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Table of Contents

Reversed Unshieldedness and True Relationality: A Philosopher,
Poets, and a Research Professor Discover Vulnerability

Andrea Owen

Washington and Lee University

1

Bad Faith and the Belief That Vaccines Cause Autism

Raymond P. Uymatiao

University of Connecticut

9

Standing On Your Own: Irony, Love, and Autonomous Dependence
in Kierkegaard's Thought

Pedro Monque

St. Olaf College

24

You Will Regret Both: Kierkegaard's Critique of Modernity in
Either/Or

Josh Hinchie

University of Tulsa

36

Intersubjectivity and the Importance of Meaningful Subject-to-
Subject Interaction

Stephanie Foster

Washington and Lee University

46

Reversed Unshieldedness and True Relationality: A Philosopher, Poets, and a Research Professor Discover Vulnerability

Andrea Owen

Abstract: The following essay attempts to understand vulnerability as it is inexplicitly portrayed in Martin Heidegger’s “What Are Poets For?” In Heidegger’s piece, he draws on the poetry of Friedrich Hölderlin and Rainer Maria Rilke to explain what appears to be vulnerability, although Heidegger does not use the term. Reading deeper into his tract, with the help of Professor Brené Brown’s TED Talk “The Power of Vulnerability,” helps us better understand vulnerability—not only our resistance to it, but also the safety it brings. Using the ideas of Heidegger, the poets, and Brown, this essay seeks to explain what Heidegger terms “unshieldedness” and why “reversing unshieldedness,” or becoming vulnerable, offers a counter-intuitive safety, as it allows one to have true relationships with other people.

I. Introduction

Recently, someone referred me to “The Power of Vulnerability,” a TED Talk by Professor Brené Brown of the University of Houston. In the talk, Brown began a story about her discovery of vulnerability by explaining her disposition as a researcher. Her education taught her that “if you can’t measure it, it doesn’t exist,” she made it her life goal to eliminate discomfort, to “make [messy topics] not messy,” to calculatively deconstruct these topics so that everyone could understand and conquer them.¹ However, as Brown set off to “deconstruct vulnerability,” she soon found not only that vulnerability flew in the face of her calculative approach, but also that vulnerability possessed an extraordinary power.² In fact, Brown’s discovery that vulnerability is powerful illuminates a similar theme in Martin Heidegger’s “What Are Poets For?” Although Heidegger never explicitly uses the word “vulnerability,” he describes its power when he indicates that an ironic reversal of “unshieldedness” is the birthplace of true relationality.

1 Brené Brown. “The Power of Vulnerability,” TED video, 1:50-3:10, June 2010, http://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability?language=en.

2 Ibid., 5:45-5:55.

II. All Beings are Unprotected

In order to understand Heidegger's concepts regarding vulnerability, we must first examine the nature of the venture and the draft as the uncontrollable progression of existence. Heidegger describes the venture as "the unheard-of center of all daring, the eternal playmate in the game of Being."³ Conversely, the draft is the force that draws beings towards the venture.⁴ All beings are subject to the draft towards the venture, like the "flow" in the cliché "go-with-the-flow." The venture, and the draft that draws everything towards the venture, comprise the inevitable progression of existence.

Going with the draft into the venture, however, leaves beings dangerously unprotected. "Nature ventures living beings," Heidegger writes as he quotes poet Rainer Maria Rilke, "and 'grants none special cover.'"⁵ Beings, all following the draft of the venture to some extent, are unprotected. We are exposed to the possibilities of losing loved ones, suffering physical ailments, being emotionally hurt, getting our hearts broken. Further, the venture includes "flinging into danger."⁶ As Brown herself indicated in her lecture, "life is messy."⁷

To elaborate, it is perhaps the balance of the venture that renders the venture dangerous. Heidegger writes that the venture holds what is ventured in balance.⁸ He also indicates that in the Middle Ages, the same word, *die Wage*, meant both balance and risk.⁹ Thus, Heidegger implies that the balance of the venture intrinsically involves danger. The venture balances death and birth, pain and pleasure, punishment and reward, failure and success; death makes way for birth, feeling greater pain lets us feel greater pleasure, the reality of punishment makes us appreciate rewards, understanding failure makes us appreciate and yearn for success. The "bad sides" of the balance—pain, death, punishment, failure—are constant dangers for us, but again, all part of the balance.

3 Martin Heidegger, "What Are Poets For?" in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: HarperCollins, 1971), 102.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid., 100.

6 Ibid.

7 Brown, 2:15-2:30.

8 Heidegger, 102.

9 Ibid., 101.

III. Unshieldedness: Man's Unique Unprotectedness

Heidegger explains that while neither animals nor humans are protected from these dangers, their difference in being causes them to “differ in their unprotectedness.”¹⁰ Man's distinctness of being, Heidegger suggests, comes from the way that he is ventured. Heidegger cites Rilke, whose poetry

thinks of a man as the being who is ventured into a willing, the being who, without as yet experiencing it, is willed in the will to will. Willing in this way, man can go with the venture in such a way as to set himself up as the end and goal of everything. Thus man is more venturesome than plant or beast. Accordingly, he also is in danger differently from [plant or beast].¹¹

Here, Rilke (and thus Heidegger) indicates that the venture that takes man gives him a will. In other words, man himself does not make a will, but rather is given one. However, human will has a propensity to make its owner the only end goal, as man usually wants to do everything for his own ultimate benefit. Thus, a man's will may render him “more venturesome.” It is not enough for the man as a willing being to go with the draft into the venture; he must also will it himself. With this will, he may try to take action against the “bad sides” of the balance—again, pain, death, punishment, failure. However, at the end of the quote above, Rilke ironically suggests that having such a will actually puts man in a different kind of danger, demonstrating man's unique unprotectedness.

Further, man's unique unprotectedness, which Heidegger calls “unshieldedness,” is found in the way that man's will objectifies. Man's willing, Heidegger writes, is “production, placing here, and this in the sense of objectification purposely putting itself through, asserting itself.”¹² In willing, man asserts himself specifically through objectification. For example, Brown sought to “organize [life and its messiness] and put it into a bento box; she wanted to understand the messy topics, “[hacking] into these things that [she] knew were important and [laying] the code out for everyone to see.”¹³ Brown, like many, hung her hat on “research,” the

10 Ibid., 100.

11 Ibid., 112.

12 Ibid., 108.

13 Brown, 2:20-3:10.

definition of which, she says, is “to study phenomena for the explicit reason to control and predict.”¹⁴ In fact, when she learned through interviews that what “underpinned [shame] was excruciating vulnerability,” she claimed that she sought to “beat [vulnerability] back with a measuring stick” so that she could control, predict, and thus possibly prevent shame.¹⁵ Perhaps this research could help her and others escape the dangers of the balance, in particular those associated with shame. In this way, Brown attempted, as many of us do, to willingly assert herself by objectifying nature. However, Heidegger writes that objectification by willing does not actually protect man—it makes him “unshielded.” As unshielded, “[man] himself and his things are thereby exposed to the growing danger of turning into mere material and into a function of objectification.”¹⁶ Unshieldedness, found in willing objectively, is by nature dangerous; perhaps, as Heidegger soon indicates, we are in danger of losing something when our unshieldedness objectifies.

IV. Reversing Unshieldedness

Now, Heidegger has presented us with a dilemma: no beings are protected in the balance of the draft as they are subject to the dangers of the balance, but man is still dangerously “unshielded” through his willing against those dangers. Danger of some kind is inescapable.

Therefore, Heidegger’s solution comes from an excerpt from Friedrich Hölderlin’s poetry: “But where there is danger, there grows also what saves.”¹⁷ There is no safety, Heidegger suggests, apart from danger. Such a loop-hole would seem like the only possible solution to the question of how to “escape” inescapable danger.

Thus, Heidegger suggests that safety comes not in eliminating unshieldedness, but in reversing it. “What keeps safe is unshieldedness in reverse,” he writes.¹⁸ With apparent absurdity, Heidegger does not suggest that any type of shield or protection will keep us safe. Rather, unshieldedness in itself saves us. However, it is not just any unshieldedness—it is

14 Ibid., 10:45-11:00.

15 Ibid., 5:00-6:00.

16 Heidegger, 113.

17 Friedrich Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke* (Munich: N. V. Hellingrath, F. Seebass, & L. V. Pigenot, 1913-1916), IV, 190, quoted in Martin Heidegger, “What Are Poets For?” in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: HarperCollins, 1971), 115.

18 Heidegger, 119.

unshieldedness in reverse. Such a reversed unshieldedness Heidegger calls a “conversion.”¹⁹

Heidegger elaborates on the meaning of this conversion: it is a shift between the interiority of the “calculating consciousness” to the “true interiority of the heart’s space.” He writes, “if the unshieldedness...²⁰ lies in the objectification that belongs to the invisible and interior of calculating consciousness, then the natural sphere of unshieldedness is the invisible and interior of consciousness.”²¹ Thus, the interior of our consciousness is where we have become calculative, objectifying creatures, and thus unshielded. However, “it may well be that the turning of our unshieldedness... must begin with this, that we turn the transient and therefore preliminary character of object-things away from the inner... producing consciousness.”²² Thus, reversing unshieldedness moves past the calculating consciousness. This is a dangerous process, as it leaves behind the objectifications that organize life and make it less menacing. Heidegger then goes on to say that this process of turning unshieldedness moves “toward the true interior of the heart’s space.”²³ He quotes Rilke, who writes that “our task is to impress this preliminary, transient earth upon ourselves with so much suffering and so passionately that its nature rises up again ‘invisibly’ within us.”²⁴ Again, this process does not seem safe. To be “impressed,” to feel “suffering” and “passion,” to have the world rise within us—these are to let the world alter us deeply, within our deep interior.

V. What Reversed Unshieldedness Offers

Yet, in the conversion towards the interiority of the heart, safety appears as freedom in our relationships with others. Heidegger writes, “only in the invisible innermost of the heart is man inclined toward what there

19 Ibid.

20 “But if the unshieldedness is the parting against the Open, while yet the parting lies in the objectification that belongs to the invisible and interior of calculating consciousness, then the natural sphere of unshieldedness is the invisible and interior of consciousness.” I omitted the portion about the “Open” because I have not explored it in my essay, and in effect, the logic of the sentence is not altered if I omit “the Open.”

21 Heidegger, 124.

22 Ibid., 127.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

is for him to love: the forefathers, the dead, the children, those who are to come.”²⁵ Here, the conversion that saves us moves past the interiority of calculating consciousness to a deeper interiority of the heart, where relationality, the capacity to love, is born. In fact, Heidegger writes earlier that when things “can be at rest within themselves...they can rest without restriction within one another.”²⁶ Together, these quotes suggest that the interiority of the heart allows us to rest within ourselves, so that we can be at rest with one another. In fact, Brown found that those people who felt a true sense of connection to others “had connection as a result of authenticity. They were willing to let go of what they thought they should be in order to be what they were.”²⁷ Here, as people allowed penetration through their own objectifying walls into their true hearts, they found freedom, and therefore, perhaps, a unique safety.

