
KIERKEGAARD, PHILOSOPHY, AND AESTHETICISM

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Beginning with a consideration of one of the central methodological issues in contemporary Kierkegaard scholarship, this paper goes on to suggest that the tradition of reading Kierkegaard as a philosopher, or in the terms of philosophy, is a tradition of *aestheticism*. Calling upon the distinguishing features of the aesthete found in the work of Anthony Rudd and Patrick Stokes, I argue that the tradition of reading Kierkegaard as a philosopher has these *same features*; and so can be said to be a *tradition of aestheticism*. The paper goes on to make this case in detail with respect to Rudd's book *Kierkegaard and the Limits of the Ethical* and Stokes' *Kierkegaard's Mirrors*.

Keywords: Philosophical methodology – Analytic philosophy – History of philosophy – Aestheticism

1. Introduction. In this paper I am going to suggest that the tradition of reading Kierkegaard as a philosopher, or the tradition of reading him in the terms of philosophy, is one of aestheticism. Put otherwise I will seek to suggest that much of what has, and continues to, pass for Kierkegaard scholarship can be identified as a form of aestheticism, or aesthetic interpretation. If this is correct then, ironically, many of those that have, and continue to, dedicate themselves to preserving and perpetuating what they take to be Kierkegaard's message are, in fact, engaged in a form of the very malady that he sought to save us from.

I will begin with some general reflections on the state of contemporary Kierkegaard scholarship, specifically on what I hold to be the centrally important issue of whether Kierkegaard's work might be read in abstraction from the history, culture, and theological debates, of his time. That such interpretations are possible, (or at least that any contemporary use or application of Kierkegaard's thought might be made consistent with historical interpretation), has been a basic and pervasive assumption of the reception of Kierkegaard as a philosopher and of his work as philosophy. This is an assumption that recent work on Kierkegaard has drawn into question or, indeed, claimed to be fallacious.¹

While it would be overly ambitious to attempt to justify the general claim that *all* philosophical readings of Kierkegaard are aesthetic in the limited space available to me,

¹ See Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 648-650; and my recent paper "Kierkegaard's Forgotten History, or Who is the Speculative Thinker?," *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, vol. 32, no. 2 (2011), 309-334.

I nonetheless wish to seek to advance this case by giving some concrete examples. To this end I examine the work of several contemporary analytic commentators working within the tradition of reading Kierkegaard as a philosopher: Anthony Rudd and Patrick Stokes.² Specifically, I shall seek to outline Rudd and Stokes' reflections on the figure of Kierkegaard's aesthete, as depicted in *Either/Or* part one. Calling upon these reflections, and the features of aestheticism that they reveal, I argue that the methodological presuppositions of these commentators can themselves be identified as aesthetic.

2. Current Kierkegaard Scholarship. Given the theme of this collection of articles, it is appropriate to begin with some reflections on the state of current Kierkegaard scholarship. The centrally important issue in contemporary Kierkegaard scholarship, as I envisage it, is the methodological one of how we go about reading Kierkegaard's works and understanding his thought. Specifically it is the subject of the relation between Kierkegaard's work and thought and the history, culture, and intellectual debates which gave birth to them. At issue is the question of whether or not, or how far, interpretations of Kierkegaard's work and thought can depart from his immediate intellectual, cultural, and historical context and still be considered readings of 'Kierkegaard'.

Commentators are divided on the answer to give to this question. For instance, certain scholars apparently hold that questions of historical interpretation are *arbitrary*, or *irrelevant*, to contemporary readings of Kierkegaard and uses of his thought.³ Others think that our understanding of Kierkegaard's work and thought in his immediate intellectual and cultural context can be made *consistent* with the attempt to apply him to our own contemporary philosophical concerns and agendas.⁴ My own view is that there is a *necessary* connection between our understanding Kierkegaard's immediate intellectual and cultural context and our comprehending his work and thought aright, such that these *cannot* be separated one from the other. Moreover, I think that the attempt to read Kierkegaard outside of his immediate theological and historical context cannot but lead to misreading and misinterpretation; and that *this* situation, by and large, describes the state of current scholarship. (Indeed, I want to suggest, it describes the history of reading Kierkegaard's work as philosophy and understanding him as a philosopher).

