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The Role of Aesthetics in Soren Kierkegaard's Ethics and Beyond

Soren Kierkegaard was a Danish philosopher active in the 19th century. In this paper, I will explore Kierkegaard's concept of aesthetics and its relation to ethics and religion and argue that, contrary to Kierkegaard's claims, aesthetics can have a positive role in an ethical-religious life. First, I will discuss Kierkegaard's primary concerns and summarize Kierkegaard's views on how the conception of aesthetics functions in the ethical and religious life. Then, I will identify passages in which it is possible to understand aesthetics playing a positive role in an ethical-religious life.

In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard is primarily concerned with the development of the individual in an ethical-religious sense. In the *Postscript*, Kierkegaard discusses ethics and religion together, as each is concerned with how one ought to live. Kierkegaard is interested in how people come to desire to live an ethical existence, as well as how an individual actually achieves an ethical existence. Kierkegaard believes that the philosophers of his time have become too obsessed with ideas. He feels that the focus on ideas, which are infinite and objective, has led the great thinkers of his time to forget the subjective and finite nature of human existence in their philosophies. Kierkegaard differentiates between the passion which these philosophers have for ideas, and the passion necessary to achieve an ethical-religious life. Kierkegaard calls the passion necessary to live this life *existential pathos*. This is because this is passion for one's own actions and character.

In the *Postscript*, Kierkegaard develops a view of aesthetics that appears to be at odds with the ethical-religious life. For Kierkegaard, the pathos of aesthetics is, “the pathos of the possible,” or the ideal (Kierkegaard 326). All that falls under the realm of aesthetics, like art and music, strives to achieve an ideal of beauty which cannot actually be achieved on Earth. In other words, in aesthetics, possibility is of higher importance than actuality.

One who lives an ethical life, on the other hand, is focused more on actuality than possibility. Only by actions which affect one’s own actual existence can one begin to live an ethical life. For example, one ethical action would be to keep a promise to a friend. Aesthetic practices are about creating something else, like a work of art which attempts to live up to an ideal. The ethical, in contrast, consists of shaping one’s own character through action. As one completes ethical actions in their life, one becomes more ethical. For example, if one continues to fulfill promises to friends, their character becomes one of a trustworthy person.

Kierkegaard argues that aesthetics are harmful to the ethical life because they distract from it. He notes that those concerned with aesthetics are often so concerned with attaining worldly beauty that they fail to have concern for the ethical. One may be concerned with attaining this beauty by gaining possession of beautiful things, or by creating beautiful things. Either one can distract from the development of one’s own character. From this picture we see how a focus on aesthetics could prevent one from living an ethical life.

However, though Kierkegaard disparages the sort of person who pursues aesthetics at the expense of the ethical, there are ways in which aesthetics can help one to achieve an ethical existence.

I argue that to have a concern with aesthetics does not necessarily make one unethical. Yes, aesthetics *can* be detrimental to an ethical life, but it does not *have* to be. While aesthetics takes one's focus away from the ethical, it is only momentarily, if one has their priorities set on living an ethical life. As long as one is not ignoring important duties to others during the times that one enjoys aesthetic pursuits, aesthetics does not prevent character development. Furthermore, though Kierkegaard disparages the person who pursues aesthetics in the *Postscript*, I argue that there are ways aesthetics can help one to achieve an ethical existence. In fact, there are parts of the *Postscript* in which Kierkegaard describes aesthetic activities as benefitting an ethical-religious life.

I would like to look now at passages from the *Postscript* that appear to support the claim that aesthetics can have a positive role in an ethical life. On page 390 of the *Postscript*, Kierkegaard describes a sermon given in church. He argues that there is a specific sort of sermon which would be most helpful for a person to receive in church, in order to give that person a better chance of living an ethical life. Whatever sort of sermon is presented, it is the product of choices the pastor makes concerning the composition and presentation of the sermon. Choices regarding the compositions and presentation of a sermon are choices concerning the *aesthetics* of the sermon.

Kierkegaard notes early on in the *Postscript* that just because religion is the subject matter of a piece of music, this does not make the singing of this piece of music

an ethical or religious pursuit rather than an aesthetic one, “To *sing the praises* of a hero of faith,” he writes, “is just as much an aesthetic exercise as singing those of a war hero” (Kierkegaard 326). The same is true for a speech, in this case, the religious sermon. On page 390, Kierkegaard discusses which kind of sermon would be most helpful in cultivating passion in churchgoers, “the main thing is that the individual goes home from church with the passion and fervour to carry the fight to the living-room” (Kierkegaard 390). In other words, the sermon needs to give listeners the passion to contemplate and live out their ethical-religious obligations during every day of their life.

An inspirational sermon is the product of aesthetic choices on the part of the person who wrote and then delivered it. If a sermon is not inspirational, church-goers may ponder important questions about their manner of existence in church and then afterwards put these thoughts away to wherever they were before, to let them, “lie in the same place until next sunday” (Kierkegaard 390). At earlier points in the *Postscript*, Kierkegaard has expressed skepticism of the church in general for just this reason, in that he felt that it did not effectively inspire people to ethical lives.