To clarify, because “what we are” is always unshielded, it is authentic²⁸ unshieldedness—or rather, unshieldedness in reverse—that saves. To be who we truly are is to be unshielded, so to be safe may not be to escape unshieldedness. However, a distinction should be made between normal unshieldedness and reversed unshieldedness. Normal unshieldedness tries (and fails) to objectively will against danger and create “shieldedness.” On the other hand, reversed unshieldedness does not try to be shielded and is therefore ironically a more authentic unshieldedness. Reversed unshieldedness does not say, “I will put up calculative walls to protect myself from the world.” Rather, it says, “I acknowledge that I am unshielded: that I am afraid of the ‘bad sides’ of the balance and desire to protect myself from them, but I will willfully go with the draft into the potential danger nonetheless.”

In fact, Brown’s discussion alluded to this reversed unshieldedness and appropriately termed it “vulnerability,” where we find the ability to safely connect with others. When Brown talked to people who experienced the most relational “sense of love and belonging,” she discovered the following about them:

They talked about the willingness to say “I love you” first...
to do something where there are no guarantees...to invest in a

25 Ibid., 125.

26 Ibid., 127.

27 Brown, 9:20-9:35.

28 Although “authentic” here is partially borrowed from Brown, Heidegger uses “authentic” extensively in *Being and Time*, so I found it appropriate to use here.

relationship that may or may not work out. . . . And now, my mission to control and predict had turned up the answer that the way to live was with vulnerability, and to stop controlling and predicting.²⁹

These people who felt the most sense of connection were vulnerable. They subjected the interiority of their hearts to the dangerous risks of possible rejection, uncertainty, or failure—whatever the balance of the venture threw at them—and hence were authentically unshielded. Their behaviors did not try to control or predict. Indeed, that these people felt more “love and belonging” than did others flew in the face of Brown’s controlling and predicting. Thus, controlling and predicting—or Heidegger’s objective willing—puts one in danger of not experiencing connection and belonging. As Heidegger might say, unshielded, objective willing turns one away from the interiority of the heart. Vulnerability, as an ironic reversal of unshieldedness, is therefore the birthplace of relationality.

VI. Conclusion

Let me provide an overview what we have discussed. As beings are taken up in the draft towards the venture, they suffer the dangers of the balance. Pleasure is balanced by pain, success by failure, reward by punishment. All beings live a dangerous existence. But as humans try to protect themselves from pain, failure, punishment, etc.—the “bad” sides of the balance—they live an even more dangerous existence. This attempt at protection, brought about by objective and calculative willing, actually makes humans unshielded, in a unique type of danger. As danger of some kind is now unavoidable, the only safety must come from some type of “loop hole,” and such is what Heidegger suggests. To be safe, we must reverse our unshieldedness. This reversal takes the form of a conversion from the “calculating consciousness” where we objectify the world in an attempt to protect ourselves from it, to the “true interiority of the heart,” where we may be changed in frightening ways, but where we may also love others. To clarify, in the reversed unshieldedness, one does not eliminate one’s unshieldedness. Instead, this reversal is to acknowledge that one is unshielded and has a desire to protect oneself from the dangers of the balance, but nevertheless to go willfully with the draft into the potential danger. Again, when we reverse our unshieldedness, our hearts may be changed; we will be vulnerable. But we may also truly and meaningfully relate with other people, and this relation is the safety found in vulnerability.

29 Brown, 10:15-11:15.

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Bad Faith and the Belief that Vaccines Cause Autism

Raymond P. Uymatiao

Abstract: This paper will argue that the anti-vaccination movement's assertion that vaccines are a cause of autism is made in bad faith. Bad faith as developed by Sartre is the evasion of personal responsibility and freedom that occurs through the adoption of false but idealistic beliefs which are held in spite of evidence against those beliefs. This paper will argue that what the anti-vaccination movement is evading is a theodicy in which innocent children are permitted to suffer from disease and that it does so by creating a scapegoat upon whom to cast blame, namely the scientific-medical community, the state, and the pharmaceutical industry, whose evidence can never be sufficient for the dismissal of their beliefs. By asserting that these people are to blame for making children autistic by vaccinating them, the anti-vaccination movement creates a convenient although false explanation that replaces more plausible explanations for the pathogenesis of autism, allowing them to evade a theodicy in which innocent children are not exempt from suffering. I will argue that in the act of refusing to vaccinate one's children there lies a teleological suspension of the ethical.

I. Introduction

The existential conditions for the belief that vaccines cause autism will be analyzed using Jean-Paul Sartre's notion of bad faith and Friedrich Nietzsche's and Arthur Schopenhauer's theses that people desire the ability to attribute blame to people and punish them. Bad faith as it pertains to the anti-vaccination movement's belief that vaccines cause autism will be explained as a result of an evasion of a theodicy that permits the suffering of children by means of accidental injury or death or the affliction of disease, as well as an attitude toward science that makes no amount of scientific evidence sufficient for the refutation of that belief. The anti-vaccination movement is thus a frustrating phenomenon for medical professionals, scientists, and public health experts alike because the evidence-based paradigm that informs medicine and science cannot be sufficiently persuasive for the rejection of the belief that vaccines cause autism.

It is important to note that when I say that a "theodicy which permits the suffering of children" is evaded, what I mean is a naturalistic explanation

for a child's autism that involves genetic causes is rejected in favor of one which views scientists and doctors as conspirators who are trying to harm children, or another which views science and medicine's evidence-based paradigm as innately inadequate to demonstrate the safety of vaccines. Bad faith as the evasion of personal responsibility entails that a specific sort of personal responsibility towards something is evaded. I will try to define what the anti-vaccine stance is trying to evade as well as sketch an image of the choices being made to facilitate the evasion. Next, I will argue that in order to make this evasion possible, the following occurs. First, there is the transformation of fallible belief into infallible or ideal belief. The second is the rejection of a theodicy which permits the affliction of children with disease in favor of one that permits the attribution of blame to people, which involves the creation of an alternative theodicy in which the medical and scientific communities are perceived as an explanation for the suffering of children. Because the idea of bad faith deals with how the evasion of personal responsibility connects with the transition of beliefs into infallible beliefs, bad faith is an appropriate and enlightening way to look at a dangerous phenomenon which cannot be amended with reason and evidence alone. The last section of this paper will inquire as to whether the refusal to vaccinate one's children is one where a teleological suspension of the ethical is made.

II. Brief Overview on Vaccines and the Anti-Vaccination Movement's Assertion that Vaccines Cause Autism

Vaccines are biological preparations that, through eliciting an immune response in a patient, confer immunity to a particular disease. Many of the diseases vaccines seek to keep in control are deadly and debilitating diseases such as smallpox, measles, chicken pox, and polio. Public health organizations such as the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) or the World Health Organization (WHO) use vaccines to control these diseases by working with healthcare providers to implement the vaccination strategies across entire populations. Today in the United States, the CDC recommends in its 2015 vaccination schedule about 25 total doses of 11 different vaccines designed to create immunity for diseases or viruses such as hepatitis B, rotavirus, diphtheria, polio, measles, mumps, rubella, and varicella, with dosage and scheduling varying by risks associated

with certain populations or timing.¹ Many of these diseases are very dangerous but have been largely eradicated in industrialized countries or all countries due to robust vaccination programs. For instance, before the first clinical use of the measles vaccine in the UK, the peak of the measles epidemic in 1955 in the UK saw 693,803 measles cases that led to 174 deaths. Following the implementation of major national and international vaccination strategies, measles vaccinations decreased by the mid 1980's the incidence of measles to under 100,000 per year with only 13 deaths.² Similar narratives in which widespread and strategic vaccination across a population greatly reduce harm exist for polio, smallpox, tetanus, and many other diseases.³

The anti-vaccination movement as it exists today poses a serious public health risk due to its capability to persuade people from vaccinating themselves or their children out of the belief that vaccines may cause autism, as well as other kinds of harm such as allergic reactions to vaccines. This poses a serious public health hazard because the efficacy of vaccines is dependent on a high level of penetration through a population and the protection of those who may not be able to receive a vaccine for reasons such as allergies to those vaccines through herd immunity, an immunity which is attained by surrounding people without immunity with those with. While not large enough to cause widespread outbreaks of disease, the anti-vaccine movement, where it happens to be most pervasive, has already caused small outbreaks of diseases vaccines would have otherwise prevented. For instance, according to a CDC report, the monthly number of measles cases in the United States reached a 20 year high as of 2014 and 90% of these measles cases in the United States involved patients who were not vaccinated with 85% of those who are not vaccinated being so because of religious, philosophical, or personal reasons.⁴

1 "Recommended Immunization Schedules for Persons Aged 0 Through 18 Years," *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, 2015. Accessed April 3 2015, <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/schedules/downloads/child/0-18yrs-combined-schedule-bw.pdf>.

2 Leen Khader Tannous, Garvin Barlow, and Neil Metcalfe, "A Short Clinical Review of Vaccination against Measles," *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 2014. Accessed April 3, 2015, http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4012664/?report=reader#_ffn_sectitle.

3 A. M. Stern and H. Markel, "The History Of Vaccines And Immunization: Familiar Patterns, New Challenges." *Health Affairs* 24 (2005): 611-21.

4 "Measles Cases in the United States Reach 20-year High," *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, May 29, 2014. Accessed April 4, 2015.

As the anti-vaccination movement threatens to undermine the efficacy of vaccines, medical professionals and scientists have to contend with the difficulty of persuading those who believe vaccines will harm them and their children to do so anyways. This is in spite of the fact that the original 1993 study published in *The Lancet* by Wakefield that linked the MMR (measles, mumps, rubella) vaccine to autism was discredited and the failure of studies to find this alleged link.⁵

Broadly speaking, autism is a condition which is characterized by deficiencies in social interaction and communication. Autism as a label for the purposes of this essay will be used as a broad label for all autism spectrum disorders that the anti-vaccination movement believes can be caused by vaccines. This includes diseases such as Asperger syndrome, pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS), and childhood disintegrative disorder under the American Psychiatric Association's DSM-5 (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Fifth Edition). It is an assertion made by the anti-vaccination movement that vaccines cause autism or at least that there is a lack of evidence that this is not the case.