Methodological questions, such as the above, in turn raise further questions about how we are to go about classifying and characterizing Kierkegaard, his work, and his thought. Indeed, the answer that we give to the above question has large and significant corollaries for the identity of Kierkegaard, the discipline of Kierkegaard scholarship, and we as Kierkegaard scholars. For questions concerning how we are to go about reading

² I am grateful to Patrick Stokes for allowing me access to his unpublished manuscript, *The Naked Self*. My references to this work will be to the pagination of the manuscript, but readers should be aware that this may differ from the work when it appears in print.

³ For example, this appears to be Rudd's view. See Anthony Rudd, *Kierkegaard and the Limits of the Ethical* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 19.

⁴ This position is the view of the majority of commentators, although few explicitly state as such. On this point see the passages from Stokes' *The Naked Self* treated in section 5 below.

and understanding Kierkegaard's works have consequences for what we can conceivably take ourselves to be doing when we engage in Kierkegaard scholarship, and thus for our own natures and identities as Kierkegaard scholars. For example, is it possible for us to think of ourselves as engaged in a wholly *ahistorical*, secular, and philosophical investigation, or must Kierkegaard scholars necessarily conceive of themselves as working out of disciplines such as Danish intellectual and cultural history? In this way questions of methodology strike at the heart of the nature and identity of Kierkegaard scholarship, and of ourselves as Kierkegaard scholars.

My own view is that Kierkegaard scholarship must, of necessity, conceive of itself as working against the background of Danish intellectual and cultural history. In contrast, the tradition of interpreting Kierkegaard as a philosopher, and his work as philosophy, (including the movement in Kierkegaard scholarship that conceives of itself as engaged in some secular, theologically naturalistic, and philosophical undertaking), has largely been ignorant of the immediate intellectual, theological, and cultural context in which Kierkegaard was writing. More recently, however, as research about Kierkegaard's place in the Danish Golden Age has been published, such methodological approaches are moving from a situation of ignorance to one of *self-deception*.

The tradition of reading Kierkegaard as a philosopher, and his work as philosophy, has, by and large, *defined itself* in opposition to a certain conception of philosophy. A conception of a certain kind or type of philosophy as *disengaged*, *abstract*, *speculative*, and *impersonal*.⁵ Yet this tradition, I claim, is itself premised upon a methodology which *disengages* and *abstracts* Kierkegaard's work and thought from his immediate historical and cultural context; as well as from the particular historical individual Søren Kierkegaard.⁶ The irony is that, in true Hegelian fashion, the tradition of reading Kierkegaard as a philosopher defines itself in opposition to a position with which it is, ultimately, *identical*. Only by becoming self-conscious of this, and the conditions which have given rise to it, can this tradition of Kierkegaard scholarship overcome itself and understand his work and thought aright.

The above tradition is also, as I shall seek to suggest in the remainder of this paper, a tradition of *aestheticism*. To make this case I will now consider some remarks about Kierkegaard's aesthete, as found in the work of certain contemporary commentators who seek to make the case that Kierkegaard has a serious contribution to make to contemporary philosophy: Anthony Rudd and Patrick Stokes. My purpose is to outline Rudd and Stokes' portrait of the aesthete, before using it as a basis upon which to examine both the

⁵ See, for instance, the conception of philosophy *against* which Kierkegaard's work is presented in Chapter I of Rudd, *Kierkegaard and the Limits of the Ethical*, 1-26; Chapter II of John Lippitt, *Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard's Thought* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 12-26; and Rick Furtak, "The Kierkegaardian Ideal of 'Essential Knowing' and the Scandal of Modern Philosophy," *Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript: A Critical Guide*, ed. Rick Furtak (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1-5; 87-110.

⁶ On this point see my paper "Kierkegaard's Forgotten History, or Who is the Speculative Thinker?" *op. cit.*

methodological presuppositions of the tradition of reading Kierkegaard as a philosopher in general, as well as the agenda of these commentators in particular.

