The Seduction of Kierkegaard's Aesthetic Sphere

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"[W]ith regard to something in which the individual person has only himself to deal with, the most one person can do for another is to unsettle him (sic)."[1]

Introduction

Moral education, whether the cognitive-developmental approach of Lawrence Kohlberg or the character approach advocated by Thomas Lickona, is fundamentally optimistic.[2] It is hopeful that teachers can set in motion the ethical agency of students, imparting an ethical core that endures. The transition between frameworks from amoral to moral is thought to be a reasonable goal. Yet philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, in his tale on the discord of contemporary moral discourse in *After Virtue*, casts doubt on such optimism.[3] *After Virtue* portrays contemporary moral utterance as "a confrontation between incompatible and incommensurable moral premises and moral commitment as the expression of criterionless choice between such premises, a type of choice for which no rational justification can be given."[4] Given such disarray, the promise of moral education is indeed questionable. If the transition from amoral to moral frameworks is fundamentally irrational or does not avail itself to reason, how can teachers hope to cultivate moral growth? They certainly cannot do so irrationally.

One of the major culprits in MacIntyre's tale of woe is Søren Kierkegaard. It is Kierkegaard who, according to MacIntyre, enticingly argues that frameworks that guide human choice are fundamentally incompatible. The decision to choose one framework over another involves an irrational, arbitrary "leap." While criteria may inform action within a particular framework, the choice to cross the threshold into another framework is without criteria. MacIntyre's interpretation of Kierkegaard is not without dispute; the arguments center on the nature of transition, how it occurs, and whether it occurs rationally, irrationally, or in some other way.[5]

Though sensitivity to pedagogy infuses all of Kierkegaard's writings, Kierkegaard's voice in education, and moral education specifically, is scant.[6] This is striking considering the range and

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[1] Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments, Vol. I.* , trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 387.

[2] See Lawrence Kohlberg, *The Philosophy of Moral Development: Moral Stages and the Idea of Justice (Essays on Moral Development*, Vol. I, (1981) and Thomas Lickona, *Educating for Character: How Our Schools Can Teach Respect and Responsibility* (1992).
by Thomas Lickona 200..

[3] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame, IN 1981).

[4] MacIntyre, After Virtue, 39.

[5] *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre*, (eds. Davenport & Rudd, 2001). MacIntyre's position on this point has arguably evolved, most notably *In Three Rival Versions of Inquiry*, where he argues that traditions, rather than insular and incomprehensible, are intelligible across time. Truths are made intelligible within a tradition and that tradition (T1) which understands a conflicting tradition (T2) on its own terms and is able to resolve its (T2) intractable problems with a better account (i.e. Galileo's answer to Ptolemy) is or should be the prevailing tradition. This is in effect is what B attempts with A in *Either/Or*—explaining A's modality within B's terms. Kierkegaard's pseudonymous editor, Victor Eremita, notes that A and B's manuscripts offer no clear resolution. This makes sense for A, as I will argue, needs more than cognitive persuasive.

[6] A recent Ebsco article search for "Kierkegaard and education" yields just 74 listings, as compared with the 1,315 listings for "Dewey and education," or 734 listings for "Plato and education."

depth of his influence in philosophy and theology. While Kierkegaard is not as optimistic as Kohlberg or Lickona are about pedagogies that inculcate ethical virtue, neither is he as pessimistic (or incoherent and irrational across spheres) as MacIntyre suggests. Given the ethico-religious telos that animates Kierkegaard's project, and the amazing variety of texts that illuminate and enact the existential journey into lived virtue, Kierkegaard offers a wealth of resources for pedagogies that aspire to cultivate virtue. Yet Kierkegaard does, as his pseudonym Johannas Climacus intends, create difficulties. Specifically, he exposes how difficult it is to become and remain virtuous, and impart this wisdom to others.

Rather than a life of virtue, Kierkegaard exposes how we are incessantly drawn by the lure of the aesthetic sphere, characterized by a love of pleasure, unbroken immediacy, distraction, a constant flight from boredom, and an ultimately an evasion of becoming a meaningful self. Kierkegaard's aesthete, a precursor of today's distracted and perpetually amused self, poses an intractable challenge for pedagogies that aspire to cultivate virtue. The aesthete, while more than capable of comprehending ethical criteria, whether Aristotelian or Kantian, inexplicably resists them.[7] Attempts at rational mediation are insufficient, as is mandating a going through the motions of virtue (acting just so as to become just), as the aesthete is adept at playing a part, all the while withholding existential commitment. For the aesthete a subtler, more seductive, and indirect approach is required.[8] More than a failure of thinking and willing, aesthetes suffer with a failure of imagination.[9] Even more problematic, as Kierkegaard diagnoses, aesthetes are often self-deceived, under the illusion they are living within ethical or religious categories, all the while living within an aesthetic categories.

If a virtue ethics is going to succeed it must provide resources that contend with the relentless seduction of an aesthetic way of being—one that is continually ramped up by the novel ways contemporary culture finds to amuse and distract the self. In this essay I explore the challenge the aesthetic sphere poses for virtue ethics. With assistance from Kierkegaard's *Sickness unto Death*, where the pseudonym Anti-Climacus therapeutically diagnoses all varieties of despair, I explore the anxiety, inner poverty, and nihilism that attract and haunt the aesthete.