In the 2015 PBS documentary *The Vaccine War*, members of the anti-vaccination movement as well as medical professionals and scientists are interviewed and provide their testimony on the controversy behind vaccination. Among the interviewees was J. B. Handley, a prominent skeptic of vaccination, the father of an autistic child, and the founder of an organization named Generation Rescue. This organization asserts that the connection between autism and vaccines is not yet known and that aggressive vaccine schedules may be to blame for the increase in autism rates. Here is a short section of his interview:

You're implying there is a connection [between the increase in autism diagnoses and implementation of intensive vaccine schedules], but the fact that two things go up at the same time doesn't mean they're associated.

No. So if you're thinking about autism for a moment, and you accept that the prevalence has risen dramatically, which most

5 L. E. Taylor, A. L. Swerdfeger, and G. D. Eslick, "Vaccines Are Not Associated with Autism: An Evidence-based Meta-analysis of Case-control and Cohort Studies," *Vaccine* 32, no. 29 (2014): 3623-29.

mainstream scientists accept, there are still some doubters out there who you'll be able to find who will try to give you this mythical notion that autism had already been with us at the same rate. But if you accept for a moment that prevalence has actually risen, which, again, most scientists, all the mainstream autism organizations, all accept that it has, then it has to be an environmental component. There has to be something in the environment going on that's raising the prevalence. Well, if it has to be an environmental component, the right question is: What is it? Is it one thing? Is it five things? Is it 10 things? ...

You're talking about a different hypothesis. I'm talking about, is it MMR?

Yeah, it hasn't been looked at in a proper way. So no, I wasn't remotely convinced, and I don't stand convinced today.⁶

In the above transcript of his interview as well as through the rest of the interview, Handley seems to have an attitude towards evidence that suggests that he doesn't actually believe that modern vaccination practices cause autism. He cites the large rise in the number of autism diagnoses made since the 90's in the United States and attributes this to modern vaccination schedules.

The problem with this objection is that it conveniently disregards other explanations for the increase in autism diagnoses in the United States. Examples are the diagnostic substitution of mental retardation to autism (a "euphemism treadmill"), an increased imperative among educators to report unusual behavior among students as a result of the passing of the IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Act), and the broadening of the diagnostic criteria for autism spectrum disorders between the original DSM (Diagnostic Statistical Manual) and the DSM-5. An example of diagnostic substitution is found in Croen et al.'s 2002 paper "The Changing Prevalence of Autism in California" which found that decreases in mental

⁶ *Frontline*, "The Vaccine War," directed by Jon Palfreman (2015; Arlington, VA: PBS.), <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/health-science-technology/the-vaccine-war/j-b-handley-no-study-shows-vaccines-didnt-cause-my-sons-autism/>.

retardation diagnoses are accompanied by increases in autism diagnoses.⁷ Interestingly, as diagnoses of mental retardation have been decreasing over the time period in Croen's study, no one has attributed vaccines a cause of the reduction in mental retardation diagnoses. While there is no controversy as to whether diagnostic substitution is a factor at all in raising the number of autism diagnoses, further studies have shown that only about 25 percent of new diagnoses can only be attributed to diagnostic substitution.⁸ Yet, this does not take away from the point that one should not have an attitude towards evidence such that alternative explanations are immediately cast away. I will argue that this happens in bad faith.

III. Bad Faith: Belief

According to Sartre, there exists a notion of ideal belief. An ideal belief is a belief so justified that it is equivalent to knowledge and has a criterion of evidence that only accepts perfect evidence. In bad faith, ideal belief becomes the standard of belief so only pleasing evidence may be used as the standard for ordinary beliefs. What this allows for is merely the use of evidence that one finds pleasing in order to evade responsibility for our choices. In the case of the anti-vaccination movement and its ideal belief that vaccines cause autism, the attitude toward evidence is one that rejects evidence which contradicts their ideal belief.

Husserl here describes how beliefs made in bad faith are recognized through critical reflection in his *Cartesian Mediations*:

Moreover, this open possibility of becoming doubtful, or of non-being, in spite of evidence, can always be recognized in advance by critical reflection on what the evidence in question does.⁹

What ideal belief allows for is the rejection of any scientific evidence against the claim that vaccines cause autism, because if the evidence contradicts the belief, it is resisted or immediately rejected. The belief that vaccines cause autism as held by current anti-vaccination advocates is thus an ideal belief.

7 Lisa Croen, Judith Grether, Jenny Hoogstrate, and Steve Selvin, "The Changing Prevalence of Autism in California," *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 32, no. 3 (2002): 207-15.

8 M. King and P. Bearman, "Diagnostic Change And The Increased Prevalence Of Autism," *International Journal of Epidemiology* 38, no. 5 (2009): 1224-34.

9 Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Mediations: An Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1960) 15.

The way in which the anti-vaccination movement deals with evidence is to evade it. An example of how this occurs is when scientific evidence from universities is rejected because much of that research is federally funded through organizations such as the NIH, reflecting a belief in unreasonable conspiracies between governments and researchers. Similarly, upon the refutation of certain hypotheses, such as the connection between the MMR vaccine and autism or that of thimerosal and autism, new hypotheses are created. Although certain related hypotheses may be wrong, the primary ideal belief that vaccines cause autism cannot be refuted.

For instance, Gerber and Offit's "Vaccines and Autism: A Tale of Shifting Hypotheses" explores three broad hypotheses the anti-vaccination movement has generated, their refutation, and their swift replacement with newer hypotheses. Importantly, how each of these hypotheses are subsequently debunked with sound reason and evidence are provided. These are the hypotheses that (i) the MMR vaccine causes autism by damaging the intestinal lining (as per Wakefield's retracted paper), (ii) that thimerosal, a mercury-based vaccine preservative damages the central nervous system, and (iii) many simultaneous vaccinations overwhelm the immune system. (i) and (ii) have been refuted but (iii) has not yet undergone rigorous empirical testing. However, it is deemed a naïve hypothesis by immunologists because vaccines don't have enough "immunological load" to overwhelm an average child's immune system. Yet, organizations like Generation Rescue and individuals like J. B. Handley and Jenny McCarthy continue to demand changes to vaccine schedules despite a lack of any sound theoretical or empirical evidence for doing so. By creating newer and more naïve hypotheses that are more and more difficult to test due to ethical concerns, the anti-vaccine movement flees from evidence by demanding more.¹⁰

Another phenomenon ideal belief results in is the privileging of epistemologically weaker kinds of evidence such as anecdotal evidence. For instance, many anti-vaccination advocates such as J. B. Handley or Jenny McCarthy describe "losing" their children to autism immediately after vaccination. In an interview in the PBS documentary *The Vaccine War*, J. B. Handley testifies that his child "regressed" developmentally just after vaccination and that this was an experience of other parents as well:

10 Jeffrey S. Gerber and Paul A. Offit, "Vaccines And Autism: A Tale Of Shifting Hypotheses," *Clinical Infectious Diseases* 48, no. 4 (2009): 456-61.

J. B. HANDLEY: I don't give a [expletive deleted] about what the MMR said! My kid got six vaccines in one day, and he regressed! You don't have any science that can show me that the regression wasn't triggered by the six vaccines. What the parents are saying is, "I went in for a vaccine appointment. My kid got six vaccines, and they regressed."

We need to ask the question as to why the regression took place, not whether the regression took place, why the regression took place. The only way to do that is to look at that load of vaccines and compare a group of kids or a group of animals who got the load and who didn't.¹¹

Here, evidence and sophisticated theoretical paradigms in immunology such as the estimated capability of infants' immune systems being able to potentially respond to thousands of vaccines simultaneously, or the fact that modern vaccines actually have a lower immunological load than previous vaccines as more effective vaccines are engineered, are given less privilege than anecdotal evidence. Ideal belief thus lowers value of evidence contrary to it and causes one to be more willing to accept epistemologically weaker sorts of evidence. A serious double standard is at play when one demands for more rigorous peer-reviewed studies that involve non-federal or pharmaceutical company-based funding while accepting and using anecdotal evidence as the bulwark of one's convictions.

A demand for perfect evidence as a response to the creation of ideal belief is thus created when anti-vaccination advocates assert that vaccines cause autism. To carry out this act of epistemological gymnastics, prominent figures and organizations in the anti-vaccination movement hold any evidence contrary to their ideal belief as inadequate while accepting any evidence in their favor, even if it means implementing a double standard for evidence. Bad faith as the evasion of a displeasing truth in favor for a pleasing falsehood is thus something that the anti-vaccination movement happens to find itself in when it asserts that vaccines cause autism.

IV. Bad Faith: Evasion

At the end of the previous section, bad faith was articulated as the fleeing

¹¹ *Frontline*.

from a displeasing truth in favor of a pleasing falsehood. This raises the following questions: how can the notion that vaccines cause autism be a pleasing falsehood? Likewise, how can a conspiracy between big pharmaceutical corporations, states, and the medical-scientific community be a pleasing falsehood? And lastly, what displeasing truth is being evaded? Plausible answers to these questions may all relate to what may be an evasion of a theodicy in which the suffering of children is permitted. Is nature to blame for the suffering of children? Or can people who can be held responsible be blamed? Vaccines and the parties responsible for the creation and administration of vaccines act as a scapegoat who can be used to explain the suffering of children who are afflicted by autism by virtue of having been vaccinated.

Thus, in bad faith, the anti-vaccination advocate attempts to evade naturalistic explanations for the suffering of children and themselves that involve, for instance, genetic causes which in turn means simple bad luck. A reason for thinking this may be that the scapegoat, namely vaccines and the parties associated with them, is preferable as an explanation for suffering to simple bad luck.

Nietzsche's hypothesis found in *Twilight of the Idols* is that the belief in free will and moral responsibility is pervasive because people desire to be able to punish other people. On this matter he says:

Today we no longer have any pity for the concept of "free will." we know only too well what it really is – the foulest of all theologians' artifices, aimed at making mankind "responsible" in their sense... Wherever responsibilities are sought, it is usually the instinct of wanting to judge and punish which is at work.¹²

How does the want to judge and punish connect with the preference of members of the anti-vaccination movement for an explanation of their suffering that involves doctors or scientists as opposed to the nature? The desire to attribute free will to people in order to be able to punish them for their actions could mean that it is preferable to have a cause of suffering that one can hold responsible.

This is contrary to Schopenhauer's stance on the matter, which argues that

12 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1954), 499.

suffering from nature is preferable to suffering from the will of another. On this he writes in his essay “On Religion”:

Suffering which falls to our lot in the course of nature or by chance, or fate, does not, *ceteris paribus*, seem so painful as suffering which is inflicted on us by the arbitrary will of another. This is because we look upon nature and chance as the fundamental masters of the world; we see that the blow we received from them might just as well have fallen on another. In the case of suffering which springs from this source, we bewail the common lot of humanity rather than our own misfortune.¹³

Nietzsche and Schopenhauer would probably disagree on whether it is preferable to suffer to nature than to other people. Should the anti-vaccination movement really prefer to blame people, scientists, medical professionals, the state, or pharmaceutical companies instead of nature in the form of genetic causes of autism, the conclusion of Nietzsche’s view would be favored: people prefer the causes of their suffering to be blameworthy. The possibility of being able to attribute free will, moral responsibility, and thus punish may make it preferable to think that people are to blame for particular sorts of suffering as opposed to nature. Here it is important to note that when one tries to reconcile the phenomenon of the anti-vaccination movement’s preference for suffering at human hands instead of nature’s, a problem with Schopenhauer’s view arises.