3. Who is the Aesthete? In this section I will begin by briefly sketching what I take to be a commonly recognised, or accepted, portrait of the figure of the aesthete 'A' in *Either/Or*. I will then seek to supplement this brief sketch with some remarks on the identifying or distinguishing features of the aesthete as found in Anthony Rudd's *Kierkegaard and the Limits of the Ethical* and *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre*, and Patrick Stokes in *Kierkegaard's Mirrors* and his unpublished manuscript *The Naked Self*.⁷

The aesthetic individual, or the aesthete, personified by the figure of 'A' in *Either/Or*, lives life in terms of the interesting and the boring. Pursuing whatever fleeting activity will occupy him, and momentarily excite his curiosity and attention, the aesthete can even be said to go to lengths *not* to engage in activities that might lead to commitment, responsibility, and the taking on of a more stable and consistent identity. The aesthete can be said to be preoccupied with the way in which things *appear* to be, without a concern for their deeper significance or nature. Moreover the aesthete's attempt to attribute meaning and significance to things is dictated by fad, whim, fashion, contingency, and coincidence. In this way the aesthete's life is dictated by immediacy, fortune and misfortune: for the meaning and significance of his life appears to lie in nothing over and above the contingency of what happens to befall him.

Rudd describes the aesthete 'A' as a "prototype of the rootless Sartrean or Rortyan ironic self," "the disengaged or ironic modern self-one who stands outside of all traditions," and as "the prototype of the rootless, individualistic modern self, for whom all relationships, traditions and roles are contingent-Sartre's existentialist self..."⁸ Rudd goes on to develop a portrait of the aesthetic individual 'A', and what is wrong with his conception of life or reality, *vis-à-vis* the ethical position of the Judge.

One of the features of the aesthete, as Rudd suggests, is the ability to control or manipulate his memory: to be able to remember and forget what he wants to. This, the art of remembering and forgetting, allows the aesthete to avoid attributing any overwhelming significance and meaning to his experience and history such that it might lead to the formation of commitments, or the taking on of projects, roles, and responsibilities.⁹ In accord with this, it is essential to the aesthete that he be continually concerned with the new, the novel, in order to avoid any weight of responsibility or commitment that might be fostered upon him by beginning to pay attention to his own history. As Stokes points out, for the

⁷ I have reviewed several of these books. See, "Kierkegaard's Mirrors: Interest, Self, and Moral Vision," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, vol. 19, no.1 (2011); and "Kierkegaard and The Limits of the Ethical," *Kierkegaard's Secondary Literature* (Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources, vol. 18), ed. Jon Stewart (Aldershot: Ashgate, forthcoming).

⁸ Rudd, *Kierkegaard and the Limits of the Ethical*, xxiii; Anthony Rudd, "Reason in Ethics: MacIntyre and Kierkegaard," *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre: Essays on Freedom, Narrative, and Virtue*, ed. Anthony Rudd and John Davenport, (La Salle: Open Court, 2001), 131, 138.

⁹ Rudd, *Kierkegaard and the Limits of the Ethical*, 71.

aesthete, “novelty is paramount,” and is “threatened by any commitment that results from temporal duration.”¹⁰

What motivates the aesthete is the pursuit of the interesting, and the avoidance of boredom. Yet “the desperate attempt to stave off boredom,” as Stokes notes, compels the aesthete “to find diversion in ever more aspects of life, that is, to find more and more things interesting.”¹¹ Despite this the aesthete must also be selective about the object of his interest, lest his distraction become so compelling that it begin to demand something of his future, and so he “must cultivate an ability to be diverted by things of no consequence.”¹² The result of this continual pursuit of the interesting, and the avoidance of boredom, commitment, and responsibility is, as Rudd tells us, that aesthetic life “reduces to a series of moments...with no principle of unity discernible in them.”¹³ The aesthetic life “lacks continuity.” What is essential to such a life, as Kierkegaard describes it, claims Rudd, is “the avoidance of commitments which would tie the self down, [and] provide it with a stable identity.”¹⁴ For this reason Rudd holds the purely aesthetic life to be one “which makes impossible the development of a coherent sense of personal identity, and therefore one that makes personal fulfillment impossible.”¹⁵

We should now have a sense of the different features that go to characterize and identify the figure of the aesthete, and the aesthetic life. On this basis, I will now turn to examine and evaluate some of the methodological presuppositions that I take to be endemic to not just contemporary analytical interpretations of Kierkegaard but also to the tradition of reading Kierkegaard as a philosopher more generally. The purpose of this is to suggest that the tradition of Kierkegaard scholarship is, at bottom, a tradition of aestheticism.

