

and thirdness is so all-pervasive, it is hard not to notice that number seems here to operate prior to its extension into arithmetic, into counting or into abstract seriality, and it is hard not to wonder whether there are not at least some common principles in play, common issues that arise, common solutions and dilemmas.

Those who have studied the Pre-Socratics, pursued the dialectic through Hegel, Kierkegaard, Marx, and Sartre, and even followed its twists and turns in contemporary philosophies of difference (Derrida and Deleuze) may think that these issues have been sufficiently clarified and resolved. And yet the thought that they may have been resolved suggests, not least to Kierkegaard, that it is in the very idea of resolution that the danger lies. So let us rehearse just a little what is at stake.

The binary choice captured by the title *Either-Or* could be said to reflect an opposition between two ways of understanding time and repetition—one we could call external, and the other internal. The external way understands temporal succession in terms of an outer sequentiality, while the internal account not only proposes an inner connectedness, it believes that the external view itself can be taken up as a moment in the development of that internal perspective. And Kierkegaard seems to suggest that it's only on this latter view that various of the normative conditions we imagine to govern the external view are actually realized. Thus, the idea that those who work get the bread suggests that there is some sort of natural causality and justice in the ordinary world. In fact, says Kierkegaard, in the real world this principle is often mocked, while in the spiritual world it really is true. "Here an eternal divine order prevails" (FT[1], 38). For Kierkegaard spiritual work has a direct connection to results, one not mediated by fallible external circumstances subject to a law of indifference. Though it has to be said that the significance of faith does not suggest that if you make the right spiritual moves you will get the right results, for that would reduce spiritual life to a calculable activity, leaving no room for grace. Rather, as Hegel said, there is no royal road to truth, even if spiritual work is a necessary condition for self-transformation. Whether it is sufficient is another story.

The Phenomenology of the First Kiss

Kierkegaard often ruminates on the significance of the first kiss. Why is it so difficult to think this through on the ethical plane? The argument rests surely on the phenomenology of the first kiss, by which I mean not necessarily the very first kiss, or even the first "romantic" kiss. There are kisses one gives and receives as a child from parents and ancient aunts that just don't count. And even romantic kisses can be exploratory, imitative, learning how to do it, what it feels like. By the first kiss, I mean a kiss that inaugurates a relationship. It is not enough to say that it does so intentionally, for it may

precisely be the occasion for the formation of such an intention, and it may happen precisely on the understanding that it not inaugurate a relationship. For the sake of our discussion, I would describe the first kiss as the experience of the opening of a possibility, as a trembling on the brink of something inchoate but momentous, the experience of the realignment of boundaries. Space and time, self and other, activity and passivity, certainty and uncertainty are all thrown into the air, and caught again, differently. I will not decide here whether one is being kissed or doing the kissing, or whether there is some ideal mutuality. Whatever the general shape, the first kiss solicits the tenderness of a response, a visceral recognition of the desire of the other. But it also asks a mute question, a question every bit as important as "What is the meaning of Being?"

For Kierkegaard's aesthetic seducer, the first kiss, coupled with the subsequent conquest, presages the end of all interest. A kiss always has a distinct character. "Sometimes," he writes, "it is clicking, sometimes hissing, sometimes smacking, sometimes popping, sometimes rumbling, sometimes resonant, sometimes hollow, sometimes like calico, and so on" (EO[1], 350). But this sonorous classification pales into insignificance compared to the spiritual and subsequently erotic levels of intensity that Johannes seeks to develop in his Cordelia. The first kiss, he writes, is indifferent not just to sound but also "to touch, [and] time in general" (EO[1], 351).

A little later, Johannes begins to be troubled that it might occur to her at some moment to consider the future:

So far this hasn't happened; I have been too good at drugging her aesthetically. Nothing less erotic is imaginable than this talk of the future, the reason for which is basically that people have nothing with which to fill the present. When I'm there I have no fear of that either, for I can make her forget both time and eternity. (EO[1], 373)

Finally, we recall how it ends:

Once a girl has given away everything, she is weak, she had lost everything. . . . I will not take leave of her; nothing disgusts me more than a woman's tears and a woman's prayers. . . . If I were a god I would do for her what Neptune did for a nymph: change her into a man . . . now it is over and I want never to see her again. (EO[1], 376)

Judge Wilhelm's aim in part II of *Either-Or* is to show that we do not have to jettison the intensity of the first kiss in marriage. It is not necessary for a woman to "exchange maidenly yearning for marital yawning" (as Johannes Climacus puts it in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*). On Johannes's aesthetic model, thinking about the future is a distraction from the intensity of the present. And this is easy to understand. It is hard to listen to a fugue while wondering about how to meet the mortgage payments. The aesthetic

intensity of the present may be thought to rest precisely on its exclusion of the outside world, of time and space. I am reminded of John Donne's poem "The Good-Morrow":

I wonder by my troth, what thou, and I
Did, till we lov'd? were we not wean'd till then?