Schopenhauer himself says that suffering at the hands of nature is less painful to suffering at the hands of man because “we look upon nature and chance as the fundamental masters of the world; we see that the blow we received from them might just as well have fallen on another.” Thus, Schopenhauer must either be wrong, or the desire to justifiably punish be strong enough to overcome Schopenhauer’s assertion that suffering from nature is more painful than suffering because of other people.

From this phenomenon arises the question “why us?” when a parent or parents realize their child has a disability or disease such as autism. When pure misfortune is thought of as the cause of this suffering, one is left without resolution. On the other hand, when other people are the cause of suffering, the possibility of vengeance is present. On this matter

13 Arthur Schopenhauer, “On Religion,” in *Collected Essays of Arthur Schopenhauer*, (Lanham: Start Publishing LLC, 2012), 202.

Schopenhauer writes in the same essay:

But that it is the arbitrary will of another which inflicts the suffering, is a peculiarly bitter addition to the pain or injury it causes, viz., the consciousness that someone else is superior to us, whether by force or cunning, we lie helpless... By inflicting injury on the one who has injured us, whether we do it by force or cunning, is to show our superiority to him, and to annul the proof of his superiority to us. That gives our hearts the satisfaction towards which it yearns.¹⁴

While Schopenhauer may have been wrong with regard to whether people would prefer to suffer at the hands of nature instead of other people, his writing from the same paragraph which discusses vengeance supports the theory that the anti-vaccination movement is attempting to evade the theodicy which permits suffering of people from nature by trying to blame people who can be held morally responsible and hence punished. This supports Nietzsche's hypothesis which says that people want to attribute free will to other people so they can be held morally responsible and be punished for their acts. When one has someone to cast blame on, vengeance becomes possible. Should that succeed, "getting even" becomes possible. Thus, despite the fact that suffering at the hands of man may be more painful than suffering at the hands of nature, the satisfaction of having a cause of suffering being people and thus finite, may drive the rejection of a theodicy in which nature permits for the suffering of children. In the case of the anti-vaccination movement, this would mean preferring to think that the medical-scientific community and anyone who has to do with vaccines are the cause of autism. This would be the preferred way to think because scientists and doctors being people disclose the possibility of justifiable vengeance through punishment, which Schopenhauer as well as Nietzsche seem to agree as being something appealing to man.

V. The Choice to Not Vaccinate - A Teleological Suspension of the Ethical

A teleological suspension of the ethical is the suspension of ethical beliefs for the sake of faith. In Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard discusses the existential condition of Abraham as he climbs a mountain under God's orders to sacrifice his own son. Because killing

¹⁴ Ibid., 202.

one's own children is obviously ethically wrong, it is said that Abraham must have suspended the ethical in order to carry out his duty as a faithful person to God. Here, Abraham lives a paradox for he, as a knight of faith and a finite being, must follow the absolute while dismissing the universal (the ethical). Just as Abraham is about to sacrifice Isaac, he is stopped by an angel and becomes the father of Israel.¹⁵

Such a teleological suspension of the ethical is made by those who refuse to vaccinate their children due to concerns that vaccines may cause autism, as well as by those who assert the idea that vaccines may cause autism in bad faith by subscribing to the absolute they have constructed for themselves in the form of the ideal belief that vaccines cause autism. As such, the ethical is suspended. Here, the ethical would be the advice of medical professionals, the available evidence contrary to the idea that vaccines cause autism, and the ethical decision to vaccinate one's children to prevent outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases. Although it is done in bad faith as opposed to good faith, the anti-vaccination movement, by constructing an ideal belief, creates an article of faith which the ethical may be suspended for.

VI. Conclusion

The belief that vaccines cause autism is thus one that is held in bad faith. This happens through the construction of an ideal belief which becomes the standard of evidence to which no amount of evidence contrary to it can demonstrate its falsity and the evasion of a naturalistic theodicy which permits the suffering of children in favor of one that allows its adherents to have people to blame. Also, there is a teleological suspension of the ethical in those who do not vaccinate their children due to concerns that arise from vaccines being a cause of autism and anyone else who holds that belief in bad faith, due to the creation of ideal beliefs that call for the rejection of evidence and reasons that can cause other people harm.

An ironic consequence of the pervasive nature of bad faith is that this paper's thesis could easily be accused of being in bad faith. Even sincerity according to Sartre is said to be not only necessary for the existence of bad faith, but that claims of sincerity are especially likely to leave one in bad faith. Therefore, in the name of truth and authenticity, I can only

15 Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alastair Hannay (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1985).

recommend that the best available reason and evidence ought to be scrutinized and respected, so that harmful ideal beliefs such as the one analyzed in this essay can be rejected.

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Standing On Your Own: Irony, Love, and Autonomous Dependence in Kierkegaard's Thought

Pedro Monque

Abstract: This paper discusses the concept of autonomy in Kierkegaard's authorship in relation to two features of Kierkegaardian thought: irony and love. In the first part of the paper I discuss the necessity for the ironic consciousness to develop autonomy. I first analyze the characteristics of the ironic consciousness' emergence as described in *On the Concept of Irony*, and then outline the challenges it creates for the individual seeking autonomy through a phenomenological examination of A from *Either/Or*. In the second part of the paper I argue that there is an aesthetic as well as a religious solution to the problems posed by the ironic consciousness. In particular, I discuss whether the principal characteristic of divine love, "not seeking its own," can lead the religious individual to a relationship with the divine that is truly autonomous, and whether this can be said to respect ideal love's demands.

In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard presents the idea that friendship and romantic love, while immensely valuable, are merely refined forms of self-love. These forms of love work as an exchange that is ultimately filled with a concern for guaranteeing that one is getting something from the relationship.¹ By contrast, the ideal form of love, according to Kierkegaard, is self-renouncing: it "seeks not its own."² A discussion of the material implications of this form of love, while interesting in its own right, is not the aim of this paper. Instead, let us examine a key idea in Kierkegaard's text: for love to not seek its own, the lover must act in such a way that the beloved thinks of love's gifts as belonging to her from the very beginning. In other words, love does not seek recognition from the receiver, and it must act so the receiver does not owe to the lover. Self-renouncing love must conceal itself like this because it acknowledges the world of the spirit, or self, and to love a person in this sense is to help them become independent. If the beloved relied on something external to secure

1 This form of love is traditionally associated with classical philosophy, as evidenced in Book VIII of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* or Cicero's *De Amicitia*. For an account of how self-interested love can develop into altruistic forms of group love under a modern naturalistic framework see Patricia Churchland, *Braintrust: What Neuroscience Tells Us About Morality*, (Princeton University Press, 2011).

2 Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 247-60.

her selfhood, then she would not be autonomous since she would not be standing truly on her own. Hence, love can claim no credit for the greatest benefaction in Kierkegaardian thought, which is to help someone stand on his or her own.³

The path to standing on one's own is tied to the development of the ironic consciousness, a concept which spans Kierkegaard's authorship.⁴ This ironic consciousness is an integral part of the development of autonomous self-hood; however, obtaining it requires the person to remove herself from immediacy, which leads to pain and alienation. An even greater problem is that irony only helps complete the first half of the path to autonomy, i.e. removing the individual from immediacy. It cannot, however, ensure that the person will make a return to immediacy and resolve the state of despair or inauthenticity that Kierkegaard attributes to the ironic consciousness. Developing an ironic consciousness comes at a great price to the individual and is not enough for a person to stand on his or her own. To be autonomous, the person must complete the entire Kierkegaardian double-movement; that is, she must not only depart from immediacy but also make her return to it through an acceptance of immediacy mediated by the concept of God. In this paper I will examine the reasons why the ironic consciousness, embodied by the character of A in *Either/Or*, might or might not be considered to be fully standing on its own, and how the concept of God is supposed to remedy this limitation of the ironic consciousness by reconciling the individual with his or her immediacy. I also explore the idea that Kierkegaard does not claim the concept of God to be the exclusive solution to the problem of autonomy; instead, every individual is free to choose their way to reconciliation with immediacy.

I. The Creation and Challenges of the Ironic Consciousness: Irony as Socratic Poison

To understand why Kierkegaard argues that the ironic consciousness cannot stand on its own, we must first know what it means to have an ironic consciousness. An individual develops an ironic consciousness by realizing her freedom from immediacy, i.e. freedom from all the rules,

3 Ibid., 255-257.

4 For a detailed discussion on irony and its role in Kierkegaard's authorship see K. Brian Söderquist, *The Isolated Self*, (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2007); see also K. Brian Söderquist, "Irony," in *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, ed. John Lippitt and George Pattison, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

ideas, and boundaries imposed on the individual by her culture, religion and society. This process is aptly shown by the figure of Socrates in Kierkegaard's dissertation, *On the Concept of Irony*.

To become free from immediacy is to realize that all demands made upon us by others have no objective foundation from which to claim our compliance. This form of negative knowledge (i.e. knowledge of what is not true) is embodied by Socrates and his challenge to the worldview of his time. Through his questioning, Socrates is able to destroy anyone's claims to certainty about anything, be it an ethical duty as in the *Euthyphro*, or a familiar concept such as love in the *Symposium*. From this process of questioning arises the ironic consciousness, which is freed from immediacy by critically examining knowledge. Kierkegaard labels this consciousness "ironic" because his definition of irony transcends its common usage as meaning the opposite of what is said. Instead, irony represents pure negativity: a lack of any positive content. The ironic consciousness does not know what "good" is, but it knows what it is not. Kierkegaard's irony is not a rhetorical or stylistic device but an existential category. It describes the individual who, through Socratic reflection, becomes completely free but is also psychologically isolated from immediacy.⁵

While irony endows us with negative freedom, which frees us from all sorts of burdens imposed on us by others, it is also a painful process that severs us from the guideposts that give meaning to our lives. In a telling excerpt, Kierkegaard provides an account of how Alcibiades felt during his relationship with Socrates: "He is like one bitten by a serpent, yet bitten by something more painful and in the most painful place: in the heart and the soul."⁶ Irony works like a poison because it prevents the individual from relying on immediacy to determine their identity and life-direction. Thus, sparking the ironic consciousness in someone is the first step in helping them stand on their own, but it is by no means its conclusion. Irony leaves the individual in a state of alienation from her immediacy and from herself, her life goals no longer meaningful since they can be destroyed by the process of Socratic reflection.

