Kierkegaard's Either/Or:

Author B's Assertions on the Titular Dichotomy

By Ashley Kwon

How should one live? This simple question, one that has been tirelessly debated since the ancient Greek philosophers, is once again raised by Kierkegaard in his 1843 work *Either/Or*. Kierkegaard presents the reader with two different outlooks on life through two pseudonymous authors. The first part of the book, *Either*, depicts the thoughts and views of an aesthete known as "Author A". The second part, *Or*, is a response to *Either* written by an ethicist named Judge Willem, or "Author B". Each author makes several persuasive claims as to why his respective worldview is superior to the other's**.** However, unlike Author A, who fully rejects the idea of living and being judged ethically, Author B deems both the "aesthetic" (*either*) and the "ethical" (*or*) to be coexisting natures in our minds that are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In fact, B asserts that both the *either* and the *or* are imperative in validating his own ethical approach to life, because the core motivation of the ethicist is possessing the ability to choose. Furthermore, only the freedom of one's mind can make this choice. In this way, Author B implies a certain subjectivity to truth, contending that *either/or* is really a reflection of the anguished position of humanity, and how incapable our limited visions are in seeing an absolute truth compared to the omnipotent, all-knowing God**.** This paper explicates and defends the above claims of Author B on the titular conflict of *either/or* and its relation to a meaningful life.

Author B is well aware of the skepticism that plagues the aesthete when it comes to objective truth. Author A laments in his *Diapsalmata* that philosophy, with its never-ending questions and inconsistencies, has failed to give an answer to the meaning of life – that is, an answer that resolves *either/or*. Author B is actually in agreement with this point, stating that "in this world there rules an absolute either/or, but it is a world philosophy has nothing to do with" (489). In order to correctly choose between *either* and *or*, one needs to know the absolute truth that dictates how one should live. However, B asserts that nothing – not even philosophy – can objectively determine this apprehension of truth. This is because while philosophy can address the spheres of thought, which include logic, nature and history, "with what might be called inward works philosophy has nothing whatever to do; but inward work is the true life of freedom" (489). Despite philosophy's ability to provide theories and relative mediation in *either/or*, the freedom of one's mind – one's inward work – may cause us to doubt any reason philosophy has to offer. B further elaborates that "the question here is, under what categories one wants to contemplate the entire world and would oneself live" (486). Although B wants the reader to be able to see the world under the categories of good and evil like an ethicist, rather than the aesthete's fixation on mood, he acknowledges that no external force, authority, or philosophical reasoning is enough to force an individual to believe that the ethical is the best way to live a meaningful life. The only way for someone to believe that the ethical worldview is the

correct one is for them to choose to commit to it. One must *will* one's conceptions of the world to fall under the categories of good or evil.

Thus, B highlights the main difference between the aesthete and the ethicist: "the aesthetic is not evil but indifference, and that is why I said that it is the ethical that constitutes choice" (486-487). And since choice must be between at least two things, the ethical relies on the coexistence of both the *either* and the *or*. In this way, Author B sees the ethical as a reorientation or a transfiguration of the aesthetic, rather than a total contradiction. He also asserts that the two approaches are not always mutually exclusive, refuting A's claims that the ethical life is completely ascetic and devoid of pleasure. For instance, A rejects marriage, claiming that the duty it entails will hinder his ability to simply enjoy love. In response, B devotes the chapter "*The Aesthetic Validity of Marriage*" to demonstrating "the aesthetic significance of marriage, and to show how the aesthetic element can be sustained in the face of life's manifold obstacles" (386) by treating duty as a friend of love. He accuses A's passive lifestyle to be depriving A of his own agency, stating, "You are a hater of activity in life; quite right, for before there can be any meaning in activity life must have continuity, and this your life lacks" (503). B concludes that A's unwillingness to make choices is the reason he is unable to see that the ethical can afford pleasures that the aesthetic cannot. B does not believe that A is never willing to make a selfless, ethical choice, and remarks that even an aesthete can subconsciously recognize the importance of making choices. "You can do all this", he points out, "and when you want to, you can do it handsomely [...] You acknowledged what you otherwise will not acknowledge, the importance of either/or" (481). A is therefore an aesthete not because he always refuses to make the correct or good choice, but because by refusing to discern good and evil, he precludes the choice between good and evil altogether. On the contrary, B is actively making his own choices so that they coincide with duty, and the very act of making these choices bears fruit that an aesthete could not imagine. Consequently, B identifies the ethical as "not a matter of the reality of the thing chosen, but the reality of choosing" (490).

