Towards a Deontic Kierkegaardian Virtue Ethics
Kierkegaard
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Søren Kierkegaard was a 19th century philosophical and religious thinker whose thought can be understood in part as a response to the Danish Hegelian philosophical movement contemporary to his lifetime in Copenhagen. However, although there is agreement that his work critiques Hegelianism, Kierkegaard remains a notoriously difficult author to provide an uncontroversial interpretation of. Questions loom especially large with regards to Kierkegaard's positive ethical position.

Some people argue that Kierkegaard's project is to dismantle the Kantian and Hegelian conceptions of ethics as both rational and universally binding, while others argue that his critique is leveled most strongly against his contemporaries' pretenses of having incorporated the concept of God into strictly philosophical categories, and nonetheless his positive ethical viewpoint still closely resembles Kant's. These positions are well articulated within Alaisdair MacIntyre's work *After Virtue*, and John Stewart's work *Kierkegaard's Relationship to Hegel Reconsidered.*

In *After Virtue,* Alasdair MacIntyre argues that Kierkegaard presents a radical departure from the ethical project of the Enlightenment Period by constructing an interpretation of ethics such that no rational mediation between aesthetic and ethical modes of existence can exist. No rational deduction can demonstrate the primacy of ethical over aesthetical values and action. More conservatively, John Stewart argues in *Kierkegaard's Relationship to Hegel Reconsidered* that when Kierkegaard's polemics are indeed directed at Hegel, and not the Danish Hegelians, the contentions raised are

typically minor and not wholly incompatible with Hegel's view. I suggest that both of these framings are fundamentally deficient for explaining the motivation for and consequences of Kierkegaard's positive ethical position.

Kierkegaard's ethical project is motivated by his strongly held the conviction that the purpose of ethics has been nearly universally misunderstood, from the Ancients, to Kant, to most notably, Hegel. My picture will present Kierkegaard as an analytically rigorous ethical philosopher who extends a cogent and compelling critique of Hegel's ethical view in the *Philosophy of Right* to construct a positive ethical framework.

First, we must note a few key points of disagreement between Kierkegaard and those to whom he is responding. Kierkegaard insists that philosophical treatments of ethics have heretofore neglected appropriate focus on the individual, in favor of universal categories. On Kierkegaard's view, the Greeks fail to recognize the heterogeneity of the ethical actor. Kierkegaard recognizes three distinct types of actors, the "religiously virtuous"[1] actor, "ethically virtuous" actor, and unvirtuous "aesthetic" actor, while the Greeks only recognize two — the virtuous and the unvirtuous. Kant conceptualizes duty as an a priori and rationally deducible normative force, which exists apart from any subjective moral character and concretely existing personality. Kierkegaard argues, however, that this is a misunderstanding of the metaphysical grounds for duty, and consequently, the source of its motivational force. Hegel conceptualizes ethics as the concrete realm of customs, duties, institutions, and mores that are generally accepted in any given society, where the spirit of the time, or 'Geist', inevitably mediates conceptual contradictions that present themselves within the laws and norms, and the polis'

[1] These will be notated "virtuous$_R$", and "virtuous$_E$" for Religious and Ethical virtue respectively.

relationship to these laws and norms. Kierkegaard believes that Hegel's conceptualization of ethics is necessarily inconsistent with the purpose of ethics, which, in Kierkegaard's view, is to orient the actor forwards, towards the future, and thus cannot rely upon existing social mores, traditions, or customs as its ultimate reference point. Hegel argues that spirit of ethics exists in some degree of unresolved contradiction with itself, yet ethics demands that the actor operates consistently with the established norms. This seems inadequate to Kierkegaard, and his ethics importantly overcomes this limitation, by conceptualizing the properly developed individual as capable of seeing 'beyond' the common ethical sphere and thus determine morally right action independent from contingent norms and laws[2].

Kierkegaard includes aspects of these three theorists within his positive ethical claim, however, which I argue takes the form of a developmental and deontic virtue ethics. I argue this becomes evident when considering Kierkegaard's theorizing about three ethical stages of existence, the Aesthetic, the Ethical, and the Religious, which I argue are related in a developmental way, rather than existing discretely, and irreconcilably. I will map the progression of these three ethical states while introducing the relevant ethical and epistemological claims as they fit within the development.[3][4]

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[2]See Miranda Fricker's *Epistemic Injustice* for a similar, and contemporary argument for this position.