4. The Philosophical Tradition as Aesthetic. I will now suggest that the philosophical tradition of reading Kierkegaard, of reading him as a philosopher or in the terms of philosophy, is aesthetic, on the grounds that this tradition shares the above outlined distinguishing features of aestheticism. Specifically: an attachment to immediacy; the ability to control memory; be distracted by novelty and things of no consequence; and a concomitant resistance to commitment, responsibility, and the formation of a stable and coherent identity, can all be said to be features of the attempt to read Kierkegaard as a philosopher. Indeed all of these maladies, I think, accompany the methodological presuppositions of much that has passed, and continues to pass, for Kierkegaard scholarship.

The attempt to read Kierkegaard as a philosopher can be said to be an immediate one, for it depends upon approaching his texts and arguments as they immediately appear

¹⁰ Patrick Stokes, *Kierkegaard's Mirrors: Interest, Self, and Moral Vision* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 24.

¹¹ Stokes, *Kierkegaard's Mirrors*, 22.

¹² Stokes, *Kierkegaard's Mirrors*, 23.

¹³ Rudd, “Reason in Ethics,” 139.

¹⁴ Rudd, “Reason in Ethics,” 138.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

(and speak to one's interests and inclinations); and irrespective of situating them in a historical or cultural narrative in which a larger meaning or significance might become manifest. The concern, or agenda, of the commentator attempting to bring Kierkegaard's work into relation with his or her contemporary philosophical concerns is: how does this work speak to my, or our, contemporary philosophical issues and problems? The concern is with how these works can, or do, appear, as opposed to what Kierkegaard's meaning, aim, or intention might have been in writing them. This is evident in the structure of numerous contemporary works on Kierkegaard which typically assume the form: here is an important contemporary philosophical problem, now how does Kierkegaard answer to it?¹⁶ This is in contrast to an approach which begins with a historical understanding, and proceeds on that basis.

The methodological agenda of the philosophical tradition of Kierkegaard scholarship can also be said to be premised upon fortune and misfortune. Its motivation is to bring Kierkegaard into relation to the latest philosophical fad, whim, or fashion, and without concern for questions of historical meaning and necessity (such as: whether the question, or issue, is one that can realistically have occupied Kierkegaard at all?) An example of this is the strategy that any observation or remark on Kierkegaard by a modern philosopher requires a volume of papers, as has recently happened in the cases of both Derrida and MacIntyre.¹⁷ Yet such interpretations merely play with the ambiguity of being able to interpret Kierkegaard independently of the degree of determinacy that historical and cultural considerations bring to bear.

The tradition of reading Kierkegaard as a philosopher, certainly in its more recent history, might also be said to practice the careful control of memory. For while texts on Kierkegaard typically begin with *some* reference to his historical and cultural context, these proceed at such a level of generality as to be misrepresentative.¹⁸ Commentators' commonly pay lip service to history in the form of a paragraph inserted in the introduction to their works, before swiftly moving on to the important issues that occupy them. A good example of a subject, or topic, that has been misrepresented as a result of this inattention to history (as Jon Stewart has pointed out), is Kierkegaard's relations to Hegel, Hegelianism, and the figure of the speculative thinker.¹⁹ For, as Stewart argues, the figure of Hegel in Kierkegaard's work cannot simply be identified with the historical Hegel, but plays a far more complex and illuminating role.

¹⁶ For example see Rick Furtak, *Wisdom in Love: Kierkegaard and the Ancient Quest for Emotional Integrity* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2005); and Stokes, *Kierkegaard's Mirrors*.

