Søren Kierkegaard’s Either/Or vividly presents a confrontation between two radically different ways of life: the aesthetic and the ethical. Throughout Part Two of this work, the ethical Judge William implores the writer of Part One, ‘A,’ to give up his shallow aesthetic existence in exchange for the deeper, more meaningful life of the ethicist. The main difference between the aesthete and the ethicist, according to Judge William, is one’s ability to make a choice. “Choice itself is decisive for a personality’s content; in choice personality immerses itself in what is chosen, and when it does not choose it wastes consumptively away” (Kierkegaard 482). This choice, he continues, is not between good and evil, rather it is a choice of either recognizing good and evil or ignoring them (Kierkegaard 486). It is because of this choice that the ethical life is better and more meaningful than the aesthetic life. According to Alasdair MacIntyre in After Virtue, however, this communication between the ethical Judge William and the aesthetic A cannot actually exist. The ethicist and the aesthete can only understand each other from their own point of view, making communication between these two spheres impossible. This paper will show that MacIntyre’s extreme position on communication is incorrect and that his critique ultimately fails. After explaining what an ethical existence is and what differentiates it from that of an aesthetic existence, I will write about why it is not Judge William’s responsibility or right to try to change ‘A’, presenting my own critique on Judge William’s project to fundamentally change his aesthetic friend.

Judge William is the epitome of ethical existence. As a judge, his whole purpose in life is to decide what is right and wrong, what is ethical and what is not. His working life revolves around the fact that one can act in an ethical manner. As John W. Elrod writes in his book, Being and Existence in Kierkegaard’s Pseudonymous Works, the ethical life that Judge William leads—the life that he would like ‘A’ to lead—is one of great discipline and strength:

In the ethical stage of existence, the individual becomes conscious of himself as ideal and relates to this ideality as a possibility, which it is his duty to actualize. Moreover, the individual by accepting and fulfilling his task becomes the “true man, the whole man.” It is an
ennobling and humanizing activity, and the ethical individual is confident of his own power to actualize this task which is before him. (Elrod 114-115)

What differentiates the ethicist from the aesthete is, ultimately, his or her ability to make a choice. This is what Elrod means when he writes about the ethicist actualizing his duty. The aesthete, afraid of becoming stuck in the rut of boredom and repetition, shies away from making a concrete choice. In “Equilibrium Between the Aesthetic and the Ethical,” Judge Williams tells of the hypothetical, though quite true, thought process of an aesthete who cannot decide on what profession they should take up. After trying to decide between a priest and an actor, a lawyer and a barrister, and a hairdresser and a bank teller, the aesthete thinks that he is making many choices. In reality, however, the aesthete has chosen nothing. “So your life goes on. After a year and a half wasted on these deliberations, having exerted with admirable energy all the strength of your soul, you have come not one step further” (Kierkegaard 484). Judge William, on the other hand, takes all choices quite seriously:

The moment of choice is for me very serious, less on account of the rigorous pondering of the alternatives, and of the multitude of thoughts that attach to each separate link, than because there is a danger afoot that at the next moment it may not be in my power to make the same choice, that something has already been lived that must be lived over again. (Kierkegaard 483)

But what is this choice that Judge William writes of? As Robert L. Perkins writes in his dissertation, Kierkegaard and Hegel: The Dialectical Structure of Kierkegaard’s Ethical Thought, “the choice which Judge William is recommending to the aesthete is not a choice of good or evil, but rather a choice of good and evil, that is he urges the aesthete to choose the ethical” (Perkins 148). Judge William wants for ‘A’ to stop experimenting and make a concrete choice. This choice is the choice of the ethical; the ability to choose right from wrong. It is not only choosing the ethical way of life that Judge William urges. It is also to make any choice at all, whether it be the choice to have a job, the choice to stay in a relationship with one woman, or the choice of how to spend one’s evening. He does not want ‘A’ to
choose either good or evil. He simply wants ‘A’ to make a choice, which is an aspect of the ethical way of life. Constantly changing one’s actions and decisions is not an authentic way of living.

Now that we have seen that A and Judge William differ on the issue of choice, I will turn to Judge William’s project of persuading A to choose ethical existence and its view of choice. Alasdair MacIntyre says that this is a doomed project because any communication between the different stages of existence is impossible. Because ‘A’ views the world in an aesthetic way, he cannot understand the ethical language and notions that Judge Williams uses to try and persuade ‘A’ to live the ethical life. Likewise, Judge William cannot understand ‘A’’s motivations for living aesthetically. MacIntyre describes this idea of Kierkegaard’s as “criterionless choice,” saying, quite logically, that “the choice he [Judge William] calls on us to make between the ethical and the aesthetic cannot be a rational one,” (Davenport and Rudd xxi) because the aesthetic is not able to make rational choices. But isn’t this the only way that one can change from an aesthete to an ethicist? Mustn’t one make an actual choice to change from one way of living to the other? By getting ‘A’ to the point where he must choose whether to remain an aesthete or to become an ethicist, Judge William will have already won the battle, because making a conscious choice is an aspect of the ethical life.