Still, this first step respects self-renouncing love's command to not

5 For a longer discussion on the subject see Söderquist 2007, especially the introduction and chapter 3.

6 Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony with Constant Reference to Socrates*, trans. Lee M. Capel, (London: Collins, 1966).

make the lover dependent on the benefactor. Socrates just catalyzes the emergence of the ironic consciousness without claiming any credit for its emergence because the individual has always had the capacity for self-reflection. No external power can force someone to reach the ironic state. Even though feeling disconnected from our environment looks like a precarious existential position, and encouraging it in others seems ethically questionable, Kierkegaard claims that any life deserving to be called human begins with irony.⁷

II. A from *Either/Or* and the Phenomenology of the Ironic Consciousness

To fully understand the impact of developing an ironic consciousness we can look at A from *Either/Or*, who is a modern, reflective individual who understands his absolute negative freedom. In the “Diapsalmata” we can evince A’s nihilism through his sayings, for example: “How empty is life and without meaning. - We bury a man, we follow him to the grave...”⁸ We can also find evidence that A went through a process of ironic emancipation:

When I was very young I forgot in the cave of Trophonius how to laugh; when I became older, when I opened my eyes and saw reality, I started to laugh and haven’t stopped since. I saw the meaning of life was getting a livelihood, its goal acquiring a titular office, that love’s rich desire was getting hold of a well-to-do girl... That’s what I saw, and I laughed.⁹

A knows that human customs are arbitrary and cannot help laughing at the idea of taking them seriously. Furthermore, his nihilism is metaphysically grounded: “I lie stretched out, inert; all I see is emptiness, all I live on is emptiness, all I move in is emptiness.”¹⁰ Unlike the relativist for whom there is some truth to everything, A realizes that there is nothing which can claim his love, obedience, or admiration. By recognizing the emptiness of the universe, its lack of positive content from which to derive values, he is

7 Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony* sec. 5, 6; quoted in Söderquist 2007, “Irony is Truth”.

8 Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*, trans. Alastair Hannay, (London: Penguin, 1992).

9 *Ibid.*, 51.

10 *Ibid.*, 53.

positioned firmly in irony.¹¹

As modern readers, we feel tempted to cheer for anyone who finds freedom from immediacy; after all, if anyone is going to choose the values we will uphold throughout our lives, it should be us. However, Kierkegaard aims to show us through the character of A that standing on our own takes more than acquiring an ironic consciousness. A is burdened by his negative freedom, he is unable to create and sustain an identity for himself. If ironic emancipation necessarily leads to a lack of identity, one should question whether developing an ironic consciousness is good.

Karsten Harries proposes that, in order to make decisions, one must possess criteria to guide one's choice.¹² Otherwise, our choices would not be distinguishable from accident, and we could not affirm ourselves as individual agents. If irony prevents us from acquiring any such criteria from immediacy or from taking them seriously, how are we supposed to choose one thing over another? This is the problem faced by A, and he narrates it as follows: "If you marry me, you will regret it; if you do not marry me, you will also regret it; if you marry or if you do not marry, you will regret both... Laugh at the world's follies, you will regret it; weep over them, you will also regret it."¹³ A's attitude shows utter indifference toward any decision because they cannot be justified. Furthermore, irony creates melancholy when we remember how easy it was to live in immediacy. A advises us to keep essays written at age fifteen, a time when one idealistically proved things such as the immortality of the soul.¹⁴ He also declares: "Wine no longer gladdens my heart... My soul is faint and powerless... I have lost all my illusions. In vain I try to abandon myself to the infinity of joy; it cannot raise me up, or rather, I cannot raise myself up."¹⁵ This pitiful state shows that developing an ironic consciousness does not necessarily help us develop a strong sense of selfhood that can stand on its own and make meaningful decisions. Rather, A is haunted by his mood and his choices are mere accident.¹⁶

11 The distinction between sophistic relativism and Socratic irony is thoroughly discussed in "The Conception Made Necessary" in *The Concept of Irony* and Söderquist 2007, chapter 2.

12 Karsten Harries, *The Meaning of Modern Art*, (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1968).

13 *Either/Or*, 54.

14 *Ibid.*, 52.

15 *Ibid.*, 56.

16 *Ibid.*, 47.

A cannot be autonomous and give meaning to his life because, in embracing all that the ironic consciousness entails, he has given up his sense of self and any possibility of having a lasting sense of identity. Lacking a self, which Kierkegaard also describes as “having the fullness of your consciousness,” or your real nature, outside of yourself, is such a painful condition that he devotes a whole section of *Either/Or* to describe it.¹⁷ But how can we know that A’s difficulty in choosing is indicative of his lack of identity? Even if an ironic consciousness lacks reasons for choosing because it discovers that it inhabits emptiness, what makes us think that that person’s consciousness, now freed from immediacy through irony, actually loses itself?

Passages of A’s writings suggest this interpretation. For example, he writes: “If anyone should keep a diary it’s me, to aid my memory a little. After a while it often happens that I completely forget what reasons motivated me to do this or that, not just in bagatelles, but also in taking the most decisive steps.”¹⁸ Here we can see someone who wants to remember the reasons for his actions and longs to find a trace of coherence that reveals selfhood instead of accident.

But why does Kierkegaard think that an ironic consciousness cannot rely on itself as a source of values or as a witness to its commitments? An answer to this question is formulated clearly in *The Sickness Unto Death* on the topic of defiant despair (which I interpret to be equal to A’s ironic consciousness). Kierkegaard’s pseudonym Anti-Climacus states: “If the despairing self is active, then really it is constantly relating to itself only experimentally, no matter what it undertakes... The negative form of the self exerts the loosening as much as the binding power; it can, at any moment, start quite arbitrarily all over again.”¹⁹ Thus, the ironic consciousness, knowing that it can make or destroy its own values, cannot take them seriously.

17 Ibid., 214, 209-222.

18 Ibid., 50.

19 Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Edification and Awakening*, trans. Alastair Hannay, (London: Penguin, 2004), 100.

III. Dependent and Independent Ways of Standing On Your Own

As we have seen in the previous section, A faces an important challenge: how can he have some form of psychological stability, a sense of selfhood, if he hovers over emptiness as an ironic consciousness? Anti-Climacus' definition of the self helps illuminate what his problem is: "The self is the conscious synthesis of infinitude and finitude, which relates to itself, whose task it is to become itself, which can only be done in the relationship to God," and also: "In general, what is decisive with regard to the self is consciousness, that is to say self-consciousness. The more consciousness, the more will; the more will, the more self. Someone who has no will at all is no self."²⁰ Using these two quotes, one can interpret A's struggle as an imbalance in his sense of self: he does not take seriously his finitude, or immediacy, and this keeps him from relating to himself as a synthesis of his mind, the infinite part of his self, and his immediacy, the finite part of himself. The repercussions are twofold: first, by lacking criteria to will coherently through time, A recognizes his actions are based on mood. Second, by turning his ironic negativity inward and doubting he has any sort of essence to his being, the task of becoming a self, i.e. himself, becomes perplexing. Let us now consider some solutions to this problem.

IV. The Aesthetic Solution: Detachment and Memory-Control

An aesthetic solution like the one A takes works by denying there is a problem in the first place. While Anti-Climacus sees a lack of will as a lack of self, and an imbalance between finitude and infinitude as a state of despair, A sees his condition as the natural consequence of sobering up to the world's reality. There are no guiding principles to rule our decisions, and there is no essential self to be found, so the idea that one must have some continuity in commitments or values in order to have a self is absurd. It is as meaningless as asking someone to count the number of pennies in an infinite penny jar. It doesn't matter whether you get to 100,000 or stop at 20 and start over again and again; either way, you are still infinitely far from completion. Hence, relating to yourself only experimentally, changing your mind, or acting according to mood are forms of life with equal validity as having lasting commitments.

The aesthetic life not only tears down traditional conceptions of the good life, it also presents us with a way to live with our ironic consciousness.

²⁰ Ibid., 59.

First, the fact that we are embodied is heightened and intentionally used. In the essay “Crop Rotation,” A explains the importance of using everything, from friendships to romantic relationships, to keep ourselves entertained, or idle. The only requirement is to remain detached so you can leave a relationship when it turns boring, and to be detached enough to observe existence as accidental so we can cultivate an internal arbitrariness that “corresponds [to] the accidental outside one.”²¹ Staying constantly amused and always seeking the freedom to pursue what interests us, we can live happily. And while we might not be able to control our moods, we should “always see the mood a little in advance,” or try to predict how we will feel in the future and make the most out of this.²² In sum, the aesthetic life exhorts us to take advantage of our embodiment, our relationships and our moods, and make the most out of these impermanent sources of idleness.

An even more sophisticated technique for leading a satisfying aesthetic life is to develop control over our memories. If all we can count on is our own mental life, we should learn how to fashion it. This is extensively described in “The Unhappiest One” where A describes the unhappiest one as a misshapen human figure that, nonetheless, “rests on none but himself” through a process of memory-control.²³ The description of the unhappiest one does not make him appealing, but perhaps we can separate this gloomy description, and even our idea of A, from the image of the person who can control their memories. A states: “A life in recollection is the most perfect imaginable; memory gives you your fill more abundantly than all of reality and has a security that no reality possesses.”²⁴ Hence, an individual who masters the art of controlling their memories need not also be unhappy. We can stand on our own while acknowledging our lack of essentiality and revel in our fluid identities which we can (re)construct at will by controlling our memories.

The problem with the aesthetic solution to the challenge of having an ironic consciousness is not a conceptual one, as I have shown. Rather, it may be an empirical psychological fact that the ironic consciousness generates distress and suffering despite our attempts to control emotions through detachment and memory-control. Some argue it all comes back

21 *Either/Or*, 236, 240.

22 *Ibid.*, 239.

23 *Ibid.*, 220.

24 *Ibid.*, 50.

to the fact that we cannot take our commitments seriously.²⁵ While this interpretation is compelling, A's misery need not become a universal condition of all ironic individuals; some of us might cheerfully embrace the task of fashioning ourselves on our own.

V. The Religious Solution: Interpreting Immediacy as Gift

The ironic consciousness' consequences of lacking a will through time and doubting the possibility of being a self beyond the mere capacity to fashion ourselves can be interpreted as misrelations to our immediacy. Because ironic persons realize the arbitrariness of outside values, they cannot take them seriously, and because those values determine their self, they cannot take their identity seriously. If external constraints obtained through immediacy have no power over us, but there is also no essential self, we are left without materials for constructing a self and standing on our own. However, if we could dispel the veil of arbitrariness and give validity to immediacy, we could then find sources of meaning in the universe and stop struggling with our perceived lack of identity.