¹⁷ See Rudd and Davenport, *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre*; and Elsebet Jegstrup, ed. *The New Kierkegaard* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

¹⁸ For a consideration of such cases of misrepresentation, see my papers: "Kierkegaard on Emotion: A Critique of Furtak's *Wisdom in Love*," *Religious Studies*, vol. 46, no. 4 (2010), 489-508; "Saving Kierkegaard's Soul: From Philosophical Psychology to Golden Age Soteriology," *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook 2011*, ed. Heiko Schulz, Jon Stewart, and Karl Verstrynge (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2011), 279-302; and "Kierkegaard's Forgotten History, or Who is the Speculative Thinker?"

¹⁹ See Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel*, 38-39.

The importance of being distracted by things of no consequence is also in evidence in philosophical readings. For example, commentators often spill large amounts of ink examining passages in more minor works, such as the book review *Two Ages* or the unfinished early work *Johannes Climacus*, as opposed to paying serious attention to more major works such as the *Philosophical Fragments* and the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Such exercises are commonly undertaken to form tenuous connections between these texts and contemporary concerns, without any regard for the place or significance of these texts in the Kierkegaardian corpus more generally.

What the above features or characteristics appear to manifest is a fear of *commitment*, specifically a commitment to making sense of Kierkegaard as a particular or single individual existing in a certain time and place (the Danish Golden Age); and of his texts and thought as a product of the history and culture of that time. Yet to recognize this, and commit oneself to making sense of the historical Kierkegaard, is to take on a *responsibility*: that one's work does justice to the historical facts. Indeed, one might say that it is only through such commitment and responsibility that continuity is gained; and the figure of Kierkegaard; Kierkegaard scholarship; and the Kierkegaard scholar, form a stable, coherent, and persistent identity. When one looks across the numerous different Kierkegaards that can be found in the history of commentary and scholarship, and the numerous methodological approaches to his thought and work, one might be tempted to conclude that a commitment to history, and the subsequent taking on of responsibility and formation of a coherent and stable identity are precisely what is lacking.

All of the definitive features of aestheticism outlined (a commitment to immediacy, dependency upon fortune and misfortune, ability to control memory and be distracted by things of no consequence; and the avoidance of commitment, responsibility, and formation of a stable and coherent identity) can be said to be shared by the tradition of reading Kierkegaard as a philosopher; and so it can be concluded that it is, at bottom, aesthetic. The philosophical tradition of reading Kierkegaard is, ironically, *a tradition of aestheticism*.

5. A Poem for the Poem's Sake. The above case proceeds at a certain level of generality; to help substantiate it I will now offer some examples from the work of two commentators who are inheritors of the tradition of reading Kierkegaard as a philosopher: Anthony Rudd and Patrick Stokes. In this I will again take the above features of aestheticism in turn (a commitment to immediacy, dependency upon fortune and misfortune, ability to control memory and be distracted by things of no consequence; and the avoidance of commitment, responsibility) and apply them to the works of Rudd and Stokes. Focusing upon some of the methodological remarks made by these commentators, I will seek to establish that their approach to Kierkegaard is based on presuppositions that can be said to be aesthetic.²⁰

Rudd and Stokes' investigations into Kierkegaard's thought and work both begin

²⁰ While there are some differences in the methodological views of Rudd and Stokes, I take them to be sharing a common approach to Kierkegaard.

from a concern with modern day contemporary issues. For instance, *Kierkegaard and the Limits of the Ethical* is an attempt to say something about the “problematic status” of ethics and religion in the modern world, and to show how Kierkegaard’s work is relevant to the questions and problems of contemporary analytic philosophers.²¹ Specifically, Rudd attempts to bring Kierkegaard’s work into positive relation to recent issues in epistemology, ethics, virtue ethics, personal identity, and narrative theory; and to bring Kierkegaard into relation to modern thinkers such as Alasdair MacIntyre, Derek Parfit, Bernard Williams, and Philippa Foot.²² Stokes, in part influenced by the work and thought of Rudd, also seeks to show how Kierkegaard can be applied to issues in contemporary ethics and personal identity. Specifically, Stokes brings Kierkegaard’s work into relation to issues in the ontology of selfhood, moral perceptualism, and narrative theory; and such contemporary figures as John McDowell, Harry Frankfurt, Bernard Williams, Iris Murdoch, and Derek Parfit.²³

The approach of Rudd and Stokes stems from a concern with, and interest in, contemporary philosophical issues; and how Kierkegaard’s work and thought stands with respect to modern philosophical problems and the work of contemporary thinkers. This approach is premised upon immediacy, because it depends upon interpreting Kierkegaard’s thought in terms of how his work can, or might, speak to our contemporary philosophical problems and concerns. Such an approach is immediate because it begins by reading Kierkegaard’s work in terms of how it speaks to the interpreter’s own contemporary intellectual questions and interests, as opposed to attempting to situate it within its own historical, intellectual, and cultural context.

