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EITHER (NIETZSCHE) / OR (ARISTOTLE)? MACINTYRE'S MODERNITY AND THE ENDURING RELEVANCE OF KIERKEGAARD

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Abstract

This essay situates Alasdair MacIntyre's typology of moral enquiry in *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* relative to his critique of Søren Kierkegaard in *After Virtue* to offer an alternative reading of Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* to the one MacIntyre proposes. The essay shows that MacIntyre's reading of Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* fails to register that in important respects Kierkegaard's counterpoint of rival perspectives in *Either/Or* bears striking resemblance to the scenario of mutual antagonisms that MacIntyre identifies among the genres of genealogy, encyclopaedia, and tradition-informed moral enquiry. The essay then proposes a reading of *Either/Or* that implicitly questions not just the approach of the encyclopaedists, but also the approach of all genealogists of modernity (including the genealogy of Friedrich Nietzsche). Finally, contrary to MacIntyre's unfortunate judgement that "Kierkegaard's doctrine" is "at once the outcome and the epitaph of the Enlightenment's systematic attempt to discover a rational justification for morality," the essay argues instead that what we can learn from Kierkegaard has been and ought to remain of enduring relevance for "tradition-informed" philosophical and theological thinking in modernity.

Some readers will recognize in my title a compound allusion to Alasdair MacIntyre's "Nietzsche or Aristotle?," chapter nine in *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (1981; second edition 1984; third edition 2007), and to Søren Kierkegaard's *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life* (*Enten–Eller. Et Livs-Fragment*, 1843), published under the pseudonymous editorship of Victor Eremita. Other readers may find it a mystifying *coincidentia oppositorum*, however, so let me outline here what I envision with this essay. I begin with a consideration of MacIntyre's critical discussion of what he takes to be the three contending moral outlooks available in modernity, paying particular attention to his critique of the genre of "genealogy," but also taking stock of the genre of "encyclopaedia" and MacIntyre's own "tradition-informed" approach. I then situate MacIntyre's typology of moral enquiry relative to his critique of Kierkegaard in *After Virtue* to offer an alternative reading of Kierkegaard's

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Either/Or that draws upon MacIntyre's typology but modifies it to elucidate crucial resonances that MacIntyre himself misses. What I will show is that MacIntyre's reading of *Either/Or* fails to register that in important respects Kierkegaard's counterpoint of rival perspectives in *Either/Or* bears striking resemblance to the scenario of mutual antagonisms MacIntyre identifies. Finally, I propose here a reading of Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* that ultimately (i.e., in its "Ultimatum") questions all our genealogies of modernity, whether conceived as acclamations of historical progress and enlightenment or as lamentations of decline from a classical or medieval synthesis, or for that matter genealogy in the specific form that is perhaps most famous today and which undermines both the progressive and declensionist stories alike—namely, that of Friedrich Nietzsche. In critical conversation with MacIntyre's judgement that what he calls "Kierkegaard's doctrine" is "at once the outcome and the epitaph of the Enlightenment's systematic attempt to discover a rational justification for morality," I want to suggest instead that what we can learn from Kierkegaard has been and ought to remain of enduring relevance for tradition-informed philosophical and theological thinking in modernity.[1]

Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry

In his 1988 Gifford Lectures, published in 1990 as *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, MacIntyre delineates what he regards as the three main mutually exclusive intellectual orientations available in post-Enlightenment culture.[2] These are what he calls (1) the encyclopaedic rationality of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thinkers, (2) the genealogical theorizing of Nietzsche and such postmodern protégés as Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man, and Michel Foucault, and (3) the tradition-informed Thomistic point of view synthesizing Aristotelian and Augustinian commitments. In their characteristically modern versions, MacIntyre tells us, these orientations each stem from a seminal text from the late nineteenth century: the Ninth Edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1875–89), Nietzsche's *Zur Genealogie der Moral* (1887; hereafter, *On the Genealogy of Morality*), and Pope Leo XIII's encyclical letter *Aeterni Patris* (1879).

[1] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Philosophy*, third edition (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007 [first edition 1981; second edition 1984]), 42, 39.

It might appear in what follows that *Either/Or* is more apposite for tradition-informed philosophical thinking than it is for theological thinking, but if so then this is due only to the fact that the theological significance (in particular the *hamartiological* significance) of the work is not as easily recognized as it is in Kierkegaard's later writings. As a consequence of its focus on MacIntyre's own narrow engagement with (but expansive claims about) Kierkegaard, this essay does not address such expressly theological writings as Kierkegaard's *Works of Love* (1847), *Christian Discourses* (1848), *The Sickness unto Death* (1849), and *Practice in Christianity* (1850), among others. Nevertheless, as will become clear, it does take seriously the view expressed in "On My Work as an Author" (1850) and elsewhere that Kierkegaard's "authorship, regarded as a *totality*, is religious from first to last," and that his Christian perspective offers the hermeneutical key for understanding the dialectical structure of his authorship, including *Either/Or*. See "On My Work as an Author" in *The Point of View*, trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 6. On Kierkegaard as a theologian see, for example, David Law, *Kierkegaard as Negative Theologian* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); Arnold Come, *Kierkegaard as Theologian: Recovering Myself* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1997); George Pattison, *Kierkegaard and the Crisis of Faith* (London: SPCK, 1997); Sylvia Walsh, *Living Christianly: Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Christian Existence* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005); and *The T&T Clark Companion to the Theology of Kierkegaard*, ed. Aaron Edwards and David J. Gouwens (London: T&T Clark, 2020).

[2] Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (London: Duckworth, 1990). I have glossed MacIntyre's "moral enquiry" with "intellectual orientation" here. Kierkegaard's practical "lifeview" (*livsanskuelse*) might be equally apt. In any case, MacIntyre makes it clear that he intends something fuller than "moral philosophy" in the contemporary anglophone sense because, as he says, "moral enquiry extends to historical, literary, anthropological, and sociological questions" (*Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, 3).

The express aspiration of the Encyclopaedia was "the progress of science," as its editor Thomas Spencer Baynes put it: "The available facts of human history, collected over the widest areas, are carefully coordinated and grouped together, in the hope of ultimately evolving the laws of progress, moral and material, which underlie them, and which will help to connect and interpret the whole movement of the race."[3] This architectonic conception of the unity of the human and natural sciences, MacIntyre tells us, emerged late in the nineteenth century and viewed all sciences as having four constitutive features: (1) the data organized, (2) the concepts organizing the data, (3) a consistent and universal method of organization, and (4) continuous progress toward comprehensive objective knowledge.[4]

In view of Kierkegaard's polemic against G.W.F. Hegel, we might here observe the mediated influence of Hegel on the British encyclopaedists, and his *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Outline* (*Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse*, 1817; 1827; 1830) should certainly be read as "both the institution of a method of thinking encyclopaedically and the claim that all knowledge can be systematized though a philosophical paradigm."[5] It might at first seem far-fetched to speak here of Hegel's influence in Victorian Britain, but in fact British intellectual culture was awash in German idealism at the end of the nineteenth century. "The Rhine has flowed into the Thames," L.T. Hobhouse exclaimed in 1907, and Henry Jones elaborated:

> Carlyle introduced it, bringing it as far as Chelsea. Then Jowett and Thomas Hill Green, and William Wallace and Lewis Nettleship, and Arnold Toynbee and David Ritchie—to mention only those teachers who are now silent—guided the waters into those upper reaches known locally [i.e., in Oxford] as the Isis. John and Edward Caird brought them up the Clyde, Hutchinson Stirling up the Firth of Forth. They have passed up the Mersey and up the Severn and Dee and Don. They pollute the bay of St. Andrews and swell the waters of the Cam, and have somehow crept overland into Birmingham. The stream of German Idealism has been diffused over the academical world of Great Britain. The disaster is universal.[6]

Since Jones succeeded Edward Caird as Professor of Moral Philosophy in Glasgow in 1894 and counted himself a fellow proponent of idealism, we know his quip about universal disaster was tongue in cheek. By contrast, whenever Nietzsche comments concerning the pretensions to progress, science, objective knowledge, etc., such remarks are as a rule acerbic. In his aphoristic fashion he will speak of Hegel's "astonishing move, with which he struck through all logical habits and indulgences when he dared to teach [in his *Encyclopedia*] that species concepts develop *out of each other*; with this proposition the minds of Europe were preformed for the last great scientific movement, Darwinism—for without Hegel there could be no Darwin."[7] But what is "science," anyway?