Rather than build a clear, logical system, Kierkegaard does philosophy by way of examples, canvassing pseudonyms that idealize and typify, according to Paul Holmer, "the range of real [men and women] and their options, choices, attitudes, passions, and reasoning."[10] While deeply engaged with sources from classical and modern philosophy, as well biblical and spiritual traditions, Kierkegaard was also an astute critic of popular culture. With literary tropes and cultural criticism Kierkegaard reveals the inner dynamics of the aesthetic sphere.[11] In this spirit, I will draw from a

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[7] The aesthete's comprehension of the ethical sphere, however, is in question. For Kierkegaard genuine ethical knowledge is subjective and existential. It is won by living into the ethical ideals one aspires to. The aesthete's knowledge of the ethical sphere is laced with an existential despair that tends towards an idealized (and impractical) abstraction, on the one hand, or is prone towards a hardened and cynical realism that dismisses the ethical modality as a real possibility, on the other.

[8] Kierkegaard's method of indirect communication will be carefully examined. While some recent scholarship is beginning to chart this terrain, the pedagogical implications merit considerably more attention. See especially Sæverot, Herner, "Kierkegaard, Seduction, and Existential Education," *Studies In Philosophy & Education* 30, no. 6 (November 2011): 557-572; Biesta, Gert, "Receiving the Gift of Teaching: From 'Learning From' to 'Being Taught By'," *Studies In Philosophy & Education* 32, no. 5 (September 2013): 449-461, and Mcpherson, Ian. "Kierkegaard as an Educational Thinker: Communication Through and Across Ways of Being." *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 35, no. 2 (May 2001).

[9] By this, I am not suggesting Aristotle's ethic lacks imagination. To become virtuous, in Aristotle's account, the telos of human flourishing must be continually re-imagined and enacted with practical wisdom. Kierkegaard agrees with this, but goes further, examines how imagination so often goes awry.

[10] Paul Holmer, "Kierkegaard and Philosophy" in *New Themes in Christian Philosophy,* McInerny, Ralph, ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 18.

[11] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, Part I.

variety of sources (literature, film, poetry) to illuminate the lure of the aesthetic sphere within our contemporary.

Along the way, I explore how modern education unwittingly caters to an aesthetic sensibility, aiding and abetting the flight from responsible self-making. Aspiring towards an ethical neutrality that abdicates substantive teloi, all the while depleting the necessary pathos required for living into to a substantive telos, contemporary education cultivates a pragmatic, ironic self, bent on distraction while adept at securing status and material gain. Both education for career preparation and liberal education (as it is presently understood) play into the aesthete's ironic and pragmatic proclivities.[12]

Finally, I offer a preliminary sketch of what a Kierkegaardian pedagogical approach to reach the aesthete looks like. Towards this end, I turn to author Flannery O'Connor's counsel on how to read literature and to art historian Jody Ziegler for an example of a pedagogical practice that takes on indirectly yet squarely the aesthete's vices, and begins to cultivate the practice and discipline virtue requires.

Aesthetic Maneuvers

When thinking of an aesthete the image of a person uncomfortably sitting in a chair comes to mind, perhaps on an airplane. The aesthete is that person who constantly fidgets, always adjusting the seat, incessantly maneuvering to find just the right position, ever resisting the resignation required to sit still. Aesthetes are on the move, easily bored, prone to chitchat, flitting from one thing to the next, seeking the immediacy of pleasure so as to escape the present moment. If immediate pleasures are not to be had aesthetes seek refuge in a world of fantasy. The perpetually wired possibilities and virtual escape of the modern age are an aesthete's dream.

Underneath the aesthete's maneuvering (both internal and external) is a person who is in despair. Despair, notes Kierkegaard's pseudonym Anti-Climacus, is one of the darker, hidden forms of human suffering. In the abstract it is a surpassing excellence that distinguishes us from other animals—squirrels, as far we can tell, are not overcome with self-doubt or self-loathing. In the concrete, however, despair is a horrible sickness. At its core it is self-loathing and a rejection of the self. Despair ultimately consists of despairingly willing to get rid of oneself. It is often misconstrued as despair over something, but ultimately despair is over oneself. For instance, in wanting to be like someone else one may despair over not being more like that person, but really this despair is a despairing over one's self or being stuck with oneself. Despair wants to be rid of the self one is or affirm a self one is not. It "is a self-consuming but an impotent self-consuming that cannot do what it wants to do, to consume itself."[13]

Rather than confront and face despair the aesthete's modus operandi is to run from it, either consciously or unconsciously.[14] This flight from the self can take on all manner of neuroses, including suicide, plastic surgery, tennis (as Pascal observed in his time), heroin, solitaire, gaming, pornography, the pursuit of power and status, sports, Dorian Grey's obsession with the theatre, and geometry (Pascal's dig at Descartes's disembodied approach)—anything to get away from the self one despises.[15] These activities are not a giving away of the self (i.e. a sacrificing oneself for another

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[12] At present liberal education is larger understood as the development of personal autonomy through the acquisition of critical thinking skills. See Bruce Kimball's, *Philosophers and Orators: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1986),

[13] Søren Kierkegaard, *Sickness unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition For Upbuilding And Awakening*, Eds. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 18.