For love, all love of other sights controules,
And makes one little roome an every where.⁴

The claim that the First Kiss is indifferent to time, that it is important that she "forget" time, and that thinking of the future ruins everything, and so on, may be more complicated than it seems, even before we turn to Judge Wilhelm's response. Leaving aside the manipulative unpleasantness of "The Seducer's Diary," it is simply not clear that Johannes and Cordelia actually have the kind of encounter that could count as a First Kiss. It is surely not sufficient that Cordelia have no thought of the future. For a true First Kiss, even in aesthetic terms, I would think it necessary that Johannes too be "controuled" by love. In fact, he is not really occupying their "little roome." The whole action is contained within a calculative temporal and spatial framework. She may not know this, but he certainly does. Moreover, even if Johannes were fully participating in the first kiss, which I claim he is not, the idea that we "forget" time in these moments seems too simple. It does not, for example, preclude the possibility that time is operating as one of the grounds of the intensity of the experience.⁵ It may well be that time is not being represented, or that a certain linear understanding of time is suspended. But that does not mean that time is absent.⁶

There are many philosophers, and I am thinking specifically of Heidegger and Irigaray, who argue that it is precisely through our reversion to, or a transformation into, a more "original" inhabiting of space and time that new possibilities of thinking and being arise. The experience of the opening of love may not be alone in convincing us of the plausibility of this thought, but it is certainly a powerful source. If it is not the experience of unity, of the dissolution of boundaries (as it is often poetically expressed), it surely involves a dramatic disturbance, or mobilization and interrogation of boundaries—bodily, emotional, and social. It is in this sense that love truly makes us tremble. And this trembling occurs in part because what is at stake is utterly inseparable from time. The feeling of safety, the sense that she is the one you have always been looking for, the sense that whatever this leads to will be good—the tension between the ecstatic exhilaration and the anxiety that this will not last—these are all surely part of the experience of the First Kiss, and of first intimacy in general. It is not that time is banished. It is rather transformed, put into play, renewed. And at the level of fantasy, time operates forcibly whenever we feel or say "forever."

Clearly, any sense we give to the First Kiss is an idealization of some sort. I am arguing for the First Kiss as the event of opening of love, which has a projective and destabilizing dimension, one in which the destabilizing reveals the schematizing parameters of our standardly individuated existence. And it is one that sets in motion powerful desires for connection, and re-connection, desires that themselves almost certainly have archaic origins. As I see it, this account is a corrective of Johannes's sketch of the aesthetic take on the First Kiss in two respects: (1) It is no longer wedded to the distortedly one-sided formulation that the manipulative seducer sets up. Once we have genuine mutuality, then a cycle of growing recognition and tenderness is set in motion, which cannot happen in a seduction framed even by altruistic manipulation. (2) Time is not banished at all. Rather, it enters in more profound ways.

The Ethical Transformation

The revisionary thesis about first love in part II has many aspects, and it seems important to know if they can be separated. For the sake of speed and clarity, I will list some of them:

1. Judge Wilhelm expresses extreme gratitude that his eventual wife was his first love. This makes first love into only love. But is this claim necessary? And if he thinks it is, does not that point to a limitation in his whole account of how first love develops?

2. Judge Wilhelm is clearly seeking to impress on the aesthete that there are dimensions of relationality (in love) that only something like long-term unconditional commitment makes possible. This seems to be a central claim, and an important truth to which a certain kind of aesthete is indeed blind.

3. The aesthete might respond: But there are equally dimensions of hell that only open up under these circumstances. Marriage, he suggests, can be like living in a prison cell. Judge Wilhelm boldly affirms that these people are betraying marriage and so on. And he explicitly does not attack divorcees, who at least have courage.

4. We might understand Kierkegaard as arguing for the constitutive role of long-term commitment, or for the constitutive role of an absolute commitment. He is ambivalent precisely because an absolute commitment by one party, even by both parties, does not guarantee constant renewal, which seems at least to be the justification of marriage over a life of mere repetition. In fact, one might argue, it is a condition of the possibility of renewal of the significance of First Love (constant rejuvenation), not that one simply occupies the space it opens onto, but that one enacts and re-enacts the anxious movement, the trepidation, of opening onto that space, and that one allows the boundaries to be put in play. And in extremis, one risks the possibility of the failure of this repetition. The logic here is that of the faith of an