[3] Quoted in MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, 19.

[4] MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, 20.

[5] Tilottama Rajan, "Philosophy as Encyclopedia: Hegel, Schelling, and the Organization of Knowledge," *The Wordsworth Circle* 35, no. 1 (2004): 6.

[6] Henry Jones, *Contemporary Review* 92 (December 1907): 618.

[7] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (§357), in *The Gay Science, with a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, ed. by Bernard Williams and trans. by Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 218. Italics in original; for the location of Hegel's "astonishing move" we are directed to the *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences* (§368, especially the *Zusatz*; 1830 edition).

Nietzsche's answer: "a means of self-anaesthetic."[8] And "German philosophy"? Nietzsche's answer: "an underhanded theology."[9] Of course Nietzsche does not always make his assertions in such a glib fashion, and indeed many have observed that *On the Genealogy of Morality* in particular reads overall as an academic treatise. But MacIntyre points out, correctly I think, that the academic genre of the *Genealogy* represents only an assumed posture and not a genuine commitment to ascertaining the truth of matters. Citing Oscar Wilde's quip that "Metaphysical theories are masks," MacIntyre suggests that Nietzsche would have wished to add that our theories are only for particular audiences and occasions, and that "our apparently cognitive attitudes towards them are no more than modes of putting on, displaying, and discarding such masks."[10]

Nonetheless, the mask of the *Genealogy* does assume and propose a critical position, and what it proposes is that the notions of "good" and "evil" that we have inherited from Judaism and Christianity are not simply given, but rather that they have a history of interpretation. As one of Nietzsche's most sympathetic interpreters puts it, "The great accomplishment of *The Genealogy of Morals* is the demonstration that morality in general and asceticism in particular are indeed subjects of interpretation, they can be added to our interpretative universe."[11] And while I think the language of "demonstration" here probably discloses an overconfidence in the success of Nietzsche's critical project, it is obvious that his interrogation of the genesis and history of the inherited ethical *Weltanschauung* as a record of a "slave revolt in morality" aims ultimately to undermine confidence in the very idea of "truth" itself. If we "turn to the most ancient and most modern philosophies," he writes:

> all of them lack a consciousness of the extent to which the will to truth itself needs a justification, here is a gap in every philosophy—how does it come about? Because the ascetic ideal has so far been *master* over all philosophy, because truth was set as being, as God, as the highest authority itself, because truth was not *allowed* to be a problem. Do you understand this 'allowed to be'?—From the very moment that faith in the God of the ascetic ideal is denied, *there is a new problem as well*: that of the value of truth. —The will to truth needs a critique—let us define our own task with this—, the value of truth is tentatively to be *called into question* …[12]

Now, I know it scarcely needs saying, but for the sake of making it explicit let me state the blatantly obvious: Nietzsche's *Genealogy* is an anti-theological genealogy of modernity. The work attracted comparatively little notice initially, however. And for this reason MacIntyre observes that "the theologians of the late nineteenth century were not, of course, as yet aware of the genealogical challenge," although he also notes that the rapid rise to ascendancy of science and a concomitant theological liberalization across the century had already "evoked a variety of theological

[8] Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* (§23) ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 110.

[9] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ* (§10), in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, ed. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 9.

[10] MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, 47.

[11] Alexander Nehamas, "The Genealogy of Genealogy: Interpretation in Nietzsche's Second *Untimely Meditation* and in *The Genealogy of Morals*" in *On Literary Theory and Philosophy: A Cross-Disciplinary Encounter*, ed. Richard Freadman and Lloyd Reinhardt (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991), 244.

[12] Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 113; italics in original.

restatements, of which Kierkegaard's and Newman's were among the most notable."[13] I would not gainsay for even a moment either this characterization of the intellectual trajectory of the century or of the significance of John Henry Newman and Kierkegaard. I do find the latter judgment striking, however, both for the fact that MacIntyre (1) does not comment further on Kierkegaard (or Newman) in *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, and (2) his apparent tone of approval here seems hard to square with his reading of Kierkegaard in *After Virtue*. I will interrogate this ambiguity concerning MacIntyre's reading of Kierkegaard's theological restatement in the subsequent section. Here I simply note further that the Nietzschean "genealogical challenge" is clearly not a challenge solely to theologians in any narrow sense, however, nor even uniquely to confessionally minded theists more generally. For Nietzsche calls into question the will to truth of the human and natural sciences as well, even though this point is not always so readily recognized on naively secularist readings. In a parenthetical aside to the passage quoted above, Nietzsche points us to *The Gay Science* (*Die fröliche Wissenschaft*, 1882; 1887) where he asserts, "We see that science, too, rests on a faith, there is simply no 'presuppositionless' science."[14] And by "presuppositions" here Nietzsche means more than the "modest hypotheses" any scientist would admit she needs even to formulate a research question or experiment. He means, rather, that "it is still a *metaphysical faith* upon which our faith in science rests" insofar as it entails the ideal of some ultimate truth of the matter that can be known conceptually and articulated in propositional form.[15] Accordingly, the conflict between what MacIntyre characterizes as the architectonic "framework of a unified, encyclopaedic rationality," on one side, and the radically open perspectival genealogical genre, on the other, is clear.

As a third alternative to both crypto-theological encyclopaedia and anti-theological genealogy, MacIntyre retrieves and recommends what he calls the tradition-informed Thomistic version of moral enquiry. This point of view entails

> an acknowledgment of truth as a measure independent of the tradition which aspires to measure itself by truth, but there is nonetheless no thesis, argument, or doctrine to be so measured which is not presented as the thesis of this particular historically successive set of tradition-informed and tradition-directed individuals and groups in whose lives the dialectical and confessional interrogation have gone on. It is no trivial matter that all claims to knowledge are the claims of some particular person, developed out of the claims of other particular persons. Knowledge is possessed only in and through participation in a history of dialectical encounters.[16]

[13] To this he adds, "But they could not but be responsive to the recurrent attempts within every major Christian denomination to reshape and to diminish central Christian doctrine in a way that would make it acceptable to post-Enlightenment culture, the culture of the encyclopedia. And these recurrent attempts evoked a variety of theological restatements, of which Kierkegaard's and Newman's were among the most notable." MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, 69.