[14] The unconscious version is captured in the robotic, saccharine happiness of the *Stepford Wives* or in the vane pursuits of the *Madmen*. Most of the protagonists in these films are blind to the futility of their pursuits. They are far removed from the awareness of Qoheleth, the wisdom writer of *Ecclesiastes*, who sees the vanity and emptiness in such endeavors.

[15] Pascal references both tennis and geometry as ways to evade the task of becoming a self. His mention of geometry was a dig a Descartes' disembodied project.

person), but rather attempts to escape from or obliterate the self. They can be neurotic, as Carl Jung observes, insofar as they serve as substitutes for legitimate suffering.[16]

Each of the spheres Kierkegaard diagnoses are characterized by a dialectical and existential tension: pleasure versus boredom for the aesthete; responsibility versus guilt for the ethicist; and faith versus absurdity for the religious. For the aesthete, a preoccupying pursuit of pleasure and ease leads to a moral evasion that may happen unawares or perhaps there was an awareness that was long ago obscured. Comedian Louis C.K shares an illustration of this blindness when going to pick up a friend's cousin at the Port Authority bus station in New York City.

Arriving from a sheltered and rural setting, his friend's cousin had never been to a city. As they are walking out of the bus terminal, Louis relates the following story: "She [the cousin] passed this homeless guy and she sees him. I mean, we all passed him, but she saw him. She is the only one who actually saw him…and my cousin was like…so, he's supposed to be there. Come on lets go."[17] The aesthetic modality is, no doubt, a coping mechanism, as living with the ethical strain of infinite responsibility for the Other is too much to bear 24/7. Yet for the aesthete this evasion, this flight from the self and moral responsibility, becomes a life style.

In his short text, *The Present Age*, Kierkegaard diagnoses a culture in the throes of an aesthetic sensibility as lacking passion and existential earnestness. "The present age," he observes, "is one of understanding, of reflection, devoid of passion, an age which flies into enthusiasm for a moment only to decline back into indolence." "Nothing ever happens," Kierkegaard observes, "but there is instant publicity about it…" This age of reflection is defined by a pathological "talkativeness" that "jabbers on incessantly about everything and nothing." Given the vacuous 24-hour news cycle of our present culture, Kierkegaard's comments are especially prescient.

In thrall of this spin, the aesthete is pulled into a "superior indolence that cares for nothing at all...that disperses and exhausts all the powers of the soul in soft enjoyment, and lets consciousness itself evaporate into a loathsome gloaming."[18] The spiritual energies required for becoming a self (imagining to and attending to ethical-religious possibilities) are depleted.

(Dis)-Integration

Whatever form it takes the aesthete's attempt to escape despair only intensifies it and stunts self-formation. In one way or another a despairing person shirks the task of becoming an existing self, which requires, according to Anti-Climacus, properly integrating or synthesizing the two major parts of the self, possibility and necessity, or infinitude and finitude.[19] Possibility or infinitude refers to our capacity to imagine and entertain alternatives ways of being, an ability to imagine a better self. Within this capacity resides ethical possibilities, whether Kantian or Aristotelian. Necessity or finitude refers to the concrete givens of one's existence, including one's life circumstances, personal history, as well as one's physical and mental capacities. Possibility must be informed by necessity, lest possibilities outrun actuality and remain abstract fantasies—where aesthetes often get entangled. Likewise, necessity must be informed by possibility, lest meaningful options for ethical or religious ways of being are crowded out.

Veering towards finitude or a focus on necessity, observes Anti-Climacus, involves a narrow reductionism, a complete acceptance of a crowd mentality. Consumed by worldly matters a "person

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[16] Carl Jung, *Word and Image*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 123. Jung defines neurosis as "a substitute for legitimate suffering."

[17] Szekely, L., aka Louis C.K. (2012) clip retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tbR8A27sxg8

[18] Kierkegaard, *Concept of Irony,* 295.

[19] Kierkegaard's anthropology envisions the self as an unstable mix of body and soul. Becoming a self, rather than negating one half over the other (i.e. materialism or Platonisim), requires a synthesis of both. Echoing Pascal, Kierkegaard sees human beings as half-angelic and half-best (*Pensées* #329). Self-hood requires integrating both. This is starting assumption that Kierkegaard makes, which a materialist, arguably, can dismiss embracing a view of that talk of the self is a mere chimera. The self is nothing other than a material conglomeration that consciously and unconsciously seeks to fulfill desires.

forgets herself, forgets her name divinely understood, does not dare to believe in herself, finds it too hazardous to be herself and far easier and safer to be like others, to become a copy, a number a mass person."[20] Such a person, by losing herself in this way, is often greatly successful in the world, always playing it safe, counting on probabilities; yet she never ventures in the highest sense. Such a person mortgages herself to the world. The anxieties of maintaining worldly security totally consume her heart. Such a person is worried about many things, living constantly in the future. Resolving this anxiety through faith in something greater is a leap that such a person considers outlandish and downright foolish. Thus spiritually speaking she has no self, "no self for whose sake they could venture everything…"[21]