In this way, B muses that while the ethical does not exclude aestheticism, it is "a higher form of existence" (502) because when met with *either/or*, it recognizes it should make a choice that yields good over evil. In being able to recognize good from evil by some definition, B argues that the ethicist has reached a level of awareness that the aesthete has not and evokes a higher set of principles. He elaborates that "the reason why someone who lives aesthetically cannot, in a higher sense, give any enlightenment is that he lives constantly in the moment, that his knowing is after all confined constantly to a certain relativity, within a certain boundary" (492). By rejecting the ethical life, A avoids the very notion of *either*/*or* in order to escape the despair of inner dilemmas. He fears this despair, and dreads the regret accompanying it even more. Rather, he opts to rely on aspects of the outside world to stimulate his immediate, shallow senses rather than reflect on inward choices to stimulate his personal growth. B, on the other hand, confronts *either/or*, which he refers to as "the crossroads, when my soul was matured in the hour of decision" (477), and embraces this despair. *Either/or* forces one to confront the critical

distinction between good and bad, enabling evolution and maturation through the choices made, taking control of one's destiny instead of passively allowing fate to unfold. This maturation is how B hopes to convince the aesthete (or perhaps, in B's eyes, a "man-child") to live ethically. He writes, "I simply want to bring you to the point where that choice truly acquires meaning for you. It is on this that everything hinges. Only when one can get a person to stand at the crossroads in such a way that he has no expedient but to choose does he choose what is right." (486). Hence, the existential crisis *either/or* induces is essential to growth, for it can do what reason cannot: persuade a change in worldview by forcing an individual's eyes to see good and evil as choices.

Because choice lies at the essence of *either/or* and its quest for truth, one problem that arises is that truth gains a subjective nature. How one chooses to live is motivated by their belief in some truth; as a result, even if different individuals have conflicting motivations, they are all acting in accordance with what they believe is the truth. Even the choice of *not* believing in a truth remains still a truth. For instance, Author A refuses to act in accordance with any truth because he does not know what the absolute truth is. However, in doing so, his truth becomes not believing in any truth. The aesthete tries to avoid the question of *either/or*, but he has answered it anyway by not answering it; he chooses not to live ethically. Conversely, if he *had* addressed *either/or*, he would be choosing the ethical approach no matter what; for the ethical constitutes of active choosing. As B notes, "someone who, once the ethical has become apparent to him, chooses the aesthetic, does not live in the aesthetic sphere for the sins and comes under the category of the ethical, even if his life must be described as *un*ethical" (486). So it happens that one person's truth can differ from another's, and this subjectivity is impossible to escape, making the search for absolute truth even more convoluted.

B does not antagonize this subjectivity. In fact, in his final chapter, he admits that whether one chooses the *either* or the *or*, one will not have chosen the absolute truth. The only being that knows this truth is God; thus, no matter how little one understands the events in one's life, and how difficult it is to force to choose between *either/or*, one can find rest in the thought that "against God we are always in the wrong; [for] this thought then stays the doubt and alleviates its anxiety, it puts one in heart and inspires one to action" (608). Here, B seems to be implying that *either/or* was never a dichotomy between the aesthetic and the ethical, but rather one between subjective truth and absolute truth, the latter which can only be found in God. If the ethical is a progression of the aesthetic, the religious is then a progression of both; and thus, the necessity of the coexistence of *either* and *or* is once again emphasized. We need both the aesthetic and the ethical because while we can have faith that God is always right, we cannot believe that He will simply show us the correct way to live. Hence, instead of trying to prove the absolute truth, one should seek the truth that feels the truest to oneself by using the path that the aesthetic and the ethical have paved; for "only the deep inner movement, only the indescribable motions of the heart, only these convince you that what you have recognized 'belongs unto you' [...]; for only the truth that edifies is truth for you" (608-609). Since there is no preordained value discerned in

the visible world, one must use *either/or* to search what one values the most, and this becomes the basis of one's truth.

In conclusion, we return to the question: "How should one live?". Author B claims that there is no absolute answer to this question, because reason has limited value in determining whether a life is meaningful or not. The way humans must cope with this is to confront the *either/or* in our inward work and search for the life that feels the truest to us. Hence, despite the anguish that *either/or* may cause us, it is vital that we allow ourselves to be confronted at its crossroads, because its essence – the power of *choice* – is the basis of the human condition. While one can have faith in God, in the end, one must trust oneself to decide how to view life. Through Author B, Kierkegaard reveals his intentions behind his presentation of the *either/or*: to encourage the reader to reflect upon his own life and make his own choice. "If a man is sometimes in the right, sometimes in the wrong, to some extent in the right, to some extent in the wrong, who is it then but man who decides?" (601)

Source: Kierkegaard, Soren. *Either/Or.* Translated by Alistair Hannay. Penguin Books. 1992.