[14] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (§344). Finally, as Nietzsche asserts, science has simply assumed and obscured its own theological basis: "even we knowers of today, we godless anti-metaphysicians, still take *our* fire, too, from the flame lit by the thousand-year old faith, the Christian faith which was also Plato's faith, that God is truth; that truth is divine … But what if this were to become more and more difficult to believe, if nothing more were to turn out to be divine except error, blindness, the lie—if God himself were to turn out to be our longest lie?" (200–1; italics in original).

[15] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (§344), 201; italics in original.

[16] MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, 201-2.

MacIntyre admits that what he sketches is only "the barest outline" of the version of moral enquiry coalescing in and recapitulated by *Aeterni Patris*, but the principal figures of the tradition are familiar enough to understand what he envisions: "Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle invented and perfected a dialectical mode of accountability, the Bible and Augustine a confessional mode. Anselm moved from confession to dialectic, Aquinas both from confession to dialectic and from dialectic to confession."[17] To participate in this tradition means to be committed to the idea of truth as the measure of what is good, and to become increasingly receptive to that truth through faithful and critical enquiry.

From this tradition-informed Thomistic perspective, the deficiency of the encyclopaedic point of view is that it minimizes discursive and dialectical subjectivity and prioritizes abstract objectivity to such a degree that one forgets that it even *is* still a point of view. MacIntyre writes (and in language that strongly echoes the critique of objective thinking in Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*), "That such-and-such a person discovered this truth or argued in favor of this thesis is entirely accidental; truth and rationality are both independent of the particularities of the personal. What was uttered is crucial; who uttered it is always a side issue. So the encyclopaedia's own style is that of a studied impersonality."[18] Here it is not just *truth* that is acknowledged as an independent measure, but *human rationality* too is assumed to be an hypostasis independent from the contingencies of our attempts to apprehend the truth. From MacIntyre's tradition-informed point of view, the encyclopaedist fails to recognize that claims to know something or other are always the claims of historically located individuals in particular traditions of enquiry.

By contrast, the deficiency of the genealogical point of view from the tradition-informed perspective is that "the genealogist follows Nietzsche in dismissing any notion of *the* truth and correspondingly any conception of *what is* as such and timelessly as contrasted with what seems to be the case from a variety of different perspectives."[19] What's more, the traditionalist can point out that any hope in the emancipatory power of genealogy—that is, any hope that honesty concerning the impersonal will to power might liberate us from the deceptions of *ressentiment* and the will to truth—consumes itself in its own critique, since genealogy volatilizes the very idea of a self who could genuinely commit to any robust notion of freedom. To quote MacIntyre again: "Make of the genealogist's self nothing but what genealogy makes of it, and that self is dissolved to the point at which there is no longer a continuous genealogical project."[20] Said another way, to make sense of the genealogical project *qua* concerted project would entail political and ideological commitments of the sort dissolved by the genealogical game itself. I think MacIntyre is clearly right about this point.

[17] MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, 147-48, 201.

[18] MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, 203. I have in mind here, for example, Johannes Climacus's critique of the objective thinker as one for whom "personal eternal happiness cannot come up at all, precisely because his task consists in going away from himself more and more and becoming objective and in that way disappearing from himself and becoming the gazing power of speculative thought." *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 56. Despite this important point of agreement, I see no indication in MacIntyre's work that he is familiar with Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* (*Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift til de philosophiske Smuler*, 1846).

[19] MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, 205.

[20] MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, 54.

Either/Or *before and after* After Virtue

I want to turn now to MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, and specifically to his reading of Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* in that book. What I want to argue is that MacIntyre's critique fails to recognize that what Kierkegaard orchestrates in *Either/Or* is in fact something very like the scenario of mutual antagonisms MacIntyre elucidates between the genealogical stance and tradition-constituted commitments in particular. (Kierkegaard is of course also famously critical of assumptions about scientific objectivity of the sort MacIntyre attributes to the encyclopaedists but, due to limitations of space, here I can only point the reader to the first part of his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.[21]) In view of this I will then suggest that, despite MacIntyre's critique, Kierkegaard has been and can remain an important contributor in renewing the theological tradition in modernity after the anti-theological genealogical challenge.

Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* is a kind of virtuosic, ironic, dialectical, confessional book. It can be all these things at once because, although its subtitle is "*a* fragment of life," in fact it is comprised of many and sundry fragments. In the first volume, the aesthete (simply called "A") and the author of the "Seducer's Diary" (known only as "Johannes") perform Kierkegaard's reading of the empty aestheticism of early German romantic irony. In the second volume, A's somewhat-older friend Judge William (a judge) performs Kierkegaard's reading of a modified Hegelian conception of ethical life. And the concluding "Ultimatum"—a sermon by a clergyman friend of Judge William—opens to a religious existence that ultimately calls into question both the aesthetic and the ethical spheres of existence. The entire work is published under the name of its pseudonymous editor, Victor Eremita (thus allowing Kierkegaard to disavow interpretive authority), who says he has found the jumbled papers secreted in an old writing desk that he purchased at a second-hand shop in Copenhagen.

Eremita aptly characterizes the sundry papers of the first volume of this two-volume work when he talks about how the "one author becomes enclosed within the other like the boxes in a Chinese puzzle."[22] This simile remains apt with respect to the whole work too, and then holds true when we step back to locate *Either/Or* within Kierkegaard's larger authorship, and once again when we attempt to locate *Either/Or* in the reception of Kierkegaard's authorship. Obviously, several things are going on within the work, in the ways it functions relative to Kierkegaard's other writings, and in the ways that it has been received as reflecting watershed developments in Western moral discourse. MacIntyre speaks of its "astonishing novelty" upon its appearance in 1843 but reckons we have become dulled to its originality due to "over-familiarity with its thesis."[23] I can only agree concerning the judgment on the novelty of *Either/Or*, but I want to suggest that it is over-familiarity with what is *assumed to be the thesis* of the work that has in fact dulled some readers to its deployment of controlled irony and its larger theological implications.

[21] See the quotation in footnote 18, and for its larger context see "The Objective Issue of the Truth of Christianity," Part One of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, 19-49.

[22] Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* I, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 9.

[23] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 39. MacIntyre mistakenly reports the year of publication of *Either/Or* as 1842 rather than 1843. He also gives the year of publication of *Philosophical Fragments* as 1845 rather than 1844 (*After Virtue*, 41).

Either/Or I

One way to approach *Either/Or* is as a poetic, equivocal juxtaposition of alternative strategies for becoming reconciled to the prosaic actuality of daily existence; in and through its various voices, *Either/Or* is by turns an aesthetic, an ethical, *and* a religious commentary. MacIntyre places it in the narrative tradition of Denis Diderot's 1805 *The Nephew of Rameau*, and Henry James's 1881 *The Portrait of a Lady*. (We might also include W.A. Mozart's 1787 *Don Giovanni* and Friedrich Schlegel's 1799 *Lucinde*, since Kierkegaard alludes to the former and critiques the latter expressly in *The Concept of Irony*, and in *Either/Or* he is responding to both in obvious ways.) MacIntyre represents the "unifying preoccupation of that tradition" as:

> the condition of those who see in the social world nothing but a meeting place for individual wills, each with its own set of attitudes and references and who understand that world solely as an arena for the achievement of their own satisfaction, who interpret reality as a series of opportunities for their own enjoyment and for whom the last enemy is boredom.[24]

Here, while agreeing that *Either/Or* can be placed *in relationship to* this tradition, I want to interrogate how MacIntyre thinks it fits *into* this tradition.