Self-building, Anti-Climacus illuminates, requires constantly striking a proper synthesis of possibility and necessity. Often, consciously or unconsciously, we evade or ignore this task. In this tendency Kierkegaard observes a way of living—a common default setting—that he contrasts with the ethical and religious sphere. While Kierkegaard's ethicist and religious person takes on, with eyes wide open, the task of self-hood, aesthetes (often with eyes wide shut) shirk this task. Kierkegaard's spheres or modalities are sometimes referred to as stages, which is misleading, for it suggests a linear or steady progression across time. Rather, the spheres are always concurrent possibilities. We can oscillate from one to the next at any given moment—pulled towards helping a friend in need or drawn to binge watching the entire *Breaking Bad* series in a week. The self never arrives at a point of stasis, but rather is always striving, always on the way, always struggling, either becoming an actualized self or running from this task, given towards the despair of possibility—getting lost in or chasing an imaginary, idealized self—or falling into the despair of necessity—characterized by a hardened resignation the negates alternative possibilities.

An example of the despair of possibility was on display in a recent National Public Radio report on the popularity of plastic surgery in Brazil.[22] The story's major protagonist was Maria de Gloria:

> [She] is 46 but looks 30. She's unemployed but has had six surgeries at the Pitanguy Institute…. [Reflecting on her situation, she says] 'I'm much happier, there is no doubt about it. My bottom will never sag, my breasts will never sag. They will always be there, hard. It is very good to look at the mirror and feel fine,' she says. When I ask her if it was all worth it, she tells me she has a 21-year-old lover. 'Things have gotten a lot better,' she quips.

This story is particularly disturbing because the selves that are despised are embodied selves that do not measure up to an idealized, (and artificial) Hollywood self, situated within a patriarchal context.

Yet a pressing awareness of our mortality can just as easily fluctuate towards the despair of necessity. Woody Allen's character, from *Hannah and Her Sisters*, bemoans "the inevitable decay of the body." In light of this, he wonders what is the point of doing anything. An even more disturbing example of the despair of necessity is illustrated by Fyodor Dostoevsky's ridiculous man, who, after much anguish, reaches the following conclusion, "I suddenly felt that it was all the same to me whether the world existed or whether there had never been anything at all: I began to feel with all my being that there was nothing existing." Soon after this "insight," the ridiculous man resolves to kill himself.

To suffer infinitude's despair is to lack finitude; it is to be caught up in the fantastic mediated by the imagination. Rather than taking action such a person is prone to fantasizing about actions. "When feeling becomes fantastic in this way, the self becomes only more and more volatized and

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[20] Kierkegaard, *Sickness unto Death*

[21] Kierkegaard, *Sickness*

[22] See NPR at: http://www.npr.org/blogs/parallels/2014/10/07/353270270/an-uplifting-story-brazils-obsession-with-plastic-surgery;

finally comes to be a kind of an abstract sentimentality." Fyodor Dostoevsky's Elder Zossima in *The Brothers Karamazov* notes this despair in a doctor he met who recounts the following:

> the more I love humankind in general, the less I love people in particular, that is, individually, as separated persons. In my dreams…I often went so far as to think passionately of serving humankind, and, it may be, would really have gone to the cross for people if it were somehow suddenly necessary, and yet I am incapable of living in the same room with anyone even for two days . . .this person because of the way she eats her soup; or that person because of the way he blows his nose.[23]

Infinitude's despair revels in possibilities, but possibilities take time to be actualized. This time is not taken because before it has begun new possibilities emerge, and the "time that should be used for actuality grows shorter and shorter; everything becomes more and more momentary."[24] In brief, becoming a self requires concrete actualization. The despair of infinitude avoids actual existence, escaping in flights of fancy.

The aesthetic sensibility encompasses a range of personality types and tendencies. One notable example of the aesthetic personality is the addict. Renton, the major protagonist of the film *Trainspotting*, powerfully articulates the outlook of an aesthete in the throes of addiction when reflecting on the bromides of popular culture:

> Choose life. Choose a job. Choose a career. Choose a family, Choose a fucking big television, Choose washing machines, cars….choose dental insurance. Choose fixed-interest mortgage repayments. Choose a starter home. Choose your friends. I chose not to choose life: I chose something else. And the reasons? There are no reasons. Who needs reasons when you've got heroin? People think it's all about misery and desperation and death and all that shite, which is not to be ignored, but what they forget is the pleasure of it. Otherwise we wouldn't do it. After all, we're not fucking stupid. At least, we're not that fucking stupid. Take the best orgasm you ever had, multiply it by a thousand and you're still nowhere near it.[25]

Renton's musings capture, in stark fashion, the aesthetic modality, also illuminating its disturbing insularity and entanglement. The aesthete desires immediacy, passion, living in the moment, yet underneath this is the avoidance of becoming a self—the desire to escape the self. In choosing not to choose life, and in choosing heroin, Renton is essentially not making a choice, an ethically significant choice that is. The marginal selfhood he has seeks to escape into a state of oblivion. What else is there? Emergence of an ethical self requires commitment to something greater than the self—commitment to what Charles Taylor describes as the acknowledgment of "horizons of significance" that determine what is important.[26]

