no reasons or authority actually exist. In reality, *Either/Or*'s presentation of the aesthetic and ethical illuminates no principles outside of the characters' particular subjective outlooks that could justify one orientation over the other. Thus, on MacIntyre's interpretation of *Either/Or*, any choice to become ethical is, at its base, "criterionless."

MacIntyre's interpretation of *Either/Or* marshaled a wide-ranging set of scholarly responses, many of which were collected in the 2001 volume *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre*.¹⁰ One prominent, enduring claim from the volume is that, contrary to MacIntyre's contention, there is a robust sense of moral authority and underlying rationality to the ethical life that *does* permeate the worldview shared by *both* A and William. The aesthetic and ethical worldviews are not totally incommensurable, so that the choice to become ethical is grounded and motivated by reasons and interests that A should be able to appreciate from his perspective. Hence, the choice to become ethical is not criterionless, and *Either/Or* should not be read as an early precursor to emotivism. The debate that began with *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre* has continued to evolve throughout the past twenty years and has recently expanded beyond *Either/Or* to see Kierkegaard as an early proponent of narrative approaches to selfhood and moral philosophy in general.¹¹

MacIntyre's encounter with *Either/Or* has proven to be enormously important and fruitful to Kierkegaard studies. This point is indisputable. One of the legacies of *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre* has surely been to establish Kierkegaard as an important figure in moral philosophy, with a conceptual vocabulary that can effectively contend with the various issues that comprise the contemporary landscape of this field. It is difficult, if not

¹⁰ Davenport and Rudd (2001).

¹¹ See Davenport (2012), Lippitt and Stokes (2015), and Rudd (2012).

impossible, to imagine the trajectory recent Anglo-American Kierkegaard scholarship has taken without the groundwork laid by the work in this volume. But at this point, one could also argue that its unintended consequence has been to overshadow our understanding of *Either/Or* in such a way that we read Kierkegaard's book according to the terms set by MacIntyre and the debates to which his work gave rise. To put this another way, a newcomer to *Either/Or* and Kierkegaard scholarship could walk away thinking that the book is fundamentally a work of moral philosophy, with the dialogue between the aesthetic and ethical designed so as to help a reader maneuver beyond the various pitfalls affecting aesthetic life and adopt some form of William's argument.¹²

Anybody who opens *Either/Or* will immediately realize there is more to the work than the concerns that occupy modern moral philosophers. As we have suggested already, and as many of the essays of the present volume make refreshingly clear, *Either/Or* is a startlingly capacious and creative philosophical work. Among other topics, it explores the nature of love, beauty, and art; the importance of religious faith and the problem of evil; the metaphysical nature and human experience of time; and the value of knowledge. Not only does the book's scale and complexity belie any tendency to define it in terms of recent debates in ethics, but, to revisit the lesson from above, its internal tensions raise new questions about what we thought we knew about both the text and Kierkegaard's work as a whole. Every time we think we have captured its meaning, we find ourselves compelled to reconsider: Perhaps there are good reasons to take A's side over William's; perhaps William's conception of the ethical life has deeper flaws than it seems; perhaps the relationship between the stages of life is more complicated than the traditional understanding suggests. The essays of this volume confront us with these very questions and themes.

Our aim for this volume is to reintroduce *Either/Or*. We believe the chapters compiled in the present volume will inspire the critical reader to reconsider what they thought they knew about the text, and thereby gain a new appreciation for it, and – perhaps – the electricity that drew them to Kierkegaard in the first place. As we have stated before, *Either/Or* is a work in which Kierkegaard's philosophical genius and brilliance shine forth with particular strength. We find no equivalent in his larger corpus for its insights into the human condition, dazzlements of irony, explorations into

¹² Of course, this is not to claim that the editors of *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre* intended *Either/Or* to be read strictly in this sense.

Introduction

7

the darker corners of the psyche, descriptions of what it feels like to be in love or a state of sorrow, happily married or excruciatingly bored. Too many of these more exotic alleyways have been underappreciated in the recent English language discussion, and it is a return to them that this volume hopes to spark. With that, we invite the reader to, as much as anything else, *enjoy* the following essays.

CHAPTER I

Existential Melancholia
The Affective Psychology of the “Diapsalmata” in Either/Or

Rick Anthony Furtak and Ruth Rebecca Tietjen

I dwell in Possibility –
 A fairer House than Prose –
 More numerous of Windows –
 Superior for Doors

Emily Dickinson¹

We violent ones, we finally endure.
 But *when* – that is, in which of all our lives,
 can we at last be open and receptive?

Rainer Maria Rilke²

Let us begin with a standard interpretation that we think is largely accurate, although also incomplete. The aesthete, named only as A, continually laments the lack of meaning in his life. He suffers through fleeting passions that flare up and then die away, leaving him in a melancholic state. Although he longs for powerful emotions and opportunities for heroic action, he feels like a chess piece that cannot be moved.³ As sensitive as he is, A nonetheless seems condemned to momentary affective impressions that, whether shallow or profound, fail to make any lasting impact on him – as will be noted by Judge William.⁴ A's life is “a life adrift,” without the underlying cares “that make integrity possible and life worth living,”⁵ perhaps even “amoral and nihilistic,” as he entertains countless possibilities but does not actualize any of them.⁶ If he could remain enthusiastic about what moves him, and develop the kind of abiding commitments and concerns that would give his life coherence, he could form a stable identity, experiencing the world as a realm of tangible meaning. As it is, A lacks grounding projects; he is not a strong evaluator with specific roles and responsibilities. Rather than being at home in the world, he is a stranger and an alien who may “swoop down

¹ Dickinson (1960), p. 327.