In the aesthete's counsel against marriage, friendship, and vocation,[25] it is not difficult to recognize a satirical extrapolation of the ironic detachment and cultivated arbitrariness of the will to power that MacIntyre identifies in this tradition. Indeed, decades prior to Nietzsche's attempt to live "life as literature," Kierkegaard's "A" envisioned his detached, aesthetic venture as the "attempt to accomplish the task of living poetically."[26] In the seducer's diary, one even finds this ironic detachment interiorized in a way that anticipates Nietzsche's aphoristic moral nihilism: "everything is a metaphor," he writes; "I myself am a myth about myself, for is it not as a myth that I hasten to this tryst?"[27] And MacIntyre is right that in *Either/Or* the paradigmatic expression of this attempt is "the romantic lover who is immersed in his own passion," only the emphasis here is decidedly on the passionate immersion and not on the beloved.[28] This immersion in reflective passion is nowhere more clear than in the part of *Either/Or* entitled "The Seducer's Diary." But such passion is notoriously inconstant; the very morning after the consummation of his operation of seduction, the seducer writes, "Now it is finished, and I never want to see her again. I do not want to be reminded of my relationship with her; she has lost her fragrance."[29] He has enacted his will in a way that fended off boredom for a short time; there is not and cannot be any larger project. The culmination of the merely aesthetic is represented as dehumanizing, and one of the first of the *Diapsalmata* in *Either/Or* is telling on this point. "There are, as is known," A writes, "insects that die in the moment of fertilization. So it is with all joy: life's highest, most splendid moment of enjoyment is accompanied by death."[30] Or, as the seducer puts it, "Now it's finished—don't remind

[24] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 25.

[25] See "The Rotation of Crops: A Venture in a Theory of Social Prudence," in *Either/Or* I, 295-98.

[26] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* I, 304; cf. Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985).

[27] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* I, 444.

[28] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 40.

[29] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* I, 445.

[30] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* I, 20. The *Diapsalmata* are the collection of aphorisms that comprise the first section of A's papers.

me." Thus, despite the aphoristic pyrotechnics and apparently self-empowering wit of the first volume of *Either/Or*, the characterization of merely aesthetic attempts to transfigure life, and thereby to assuage "the deep pain that wants to make everything dark,"[31] reads as nihilistic, a philosophy of spiritual death which likens its judgment regarding the highest in the sphere of the human spirit unto the reproductive life-cycle of insects.

On this reading, while MacIntyre is right that the letters in the first volume "interpret reality as a series of opportunities for … enjoyment," and in which "the last enemy is boredom," he is wrong to judge on that basis that Kierkegaard himself "rejects any teleological view of human nature."[32] Both Karen Carr and Anthony Rudd have pointed out that such a view ignores Kierkegaard's other works (especially his expressly Christian writings), and MacIntyre has acknowledged that they are accurate on that score.[33] Both the critiques and the concession are salutary, but really it is not even necessary to look beyond *Either/Or* to recognize a teleological view of human nature. In the second volume, this commitment is explicit, while in volume one it is only implicit. But it requires that we see in the depiction of "A" and of the seducer not a celebration of the merely aesthetic form of life affirmation, but a kind of caveat. And if MacIntyre does not read it as a celebration exactly either, he does at least suggest that Kierkegaard enjoyed the idea of "shocking the participants in everyday moral discourse."[34] On my reading, by contrast, the first volume tends to be an elegant satire of nihilism that immerses itself in "the unifying preoccupation" of mere aestheticism and seeks to run it aground on its own emptiness. In this respect, I think it is fair to say that Kierkegaard had a strong anticipatory awareness of the dangers of what MacIntyre calls the Nietzschean "genealogical challenge," and that his notable manner of responding to it took the form of an ironic parody of the "infinite absolute negativity" of romantic irony.[35] Such negativity is apparent in the various refusals of accountability that the aesthete and the seducer accomplished by trying on the masks of various roles only then to discard their pretences.[36] But the infinite absolute negativity of romantic irony is perhaps nowhere so fully realized as in the address written for a meeting of the *Symparanekromenoi* (or, Society of Buried Lives) entitled "The Unhappiest One" in which

[31] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony, with Continual Reference to Socrates*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NY: Princeton University Press, 1989), 297.

[32] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 25, 54.

[33] Karen L. Carr, "After Paganism: Kierkegaard, Socrates, and the Christian Tradition," in *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre: Essays on Freedom, Narrative, and Virtue*, ed. John J. Davenport and Anthony Rudd (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 2001), 190, n. 20; Anthony Rudd, "Reason in Ethics: MacIntyre and Kierkegaard," in *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre*, 147; Alasdair MacIntyre, "Once More on Kierkegaard," in *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre*, 344-45.

[34] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 39.

[35] To see how Kierkegaard appropriates from Hegel the phrase "infinite absolute negativity" as a description of irony, see *The Concept of Irony*, 26, 209, 231, and 254.

[36] In *The Concept of Irony*, Kierkegaard critiqued romantic ironists on this point in a very direct fashion: "What takes the ironist's time," he writes, "is the solicitude he employs in dressing himself in the costume proper to the poetic character he has poetically composed for himself. Here the ironist is very well informed and consequently has a considerable selection of masquerade costumes for himself. At times he walks around with the proud air of a Roman patrician wrapped in a bordered toga, or he sits in the *sella curulis* with imposing Roman earnestness; at times he conceals himself in the humble costume of a penitent pilgrim; then again he sits with his legs crossed like a Turkish pasha in his harem; at times he flutters about as light and free as a bird in the role of an amorous zither player. This is what the ironist means when he says that one should live poetically; this is what he achieves by poetically composing himself"; *The Concept of Irony*, 282-83; cf., Fragment 121 in *Schlegel's* Lucinde and the *Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), 177.

the imagery of anti-Christ is clear: "See, the stone is rolled away; the shade of the grave awaits you with its delicious coolness."[37]

Either/Or II

What about the second volume of *Either/Or*? Despite the vividly realized depiction of the will to power in volume one, it is in fact the longwinded characterization of ethical life in volume two that elicits MacIntyre's summary judgement. *Either/Or* is "at once the outcome and the epitaph of the Enlightenment's systematic attempt to discover a rational justification for morality,"[38] he writes; it is a work in which "for the first time the distinctively modern standpoint appears in something like fully-fledged form."[39] In the historical period beginning around 1630 and ending about 1850, MacIntyre explains, "'morality' became the name of that particular sphere in which rules of conduct which are *neither theological nor legal nor aesthetic* are allowed a cultural space of their own."[40] There is clearly *something* to this, but also an irony in identifying *Either/Or* as the last gasp of the Enlightenment project. For if "distinctively modern" moral discourse is supposed to be "neither theological nor legal nor aesthetic," then is it not very odd that Kierkegaard cast Judge William as the spokesman for the ethical?

For one thing, William is a judge, or an assessor. And while he politely expresses reluctance in crediting himself "with enough significance to represent ethics with full power of attorney," there is clearly a legal dimension to his conception of the ethical sphere.[41] And this is not some abstract moral law or "categorical imperative," even though MacIntyre believes "it is in Kant's honest and unpretentious German that Kierkegaard's elegant but not always transparent Danish finds its paternity."[42] No, on the contrary, William's view of the ethical is a socially embedded conception that makes the meaning of marriage the key to understanding ethical life. Judge William makes no appeal to some free-floating "cultural space" of "morality"; rather, he appeals to marriage, a social practice bundled in church tradition and civil law and regulated by the state. MacIntyre's allegation that Judge William recommends a view of ethical life lacking a legal dimension does not hold up in court.