Rudd and Stokes’ approach also rests upon fortune and misfortune: for it is dependent upon both what happens to be the question or issue of the day, as well as upon what issues or questions these commentators happen to find curious or interesting. In this way the approach of these commentators is *contingent* upon contemporary philosophical whim and fashion, as opposed to being concerned with historical facts and the degree of determinacy that they provide (as well as with what Kierkegaard thinks is *not* wholly subject to contingency: i.e. the absolute, the necessary, and the eternal). The methodological approach shared by Rudd and Stokes can be said to be aesthetic, in that it is premised upon both immediacy, fortune, and misfortune.

These commentators can also be said to practice the careful control of memory. Rudd, for instance, opens the preface of *Kierkegaard and the Limits of the Ethical* by writing “I hope it will be of interest to students of Kierkegaard to see, *rather than another work of historical scholarship*, an attempt to make philosophical use of his ideas.”²⁴ Rudd’s portrait of the discipline into which his book emerges is of a field with a predominant focus on historical scholarship, and in which the attempt to make contemporary phi-

²¹ Rudd, *Kierkegaard and the Limits of the Ethical*, vii.

²² *Ibid.*, 19

²³ See Stokes, *Kierkegaard’s Mirrors*, 11.

²⁴ Rudd, *Kierkegaard and the Limits of the Ethical*, vii.

philosophical use of Kierkegaard's ideas is the exception. However, it is dubious as to the historical scholarship to which Rudd is referring. *Kierkegaard and the Limits of the Ethical* was born into a discipline already populated by numerous commentators attempting to make philosophical use of Kierkegaard's ideas (in the work of scholars such as: C. Stephen Evans, M. Jamie Ferreira, and Merold Westphal). In contrast, at the time of publication, there was arguably *little or no serious historical research* into Kierkegaard's immediate historical context.

The seventeen years separating the publication of *Kierkegaard and the Limits of the Ethical* and *Kierkegaard's Mirrors* have, largely thanks to the work of Jon Stewart, given us an understanding of Kierkegaard's place in the Danish Golden Age history and culture. A knowledge of how Kierkegaard's work and thought appears in his immediate context is, therefore, not something that Rudd can reasonably be expected to have had. The same, however, is not true of Stokes, who has read Stewart's work; and is familiar with the details of Kierkegaard's place in the Danish Golden Age. While *Kierkegaard's Mirrors* makes passing reference to Kierkegaard's contemporaries Frederik Sibbern and Johan Ludvig Heiberg, no mention is made of Hans Lassen Martensen or the Danish debates about Hegelian mediation and its application to Christian Dogmatics. Stokes is not ignorant of these issues, but prefers to keep discussions of Kierkegaard's context at a high level of generality, and in abstraction of the historical particularities. For instance, characterizing Golden Age Denmark as "the small philosophical orbit... in thrall to the intellectual currents of its southern neighbour [Germany]" allows Stokes to skip many of the details that a recognition of the culture and history of the Danish Golden Age as unique and interesting in its own right would demand.²⁵

Our commentators can also be said to be distracted by things of no consequence. For instance, much of *Kierkegaard and the Limits of the Ethical* is concerned with Kierkegaard's first significant work *Either/Or*, and with giving a secular account and reconstruction of the views of the Judge in *Either/Or* part II. While *Either/Or* is a major work in Kierkegaard's authorship, it is important to understand it within its historical and cultural context. As Jon Stewart has recently, and convincingly, argued *Either/Or* was conceived as a response to the debate taking place in Denmark at the time concerning Hegel's logic of mediation; and specifically Hegel's ideas concerning the law of the excluded middle.²⁶ Rudd's focus on *Either/Or*, and his attempt to read it independently of its immediate historical context, leaves him myopic with respect to both the cultural significance of *Either/Or* in general and the theological content of the Judge's views in particular (for instance, the Judge's repeated concerns about the nature of the soul).