Kierkegaard proposes we validate immediacy by interpreting it as a divine gift. Kierkegaard's concept of the divine is far from the dogmatic idea associated with traditional religions. His God is not concerned with the petty task of determining good and evil, something he thinks humans can do well on their own, and is instead concerned with each person's attainment of authenticity.²⁶ To deny our particular upbringing, physical characteristics, or culture is to reject the gift of finitude in the form of embodiment and temporality. This gift contrasts with the infinite self-fashioning capacity of the ironic consciousness. This finitude we react to and which shapes us gives us the material from which to develop a particular self.

Kierkegaard explores the idea that immediacy is a divine gift in "The Lily in the Field and the Bird of the Air."²⁷ To appreciate immediacy as a divine gift, however, we must first understand silence and obedience. The concept of silence commands us to be quiet so as to "become listeners" and

25 See Karsten Harries, "Between Nihilism and Faith: a Commentary on Either/Or," *Kierkegaard Studies Monograph Series* 21 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2010), Söderquist 2007, and Söderquist 2013, 344-364.

26 *Sickness Unto Death*, 111-15.

27 *Without Authority*, 4-45.

perceive “something divine in this silence.”²⁸ Kierkegaard is not arguing for attunement to a supernatural power but to the divine in immediacy and ourselves. The concept of obedience reminds us of our inescapable embodiment as biological beings and what that means for our relationship to the divine: “In nature everything is unconditional obedience... Thus you can hear God in it.”²⁹ Once the individual acknowledges God’s presence in nature through silence, she is ready to become obedient and take immediacy as a divine gift:

Only by unconditional obedience can one with unconditional accuracy find the place where one is to stand; and if one finds it unconditionally, then one understands that it is unconditionally a matter of indifference if the place is a dunghill.³⁰

The religious person reconciles their ironic consciousness with immediacy by taking their immediacy seriously as a miraculous gift. Then joy flows naturally from regaining the self by accepting our immediacy: “What is joy, or what is it to be joyful? It is truly to be present to oneself.”³¹ For this to happen, we must listen silently for the self within us that has been shaped by our immediacy, and accept it obediently.

Reinterpreting our immediacy as a divine gift fends off the psychological burden of the ironic consciousness. While still beginning our path to authentic selfhood through critically examining immediacy, we can reject the aesthetic solution to irony and its counter-spiritual tenets, like avoiding lasting commitments to values and people. We can also accept that our ability to imagine infinite potential selves does not mean we can erase our factual past and its influences on us.³² Developing a self which is both a product of immediacy and also capable of fashioning itself and willing over time eliminates the main limitations of having an ironic consciousness.

One final question is in order: have all the religious individuals failed in their attempt to be truly autonomous because of their reliance on the divine to mediate their relation to immediacy, and thus to themselves? After all, they are dependent on the divine to be themselves, so this divine love seems

28 Ibid., 12-13.

29 Ibid., 25.

30 Ibid., 28.

31 Ibid., 34.

32 See K. Brian Söderquist, “Authoring a Self,” in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009).

to fail at seeking not its own. This issue is open to interpretation; however, we suggest that the intrinsically motivated and necessarily subjective nature of such a relation to the divine and immediacy is an autonomous form of dependence because it is the individual's decision to include the divine in their interpretation of the world. The ultimate source of selfhood is not an unreflective relationship to immediacy but one mediated by a concept of the divine and grounded on the individual's will.

VI. The Either/Or and Perspectives for Further Research

Throughout his works Kierkegaard presents fewer answers than questions. After describing his entire authorship as a Socratic mission in "My Task," it only seems fitting that the tensions between different ways of standing on your own in *Either/Or* and elsewhere are not resolved.¹ This fills his reader with anxious doubt and an urge to self-reflect. More work on how the choice we just discussed is a real either/or between equally valid aesthetic and religious solutions is needed. While major philosophers like Nietzsche have written extensively on the aesthetic life, exploring the subject from a Kierkegaardian perspective is highly valuable, especially because Kierkegaard later rejects this possibility in *The Sickness Unto Death*, and because his nuanced understanding of embodiment undermines simplistic accounts of isolated self-creation. Another interesting direction would be to explore whether Judge William's solution to the problem of the ironic consciousness can be interpreted as a particularly strong form of the aesthetic solution, given that it is not grounded on the divine.

33 Søren Kierkegaard, *The Moment and Late Writings*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 340-347.

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You Will Regret Both: Kierkegaard's Critique of Modernity in *Either/Or*

Josh Hinchie

Abstract: Søren Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* includes much commentary on the state of modernity by the pseudonyms A and B. In this paper, I argue that A's laments about the impossibility of happiness in the modern world and B's attempts to argue the contrary are vehicles for a critique of modern life. Through these pseudonyms, Kierkegaard paints a picture of the modern world's isolation and its inability to satisfy human desire for the absolute. Kierkegaard's aim in disenchanting the reader with modernity, in keeping with his stated purpose to "deceive men into the religious," is to provoke the reader to search for meaning beyond the social structures of the modern world. While the religious is not itself presented until the final sermon, the entire book serves to raise questions about the sufficiency of the aesthetic and the ethical and so points the reader toward the religious.

In Søren Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*, the conflicting ideas of the characters A and B suggest to the reader that modernity is in a state of crisis, faced with dangers and problems that would not have arisen in an earlier age. A laments the disappearance of tragedy in the modern world and confronts the peculiarly modern disease of boredom. B, on the other hand, responds to A's disenchantment with the modern world by attempting to show him that taking his place in the social structures of his day will give lasting peace and fulfillment. Through this dialogue, Kierkegaard presents a debate over the value of modern modes of life and what is to be done about humanity's peculiarly modern problems. While Kierkegaard does not express his opinion directly, the debate does tend toward certain conclusions, though perhaps these conclusions cannot be clearly seen by either party in the debate. The clash of the two viewpoints creates a critique of modernity that goes beyond what either A or B intends, suggesting a third option that Kierkegaard hints at throughout the book but does not clearly reveal until the final sermon.

Although A's entire oeuvre can be read as a critique of modernity, several of his works stand out above the rest. One of these is his essay "The Tragic in Ancient Drama Reflected in the Tragic in Modern Drama." Although it looks at first to be a purely scholarly comparison of ancient and modern tragedy, the essay turns into a sharp critique not only of modern tragedy but

of the modern outlook in general, which A sees as the driving force behind the corruption of tragedy. A argues from an observation in Aristotle's *Poetics*: actions suitable for tragedy must excite pity and fear, and so must involve misfortune caused neither by utter moral depravity nor by pure fate, but rather by an intermediate kind of error or flaw.¹ A points out that tragic action, since it lies "between these two extremes," contains aspects of both.² On the one hand it is active, since the hero must contribute to his own downfall, but on the other hand it is passive, since the hero must suffer for circumstances that are outside his control. Too much of either the active or the passive destroys the tragic element: if the hero's downfall is purely due to fate, it is not a tragedy but a random disaster, worthy of the news but not of dramatic representation. However, if there is no passivity or suffering whatsoever, if the hero's fate rests squarely in his own hands, then it is not a tragedy but a morality play, for pure evil is not the subject of tragedy. While genuine tragedy lies somewhere between these extremes, each age tends to lean one way or the other. According to A, the ancient is more aesthetic and therefore more passive, and the modern is more ethical and therefore more active.³ A argues, however, that the modern tends to be not only more ethical but entirely ethical, and this eliminates the very possibility of tragedy. Modernity "want[s] to know nothing about the hero's past...[and] load[s] his whole life upon his shoulders as his own deed."⁴ It views the hero as an isolated figure, standing alone and bereft of any external support.

What is this external support, and why is it absent from the modern world? A notes that even though, in the ancient world, "the individual moved freely, he nevertheless rested in substantial determinants, in the state, the family, in fate."⁵ There was a preexisting system that a person fit seamlessly into; he had a place and a purpose without having to search for one. In the modern world, these structures have dissolved, leaving the individual in isolation. According to A, modern individuals often fight this isolation by banding together in associations, trying in vain to reinstate some of the "substantial determinants" of the ancient world. However, the mere fact "[t]hat they seek to counteract the isolating efforts of the

1 Aristotle, *The Poetics of Aristotle*, trans. Stephen Halliwell (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 44.

2 Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: Part I*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 144.

3 *Ibid.*, 143.

4 *Ibid.*, 144.

5 *Ibid.*, 143.

age,” along with “the unreasonable way they seek to counteract it,” only confirms this isolation.⁶ Unlike ancient societies, modern associations are laughably contingent, simply fabricated to suit the desires of their members. Even though A criticizes these half-hearted solutions to the modern predicament, he does not put forward an alternative. The problem of isolation in the modern world seems therefore inescapable. A says that we can only be happy when we have the tragic, yet all modern attempts to recover the tragic are doomed to fail.⁷ To be happy one must be able to distribute the load of one’s life throughout society, just as the burden of the Greek tragic hero is made less bitter in being shared by the entire audience. In modernity each person stands alone and must shoulder the crushing burden of choice in isolation. A therefore holds out little hope for the possibility of any real happiness in modernity.

A similarly bleak view of the prospects for happiness in the modern world is put forth in “Rotation of Crops,” A’s self-described “theory of social prudence.”⁸ The main topic of this treatise is to confront the problem of boredom, which, in A’s opinion, pervades the whole of modern life. “All human beings...are boring,” A says, either because they bore others or because they bore themselves.⁹ A notes that the popular recommendation to a person such as himself, who thinks everything and everyone is boring, is that he should simply do something: be active, take up a hobby, get a job, whatever is necessary to quit being idle. But this, according to A, is a misunderstanding: activity is the opposite of idleness, but idleness is not equivalent to boredom. One may be as idle as the Olympian gods and yet never be bored, or one may be as active as a high school honors student and yet be dying of boredom.¹⁰ The solution is not, therefore, mere busyness. Nor is it simply constant change, restlessly turning over and over like someone trying to find a comfortable position to sleep. Rather, one must be resourceful with one’s situation, not “changing the soil but... changing the method of cultivation and the kinds of crops.”¹¹ This means that to escape boredom, one must be inventive in ordinary situations, like a child who plays with insects or counts the dots on the classroom ceiling. One can quickly exhaust the potential of large-scale diversions like international travel, but arbitrary little fixations can create limitless

6 Ibid., 141.

7 Ibid., 145.

8 Ibid., 281.

9 Ibid., 288.

10 Ibid., 289.

11 Ibid., 292.

amusement. However, in practice this kind of crop rotation is a rather dismal life: A argues that one must shun friendship and especially marriage, never permitting oneself to be sucked into a long-term commitment.¹² This is the lifestyle of a spiritual nomad, never resting in one place for too long, always on the run from boredom, which tracks him like a bloodhound. It is not a very appealing life, but then again, A does not seem to be under any illusions about its appeal. “Rotation of Crops” is not a name one gives to a full-blooded theory of the good life, but rather an attempt to salvage what one can from the rubble of modern civilization.