Renton's reflection is particularly troubling because of the intelligence and evident self-awareness displays. His capacity to step back from his predicament reveals a capacity for imagination and possibility, yet nothing he sees comes close to the intense pleasure heroin affords. Nevertheless, Renton is fully conscious of the futility of his lifestyle and its destruction, noting that the "misery and desperation and death and all that shite..." are "not to be ignored…" Still though, addiction to heroin holds him spell-bound. After the high subsides he is preoccupied with securing his next score. Eventually, however, the "shite" cannot be ignored, given the physical, spiritual, and emotional wreckage that it brings. It is at this juncture, when the aesthetic dialectic of pleasure vs.

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[23] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (New York: Everyman's Library, 1992), 57–58.
[24] Kierkegaard, *Sickness unto Death*
[25] John Hodge, *Trainspotting*, available at: http://www.pg.ru/scripts/trainspotting.html
[26] Charles Taylor, *Ethics of Authenticity*, 30.

boredom collapses that the aesthete may, unless possibility is utterly exhausted or obscured, be open to embracing an alternative paradigm.

The Consuming Self

Though fundamentally a problem with the self, despair is manifest at a macro level. Cornel West, drawing from Henry James, describes America as a hotel civilization, "in which people are obsessed with comfort, contentment, and convenience, where the lights are always on."[27] Considering the modern consumer, Zygmunt Bauman illuminates this further, examining how the consumer economy masterfully exploits the interior poverty that the aesthete seeks to escape:

> Consumed goods should bring satisfaction immediately, requiring no learning of skills and no lengthy groundwork, but the satisfaction should end the moment the time needed for consumption is up, and that time ought to be reduced to bare minimum. The needed reduction is best achieved if the consumers cannot hold their attention nor focus their desire on any object for long; if they are impatient, impetuous, and restive; and above all if they are easily excitable and predisposed to quickly lose interest.[28]

Bauman's account of the 20th century consumer echoes the reflections of Poet A, Kierkegaard's pseudonym from *Either/Or* who both embodies and articulates the aesthetic sensibility. Poet A describes it accordingly: "How sterile my soul and my mind are, and yet constantly tormented by empty voluptuous and excruciating labor pains!"[29] "On the whole, I lack the patience to live… my eyes are surfeited and bored with everything, and yet I hunger."[30]

Bauman illuminates further:

> It is the combination of the consumer, constantly greedy for new attractions and fast bored with attractions already had, and of the world in all its dimensions—economic, political, personal—transformed after the pattern of the consumer market and, like that market, ready to oblige and change its attractions with ever accelerating speed, that wipes out all fixed signposts from an individual map of the world or from the plans for a life itinerary. Indeed, traveling hopefully is in this situation much better than to arrive. Arrival has that musty smell of the end of the road, that bitter taste of monotony and stagnation that signals the end to everything for which the ideal consumer lives and considers the sense of living.[31]

This conditioned sensibility, driven by internal and external pressures, is particularly problematic for virtue ethics that are constituted by repetition of the same actions over and over again. Pedagogies that cater to our short-attention spans and lust for the novel play into the aesthete's hand.

Existential Irony

In addition to self-fragmentation and self-depletion, the aesthetes embody existential irony. While verbal irony involves the nimble use of language to convey meanings contrary to what is explicitly stated, existential irony involves an existential listlessness—remaining detached from substantive commitments. Given the aesthete's avoidance of the self, it is a life characterized by "hiddenness,"[32] and irony is the tool, par excellence, for hiding one's true self. Subsumed into a role or capable of playing many roles, "…the ironist frequently becomes nothing."[33] The Judge, the pseudonym from part II of *Either/Or* describes it this way: "[The aesthete's] occupation consists in preserving [his] hiding place, and [he is] successful, for [his] mask is the most enigmatical of all; that

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[27] Cornel West, "Democracy Matters," lecture given at Washington University-St. Louis, February, 2006. Available at: http://www.studlife.com/archives/News/2006/02/03/CornelWestdeliversinspiringlecture/

[28] Zygmunt Bauman, "The Self in a Consumer Society," *Hedgehog Review*, 1999, available at http://www.iasc-culture.org/THR/archives/Identity/1.1FBauman.pdf

[29] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, Part I, 24.

[30] Ibid., 25.

[31] http://www.iasc-culture.org/THR/archives/Identity/1.1FBauman.pdf

[32] Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 254.

[33] Kierkegaard, *Concept of Irony,* 281.

is, [he is] a nonentity."[34] "Irony," observes Lewis Hyde, "has only emergency use. Carried over time, it is the voice of the trapped who have come to enjoy their cage."[35]

David Foster Wallace illuminates this further:

> The U.S. arts are our guide to inclusion [into this irony sensibility]. A how-to. We are shown how to fashion masks of ennui and jaded irony at a young age where the face is fictile enough to assume the shape of whatever it wears. And then it's stuck there, the weary cynicism that saves us from gooey sentiment and unsophisticated naiveté.[36]

Poet A, as B (or Judge Wilhelm) observes, has "seen through the vanity of everything…but you have not gone further....You are like a dying person. You die daily, not in the profound, earnest sense...but life has lost its reality.[37]" A is a dying person yet abstracted from his own dying. Death, rather than cause for existential seriousness, has lost its profundity.