Stokes, too, grounds the argument of *Kierkegaard's Mirrors* on a tenuous basis. For instance, the beginning of Chapter II of *Kierkegaard's Mirrors* states: "Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms devote relatively little time to the nature of consciousness – the key category in terms of which subjectivity is generally discussed in contemporary philosophy.

²⁵ Stokes, *Kierkegaard's Mirrors*, 21-22.

²⁶ Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel*, 183.

Kierkegaard's only sustained treatment of the issue of consciousness occurs in the very short, unusually schematic section of the unfinished, unpublished *Johannes Climacus*...²⁷

Rather than drawing the obvious conclusion that Kierkegaard is just not interested in the nature of consciousness as it is discussed in contemporary philosophy, Stokes' commitment to bringing Kierkegaard into positive relation with contemporary philosophy leads him to infer the contrary. Indeed, Stokes uses the lack of any obvious textual evidence as licence to investigate an "unusually schematic" section of *Johannes Climacus*. A text that, in Stokes' own recognition, is unfinished and remained unpublished in Kierkegaard's life time.

The above points might be said to manifest a fear of commitment and responsibility, specifically a commitment of and responsibility to making sense of Kierkegaard as a particular individual who lived in a certain historical, intellectual, and cultural context. On this point it is interesting to consider some of the ways in which these commentators seek to justify their own methodological enterprise, whilst avoiding the demand to make sense of Kierkegaard as a historically single individual.

Rudd, in the opening chapter of *Kierkegaard and the Limits of the Ethical*, writes: "I do not claim in my exegesis to be revealing the 'true' Kierkegaard...I am certainly open to the accusation of 'creating' Kierkegaard as a precursor of certain contemporary philosophers, notably MacIntyre. But any interpretation is a dialogue between what has to be interpreted and the present concerns of the interpreter-which is why literary criticism, history-including the history of philosophy, and translations of classic works have to be done afresh by each new generation. *This is not, of course, a defence of arbitrariness; I do not think that I am reading into Kierkegaard what is not there, and I shall be quoting extensively from his works in support of my interpretations.*"²⁸

Whilst interpretation is conditioned by our own interests and concerns, this does not negate the fact that we can arrive at an understanding of a figure's work or position within their historical context. An important part of this process is placing our own concerns and agendas to one side, and attempting to determine the concerns and motivations of the figure in question. In characterizing *all* interpretation as subject to the present concerns of the interpreter Rudd is not defending exegesis, but eisegesis. *Moreover*, the above is effectively an admission by Rudd that his interpretation of Kierkegaard results from the immediacy of his own concerns, rather than a genuine attempt to engage with and understand the work of the other.

Stokes is more sensitive to methodological concerns surrounding how the historical Kierkegaard coheres with the contemporary philosophical uses to which he wishes to put him. In particular, Stokes is aware of the possibility that the historical Kierkegaard might transpire to be *so* radically different that he cannot be brought into relation to our contemporary concerns and agendas. On this point, Stokes writes: "I think we can indeed mine Kierkegaard for useful philosophical insights that may have applications *in contexts very*

²⁷ Stokes, *Kierkegaard's Mirrors*, 29.

²⁸ Rudd, *Kierkegaard and the Limits of the Ethical*, 19.

alien to his own. This is, it seems to me, essential work if Kierkegaard is to be regarded as a thinker of ongoing philosophical value rather than a merely historical figure, a sort of dimly-remembered eccentric uncle of Heidegger, whose work can safely be ignored by those disinclined to deal with it."²⁹

The point is that *even if* Kierkegaard's context is not just different, but "very alien" (read: absolutely different?), to our own, then we can still "mine" him for philosophical insight (which raises the question of *just how far* we would have to go before we were unable to make such an application? Does Stokes think that there is a limit to intelligible interpretation, or is the possibility that there is *no* such limit simply ruled out *a priori*?)