[3]To construct this argument, I will largely rely upon Kierkegaard's work in *The Concluding Unscientific Postscripts*, though I will use passages from two other works by Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* and *Either-Or,* to further illustrate points that are not completely articulated within the *Postscripts.* Kierkegaard does not focus much attention on the aesthetic sphere of existence within Postscripts, as he spends most of the work within *Either-Or* treating this question — "in order to start from the ground, the first thing I wanted to do with [*Either-Or*], was to let the existence relation between the

In *Either-Or*, our pseudonymous compiler and editor, Victor Eremita, first observes a fine desk that he desires beyond anything else. He fantasizes over the desk for some time and finally purchases it. Weeks later, in a rage, he strikes the desk and a hidden drawer reveals itself. Inside is a collection of correspondences between two men, who he dubs 'A', (or 'The Aesthete') and 'B' (or 'The Judge'). He is unsure of the chronology of the letters, but does his best to arrange the papers in order. These letters make up *Either-Or*. 'A' is a young, philandering, philosophical man. He believes that life is best spent reveling in the aesthetic: in music, arts, and physical intimacy. Though as his papers progress we find him working harder and harder to justify the aesthetic life.

In the "Immediate Erotic Stages" section of *Either-Or*, 'A' recognizes the issues brought about by a life lived like Don Juan, moving from one immediate pleasure to the next, never satisfied. This attitude culminates with the "Rotation of Crops", in which 'A' concludes that boredom is the most common state in man, and that the only remedy for this is a well-cultivated imagination. We come to understand this as an important shift in perspective. We see 'A' finally turning inwards, favoring a limited pursuit of pleasures in order that one may attain resourceful imagination and stave off boredom. This is reflective of greater embrace of the temporality of human existence, which is necessary for the later introduction of the concept of duty, which the essays by 'B' revolve around.

In *Or*, our author, 'B', is a married judge. He writes to 'A' as a close friend and confidant, and continually admonishes 'A' for his instability and endless pleasure seeking. He respects 'A''s intellectual dexterity and brilliance but sees that it is used

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aesthetic and the ethical come about in an existing individuality." (*Postscripts*, 210) So to demonstrate the aesthetic sphere I will here draw from *Either-Or*.

towards profligate ends. “The Aesthetic Validity of Marriage” Section of the *Or* volume of *Either-Or* seeks to provide an aesthetic rationale for marriage, and show ‘A’ that while his reasoning is thoughtful, his conclusions about the greatest aesthetic pleasure are fallacious, and motivated by his drive to set himself in opposition to rule and order — to align himself with the accidental, to embody fate.

Ultimately, ‘B’ demonstrates that happiness is attained through more sustained pursuits, namely romantic love – a relationship with another person that necessarily exists over time – in contrast to the immediate sensuality of seduction. “The Prayer”, at the end of the second volume, constitutes our final shift. The sermon posits that humans are ultimately never in the right before God, regardless of their motivations, aesthetic or ethical. Only by humbling ourselves before God’s absolute wisdom, allowing God to speak to us, can we understand what is right *for us*.[5]

I will explain how Kierkegaard’s virtue ethical picture, grounded in the proto-virtues of earnestness and commitment, can be used to form an analytically cogent picture of such a development. An individual will necessarily develop, like a tree grows as it sprouts from its germ, though the individual has agency to guide this development, and determine that the shape that her personality takes. Kierkegaard posits that the personality acquires its form through making decisions, earnestly and wholeheartedly, which is identical with *becoming* the sort of person *who would make those sort of decisions*. Kierkegaard recognize that one becomes a certain sort of outward self, existing concretely and distinctly in the world, by actualizing the contents of one’s ‘inward self’.

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[5]I treat the details of this development in the essay “Kierkegaardian Ethics and Superogation”. Here I will simply proceed to analyze the role of the proto-virtues and virtues within this development.