Furthermore, Kierkegaard himself notes the way that the specific choices about how a sermon is executed affect the way the religious message is understood by the listening churchgoer. A well composed sermon, presented with the appropriate tone, has a positive influence on the way that the churchgoer conducts themselves in their daily lives. Kierkegaard writes that, “the religious speaker will take care not to put emotionally strong moments together in a speech, or to have his strongest moment in the speech, that is, so as not to deceive himself and others” (Kierkegaard 390). The capable religious speaker recognizes that the moments in an ethical-religious life where

the most strength is required are not during a sermon in church. The tone of the speech is important in conveying this fact to the congregation, so that churchgoers understand that it is their passion for actions in daily life which make them an ethical-religious being, not what they say or the passion with which they say it. Decisions about the tone of the speech are aesthetic decisions, and yet despite what Kierkegaard says about aesthetic concerns being detrimental to ethical-religious ones, these decisions can have a positive impact on the way that people will receive the speech, thus affecting people's actions after the speech. So, from this section, we see that aesthetics can have a positive role in promoting an ethical-religious life.

There are other examples of aesthetics aiding the ethical, or being a part of the ethical life in some way in the *Postscript*. Kierkegaard's description of an individual's use of comic irony is such an example. Comic Irony is an aesthetic tool. However, comic irony is also commonly used among ethicists. A short explanation of further characteristics of the ethical and aesthetics is helpful in understanding the way that irony bridges the gap between the two. Ethics and aesthetics are similar in this way: matters of aesthetics, like art, attempt to live up to the ideal of beauty but cannot. A person tries to live up to the ethical ideal of the moral law but cannot. The major difference between the two is that aesthetics is concerned with creating something outside of yourself to approach an ideal of beauty, whereas the ethical is concerned with something inside yourself. That is, ethics and religion are concerned with helping the individual to become an ethical being through one's own actions.

Aesthetics can sometimes even offer tools to help one to develop ethically-religiously. Comic irony, an aesthetic device, is such a tool. Kierkegaard writes that the

use of comic irony by the ethicist functions to keep the ethicist from becoming, “distracted by the finite” (Kierkegaard 423). For example, the ethicist, in making dinner plans, may say, “I’ll be there, so long as I am not killed by a falling brick walking out of my door!”. The ethicist acknowledges that their plans made in the finite world could be interrupted at any moment. To express oneself comically in this way is an aesthetic achievement. However, the main function of this comic irony is not an aesthetic function, it is an ethical function. By expressing herself in this way, the ethicist lives while always keeping the infinite in mind. To live while keeping the infinite in mind means to think about one’s larger place in the world and beyond; it is understanding that there is more to existence than what one perceives, and that one’s decisions may not always turn out like one plans them to. This perspective is helpful in daily life, as people who keep this perspective are less likely to become preoccupied with worldly pursuits which would come at the expense of being ethical. The ethicist recognizes that they could face difficulty, or even die, on any given day. The ethicist wants to be remembered, whether in the eyes of God or in the eyes of her fellow person, as a person of high character. By maintaining a perspective which includes comic irony, the ethicist constantly reminds themselves of life’s possibility and uncertainty, and is motivated to keep making decisions which shape an ethical character.

From the aforementioned examples, the importance of aesthetic choices in creating a speech which will inspire ethical action and of the use of comic irony by one who lives the ethical life, we see ways aesthetics can aid an ethical-religious existence. However, this paper thus far has only explored examples of aesthetics in Kierkegaard’s

work. One wonders how aesthetics generally could function to aid an ethical life. In the modern world, what is the role of aesthetics in general in promoting ethical existences?

Again, general aesthetic achievement and pursuit itself, in any facet of the arts, does not guarantee that one is ethical, and can distract from ethical concerns. Indeed, a pursuit of aesthetics can cause one to be unethical. As is possible in the ethical-religious life, people can become inspired to pursue great aesthetic beauty at the expense of the ethical; in trying to own nice and beautiful things they fail to treat others ethically, as they are only worried about obtaining the means necessary to gain material things. It is also possible for people to create art at the expense of their ethical development, as they become consumed by their work.

However, we can also conceive of ways aesthetics can aid the pursuit of the ethical life in modernity. For example, we have already discussed the way irony can aid a non religious life in the pursuit of the ethical. Comic irony is a form of aesthetic self expression which helps one to keep the absurdity of life in mind. The creation of art as well as the experience of enjoying art can play a similar role in life. It helps to remind a being that finite pursuits are not the most important part of their existence, by reminding us of larger ideals to strive for, as well as reminding us of the unknown. Perhaps great art, whether a painting, piece of music, novel, or film, has the ability to inspire humility in people who experience it. Art which distills the beauty in the world may inspire awe and passion in people. People who experience great art often become inspired to treat the world and other people in a more considerate manner; it may inspire people to make more ethical decisions for the benefit of everyone. Great art may well, and sometimes clearly does help people become more understanding of their place in the world, and

are motivated to make the world a better place, a place where existence is closer to the ideal of beauty.

In conclusion, Kierkegaard is correct in his view that aesthetics on its own will not necessarily encourage ethical decisions. However, there would appear to be cases where aesthetics plays a role in one's ability to live and inspire ethical existences. Aesthetics can never guarantee an ethical existence, but it is possible for aesthetics to contribute to an ethical life, even within Kierkegaard's own framework.