Secondly, MacIntyre's claim that William advocates some "cultural space" of "morality" independent of *aesthetics* reads right across the grain of his two letters as well. In the first of his two letters—to which Eremita gives the title "The Aesthetic Validity of Marriage"—William undertakes to persuade his friend that the evanescent "moment" of aesthetic enjoyment only becomes meaningful within the context of historical commitments and obligations. In a response that directly challenges the view of marriage as unpoetic tedium that we saw in volume one, William answers:

[37] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* I, 230. In a helpful comment on a draft of this essay, Thomas Pfau has questioned whether I perhaps risk conflating the views of Schlegel and Nietzsche when in fact they pursued different projects. My point, however, is not that Schlegel's and Nietzsche's perspectives are equivalent, but rather that Kierkegaard's satire of Schlegelian irony in and through his depiction of his aesthete and Johannes the Seducer shows that he had an anticipatory conception of a moral outlook very like MacIntyre's conception of Nietzsche's "genealogical challenge." Just as MacIntyre thinks the genealogists cannot consolidate their moral worldview, so too Kierkegaard depicts romantic ironists as figures who cannot consolidate theirs. Kierkegaard may well have been unfair to Schlegel, and perhaps MacIntyre was even unfair to Nietzsche, but I think the foregoing section shows that Kierkegaard could envision something very like what MacIntyre calls the "genealogical challenge" *avant la lettre*.

[38] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 39.

[39] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 39.

[40] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 39; italics added.

[41] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* II, 323.

[42] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 43.

> It is not true that marriage is an exceedingly respectable but tiresomely moral role and that erotic love [*Elskov*] is poetry; no, marriage is really the poetic. And if the world has witnessed with pain that a first love cannot be sustained, I shall grieve along with the world but shall also bring to mind that the defect was not so much in what happened later as in its not beginning rightly. What the first love lacks, then, is the second aesthetic ideal, the historical.[43]

What William wants A to understand is that the art of poetic representation can never depict what is "really the poetic"[44] because it cannot "portray that of which the truth is precisely the temporal sequence."[45] Then William plagiarizes from Kierkegaard's dissertation, *On the Concept of Irony, with Continual Reference to Socrates* (*Om Begrebet Ironie, med stadigt hensyn til Socrates*, 1841) and says, "just as poetry and art in one sense are precisely a *reconciliation* with life, yet in another sense they are enmity to life, because they reconcile only one side of the soul."[46] But the "aesthetic validity" of marriage, he says, is not a merely imaginative reconciliation, but an actual one; it "can be portrayed aesthetically … but only in living it, by realizing it in the life of actuality."[47] Then, in his second letter, William claims that we really only achieve "the summit of the aesthetic"[48] by cultivating a lifeview that affirms consistent ethical commitment, and one can only do this in the context of particular community in a given social-historical context. The aesthete's proto-genealogical stance of self-invention is too insubstantial and volatile to achieve what is "really the poetic." In this light, MacIntyre's odd notion that William recommends an ethical view divorced from aesthetic considerations must be dismissed as well.

And, thirdly, I cannot see how MacIntyre's identification of *Either/Or* with a tradition in moral discourse that seeks a non-theological justification of morality has any more traction than his previous two charges. Judge William expresses a great deal of fellow-feeling for his friend, and he freely admits, "I actually at times with a certain reluctance feel that you dazzle me, that I let myself be carried away into the same aesthetic-intellectual intoxication in which you live."[49] But on the other hand he asserts—and this is the crucial point for William—"what you lack, altogether lack, is faith."[50] And while, like a Nietzschean genealogist, the aesthete may believe he can "play shuttlecock" with all of moral existence, his denial of any "God-relationship" means his various posturings will only ever be superficial and volatile.[51] William invites A to turn from his "sinful" ironic volatility to the ethical sphere from which he might, like William himself, "assist God."[52] In fact, William's view is so far from a non-theological justification of ethical life that he suggests that his letters can be read as a faithful commentary

[43] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* II, 96.
[44] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* II, 96.
[45] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* II, 96, 136.
[46] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* II, 137. Judge William repeats this in his second letter: "As far as poetry and art are concerned, may I remind you of what I mentioned earlier, that they provide only an imperfect reconciliation with life, also that when you fix your eye upon poetry and art you are not looking at actuality, and that is what we really should be speaking about" (*Either/Or* II, 273).
[47] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* II,137.
[48] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* II, 137.
[49] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* II, 16.
[50] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* II, 14.
[51] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* II, 294.
[52] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* II, 250.

on the catechetical handbook used in Danish schools.[53] He even commends his view to A with the guarantee that his own life "has one quality that your life, I regret, does not have—faithfulness; you can safely build upon it."[54] Accordingly, even though Kierkegaard wrote scathingly and later openly attacked the Christendom of Copenhagen's complacent bourgeois culture, he nevertheless depicts Judge William as a veritable spokesperson for Danish Lutheranism.

The Crisis of Authority and the Matter of Choice

Given what Judge William takes to be his *culturally embedded legal-aesthetical-theological ethics* (to coin an ugly phrase), I cannot reconcile the actual text of *Either/Or* with the role MacIntyre assigns it within his chronicle of modern moral philosophy. But perhaps this is because I still need to consider the matter of "choice" which, MacIntyre rightly says, is at the heart of what Judge William writes to A. "I only want to bring you to the point where this choice [between good and evil] truly has meaning for you," William writes.[55] "Rather than designating the choice between good and evil my Either/Or designates the choice by which one chooses good and evil or rules them out. Here the question is under what qualifications one will view all existence and personally live."[56] William thinks that what matters here is that one conscientiously embraces the set of criteria under which she or he lives. One chooses oneself in affirming these criteria because the criteria are supposed to structure or contour the way one becomes a self with its own history and, for William, in the light of the eternal. BUT MacIntyre alleges that by making "choice" the key to the transition to the ethical, William (and with him Kierkegaard himself) makes morality arbitrary—this arbitrariness of choice is what MacIntyre refers to as "Kierkegaard's doctrine."[57] This "deeply incoherent combination of the novel and the inherited," MacIntyre says—namely, grounding traditional morality in a personal choice—"is the logical outcome of the Enlightenment's project to provide a rational foundation for and justification of morality."[58] MacIntyre's criticism here is that the reliance on choice lacks a rational criterion for morality; the ethical narrative, he says, becomes "a story of the passions rather than of reasons."[59]

This feature of MacIntyre's argument might seem to have some traction. However, what his telling obscures is the obvious fact that Judge William himself recommends the choice *for* the ethical (as he understands it) from *within* the ethical (as he understands it) even while he recognizes that the "ethical qualifications" (criteria) which

[53] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* II, 323. Nicolai Edinger Balle's *Lærebog i den Evangelisk-christelige Religion indrettet til Brug i de danske Skoler* (Copenhagen: 1824) was initially published in 1791 and was still used for religious instruction in schools when Kierkegaard published *Either/Or*.

[54] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* II, 324.

[55] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* II, 168.

[56] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* II, 169.

[57] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 42. It should be noted that when MacIntyre briefly revisited *Either/Or* years later he seemed to wonder whether to distinguish between William's view and Kierkegaard's own view (See "Once more on Kierkegaard" in *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre*, 346): "is [Marino] right in identifying Kierkegaard's views with the Judge's?"). But generally, MacIntyre speaks of "the conservative and traditional character of *Kierkegaard's* account of the ethical" (*After Virtue*, 43; italics added) and says, "perhaps we detect his presence [viz. Kierkegaard's] most of all in the belief that he puts in the mouth of 'B' that anyone who faces the choice between the aesthetic and ethical will in fact choose the ethical … ." (*After Virtue*, 41).