Disciplining oneself to express the contents of one's earnestly endorsed “wishes” regarding one’s character and action — one’s inward self — through action, subsequently and reflexively develops one’s inward self. Kierkegaard analogizes the inner workings of the personality to a ship at sea, and such a decision as “the moment a shift of direction must be made; [where the captain] may be able to say "I can do either this or that" but if he is not a mediocre captain he will also be aware that during all this the ship is ploughing ahead with its ordinary velocity, and thus there is but a single moment when it is inconsequential whether he does this or does that.”(221, “Balance between the Aesthetic and Ethical”) Thus there is freedom within this development and the final outcome of one’s trajectory is not predetermined; the individual has some agency in the process of self-transformation. For Kierkegaard we have the potential to end up within the Ethical sphere, or ultimately Religious sphere, but this requires a proper development. To develop properly, from the aesthetic to the ethical, requires that one makes decisions regarding actions earnestly. This is irreconcilable with the aesthete, who is “not evil, [but] merely indifferent” (177, “Balance between Ethical and Aesthetic”) The individual must begin to make hard decisions to develop him or herself into a person fully capable of making decisions that reflect the contents of her rational, *and impassioned*, will. This requires an actualization of the potential skill of earnestly willing and commitment, present latently within all people, which are proto-virtues insofar as they are prerequisites for the development of virtues of character.

For Kierkegaard, passion, as an essential interest in one’s own existence, is the psychologically primary motivator for action. However, passion needs to be guided by virtues of character to move an individual into the space of the Ethical, and ultimately the

Religious. Passion abates itself within the aesthetic, as it is diffuse in its aesthetical affinities, which lack continuity, whereas the passion of the Ethical is necessarily focused into a commitment — duties that one places upon oneself, embraces, and act to satisfy from within oneself — and thus the choice to act Ethically is more meaningful to the individual. However, passion alone is not enough to make the leap to the Ethical — the virtue of courage to commit to living within Ethics terms is required too.

While the Ancients place eudemonia as the primary human telos, guiding the development of the virtues, for Kierkegaard, authenticity understood as practical coherence among earnestly willed projects or motives, is teleologically primary to eudemonia or happiness, as: "The task of becoming subjective is supposed to be the highest set for a person, just as, correspondingly, the highest reward, an eternal happiness, exists only for the subjective; or rather, comes to be only for the person who becomes subjective." (*CUP,* 137) thus this striving towards becoming an authentic subject is necessary for the proper development of virtues, which in turn allow one to receive God. If one freely chooses to make to make earnest decisions about one's life, given that: "The real action is not the external act, but an internal decision in which the individual puts an end to the mere possibility and identifies himself with the content of his thought in order to exist in it." (*Either-Or,* 302) then one in turn produces and subsequently tempers virtue, which then conditions (but does not determine) subsequent decisions. Thus virtues, for Kierkegaard seem to act as conduits, or a channel, through which passion can manifest itself.[6] Kierkegaard's attention to ethics' close dependence upon a

[6]I have written about other wide-ranging isomorphism's between Kierkegaard's thought and that of Freud (Interpretation of Dreams, Three Essays on Sexuality), Piaget (The Moral Judgment of the Child), and other canonical voluntarist action theorists, within other essays including "Kierkegaard as a Voluntarist". It's interesting to note that if

carefully considered moral psychology can, perhaps profoundly, be observed here, as his model of the personality closely resembles the three-fold schema later developed by Sigmund Freud. Passion, as an energetic drive and interestedness in one's own existence, serves as a sort of existential motor, or driving force, which closely resembles Freud's notion of 'Id'. The virtues of character, or the constraining or mediating meta-cognitive dispositions, are consistent with Freud's notion of 'Super-Ego', while the individual psyche reflects an integration of these two features, consistent with Freud's 'Ego'.

What John Davenport calls 'proto-virtues', or orientations towards one's desires, allow for the development of commitments in traditional virtues of character. The most significant among them, is earnestness. These proto-virtues are conditions under which choices occur, they are not correlated to the character of the act itself (such as the virtues of charity or kindness might be), but are rather the volitional orderings of the individual towards his or her wills and behavior. For instance, an individual might will a *kind* $(V_{character})$ act *earnestly* (V_{proto}).

