

**SKETCH OF KIERKEGAARD'S EITHER/OR  
AND THE AUTHENTIC SELF**

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He who creates himself in the self-awareness of existence by the openness of possibility embraces the validity of Being as the in-itself for whom Being is an issue: the authentic man—*The Knight of Faith*. As revealed by Soren Kierkegaard, the existentialist man, or rather, the man on the path to authenticity, goes through time but does not attach himself; he lives in the here and now but does not simply exist. He *is* by virtue of the entanglement of the *Esthetic* and the *Ethical* but becomes the *Knight of Faith* by the balancing and ordering of such a duality. He makes the movement of infinity but as such gains finitude; makes the leap upward but comes down undistinguishable from anybody else in the world: he is the tightrope dancer and at once the equalizer of the *self*.

Kierkegaard's *Either* presents to us the life of the *existentialist* man—the man on the path to authenticity—as a series of fragments. The *Esthetic* part of him represents the aspect of the singular individual who is engaged in the avoidance of what can be known as “the boring”. *Boredom* in *Either/Or* represents an inauthenticity of Being which dwells in the un-amusing life, in the non-interesting, and in the monotonous. The *Esthetic* life presents to us the notion that the eye with which the world is seen by man must involve a continuous variation from the tedious and dull aspects of his existence. He must constantly reinvent himself as a person and keep himself in a continuous unpredictability in order to avoid boredom. The characteristic of the *Esthetic* in the existentialist man involves a state of deep despair comparable to that of the poet where we see that the more pain, the more depression his life is engaged in, the more opportunity he has to busy himself in the entertaining, in the interesting, and in the pleasurable. Kierkegaard himself asks “What is a poet?” and tells us that he is “an unhappy person who conceals profound anguish in his heart but whose lips are so formed that as sighs and cries pass over them they sound like beautiful music.”<sup>1</sup> That is to say, in the *Esthetic* life the man who faces the despair which comes with being in control of his life and his emotions also creates novelty of the dull monotony of the everyday sameness of existence and engages in what we can call the art of “arbitrariness”.

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<sup>1</sup> Hong, Howard Vincent & Hong, Edna Hatlestad (2000). *The essential Kierkegaard*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press (38)

The art of being arbitrary as consequent of the *Esthetic* part of the self is the capacity to create amusing combinations of the objects of everyday life. It is the possibility of unpredictable creation and unintentional admiration. As such, *boredom* represents for the existentialist man the stimulus to confront it and transform it into an object which stands for possibility, *i.e.* the possibility to transcend sameness by creating something new: “boredom rests upon the nothing that interlaces existence. [...] All who are bored cry out for change.”<sup>2</sup> The immediate moment and its continuous variation give way to the concept of persistently changing the method by which one engages or relates to the world. This is done not by necessarily changing the grounds or condition with which we are faced, but by changing or altering the relationship one has with the world. The concept of change is vital for the existentialist man while being in charge of his own destiny. For if he were not to develop this ability and practice it, then he would become subject, or rather prey, to an external imposition which would take hold of his life, his autonomy, and ultimately, his very freedom itself.

Kierkegaard’s *Or* presents to us the life of the *Ethical* as the highest form of the life of the *Esthetic*. In this part of the self of the existentialist man we see that the individual no longer dwells in the indifference of non-commitment as he did in the *Esthetic*. The *Ethical* self lives in the moment but makes a choice in it: he makes a project in the immediate and takes a stance in time. While in the *Esthetic* sphere, man can initiate change but he cannot commit to a project because he only lives to be aesthetically or hedonistically in the moment and not to become something concrete and everlasting in it. Conversely, the *Ethical* aspect of the self allows the individual man to distinguish or discriminate between good and evil and to consequently become a self-accountable individual and a socially responsible being. Kierkegaard tells us that “the esthetic in a person is that by which he spontaneously and immediately is what he is, [while] the ethical is that by which he becomes what he becomes.”<sup>3</sup> This means that through the *Ethical* life the individual lives engaged in the here and now, in the immediate, but at once does not simply exist indifferently without commitment or responsibility; he undertakes a project that will bring transcendence to his life, *i.e.* he engages in *choosing*.