[58] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 43.

[59] MacIntyre, "Once More on Kierkegaard," 345.

have moral force for him will not have any force for the aesthete until and unless he chooses to embrace them. "I wish only to force you to the point where the necessity of making a choice manifests itself," he writes, "and thereafter to consider existence under ethical qualifications." The depiction is not of someone commending a choice from some ostensibly neutral "criterionless" position, but of one (morally self-confident) individual drawing upon a set of "ethical qualifications" to invite another (self-alienated) individual into what the former takes to be a fuller, richer, truer form of existence—what MacIntyre should recognize as a tradition-informed life. I think MacIntyre makes a series of four mistakes here: first, it is a mistake to characterize *Either/Or* as depicting a scenario in which William and the aesthete both inhabit some neutral "criterionless" position from which to choose their lifeviews; second, it is a mistake to equate William's position directly with Kierkegaard's own; third, it is a mistake to interpret both in Kantian terms; and fourth, it is a mistake to characterize this amalgamation as "the outcome and the epitaph" of Enlightenment modernity. But this is precisely what MacIntyre does: "Kierkegaard and Kant agree in their conception of morality," he writes, "but Kierkegaard inherits that conception together with an understanding that the project of giving a rational vindication of morality has failed. Kant's failure provided Kierkegaard with his starting point: the act of choice had to be called in to do the work that reason could not do."[60]

On this reading, since what MacIntyre calls Kant's "notoriously bad arguments" proved unpersuasive, Kierkegaard simply said, in effect, all right, let's make the whole enterprise arbitrary.[61] On MacIntyre's telling, "what Kierkegaard intended to convey to us was that the only way in which the transition can be made from the aesthetic to the ethical is by way of a criterionless choice."[62]

But there are better understandings of what is going on in this text. As Merold Westphal has pointed out, when William talks of choosing one's self, it might be "easy" to think he is speaking in Kantian terms, or even Platonic or Thomistic terms for that matter,

> as if one were choosing to make some eternal truth the criterion for one's life, whether this be the Form of the Good, the Natural law, or the Categorical Imperative.
>
> But most of the time Judge William talks about marriage, as if the ethical did not so much consist in becoming pure reason so as to apprehend some unchanging reality or principle, as in learning to participate in a specific social practice. As with Aristotle, socialization rather than science … is the basis of the ethical life. I choose myself in my eternal validity when I sincerely say, "I do.… With this ring I thee wed."
>
> But this means that whether he knows it or not, Judge William is an Hegelian. For Hegel is an Aristotelian who repudiates the Platonic, Thomistic, and Kantian models in favor of an ethics in which the self has no immediate relation to the Good but only one mediated through the laws and customs of one's people. *Sittlichkeit* (ethical life) signifies the social institutions that mediate the Good to the individual. Not only does Hegel identify these as Family, Civil Society (the economic sector of a capitalist society), and State, but he focuses his analysis of family life on marriage.

[60] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 47.
[61] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 45.
[62] MacIntyre, "Once More on Kierkegaard," 341.

> Nothing could be more Hegelian than the move by which Judge William makes the meaning of marriage the key to the ethical sphere.[63]

I find Westphal's analysis helpful on this point (even while we should acknowledge that William is at times critical of certain details of Hegel's philosophy).[64] For Westphal pinpoints the respects in which William's emphasis on "self-choice" entails freely appropriating the ethical traditions and actual social institutions and practices within which we live, and doing this most concretely by taking upon oneself the mantle of "married individual."

It seems to me, accordingly, that the difficulty with William's position is not arbitrariness—not a "criterionless choice." Rather, the difficulty is with understanding how he construes the complex relationship between freedom and tradition. One feature of William's rejoinder to the ironic romanticism of the aesthete seems to be that he simply hasn't understood how to hold freedom and tradition together in a life, which is why A writes suicidal aphorisms like, "so I am not the one who is lord of my life; I am one of the threads to be spun into the calico of life! Well, then, even though I cannot spin, I can still cut the thread."[65] It is tempting to quip that A is the Patrick Henry of mere aestheticism: "Give me liberty or give me death!" But one might better say he is the portent of a bald will to power desirous of emancipation from the slave morality that is modernity's Christian inheritance. Judge William, on the other hand, narrates reconciliation by affirming *both* that "every human being develops in freedom," *and* that "a person does not create himself out of nothing, [but] has himself in its concretion as his task."[66] Having oneself in one's concretion means, for William, that an individual should embrace "the calico of life"—the traditional fabric of family, civil society, state, religion and the practices they embody. One becomes a self in a particular context, or not at all.

Now, on this reading, Judge William's view becomes rather like MacIntyre's own. For like William, MacIntyre follows Hegel (and Collingwood, and Vico, and Aristotle and, later, Thomas Aquinas) in affirming that morality "is nowhere to be found except as embodied in the historical lives of particular social groups and so possessing the distinctive characteristics of historical existence."[67] And MacIntyre also proposes an either/or of his own that parallels William's. As we have seen, MacIntyre casts his either/or in terms of a choice between Nietzsche and Aristotle. In recognition of the breakdown of the Enlightenment project we are faced with a choice: *either* we accept the Nietzschean stance (and implicitly that of Kierkegaard's aesthete before him) that "morality" is simply a manifestation of the will to power, *or* we can choose to retrieve and reembody in our post-Enlightenment modernity the pre-Enlightenment "tradition of the virtues" founded by Aristotle (and mediated by Thomism).[68] MacIntyre advo-

[63] Merold Westphal, "Kierkegaard and Hegel" in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 106.

[64] Specifically, William criticizes the speculative philosopher for his orientation to the past, and his inability to choose himself in context.

[65] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* I, 31.

[66] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* II, 332.

[67] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 265.

[68] This mediation via Thomism becomes more prominent after MacIntyre's reception into the Roman Catholic church in the early 1980s. The language of "tradition-informed Thomism" becomes considerably more prominent in *Three Versions of Moral Enquiry*. In some respects, this amplification of Thomism responds to Jeffrey Stout's incisive critique that *After Virtue* lacks "anything like an adequate treatment of the relationship of the Aristotelian tradition of the virtues to the religion of the Bible and to its theology" (as MacIntyre puts it in conceding Stout's point). See MacIntyre's "Postscript to the Second Edition" of *After Virtue*, 278.

cates the virtue tradition on the basis of the criteria of that tradition. Such advocacy, it seems to me, is formally parallel to William's advocacy of the ethical tradition in which he stands. In both cases, the teleology of moral discourse is supposed to reconcile alienated subjectivity by leading individuals back into a community and tradition of living narratives and practices.