² Rilke (2007), p. 63.

³ EO I, 22/SKS 2, 30.

⁴ EO 2, 196/SKS 3, 189.

⁵ Mooney (1996), pp. 67–73.

⁶ Carlisle (2006), p. 59.

into actuality”⁷ but does not remain there. Hence, he finds that his life makes no sense. “The only thing I see is emptiness, the only thing I live on is emptiness, the only thing I move in is emptiness.”⁸

Becoming involved wholeheartedly would allow the aesthete to exist in a narrative instead of a series of lyric poems. Every moment could then be located in a wider span of time, which contains the projects and relationships that he cares about most and that therefore seem *real* to him. A could become a self in a more robust sense, defining his identity by forming and maintaining passionate commitments.⁹ Then he would feel “a sense of meaning and also the weight of a responsibility that cannot be sophistically argued away”¹⁰ by virtue of his dedication to what he loves and cares about. He would no longer float in possibility, experiencing the unbearable lightness of being “destined to have to suffer through [*gjennemlide*] all possible moods.”¹¹ So why is it that he avoids becoming consistently engaged in the world and remains trapped within his alienated melancholia? We believe that this question cannot be adequately answered merely in terms of the aesthete’s weakness of will, failure to listen to reason, or sheer obstinacy. There is more to be said on behalf of his viewpoint.

Indeed, the first voice we hear in *Either/Or* praising the kind of enthusiasm that can endure, a faithfulness that could withstand every ordeal, is not that of Judge William, but of A himself.¹² It is uncharitable of the Judge to blame the aesthete for his moods, including his depression, implying that he just needs to grow up. We ought to consider whether, when A is suffering from melancholy, or sensing that (his) life is meaningless, this is only his own fault. Yes, becoming a self means limiting oneself, and this is evidently something A cannot or will not do. Yet might there be reasons to maintain a more lyrical way of being? We shall explore why Kierkegaard’s aesthete opts to retain his habits of being melancholic and alienated, despite the painful suffering and moral shortcomings that accompany this way of life. Nowhere is his fragmentary mode of existence more vividly on display than in the set of texts entitled “*Diapsalmata*,” which constitute his introduction to us as readers: Thus, our attention will be focused mainly on this part of *Either/Or*.

The structure of our chapter is as follows. In the first section, we offer a general account of melancholy. We argue that melancholia is an existential condition that demands to be understood in terms of the metaphysics of

⁷ EO 1, 42/SKS 2, 51.⁸ EO 1, 37/SKS 2, 46.⁹ See, for example, Sløk (1983), p. 65. Cf. Rudd (2012), pp. 70–77, 168–172.¹⁰ EO 2, 66/SKS 3, 71.¹¹ EO 1, 31/SKS 2, 40.¹² EO 1, 37/SKS 2, 46.

possibility. What is characteristic of this existential condition, the mood of melancholia, is that it combines an infinite awareness of possibility with a painful awareness of the compromises we inevitably make with the world, others, and ourselves when actualizing possibilities. The aesthete's choice of a lyrical mode of being is based on his insatiable demand for receptivity and openness, the price of which is his painful sense of futility. This explains why he is nostalgic for a mythologized past and apprehensive of the dreadful future. In the chapter's second section, we take a closer look at the aesthete's relationship to the world and show how the dialectic of infinite possibility and impossible infinity is mirrored in his relationship to the world of objects, ideas, and fellow human beings. The aesthete's relationship to the world fluctuates between detached apathy and intense passion; on the social level, his alienation and loneliness are complemented by a deep sympathy for *the others* of society. Yet his self-description as incapable of action or expression is in conflict with the very fact of his literary productivity, as is exemplified by the "Diapsalmata" themselves. This is the theme to which we turn in the third and final section.

Each of the sections accordingly takes up one or more key elements of the classical discourse on melancholy: the first that of fear and sadness without cause; the second those of idleness, boredom, and loneliness (or solitude); and the third that of genius and creative energy.¹³ In our chapter, we thus engage not only in the discussion on what has been called "melancholic epistemology"¹⁴ – the question of whether melancholia can be epistemically justified – but also in "melancholic aesthetics" – the question of how melancholia attunes us to certain aspects of the world and human existence as such – and "melancholic ethics." While not qualifying as ethical in *Either/Or's* technical sense, the melancholic life has moral worth on its own terms, floating free of constraint as it does.

Existential Melancholia

The Mood of Melancholia

A recurring theme in the aesthete's writings is his infinite demand for openness and receptivity. What characterizes his mode of being is that he asks for *everything*:

Aladdin is so very refreshing because this piece has the audacity of the child, of the genius, in the wildest wishes. Indeed, how many are there in our day

¹³ See Radden (2000), esp. pp. 5–19.

¹⁴ See, for example, Graham (1990).