Against this dismal estimate of modernity, B sets his two major letters to A: “The Esthetic Validity of Marriage” and “The Balance between the Esthetic and the Ethical.” While his view of modernity is by no means boundlessly positive, B nevertheless tries to combat A’s pessimism, arguing that a solution to his troubles can still be found in the modern world if only he will plunge himself into it, abandoning his nomadic life and committing himself to the social structures of his day. He criticizes A for claiming to have a “conquering nature [that] cannot possess,” and fearing that if he ever ceases his endless sojourn from novelty to novelty he will immediately become mired in boredom.¹³ Yet B insists that this is not so: despite its seeming monotony, possession is as beautiful as conquest. Marriage is B’s favorite example of this, a fact that highlights his contrast with A, who hates marriage even more than friendship.¹⁴ While A contrasts the aesthetic value of first love with the ethical but aesthetically repulsive route of marriage, B contends that the goal of marriage is to preserve first love’s beauty within marriage’s ethical structure.¹⁵ Yes, in the absence of novelty there is a certain kind of monotony, but the task is “to surmount it, that is, to preserve love in the midst of it, not to despair.” If this is done, then marriage will have “esthetic validity” in addition to its ethical value.¹⁶ Presumably, this does not apply solely to marriage: B does not want A to get married and otherwise remain exactly the same. That would be disastrous, since A’s isolation runs much deeper than a mere failure to marry. Rather, marriage is one part of a larger vision of the ethical, useful for giving particular examples of the kind of commitment and stability that

12 Ibid., 295.

13 Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: Part II*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 130.

14 *Either/Or: Part I*, 296.

15 *Either/Or: Part II*, 125.

16 Ibid., 127.

ought to pervade the entirety of life.

B certainly portrays the life of unflinching commitment as something desirable, but what exactly should one commit oneself to? What, of everything that one could conquer, is worth possessing? Marriage seems to be only part of the equation, albeit an important one. In “The Balance between the Esthetic and the Ethical,” B makes an attempt at an answer. The sum of one’s ethical goal, says B, is to express the “universally human” with one’s entire life.¹⁷ This involves making oneself a paragon of normalcy, for “[t]he genuinely extraordinary person is the genuinely ordinary person.”¹⁸ The ordinary as B conceives of it, however, is far from being an absolute and unchanging standard. B’s analogy of the paradigmatic verb illustrates well his idea of ordinariness. He first compares the paradigmatic verb to the paradigmatic human being in order to illustrate how the universal does not demand that one completely abandon one’s individuality: just as there are many different paradigmatic verbs that are all conjugated the same way, so there can be many different paradigmatic human beings, provided that they are all ordinary with respect to the crucial cultural norms.¹⁹ However, this example betrays something else about B’s vision of normalcy, for what determines if a verb is paradigmatic? It is merely the fact that, so to speak, that’s what all the other verbs are doing. If more verbs were conjugated like such-and-such “irregular” verb, then it would no longer be irregular but paradigmatic. In a different language, too, paradigmatic verbs have different endings, and if a verb is transferred across languages it usually adopts the new language’s conjugations. And just as the paradigmatic verb is linguistically relative, the paradigmatic human being is culturally relative. One cannot transcend one’s own culture; one must embrace the “concretion” of one’s particular historical position and not try to rise above it.²⁰ This interpretation of what B means by the “ethical” or “universal” agrees with that of Johannes *de silentio*, one of Kierkegaard’s other pseudonyms. As C. Stephen Evans comments in his introduction to *Fear and Trembling*, even though such terms normally suggest an absolute, cross-cultural standard like Kant’s categorical imperative, Johannes’ usage of them is more in line with the Hegelian concept of *Sittlichkeit*, which refers to the ethical structure

17 Ibid., 328.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., 262.

20 Ibid., 261.

“embodied in the laws and customs of a people” that changes with them.²¹ B’s usage seems similarly culturally relative. Given this, it is hard to see how B’s ideal of the ethical life is any less arbitrary than A’s crop rotation. Crop rotation involves arbitrary fixations, but B’s alternative involves arbitrary submission to a certain set of culturally relative standards. There is still nothing absolute in B’s vision of the ethical life.

A’s laments about the state of modernity and B’s intriguing but unsatisfactory rebuttal combine to create a critique of modernity. Kierkegaard, as usual, does not argue in his own name, but one can perhaps grasp his purpose by considering how each character’s ideas resonate with the reader. Neither A’s nor B’s responses to the isolation and fragmentation of modern life are really satisfying. A recognizes modernity’s isolation but despairs of solving it, scoffing at attempts to ward it off through the forming of associations. B is hardly better. While he is hopeful, he has less cause for hope than he thinks, since his goal of expressing the universal through the individual seems suspiciously similar to the stopgap measures that A criticizes. B’s idea of the universal is as contingent and arbitrary as any association. Likewise with crop rotation: A’s theory is rather dismal, leading one to desire something more. Is there really no possibility of happiness in the modern world? Is there really nothing worth possessing? A seems to yearn for something that transcends this bleak existence but holds out no hope of its reality. B, on the other hand, puts his hope in a solution that proves once again illusive: the paradigm human being is as arbitrary as A’s crop rotation. The nihilism of A’s arbitrary fixations is no better or worse than a life in conformity to the cultural norms of one’s time and place. As A puts it, “[w]hether you marry or you do not marry, you will regret it either way.”²² Neither character’s solution is satisfying, though A is at least more honest. He recognizes that his solution is unsatisfactory, proposing his ideas not as cure-alls but as techniques to mitigate the inevitable tedium of modern life. Nothing can satisfy; all choices lead to regret. He claims that if only he could “see a faithfulness that withstood every ordeal, an enthusiasm that endured everything, a faith that moved mountains...an idea that joined the finite and the infinite,” then he could overcome the tedium; however, he has not caught sight of these things yet.²³ Neither the aesthetic nor the ethical fulfills these criteria. For A, then, there is no real solution to the modern condition, because any real

21 C. Stephen Evans, introduction to *Fear and Trembling*, by Søren Kierkegaard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), xx-xxi.

22 *Either/Or: Part I*, 38.

23 *Ibid.*, 37.

solution must do more than either the aesthetic or ethical can accomplish in its own right, and these are the only options of which he is aware.

The final takeaway from *Either/Or* seems at first to be that neither side has the solution to modernity's ills. However, despite the pessimistic picture Kierkegaard's work paints of modernity, this pessimism is not an end in itself. Rather, the inability of the aesthetic and the ethical alone to respond adequately to modernity points to the need for something that transcends both of these options. It was already suggested that A resonates more with the reader because he is more honest about the modern condition; perhaps it is also because he is, in a way, prophetic. A prophesies modernity's need for something beyond its social constructions and aesthetic valuations. It is unlikely that A views himself as a prophet, since he doesn't even believe in the "beyond" that he unwittingly prophesies. This theme of the inadvertent messenger is a favorite of Kierkegaard's. Just as, in the epigraph of *Fear and Trembling*, the man who communicated Tarquin's beheaded poppies failed to understand the message he delivered, so A does not suspect that his pessimistic account of modernity hides a message of hope.²⁴ But while A is a prophet, he is not a savior. His critique of modernity prepares a path for something that transcends both the aesthetic and the ethical, but he does not claim to have this something, nor does he hold out hope that it exists. Not until the very end, in the seemingly incongruous sermon inserted by B, is a third option proposed to solve the problem that A has raised.

The final sermon, "The Upbuilding That Lies in the Thought That in Relation to God We Are Always in the Wrong," feels curiously out of place among the rest of the materials B sends. While B claims that he is appending the sermon of this anonymous Jutland priest because it better makes the points he had been trying to make all along, the sermon actually undermines some of B's ideas.²⁵ The priest's biblical point of reference is Jesus weeping over Jerusalem, taken from Luke 19:41-48. He notes that, in the Gospel, the city is not visibly depraved, but stands tall in all its glory, proud of its righteousness.²⁶ It is full of practicing Jews who marry and fit into society, obey the requirements of their faith, and live according to the ethical expectations of their time and place. And yet, they

24 Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Sylvia Walsh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 2.

25 *Either/Or: Part II*, 338.

26 *Ibid.*, 342.

are in the wrong in relation to God. Their relationship to the contingencies of culture as “paradigmatic human beings” may be perfect, but their relationship to the absolute is flawed. However, this picture of Jerusalem represents exactly the sort of life that B recommends to A as the fullness of the ethical and the will of God. According to Robert Perkins, B’s God is “the handmaid of approved historical and cultural modes, the deep souls, and the high-minded.”²⁷ Perkins notes that this is precisely the image of God that the priest takes aim against: he presents a God who “cannot be used to justify our private or provincial social arrangements.”²⁸ The God of the concluding sermon is not the “handmaid” of historical and cultural modes, but in fact accuses all people, whether or not they align their lives to these modes, of being in the wrong. Something else is needed; being a paradigm human being is not itself a means of salvation. The sermon thus suggests that B’s ethical life cannot be an end in itself, but that a higher, religious mode of existence must be sought.

A deeper analysis of the sermon is outside the bounds of this essay. It is enough to note that, from what has been said, the sermon begins to develop the third way that A longs for but never finds. In this way, the sermon could be seen as the fulfillment of A’s prophecy, promising the transcendence that A yearns for. A conquers everything without possessing because the finite, relative, and merely human constructions of modernity fail to satisfy this longing. For possession to be worthwhile, human life needs something infinite, absolute, and divine. Thus, the dialogue between the aesthetic A and the ethical B points toward the religious option, revealing a longing for something more than modern society has to offer. Kierkegaard’s personal journals support this reading: in a proposed retraction for *Either/Or*, he calls the book “a necessary deception in order, if possible, to deceive men into the religious.”²⁹ In this way, though neither A nor B espouse a truly religious point of view, the combined effect of their arguments is a subtle attempt to poke and prod readers beyond the merely aesthetic or ethical. The modern world paints a picture of two options: either one is a dissolute bohemian or one is a well-adjusted, upstanding citizen. Kierkegaard shatters this dichotomy by showing how neither option can satisfy human desire for the absolute. While the religious alternative is not fully presented, the entire debate serves to “deceive men into the religious” by

27 Robert L. Perkins, “Either/Or/Or: Giving the Parson His Due,” in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Either/Or Part II*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon: Mercer University Press: 1995), 220.

28 *Ibid.*, 223.

29 *Either/Or: Part II*, 448.

disenchanted them with modernity, prophesying the religious mode of life that Kierkegaard develops in his later work.