Kierkegaard uses the image of an addict to illustrate the essential difference in personality between aesthetic and ethical individuals: "imagine a person who has become addicted to gambling. Desire awakens in all its passion; it is as if his life would be at stake if his desire is not satisfied. If he is able to say to himself: at this moment, I will not do it for an hour — then he is cured. The mood of the person who lives esthetically is always eccentric, because he has his center in the periphery. The personality has its center in itself, and the person who does not have himself is eccentric. The mood of the person

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Kierkegaard is to be accepted as voluntarist action theorist, he would be, chronologically, the first one. It is not entirely surprising that Kierkegaard can be interpreted in this way, as those who occupy the pantheon of voluntarist action theory are all largely responding to the observed insufficiency of Hegel's idealist framework.

who lives ethically is centralized. He is not in the mood, and he is not mood, but he has the mood and has the mood within himself. What he works for is continuity, and this is always the master of the mood." (*Either-Or*, 310) To understand this relationship between an individual and one's personality more closely, we can imagine three addicts, all of whom find themselves in different volitional relations to their behavior, and apply Davenports characterization of Kierkegaardian volitional states[7] 1) The unwilling addict, who (with second order volition) wills not to have (the first order) desire for drugs. 2) The willing addict who wills (with second order volition) to remain an addict (the first and second order volitional states align), and 3) the 'wanton' addict who has no second order volition towards the addictive desire on which he acts. He follows the prescription of the first order desire without any mediation by a higher order, self-conscious willing.

On this account, the virtuous person is an 'inward self,' which consists in the authentic will to be a certain sort of virtuous 'outward self', whereas the aesthetic simply has first order desires, perhaps even towards virtuousness, but lacks the earnestness in committing towards her desires. The aesthetic individual could, and likely does, have a first order will to be ethical — in simply knowing that acting ethically is morally binding (in an abstract sense), the individual has the first order desire to 'be good', but this has no strong motivational force unless one commits to this desire, in caring about (second order willing) one's own desire to be ethical.

An individual has to properly become herself, as an agent with moral virtue, and the courage necessary to choose herself within the Ethical. Once having developed into an Ethical individual, one can then be revealed to and thus receive God: "For the

[7]Borrowed from Frankfort, "The freedom of the Will and the Concept of the Person", 1971

individual's ethical development, it is the little private theatre where God is indeed the spectator … where one does not deceive but reveals, just as all ethical development consists is being revealed before God." (*CUP,* 132) While becoming ethical is enough to present oneself to God, the reception of God, as in guidance for proper action, additionally requires "faith", which is distinctive of the Religious sphere.

Within *Either-Or,* Kierkegaard presents several different, but not fully developed, rationalizations for why, precisely, the concretization of one's personality necessarily results in an embrace of societal duties as such, or in other words, why the development of character entails the embrace of the sort duties definitive of the Ethical sphere. To illuminate this question, we must turn back to the assessment of the aesthete. The aesthete cannot love, because he does not have the earnestness of willing required for commitment, he exists immediately, subject the caprices of his mood, whereas love persists over time and requires additional virtues, such as temperance. While virtues of character are necessary for a loving relationship, *to love* additionally entails duty, as if the opposite side of the same coin.

> If you separate [duty and love] you are continually in self-contradiction. It is as if someone were to separate the letters "b" and "e" in the syllable "be" and then want to discard the "e" and insist that "b" is the whole. The moment he enunciates it, he says the "e" also. So it is with true love; it is not a dumb, abstract inexpressible something, but neither is it a weak, wavering indeterminate. It is an articulated sound, a syllable. If duty is hard then love pronounces it, actualizes it, and thereby does more than the duty; if love is about to become so soft that it cannot be kept stable, duty sets boundaries to it. ("Aesthetic Validity of Marriage" *Either-Or*, 198)

The logic for why virtue necessarily entails *social duty* is not fully worked out within *Either-Or*, however, Kierkegaard believes, on deontological grounds, that love for other people inheres in the ethical life. His singular, guiding, categorically imperative ethical principle, derived from Christian biblical doctrine, is agape, or the love for one's

neighbor: “love is the fulfilling of the Law. Despite all its many provisions, the Law is still somewhat indefinite, but love is the fulfilling. The Law is like a laborious speaker who despite all his efforts still cannot say everything, but love is the fulfilling. (*Works of Love, 156*)”. While Kierkegaard only gestures to this rationale within *Either-Or*, if one is indeed to love her neighbor, on the above view, one would need to respect the universal protection that ethics extends to all agents in moral duty, thus embracing societal duties is a minimum necessary condition for the fulfillment of this principle. This acts as a bridge between duties and virtue for Kierkegaard, wherein duty depends on virtue — an individual capable of love — in the first instance.