The Ultimatum of Either/Or

But this mediated *rapprochement* is not the end of the story. For, whereas MacIntyre's teleology in *After Virtue* trends *from* "the Enlightenment project" *to* a retrieval of the "tradition of virtues," the teleology of *Either/Or* trends from ironic aestheticism *through* William's culturally traditioned Christendom and *toward* a third position. If we allow our reading of *Either/Or* to be guided by Kierkegaard's notion of "controlled irony" (that is, irony in a Socratic mode in service of a transcendent principle, as opposed to romantic irony; see *The Concept of Irony*, 324–29), then it becomes clear that *neither* of the two main alternatives of *Either/Or* is the lifeview to which Kierkegaard seeks to lead the reader. As if leaving a watermark of mastered irony beneath the text, Kierkegaard has Judge William himself recommend a sermon on "The Gospel According to Luke 19: 41–48" written by a clergyman friend of William serving as a pastor in rural Jutland. This sermon is the "Ultimatum" of *Either/Or* and it is a deliberation on the edifying nature of the confession—repeated in different ways twenty-six times across the course of the sermon—that in relation to God we are always in the wrong.[69] The great (controlled) irony is that, despite William's conclusion that this sermon expresses and confirms his view better than he himself can put it, in truth the sermon undermines William's confident assurances that one can "safely build upon" his lifeview. In fact, Kierkegaard had already intimated this more radical view in *The Concept of Irony* when he wrote, "there is a Christian view that places everything under sin, knows no exception, spares nothing."[70] And I think this suggests it is also wrong to say, as MacIntyre does, that Kierkegaard only developed a sense of his religious vocation *after* the publication of *Either/Or*.[71] On the contrary, Kierkegaard's invocation of radical Christian sin-consciousness (which he likens to Socratic ignorance in important respects, despite relevant dissimilarities as well) invites the realization that *ultimately* all our human, all too human, criteria for assessing the signs of the times and for understanding ourselves are flawed.

On Genealogy and Tradition-Informed Interpretation

In the reading that I have developed here, *Either/Or* can be read as Kierkegaard's own exploration of three rival versions of moral enquiry, only cast not in the genre of genealogical treatise but more engagingly as an ironic and interpretive *performance* of a multiplicity of competing lifeviews. And if, as Judge William's critique of the

[69] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* II, 339-54. The sermon arguably turns primarily on Jesus's words in verse 42: "Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace! But now they are hid from your eyes." It then amplifies the biblical teaching that all human criteria for reading and assessing the signs of the times are ultimately flawed through further allusions to Genesis 18:20-32, Exodus 20:5, Luke 13:1-4, Matthew 5:45, Genesis 32:24-26, Job 40:2, Romans 12:11, Matthew 7:7, and I Corinthians 3:7.

[70] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 288.

[71] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 41.

internal volatility of the romantic ironist (just as MacIntyre's critique of the internal volatility of the Nietzschean genealogist) shows how such radically individualist stances render unified lifeviews unintelligible, then so too does the inclusion of the sermon serve to question and erode the narrative unity of William's self-assured lifeview from within. This is, I think, the role and significance of Socratic irony as Kierkegaard understood it, and precisely how it operates when we read *Either/Or* as "Either/Or/Or." We might even suspect that such controlled irony also calls into question the narrative unity of subsequent theological genealogies of the various failures of the Enlightenment project as well.

Because in this essay I have worked intertextually within selected writings of MacIntyre, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard, I have not found it meaningful to question MacIntyre's characterization of genealogy as a decidedly modern genre of historical explanation that repudiates "all the key features of accountability, understood in terms either of Socratic dialectic or of Augustinian confession."[72] In its Nietzschean and post-Nietzschean form, this characterization of genealogy seems correct. But, and of course, there can be other conceptions of genealogy as well; the term "genealogy" is not proprietary, and so it can be interpreted differently and used to play on different registers. In Nietzsche's anti-theological genealogy of modernity, he made clear he intended to turn the tables on "no good" moralizing good-for-nothings when he set out to eviscerate what "our naïve moral and legal genealogists assumed up till now."[73] So Nietzsche's genealogy of morality was already a counter-genealogy. And the polyvalency of the word is surely one reason why some find a "counter-genealogy to that of Nietzsche" feasible, to quote John Milbank.[74] In this broader sense, it is no doubt even possible to enlist MacIntyre's account of moral enquiry (especially after his expressly Thomistic turn) as a theologically genial counter-counter genealogy of modernity. But if so, then I think MacIntyre's spectacularly tendentious reading of what he calls "Kierkegaard's doctrine" serves as an important caveat reminding us of the myriad known and unknown ways we can narrate history to tell the story we want to tell, rather than seeking to let history challenge and correct us. So I remain circumspect about genealogies of modernity, whether of the will to power variety, or the whiggish progress variety, or even a tradition-informed theological variety. Do they not all run the risk of narrating historical directionality, moral enquiry, epistemology, and theological tradition in a manner that is univocal, grasping, and self-assured on the order of Judge William? If this seems unfair, I will simply recall that the central thesis of *After Virtue* is that "the Aristotelian moral tradition is the best example we possess of a tradition whose adherents are rationally entitled to a high measure of confidence in its epistemological and moral resources."[75] We might as well add Judge William's, "you can safely build upon it."[76]

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[72] MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Morality*, 205.

[73] Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 39.

[74] John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, second edition (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), xvi. Such a counter-counter genealogy "narrates not simply the military tale of the devices and victories of arbitrary power, but also the continuous and sometimes decisive interruption of this story by instances of the reflecting of perfect infinite peaceful power which is the Good in finite acts of goodness and their necessary compossibility."

[75] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 277.

[76] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* II, 324.

MacIntyre concludes *After Virtue* with the lines, "if the tradition of the virtues was able to survive the horrors of the last dark ages, we are not entirely without grounds for hope. This time however the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us for quite some time."[77] Here MacIntyre sardonically depicts the scions of the Enlightenment as barbarian overlords and depicts adherents to the virtue tradition as a faithful remnant. In the light of the caveat that "in relation to God we are always in the wrong," however, "Either/Or/Or" might be read as a form of theological ideology critique, urging us to enquire not as to who are the barbarians in our midst, but rather to ask how we ourselves might be contributing to such mutual alienation.

I think one way to pursue *that* version of moral enquiry is modelled in many of Kierkegaard's works after *Either/Or*, but there is unfortunately not room to explore those here. Thankfully, we also find resources for such an approach in MacIntyre's own work. For to be informed by the tradition constituted by the dialectical mode of accountability modelled by Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, the confessional mode typified by the Bible and Augustine, the movement from confession to dialectic exemplified by Anselm, and the systematic oscillation between confession and dialectic refined by Aquinas, "it is necessary," as MacIntyre says, "not only to reread the texts which constitute that tradition, but to do so in a way that ensures that the reader is put to the question by the texts as much as the texts by the reader."[78] We will, no doubt, be put to the question differently by different texts, and different texts will put the question to other texts differently as well! By rereading *Either/Or* in a manner that puts *After Virtue* to the question, I have wanted to show that what MacIntyre dismisses as "Kierkegaard's doctrine" is not Kierkegaard's doctrine at all. What Kierkegaard truly regarded as doctrine was in fact *Christian* doctrine. And that, he said, is "very good." And then added, "Ah, but the lives, our lives—believe me, they are mediocre."[79]

Were there scope in this essay to zoom out from *Either/Or* to consider Kierkegaard's challenges to philosophy and theology more generally, I think we would soon agree that it is hard to think of a modern thinker who is both more Socratically dialectical and confessionally Christian than Kierkegaard was, and so he clearly has enduring relevance

[77] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 263.

[78] MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, 201, 233.