So, MacIntyre is correct is saying that ‘A’, as an aesthete, cannot make the choice to become an ethicist without already having become an ethicist. This, however, has nothing to do with Judge William’s ability to communicate with ‘A’. Judge William is perfectly able to try and express his view on the superiority of the ethical life to ‘A’. He does this in a very indirect way: by attempting to persuade, on ‘A’’s own grounds, that the ethical life would be more enjoyable than the aesthetic. By using this notion of enjoyment, Judge William is taking a main aspect of the aesthete’s raison d’être and applying it to the ethical life, in the attempt to lead ‘A’ to the point where he must make a choice. One way that Judge William attempts to do this is through his defense of marriage.
Happily married, Judge William is living the life that A most admonishes. Nothing is worse, according to ‘A,’ than marriage:

One never enters into marriage. Married couples promise each other eternal love. That is all very fine but does not mean very much, for when one is finished with time, one will no doubt be finished with eternity. So if, instead of saying ‘forever’, the parties said, ‘until Easter’, or ‘until the first May-Day’, then at least their words would have meaning for they would have actually said something, something they could perhaps keep to. (Kierkegaard 237)

According to ‘A,’ marriage is an act that binds down the parties involved in it. Eternal love is too large a promise to make and truly mean it. Furthermore, entering into matrimony removes the possibility of experiencing first love, which is an important aspect of the life of the aesthete. ‘A’ is afraid that making such a final and concrete choice as marriage will remove the beauty and excitement from life.

To persuade ‘A’ that making such a choice is actually beneficial to the aesthetic life, Judge William writes that marriage, instead of abolishing first love, actually perpetuates it. For the aesthete, first love is the highest form of beauty, and getting married can only prevent one from experiencing first love over and over again. ‘A’ does not want to make such a committed choice as marriage because he feels that it will detract from the beauty that he experiences in first love. Judge William does not agree. In fact, instead of usurping first love, marriage encompasses it and, furthermore, allows one to experience first love continuously. Marital love is, ultimately, more beautiful than first love:

...Marital love considered on its own is not only as beautiful as first love, it is even more beautiful because in its immediacy it contains the unity of a larger number of opposites. So it is not true that marriage is a highly respectable personage but a tiresomely moral one, while love is poetry. No, really it is marriage that is poetic. (Kierkegaard 434)

This is how Judge William tries to convince ‘A’ that making a choice will lead to a better life. By making a serious choice and committing himself to one person, ‘A’ will be able to live a much more beautiful and
enjoyable life. Contrary to what MacIntyre writes, this attempt to persuade ‘A’ is a very good one. Judge William is arguing that, on his own grounds, ‘A’ will enjoy life more if he makes committed choices. This is why MacIntyre’s critique fails.

So, instead of endorsing MacIntyre’s position on Judge William’s communication with ‘A’, I will offer my own critique of Judge William’s project. I agree with Judge William, in that I believe that an ethical life is far superior to the aesthetic life. Because of the choices that an ethical person makes in his or her lifetime, his or her life has much more meaning than it could have if one decided to live “for the moment” and avoid making serious decisions. Judge William is not wrong in trying to persuade ‘A’ to live a different life. In fact, one could argue that, as his friend, Judge William has a duty to help his friend.

What I find objectionable in Judge William’s writings is the extent to which he tries to persuade ‘A’. Judge William has written almost one hundred pages on the aesthetic validity of marriage alone, not to mention the over-one-hundred pages on the ethical versus the aesthetic in the development of personality. This is far more than being a kind and helping friend; this is borderline obsessive. What kind of friend sits down and writes over two hundred pages on why one should change the way in which they live? This goes far beyond what Judge William says is his intention:

...I simply want to bring you to the point where that choice truly acquires meaning for you. It is on this that everything hinges. Only when one can get a person to stand at the crossroads in such a way that he has no expedient but to choose, does he do what is right. (Kierkegaard 486)

This is not merely taking ‘A’ by the hand and leading him to the point where he can make a concrete choice. Judge William is far too obsessed with this idea of converting ‘A’ to make it ethical. I am arguing, on Judge William’s own grounds, that what Judge William is doing is much more than what is ethically acceptable.
Why is Judge William going to such great lengths to try and convince ‘A’ that the ethical way of life is the right way to live? Generally speaking, this kind of motivation does not come from someone who is merely trying to help a friend. This kind of behavior is most often seen in people with a guilty conscience. Is this the driving factor behind Judge William’s actions? Has the honorable judge done something that he feels guilty about, and is now trying to rectify this by trying to convince ‘A’—and, perhaps, himself—that the right way to live is by being ethical? Maybe he wants to change ‘A’ because he wants someone else to experience what he does; after all, if he is not alone in his endeavors, then Judge William knows that he cannot be completely wrong in living the way in which he lives. Judge William could just want the company, so that he is not the only one who is living ethically.

This issue of why Judge William is so driven towards his project of trying to convert ‘A’ is never addressed in Either/Or, so anything implying that Judge William is driven by guilt and the need to convince himself that he is doing the right thing is purely speculation. The fact still remains that, according to the ethical life that Judge William heartily endorses, Judge William’s project of converting ‘A’ from an aesthete to an ethicist life far exceeds the bounds that ethical duty lies within.

Works Cited