This denial of and numbness towards death A is a particularly striking symptom of the aesthetic sensibility.[38] Charles Taylor elaborates on our modern discomfort with death and aging—a necessity of our embodied selves: "We very often feel awkward at a funeral, don't know what to say to the bereaved, and are often tempted to avoid the issue if we can."[39] Within a culture of despair, notes Walter Brueggemann, we "have no adequate way to relate to death's reality and potential, so we deny it with numbness."[40] Death, rather than occasioning the emergence of an authentic self, is denied, avoided, or anaesthetized. Facing death, we suffer what Brueggemann describes as a symbol gap, wherein we lack "symbols [and rituals] that are deep or strong enough to match the terror of the reality."[41]

This symbol gap was acutely on display when *60 Minutes* aired Dr. Kevorkian euthanizing Thomas Youk, a 52-year old man, racked by Lou Gehrig's disease.[42] Dr. Kevorkian, with his intravenous cocktail of fatal drugs at the ready, asked, ""Tom, do you want to go ahead with this?' Youk, wearing green plaid pajamas and sitting in a chair in his suburban Detroit home, responds barely intelligibly: 'Yeah' [also nodding yes to show his consent.] 'We're ready to inject in your right arm. Okay? Okey-dokey."' Okey-dokey were the last words Tom heard before he died. The ethics of euthanasia aside, the symbolic impoverishment Brueggeman refers is captured by Kevorkian's anemic and clinical, "okey-dokey."

According to Brueggemann, the proper idiom to cut through this numbness in the face of death "is the language of grief…" Grief "is the most visceral announcement that things are not right." The distracted self is not "okey-dokey," but sick with despair. Walker Percy's protagonist from the Moviegoer provides illumination: "Am I," he asks, "in my search, a hundred miles ahead of my fellow Americans or a hundred miles behind them? That is to say: Have 98% of Americans already found what I seek or are they so sunk in everydayness that not even the possibility of a search has occurred to them?"[43] Aesthetes suffers what Heidegger describes as *Alltaglichkeit* "or everydayness…the ordinary-Wednesday-two-o'clock-in-the-afternoon phenomenon….[wherein] activities, repeated day after day, tend to get worn out." Afflicted with existential irony, aesthetes are

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[34] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* , Part 2, 159.
[35] …
[36] David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 694
[37] Kierkegaard, Either/Or, Part 2, 194 & 196.
[38] Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination,* 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001)
[39] Charles Taylor, "The Sting of Death," *Commonweal*, October 2007
[40] Brueggemann, *Prophetic*, 41.
[41] Brueggemann, *Prophetic*, 41.
[42] Dr. Kevorkian CBS interview available at: http://www.cbsnews.com/news/dr-jack-kevorkians-60-minutes-interview/
[43] Percy, *The Moviegoer*

distanced from existential questions and the existential ventures required for becoming a self. In Aristotelian terms, they are telos-indifferent, if not telos-averse, as aesthetes have little patience for the repetitive and tedious work required for achieving a telos. Moreover, they lack the pathos required for imagining an ethico-religious telos. In short, for the aesthete substantive, existential questions are without force. They inhabit what Heidegger describes as an "age of the total unquestionableness of all things human and natural."[44] Sartre's protagonist Roquentin inhabits this space:

> Of these relations (which I obstinately maintained in order to delay the collapse of the human world, of measurements, quantities, directions) I felt their arbitrariness; these relations no longer bit into things. *Superfluous*, the chestnut tree there, in front of me, a little to the left. *Superfluous*, the Velleda. And I myself — soft, weak, obscene, digesting, juggling with dismal thoughts — I, too, was *superfluous*...."I was *superfluous* for eternity."[45]

The despair of the aesthete ultimately tends towards utter nihilism.

Reaching the Aesthete

The opposite of aesthete's despair is suggested by the protagonist and narrator of Walker Percy's the *The Moviegoer*, "What is the nature of the search? you ask. The search is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life. To become aware of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair."[46] Dostoevsky's ridiculous man and Sartre's Roquetin are on to nothing, and this nothing eviscerates the pathos of a search for something.

Pedagogy that pushes against aesthetic proclivities would, for starters, involve a practiced ability to simply be with oneself. This sounds rudimentary, yet it is fundamental, as being with oneself is so often avoided. Comedian Louis C.K. describes it as the ability to be a person. Reflecting on our distracted culture comedian Louis C.K. explains why he does not want his kids to have a cell phone.[47] These devices, he argues, divert us from the task of becoming a real person. Echoing Blaise Pascal, C.K. says that being a real person requires the capacity to sit still. Instead we tend to fidget, check email, text, game, surf, etc., drawn into the "Total Noise" that is the sound of US culture.[48] The underlying reason, C.K. observes, is because of that thing, "…because you know, underneath everything in your life there is that thing…that empty, forever empty….just that knowledge that it is all for nothing and you are all alone…It's down there…"

The alternative, C.K. contends, is go into and confront the abyss that resides at the center of the self. He offers a personal example: "Sometimes when things clear away and your not watching anything, and you are in your car, and you start going, 'oh no, here it comes' that 'I'm alone;' it starts to visit on you—just this sadness, life is tremendously sad, just by being in it." At times, C.K. says, he is able to faces the "thing" head on. When he does he is overcome by an overwhelming sorrow that leads to weeping. His lamentation is eventually followed by a sense of profound and genuine happiness that is inexplicable, as it is not tied to a product or external stimuli, but rather springs from movements interior to the self.