[79] And the reason why our lives are mediocre, Kierkegaard noted marginally, is that "the doctrine is kept at too great a distance" and so "our lives are only slightly touched by the doctrine." NB 23:33 in *Kierkegaard's Journals and Notebooks*, vol. 8, ed. by Niels Jørgen Cappelørn et al. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 219. It should be noted that Kierkegaard did not regard Christian doctrine as truth itself, but rather as referring to the truth that Christ is. As his late pseudonym Anti-Climacus puts it: "Christ is the truth in the sense that to be the truth is the only true explanation of what truth is … . Christianly understood, truth is obviously not to know the truth but to be the truth … . Being the truth is identical with knowing the truth, and Christ would never have known the truth if he had not been it, and nobody knows more of the truth than what he is of the truth … . But when the truth is the way, being the truth is a life—and this is indeed how Christ speaks of himself: I am the Truth and the Way and the Life"; *Practice in Christianity*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 205-7.

for tradition-informed enquiry.[80] But Kierkegaard was also, as George Pattison has argued,

> among the first Christian thinkers really to grasp—existentially as well as intellectually—that, after the Enlightenment and the democratic revolutions of the nineteenth century, Christianity could no longer be assumed to be the fallback position of any well-meaning citizen … [and that] We can't go back behind the Enlightenment by invoking an authority that has lost its power to compel. Christianity may have significant reservations and criticisms vis-à-vis the ideologies of modernity, but it needs to recognise the reality of what has been called the condition of modernity.[81]

Of course, much turns on how we understand the word "compel" here. It is clearly the case that many a contemporary individual finds Christianity personally compelling in the sense that they feel called to respond to the gospel of Jesus Christ and somehow involve themselves in the church that his life inaugurated.[82] But it is clearly *not* the case—and a good thing too—that in modernity the Christian tradition has any authority to coerce general adherence to its norms, or even empty lip service to its doctrines. Kierkegaard recognized both points; he designated them with his distinction between "Christianity" in the former case and "Christendom" in the latter. Many readers across the last 150 years

[80] Regrettably, space does not permit a full discussion here of the respects in which I think we should regard Kierkegaard as *both* a dialectical *and* a confessional thinker. But since some readers familiar with his writings after *Either/Or* think he trended from being a largely dialectical thinker to being a solely confessional thinker in the end (and since that view was articulated as a criticism of an earlier version of this essay when it was delivered at the "Theological Genealogies of Modernity" conference in July 2021) it is necessary to say briefly why I think that view is mistaken. It would be wrong to conclude that such late confessional works as *Practice in Christianity* (1850), for example, abandoned dialectic, for there we read that "faith itself is a dialectical qualification" (*Practice in Christianity*, 141), and that the incarnation of God in Christ entails a "dialectical knot that no one should presume to untie, nor can anyone untie it before he himself has untied it by coming again in glory" (*Practice in Christianity*, 33). This will seem puzzling if we assume dialectic can only be put to apologetic ends in the defence of a theory or doctrine. But this is not Kierkegaard's assumption, since he characteristically deploys controlled irony (Socratic, in its way) to unsettle our assumptions about what we might think we know. Accordingly, and regarding Christianity specifically, Kierkegaardian dialectic does not seek to demonstrate that the incarnation of God in Christ can be understood, but rather (as his most dialectical pseudonym puts it), that "the only possible understanding of the absolute paradox is that it cannot be understood" (*Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 521).

But if that is not grounds to claim that in his later authorship Kierkegaard remained both a dialectical and confessional thinker, then we should also look at what else Kierkegaard was publishing in later years. In 1849, when he published the devotional work *The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air*, he published—and on the very same day—a second edition of *Either/Or*. This decision, I think, can be taken to suggest that in orchestrating the intertextual dialectic of his authorship, he was intimating something like "these are to be read together for self-examination, and then judge for yourself." That is how Kierkegaard seems to have considered the matter, in any case, for as he writes in his posthumously published *The Point of View for My Work as an Author* (1859), he speaks of the "dialectical redoubling" of his authorship in which by issuing his aesthetic works alongside his ethical-religious writings "the equivocalness is maintained" (*The Point of View*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998], 34). And in his journal, reflecting on the challenge of how best to publish *The Sickness Unto Death* (1849) and *Practice in Christianity* so not to represent himself to readers as an extraordinary Christian, he penned the words, "I am no apostle or the like. I am a poetical-dialectical genius who is, religiously and personally, a penitent" (NB 9:56 in *Kierkegaard's Journals and Notebooks*, vol. 5, 242).

[81] George Pattison, "Passionate Thinker," *The Tablet* 267 (4 May), no. 8996 (2013), 6-7. Quoted in Joshua Furnal, *Catholic Theology after Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 218.

[82] For an excellent discussion of Kierkegaard's complex relationship to the church, see Anders Holm's "Kierkegaard and the Church" in *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, ed. John Lippitt and George Pattison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 112-28.

have concluded that his "attack on Christendom" and the national church was also an assault on Christianity itself. But as Anders Holm persuasively argues, "the impassioned attack on the Church found in Kierkegaard's writings would never have occurred it if it had not been for the fact the Church was very important to him and a place he cared strongly about."[83]

Happily, while an initial "existentialist" reception of Kierkegaard tended toward a resolutely secularist reading of Kierkegaard, a good number of theologically minded post-Enlightenment readers have found in him a resource for thinking through the Christian tradition anew in ways that are critically responsive to the conditions of modernity. These include not simply headliners in Protestant theology such as Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer but also, as Joshua Furnal has shown, prominent figures among the *ressourcement* movement in twentieth-century Catholic theology, most notably Henri de Lubac, but several others too.[84] In Louis Dupré's brief intellectual history of *Religion and the Rise of Modern Culture*, the Catholic philosopher Dupré even goes so far as to speak of Kierkegaard's accomplishment as a principal manifestation of "the rebirth of theology" in the modern world, a rebirth that dialectically reinterprets modern subjectivity in the light of a call to confession and renewal that "cannot be objectively assimilated" precisely because the eternal in history is a paradox.[85]

In closing let me reformulate my "either/or/or" one last time. *Either* we are persuaded by Nietzsche's powerful rhetoric to choose "something like" his genealogical approach to thinking about modernity, *or* we can be informed by "something very like" the Aristotelian tradition,[86]—*or* we can recognize this dichotomy as a false dilemma that unnecessarily limits our interpretive resources, and then express a vote of thanks to both Aristotle and Nietzsche for the ways their positions challenge us and for what we can learn from them. I will take the third option and I am thankful to MacIntyre for helping me see the alternative. For, after all, even if he does not in the end overcome his "heroes and villains" approach to the philosophy of history, MacIntyre does nevertheless expand his catalogue of heroes. The final chapter of *After Virtue* is subtitled "Nietzsche *or* Aristotle, Trotsky *and* St Benedict"; then in *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* the list grows to include Socrates, Plato, Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas as well. And if this is the gallery of dialectical and confessional worthies to whom tradition-informed enquiry should be accountable, then we ought to be listening to the gadfly of Copenhagen as well because, to repeat, it is hard to identify a thinker in modernity who is both more Socratically dialectical and confessionally Christian than Kierkegaard.[87]

[83] Holm, "Kierkegaard and the Church," 127.

[84] Furnal, *Catholic Theology after Kierkegaard*, especially 104-43.

[85] Louis Dupré, *Religion and the Rise of Modern Culture* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 109. See also Dupré's much earlier *Kierkegaard as Theologian* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1964).

[86] MacIntyre uses the formulations "something like" and "something very like" at numerous points in *After Virtue*.

[87] I am grateful to Thomas Pfau, Darren Sarisky, and two anonymous reviewers for reading this essay and offering their insightful and critical comments.