In this manner, *Either/Or* represents the two aspects of the person on the path to authenticity, *i.e.* the existentialist, and the eventual transformation into what Kierkegaard calls “The

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<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, 55

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, 77

Knight of Faith”. Although man is a socially constructed entity he also has an independent and individual part. As such, he has no other resort from which to engage in his life than himself; he has no other place from which to transcend himself than from his inwardness. In *Either/Or*, it is then characteristically fundamental that man undergoes the stages of self-development or self-awareness that Kierkegaard poses if he is to be true to himself and find his own essence of Being. The stages posed by Kierkegaard in *Either/Or* embody the seemingly paradoxical fragmentary-entirety of what can be denoted as the authentic—the existentialist—man. In other words, it can be said that in fragments man is complete.

Man is presented to us as a series of fragments and not as a complete or whole “ideal” entity from the outset. He is not detached from subjectivity and he is not merely “out there” in the world to be simply discovered or stumbled upon as an *a priori* essence. Consequently, if a “totality” is to be gained, it is not derived from the fact that man is an *a priori* essence but rather from the notion that man is to interpret his reality uniquely and subjectively. As such, man is the aggregate of a series of individual actions as well as the relationships formed through such undertakings.

The *Ethical* stage of the self represents in the existentialist the ability to view himself as a task: as both the architect of his own life and the project itself. By virtue of the *Ethical* stage, the existentialist is continuously engaged in everyday life making choices and being responsible for those choices. He maintains the control of the self and the outside environment that seeks to control him and obscure his individual responsibility. If he were to remain in the *Esthetic* stage it would mean that he simply maintains a multiplicity of choices and possibilities at his disposal without learning how to discriminate among them by making a decision and taking a stand. Thus, the *Ethical* stage, as presented by Kierkegaard, represents in man the quality of ceasing to live only selfishly and isolated from others, and it turns man into a socially and individually responsible being, engaged in humanity, both his and the world’s, as opposed to living detached from it.

*Either/Or* shows us how the existentialist man is a combination of the *Esthetic* and the *Ethical* self. Dwelling only in one developmental stage, or part of the self, disregards or makes void the balance that the other stage provides. Nonetheless, for the existentialist man to become truly the authentic “self-aware” individual as presented by Kierkegaard, he needs to become the *Knight of Faith*. As such, he becomes the *knight of faith* by convening both aspects of his personality in virtue of the final stage of development known as the *Religious*. The existentialist as the *Knight of Faith*,

by consequence of the final stage of development coined by Kierkegaard as the *Religious*, acquires a simplicity of Being as a result of the absurd: he operates on a different authentic realm but still lives and engages among the inauthenticity of the crowd of which he is part. In being the *Knight of Faith*, the authentic man must learn to live in the world in a constant dualism by being distinct from everydayness, sameness, and monotony while at once living and employing himself in it actively and indistinguishably. He therefore does not exist simply for mere existence itself, but rather, he exists authentically in spite of it:

“The self is its own lord and master, [...] absolutely its own lord, and precisely this is despair, but it is also what it regards as its pleasure and enjoyment. [...] Revolting against the whole of existence, it thinks it has hold of a proof against it, against its ‘goodness’. This proof the despairer thinks he himself is, and that is what he wills to be, therefore he wills to be himself, himself with his torment, in order with this torment to protest against the whole of existence.”<sup>4</sup>

Consequently, in choosing and making himself as a project in the world, the authentic man as the *knight of faith* engages in time infinitely, but out of this infiniteness he gains finitude much in the same way that as being composed of fragments he becomes complete. The movement of infinity for the *knight of faith* involves remaining in a state of Being where every single moment matters; in every single moment he is choosing and engaged creating his own history and ultimate essence. He does not compress time or rushes through it but rather faces the absolute openness of possibility which comes in shaping his own destiny, in creating his own identity, and in transcending through the ability of being self-aware and self-responsible for his *Being*.

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<sup>4</sup> Friedman, Maurice S. (1999). *The worlds of Existentialism: a critical reader*. Amherst, N.Y.: Humanity Books (372)

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Original publication. 01.24.19 Archive Humanitas. Somewhere in Los Angeles.