More often than not, however, C.K. says we resist confronting the "forever empty thing." Because "…we don't want the first little bit of sad, we push it away with like a little phone, jerking

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[44] Bigelow, Pat, "The Brokenness of Philosophic Desire: Edifying Discourses and the Embarrassment of the Philosopher" in Kierkegaard Studies Monograph Series: Kierkegaard Revisited ed. by Cappelørn, Niels Jørgen and Stewart, Jon, ed., (New York: De Gruter, 1997). 328.

[45] Jean-Paul Satre, *Nausea*

[46] Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer*

[47] This interview with Louis C.K. was on the Conan O'Brian show. It is available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5HbYScltf1c

[48] David Foster Wallace, "Deciderization 2007—a Special Report, "(p. 1), available at: http://neugierig.org/content/dfw/bestamerican.pdf

off, or the food…" As a consequence we "never feel completely sad or completely happy. [We] just feel kind of satisfied with [our] products, and then [we] die." C.K. concludes by saying, "So that's why I don't want to get a phone for my kids."

From one vantage point the aesthete appears to be lazy, resisting what is difficult, always taking the path of least resistance. The Academy's response is to move us beyond pleasure towards the productivity of critical thinking, hoping to counter the thoughtless consumer-pleasure driven self with the serious, critical thinking self. Yet this critical work is not necessarily moral work. Though busy and industrious, critical pursuits can be yet another form of moral evasion, albeit a more sophisticated one. The scientist may be as morally immature as the addict—or maybe more so given the science of addiction.

What is needed, argues Kierkegaard, is a capacity for edification and the ability to read the text of one's life and real texts with ethical earnestness. I recall this kind of reading hinted at by one of my college English professors, when he held up the text we were analyzing—Shakespeare's *King Lear*—and exclaimed with some exasperation, "You do not judge the text; the text judges you and finds you lacking." In recollection, I recall that he was reacting to our sophomoric questions, which boiled down to that wearisome query we often hear from students, "What is the point?" Alasdair MacIntyre, when confronted with the question, "What is the point of a liberal arts education?" once wryly quipped "…the point is so that you never ask that question again!"[49] While perhaps not a satisfying response in this age of accountability and measurement, MacIntyre and my professor's rejoinder alludes to a different kind of learning—one that is more than just critical.

Considering the critical thinking (and the detached posture it valorizes) author Flannery O'Connor often notes an impatience for "the Instant Answer."[50] Stories in English classes "become a kind of literary specimen to be dissected."[51] Imagining one of her own stories taught from an anthology O'Connor conjures up an image of a frog being sliced up "with its little organs laid open…"[52] Something, she laments, "has gone wrong in the process when, for so many students, the story becomes simply a problem to be solved, something which you evaporate to get Instant Enlightenment."[53] Seeking direct illumination O'Connor's prospective readers often ask, "'What is the theme of your story?' and they expect [her] to give them a statement [like]: "'The Theme of my story is the economic pressure of the machine on the middle class"—or some such absurdity. And when they've got a statement like that, they go off happy and feel it is no longer necessary to read the story."[54]

O'Connor's critique exposes a weakness of an education focused on critical thinking. Critical thinking, rather than a corrective for our aesthetic tendencies, can play into its existential irony, holding moral concerns in critical abeyance. Yet what does the moral reader, or primitive reader as Kierkegaard describes her, look like?[55] For one there is a capacity for solitude, for quiet, and the ability to focus for a sustained period of time—qualities our aesthetic appetites work against. This kind of person has the ability to contend with and prevail over boredom. Bertrand Russell says that "a generation that cannot endure boredom will be a generation of little people…unduly divorced

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[49]Joseph Dunne Interview with Alasdair MacIntyre, "Alasdair MacIntyre on Education: In Dialogue with Joseph Dunne," *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 36, no.2, (2001): 5. The exact quote from MacIntyre reads as follows: "Students who ask about their academic disciplines, 'But what use are they to us after we leave school?' should be taught that the mark of someone who is ready to leave school is that they no longer ask that question."

[50]O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1977): 184.

[51] Ibid., p. 184.

[52] Ibid., p. 184.

[53] Ibid., p. 108.

[54]Ibid., p. 73.

[55]Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers Vol. IV*, Translated by and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (London: Indiana University Press, 1975), 263.

from the slow processes of nature, in whom every vital impulse withers, as though they were cut flowers in a vase."[56] Yet it is also includes a vigilance that not only fights our desire for immediacy but also resists the restive critical mind, which is greedy for resolution and categorization.