What is interesting about this passage is the *justification* given for reading Kierkegaard philosophically. This justification is, effectively, that Kierkegaard cannot be a merely historical figure, if he is not to be a merely historical figure. Or, we must be able to read Kierkegaard philosophically if we are to be able to read him philosophically. Or, Kierkegaard must be a philosopher if he is to be a philosopher. The possibility that Kierkegaard's thought is historically conditioned such that it *cannot* be applied to our own time must be ruled out *a priori*, if the enterprise of reading Kierkegaard philosophically is to remain an intelligible one. Stokes tautological justification indicates that he has come up against the limit of intelligibility with respect to his own methodological agenda, beyond which the giving of further reasons or justifications make no sense.

In explicitly addressing the objection that I am bringing to bear Stokes says: "Some may find the whole thing hopelessly anachronistic: why would a 19th century Danish philosopher-theologian have anything to say to living, analytic philosophers such as Derek Parfit, Galen Strawson and J. David Velleman? The only real way to answer this objection is to simply go ahead and show that Kierkegaard *does* have something to say..."³⁰

In this way the practise of applying Kierkegaard to contemporary analytic philosophy is thought to be *self-justifying*. The enterprise of reading Kierkegaard philosophically needs no justification from the outside, but is rather considered *autotelic*.

If I am correct in my claim that philosophical readings of Kierkegaard are ultimately aesthetic, then there is an apposite analogy to be drawn between Stokes' attempt to justify his own agenda and that of the Nineteenth Century *l'art pour l'art* movement. Specifically one might think of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Poetic Principle," in which Poe claims that the justification of poetry is, poetry; and the "poem written solely for the poem's sake."³¹ If I am correct then the attempt to apply Kierkegaard to contemporary philosophy, indeed the whole tradition of reading Kierkegaard philosophically, might be thought of as one long self-justifying poem; a reflection in which aesthetic interpreters use Kierkegaard as a muse in the name of own narcissistic intellectual concerns and interests.

²⁹ Stokes, *The Naked Self*, 28-29.

³⁰ Stokes, *The Naked Self*, 25, Stokes' emphasis.

³¹ "[U]nder the sun there neither exists nor *can* exist any work more thoroughly dignified – more supremely noble – than this very poem, this poem *per se* – this poem which is a poem and nothing more – this poem written solely for the poem's sake." Edgar Poe, *The Poems*, (Adamant Media, 2000), 9.

To move beyond the tradition of aesthetic interpretation that consists in reading Kierkegaard as a philosopher we need to develop a healthy scepticism: a scepticism to the way in which the narrative of this tradition, or its poem, seeks to perpetuate and justify itself. Specifically, the hermeneutic of suspicion required to unmask this tradition needs a sensitivity to the way in which it simultaneously attempts to conjure the illusion of a historical foundation whilst all the while insulating itself from any historical or cultural details that might draw it into question. Only by developing an understanding of Kierkegaard's work and thought in his immediate intellectual and cultural context can we come to see that the philosophical tradition lacks historical foundation. Moreover only by means of such an understanding can we overcome the propensity to aesthetic interpretation within ourselves, and our reading of Kierkegaard move to an ethical or religious basis.

6. Conclusion. This paper has sought to suggest that the tradition of reading Kierkegaard as a philosopher, or in the terms of philosophy, is a tradition of *aestheticism*. I began by reflecting upon the centrally important methodological issue of the relationship between our understanding of Kierkegaard's thought and work and his intellectual and historical context. Calling upon the distinguishing features of the aesthete developed by Rudd and Stokes, I have argued that the tradition of reading Kierkegaard as a philosopher shares *these same features*; and so can be said to be a tradition which rests on aesthetic presuppositions. Finally, I have gone on to make this case in detail with respect to the methodological presuppositions of both Rudd and Stokes, as found in *Kierkegaard and the Limits of the Ethical* and *Kierkegaard's Mirrors*.

Without history, without theology, without the Danish Golden Age of culture, our interpretations of Kierkegaard can only ever amount to forms of aestheticism; and we ourselves only ever amount to aesthetic interpreters. To move beyond the tradition of misinterpretation that consists in reading Kierkegaard as a philosopher we need to make the ethical movement to commit to history and, ultimately, to the necessity of religious or theological interpretation.

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