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Intersubjectivity and the Importance of Meaningful Subject-to-Subject Interaction

Stephanie Foster

Abstract: According to Sartre, there is a fundamental relation of intersubjectivity at work between the Other and myself, or in other words, an essential interaction involving or occurring between our conscious minds. The Other and I are irrevocably locked in a battle of the gazes, where one individual constantly objectifies the other. We can exist only as subject and object and never as two subjects. In Sartre's eyes, subject-to-subject interaction is impossible. I, however, disagree. In my opinion, Sartre's conception of intersubjectivity is unnecessarily limiting. Meaningful subject-to-subject relations are not only possible but also essential. The relation between the Other and I is not doomed to be a relation between an object and a subject. Rather, the Other and I, as subjects, aid each other in better understanding the world in which we live. In the following paper, I will examine Jean-Paul Sartre's conception of my interaction with the Other and present an alternative view, which emphasizes the importance of subject-to-subject interaction.

Jean-Paul Sartre, in "The Encounter with the Other," a chapter in his book *Being and Nothingness*, addresses the impact that the Other has on our self-understanding. He concludes that there is a fundamental relation of intersubjectivity between the Other and myself, or in other words, an essential interaction involving or occurring between our conscious minds. Sartre argues that the Other and I are irrevocably locked in a battle of the gazes, where one individual constantly objectifies the other. We are doomed to forever interact only as subject and object. In this paper, I will argue that while there is a relation of intersubjectivity at work between the Other and myself, it does not merely exist in the sense that Sartre establishes. In Sartre's eyes, subject-to-subject interaction is impossible. I, however, believe that my interaction with the Other must not always be a relation between subject and object. Rather, the Other and I, both as subjects, help each other to better comprehend the world around us.

In arguing the above, I will begin by explaining how Sartre believes I come to initially objectify the Other. Next, I will discuss how my understanding of the Other transforms when I identify her as an object that sees. Then, I will describe the manner in which my self-understanding is essentially modified

when I view the Other as a subject. This discussion will be followed by an explanation of how I seek to escape the Other's objectification of me, in order to become a subject once again, and an explanation of the battle of the gazes that results. Finally, I will argue that Sartre's conception of intersubjectivity is unnecessarily limiting. Meaningful subject-to-subject relations are not only possible but also essential.

Sartre begins his discussion of the Encounter with the Other by presenting a scenario in which the Other appears for the first time. He asks that I imagine myself in a park. Across the lawn, a woman passes by some benches. I see this woman, and I recognize her as a woman, but I "apprehend [her] as an object."¹ In other words, I see her as if she is a puppet. I think of her merely in a temporal-spatial manner. She exists in relation to those things around her, and "[her] relation with other objects [is] of a purely additive type."² She could be removed from the world, and nothing would change. She would simply be absent from the space by the benches. The Other as an object, as she is classified here, leaves me in control of the world. The world relates back to me, rather than the Other, and is understood in terms of my consciousness instead of hers. The introduction of the Other, as long as she is classified as an object, does not impact the way I conceive of the world or myself.

My self-understanding is shaken, however, when the Other is introduced as an object that observes the world I am observing. The Other's capacity to observe the world causes me to lose some of my control, my superiority. Sartre writes, "To the extent that the relation goes *toward [her]*, it escapes me. I cannot put myself at the center of it."³ When the Other observes the lawn, for example, her interaction with the lawn interferes with my interaction with the lawn and with the meaning that I give it. She, in observing the lawn, draws it toward her and away from me. There is an "orientation, which *flees from me*."⁴ Thus, the Other, in essence, steals the world from me. According to Sartre, there is an "appearance among the objects of *my* universe of an element of disintegration in that universe."⁵ While everything still exists for me, and I can consider the universe to be

1 Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*, ed. Robert Denoon Cumming (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 190.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., 191.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

my universe, parts of my world appear to be in flight toward the Other. Her capacity to observe the world causes a drain hole to emerge into which pieces of my world seem to disappear. The Other affects my superiority. I am no longer central.

Yet a still more radical shift in my understanding of my being occurs when the Other becomes a subject, a transformation that ensues when the Other turns her gaze on me. The moment that the Other sets me in her sights, I become the object that she examines, and she becomes the subject who does the examining. To better explain this change and what it entails, Sartre presents another scenario. This time, he asks that I imagine myself crouched on the ground looking through a keyhole with my ear to the door.⁶ I am absorbed in the act of spying when I hear footsteps down the hall. Someone sees me eavesdropping, and “I am suddenly affected in my being and...essential modifications appear in my structure.”⁷ Being caught spying causes me to feel shame and brings about fundamental changes in the way I understand myself. It allows me to view myself in an entirely new way. Sartre writes, “Shame reveals to me that I am this being, not in the mode of ‘was’ or of ‘having to be’ but *in-itself*.”⁸ In other words, I can now perceive myself as an object. Being seen by the Other, feeling the shame induced by her look, enables me to see myself at present. I realize that, “I *am that ego*; I do not repudiate it as an alien image, but it is present to me as a self which I *am* without *knowing* it.”⁹ In this moment, I have a pre-reflective consciousness of myself as an object for others.

In shame, in being seen by the Other, my ‘self’ is established out in the world. I have a foundation outside myself, which is determined by the Other. I cannot get rid of the image that the Other forms of me. I am not in control. For Sartre, “shame is the only original feeling of having my being *outside*, engaged in another being and as such without any defense, illuminated by the absolute light which emanates from a pure subject.”¹⁰ I find that I am an object for the Other. I am defined in terms of the Other, and I cannot change how I am viewed. As Sartre says, “I am myself only as a pure reference to the Other.”¹¹ Thus, the realization of the Other as a subject drastically alters my self-understanding. In being objectified by

6 Ibid., 196.

7 Ibid., 198.

8 Ibid., 200.

9 Ibid., 199.

10 Ibid., 205.

11 Ibid., 198.

the Other, I am able to see myself pre-reflectively as an object with a foundation outside myself.

This objectification makes me uncomfortable. It causes me to recognize “myself in this degraded, fixed, and dependent being.”¹² I dislike this powerless, dependent being that I become via the Other in shame. I much prefer being a subject who is in control of the world and myself, and I realize that in order to recover my subjectivity, I need to objectify the Other. Thus, my “reaction to shame will consist in apprehending as an object the one who apprehended my own object state.”¹³ Only this will ease the discomfort I feel. Objectifying the other in return will help me to reclaim my sense of control. It will prevent the meaning I give to things in the world from disappearing down the drain hole, which the Other introduces with her capacity to observe my universe herself and describe it differently. With the Other as an object, the drain hole will cease to exist, and my world will make sense again. Sartre writes, “In fact from the moment that the Other appears to me as an object, [her] subjectivity becomes a simple property of the object considered.”¹⁴ When I objectify the Other, her subjectivity is no longer a threat. It is simply an aspect of the world. As Sartre explains, “In this way, I *recover* myself [as subject], for I cannot be *an object for an object*.”¹⁵

Despite this recovery, I cannot remain the subject forever. As I can recover by objectifying the Other, she can also recover by objectifying me. Thus, we find ourselves locked in a battle of the gazes. There is constant conflict, a continual switching back and forth of dominance. Through this process I see, as Garcin states in *No Exit*, a play in which three individuals find themselves trapped in a room together indefinitely, that “hell is other people.”¹⁶ The Other signifies the downfall of my meaning. She steals the world from me. She degrades me.

Yet in all of this, I realize I need the Other, and she needs me. As much as we disrupt each other’s lives, she helps me recognize myself, and I aid her in her self-discovery. There exists not mere dependence on one another but interdependence and intersubjectivity. Throughout the play *No Exit*, the two others in the room aid each person in the trio to better understand

12 Ibid., 205.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid., 206.

16 Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit*, (Random House, Inc., 1989), 45.

him- or herself, demonstrating humanity's interdependence. Via the other two individuals, Garcin, a man who deserted the military, realizes that he is a coward, Estelle, a woman who had an affair and drowned her baby, is forced to face the fact that she is both an adulterer and a murderer, and Inez, a matter-of-fact individual, confirms that she is cruel. With the help of the others, the characters in *No Exit*, though they may be uncomfortable with what they learn, discover who they truly are. Similarly, in shame, I learn what type of person I am via the Other.

Thus, despite the fact that shame is uncomfortable and undesirable, it is still authentic, or in other words, it allows me to gain a reliable representation of myself. There is some benefit to shame and the Other. Both enable me to acquire deeper insight into myself. I discover that even when the Other is objectifying me, she can be helpful. If hell really is other people, hell is not as hellish as is supposed, and Sartre's claim that "hell is other people" is not as grim as he believes. A less bleak interpretation of the Other and hell has been shown to exist within the framework that Sartre creates himself, and I believe that an even more positive notion of intersubjectivity is achievable beyond what Sartre posits.

I agree wholeheartedly with Sartre that there is an essential mode of intersubjectivity between individuals. We do, in fact, need each other in order to learn crucial aspects of ourselves and to reach a deeper understanding of our being. Nevertheless, I reject Sartre's elimination of the possibility of two people meeting subject to subject. While it is difficult to conceive of a harmony between subject and subject, it is not impossible. I believe that there exists an interdependence, or a mutual dependence between the Other and myself, which permeates our lives and our beings. We are capable of sharing meaning and, as a result, can develop a richer, more nuanced understanding of the world and ourselves.

This idea is not unheard-of but rather is reminiscent of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's body of human experience. Merleau-Ponty writes in "Others and the Human World," a chapter in his book entitled *Phenomenology of Perception*, that "we are, for each other, collaborators in perfect reciprocity... we coexist through a single world."¹⁷ Though the Other and I bring our own meanings, our own understandings, and our own past

¹⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Others and the Human World," *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald Landes, (London: Routledge, 2012), 370.

experiences to every encounter, we are capable of connecting with each other, and in fact, we rely heavily on this connection. Instead of imagining a drain hole that sucks away one person's meaning so that the Other can attach hers, picture meaning gathering in the middle of the world. I can incorporate the Other's existence and the Other's interpretations of the world into my world through a 'shared' consciousness. This is not to propose a universal, external consciousness that exists in any *a priori* manner but rather to suggest that each person contributes her meaning to the world such that it is obtainable to others and influences their world views. I learn from the Other's interpretations of the world and, as a result, see the world differently. At the same time, she has access to my interpretations via this 'shared' consciousness and, consequently, views the world in a different manner as well. We collaborate, the Other and I, to reach an understanding, to attain some sense of shared meaning.

Merleau-Ponty writes, "We have learned... not to conceive of our perspectival views as independent of each other; we know that they slip into each other and are gathered [into one.]"¹⁸ We are interdependent, not independent; in this conception, the Other and I exist symbiotically. There need not be the conflict that Sartre sees inherent in intersubjectivity. The relation between the Other and I is not doomed to be a relation between a subject and an object. The Other and I, as two subjects, can come together and exist constructively, and, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, we must. Meaning is not one-sided but shared among subjects.

18 Ibid., 369.

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