Mark Edmundson acutely names his students' aesthetic sensibilities. After receiving his usual end of the term course evaluations, Edmundson is particularly troubled by the image of himself that emerges:

> I'm disturbed by the serene belief that my function -- and, more important, Freud's, or Shakespeare's, or Blake's -- is to divert, entertain, and interest…..I don't teach to amuse, to divert, or even, for that matter, to be merely interesting. When someone says she 'enjoyed' the course -- and that word crops up again and again in my evaluations -- somewhere at the edge of my immediate complacency I feel encroaching self-dislike. That is not at all what I had in mind…..I want some of them to say that they've been changed by the course. I want them to measure themselves against what they've read…. Why are my students describing the Oedipus complex and the death drive as being interesting and enjoyable to contemplate? And why am I coming across as an urbane, mildly ironic, endlessly affable guide to this intellectual territory, operating without intensity, generous, funny, and loose.[57]

Edmundson's dismay about his students describing "the Oedipus complex and the death drive as being interesting and enjoyable to contemplate" is symptomatic of this aesthetic attitude. The ethical significance that perhaps ought to be awakened when considering the death drive or the plight of Oedipus is trumped by artist, aesthetic considerations—a mindset on the look-out for amusement.

Pedagogically how do we escape Edmundson's plight, where, at best, we are perceived as ironic and amusing, or, at worst, as earnest, boring, and irrelevant. How do we cultivate, as teachers, the edification, the kind of existential earnestness, that the aesthete so desperately needs yet resists? Kierkegaard cautions against proceeding directly as coming on too strong or didactically is often dismissed by the aesthete.

Art professor Joanna Ziegler experienced this challenge acutely when teaching art.[58] Paul Valéry says "to see is to forget the name of thing one sees."[59] Students, critically informed, learn to name and categorize the art before them; or aesthetically informed, they gravitate towards art they find pleasing, amusing, entertaining. Both tendencies resist an encounter with the art or a profound beholding of what is before them: the first keeps the subject at arm's length, like O'Connor's dissected frog; the second only sees what it wants to see, turning away from what is too difficult or unpleasant.

To counter these proclivities, Ziegler gave her students three paintings to choose from in a local Museum. Each week, for thirteen weeks, the students were required to visit their painting, sit in the same place, at the same time, and view it for at least an hour. Each week they had to submit a 5-page paper about what they saw: "thirteen weeks, thirteen papers in all—each essentially the same, but reworked, refined, and rewritten." The students were not to consult any outside sources, but rather to see for themselves.

The assignment, as you can imagine, was resisted by the students, yet over time Ziegler noticed the students' essays transformed

> …from personalized, almost narcissistic, responses to descriptions firmly grounded in the

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[56] Betrand Russell, *The Conquest of Happiness*, (Oxford: Routledge, 1996), 41.
[57] Mark Edmonson' "On the Uses of Liberal Education," Harpers Magazine, 1987.
[58]Joanna Ziegler, "Practice Makes Reception: The Role of Contemplative Ritual in Approaching Art," in *As Leaven in the World: Catholic Perspectives on Faith, Vocation, and the Intellectual Life* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 2001): 31-42.
[59] Source unknown.

> picture. Descriptions evolved from being fraught with willful interpretation, indeed selfishness (students actually expressed hostility at being made to go the Museum once a week), to revealing some truth about the painting on its own terms. Most importantly, students developed a personal relationship with what became known as "my" work of art. It was a work they knew by heart, could describe from memory— brushstroke, color change, and subtlety of surface texture. Through repeated, habitual, and direct experience (not working from slides or photographs but confronting the real work of art), students were transformed from superficial spectators…into skilled, disciplined beholders with a genuine claim to a deep and intimate knowledge of a single work of art—and they knew it.[60]

Ziegler's aim with this assignment was for the students to become "practiced beholders." For this to begin to take hold, a routine and a ritual—a practice—needed to be established. This practice enabled them to "enter into a work of art as a thing in its own right." [61]

The painting, approached in this way, was no longer seen as a mere object or image to be looked at, but rather as an icon that looks at us. More than we gaze at or address an icon; it addresses us; such icons, as Jean-Luc Marion explains, are saturated phenomenon. "My transcendental ego cannot anticipate it, nor can my concept contain or comprehend it. My horizons are overwhelmed and submerged by it. I am more the subject constituted by its givenness than it is the object constituted by my subjectivity."[62]

To such phenomenon we return again and again for insight, for purpose, for enlightenment, for transformation. Saturated icons are far more than instruments that contribute to our personal or moral development. Like dear friends, we are drawn to them and we love them not simply because they flatter or amuse, although they may very well do that, but rather because they confront and challenge us, they call forth our best selves. I am not sure I have courage to assign the contemplative and demanding task that Ziegler gives to her students. There is so much to do, so much to cover, so many standards, and yet, I know, so much will be forgotten, except that which is beheld.

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[60] Ziegler, p. 38.
[61] Ibid. 31-42.
[62]Merold Westphal, "Transfiguration as Saturated Phenomenon." *Journal of Philosophy and Scripture*, 1. no. 1, (2003): 26.