The Religious stage requires this same sort of internalization of duty and regard for the Other, however, the epistemic assurance of such a duty, as in appeal to some external *standard*, is necessarily severed. Kierkegaard asserts in the *Postscripts* that the highest truth is that which exists for the individual without any objective assuredness. Maintaining a passionate orientation towards an insight that is not capable of being checked against the external world — as that which is already instantiated — is faith for Kierkegaard.

> “*The objective uncertainty maintained through appropriation in the most passionate inwardness is truth,* the highest truth there is for someone existing […] *I observe nature in order to find God, and indeed I also see omnipotence and wisdom, but I see much else too that troubles and disturbs* […] In the case of, for example, a mathematical proposition, the objectivity is given, but that is why its truth is also an indifferent truth. But the above definition of truth is another way of saying faith. Without risk, no faith. *Faith is just this, the contradiction between the subjective truth, inwardness passion of inwardness and objective uncertainty.* (*CUP*, 171)”

Thus faith is at once a measure of one’s courage and moral insight, the very existence of which is reflective of Kierkegaard’s position that the Ethical is deficient.

Herein lies Kierkegaard's critique of both Hegel and Aristotle. Contra Aristotle, the individual does not simply become virtuous and join the ranks of the virtuous having achieved the human, rather, contra Hegel, the individual must cultivate an individual relationship with God to receive his direction, as the Crowd as such never instantiates God's will in norms or laws. God does not speak to the masses but to individuals, and most people do not have the virtue of character to receive God's direction and act upon it. Thus faith requires a strength of character, a courage to remain unwavering in one's passion towards one's ethical convictions, that is not required within the Ethical sphere, as the Ethical sphere necessarily involves assurances from the exterior world for its dictums regarding duty. However, Kierkegaard does believe that God manifests within the world as the source of one's epistemic access to moral rightness, thus you must have faith in yourself to act rightly, and as the quote from *Works of Love* asserts, the individual must determine how to fully apply agape, for him or herself; one must individually come to the understanding for how to do good for others — contra Kant, one must individually determine *what his or her duty is*.

Thus Kierkegaardian virtue ethics distinguishes two types of virtuous actors: The Ethical actor who possess $\text{virtue}_{(\text{Ethical})}$ and the Religious actor who possess $\text{virtue}_{(\text{Religious})}$, whose actions (and duties) are not always consistent. Kierkegaard makes clear in *Either-Or* that an actor must choose the principles with which he is to guide his life by: "Now he possesses himself as posited by himself — that is, as chosen by himself, free — but in possessing himself in this way, an absolute difference becomes manifest, the difference between good and evil. As long as he has not chosen himself, this difference is latent." ("Balance between the Ethical and the Aesthetic", 233) and reflecting his recognition that

these differing principles for action — duties — come about as a function of differing development of character, Kierkegaard recognizes that an individual can indeed exist virtuously, characterized by adherence to social duties, while still obtaining an incomplete, and thus unideal, set of virtues.

> A Greek individual who developed himself into a perfect epitome of all the personal virtues may attain as high a degree of masterliness as he wishes; nevertheless his life is no more immortal than the world whose temptation his virtue conquered; his bliss is a solitary self-satisfaction, as transitory as everything else. (310, "Balance between the Ethical and the Aesthetic")

On this view, the Religious actor demonstrates higher qualities of character, or virtues than the Ethical actor, insofar as the Religious individual has developed the capacity to 'hear' the direction of God, and therefrom act, duty-bound. The deontic and the virtue ethical features are not separable on this view — they are distinct but theoretically interrelated features that cannot be adequately understood without reference to the other as the internalization of duties results as a consequence of having developed virtues of character.