

KIERKEGAARD'S VIEW OF THE ESTHETIC LIFE AND THE CRITICISMS OF THE ESTHETIST THAT THE ETHICIST PRESENTS

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Kierkegaard talked about three stages (or spheres) of life: the esthetic, the ethical and the religious stages. These stages do not have the same validity. The ethical is above the esthetic, and the religious is above both. One can start in the esthetic sphere, and then go on to the ethical, then to the religious sphere. It is similar to growing up, though it does not have the same naturality to it. To really get into the religious stage one has to believe. But believing is only possible by getting through stumbling, and even then it is only possible through the power of the absurd.

The esthetic stage is best shown in Kierkegaard's first ethical writing, *Either/Or*. The book consists of two parts: in the first part the esthetic person (A.) represents the esthetic point of view, in the second part the ethicist person (B.) criticizes the esthetic life from an ethical point of view. Kierkegaard uses *personas* in explaining what he means by the esthetic life. He created at least two authors, but possibly even four, to show us the *ars poetica* of the person who is led exclusively by esthetic considerations. Victor Eremita is the one who supposedly found A.'s papers, together with B.'s letters to A. A. and B. might be the same person, so there could be either two or three personas. The identity of the author of the *Seducer's Diary* is again ambiguous. It could be either A. himself, or a third person. The double or triple reflection helped Kierkegaard to distance his real self from the esthetic person while at the same time identifying with him completely. In this way Kierkegaard could show an authentic picture of the esthetic man.

Kierkegaard chose romantic love as the main theme in the esthetic life. He shows, from different angles, how the esthetic person approaches romantic relationships. His main purpose is to get as much pleasure out of this relationship as possible. This goal is realized through different devices depending on how reflective the esthetic person is. He wants momentary pleasure. Pleasure is not necessarily sex or emotional enrichment through the relationship. It can also be the curiosity of a seducing device or even the melancholy of abandonment.

The two main symbols of the esthetic life are Don Juan and Faust. Don Juan represents the most immediate esthetic pleasure. There is no reflection in it. Don Juan supposedly seduced 1003 women in Spain just by the attraction of his person. He has no time to reflect on his relationships. He wants immediate pleasure. A. attempts to prove that music is the only means through which this unreflected immediacy could be conveyed. And the only music that did it successfully was Mozart's opera, *Don Giovanni*. Faust represents the reflected esthetic life. In the *Seducer's Diary* we see a Faust-like figure who seduces only one woman. His main interest is the pleasure of the scheme itself. He delights in his spiritual superiority. His esthetic pleasure is in his craftiness and ability to manipulate the emotions of others.

We can see other esthetic people in A.'s papers who are on the female side. We meet with women who had been seduced and who live in their reflected pain. It is another example of the esthetic pleasure, though a quite gloomy one. A. also delights in a comic play written by Scribe. In this play, also shown from

the female point of view, he makes fun of the idea of romantic love. This shows the ambivalence of the esthetic point of view. It can both admire and ridicule the same things.

B., Judge William, the author of the ethical letters, criticizes A.'s esthetic life. His criticism is based on a positive affirmation of the married life. Marriage – as opposed to romantic affairs – is the real solution (not Kierkegaard's but William's!) to the problems of estheticism. He makes the following observations about A.'s point of view.

William points out that the esthetic life is of less value because it is paradoxically less esthetic than the ethical life. He makes an attempt to prove that marriage is more esthetic than romantic love. The esthetic person thinks that romantic love and marriage (just as esthetics and ethics) are *eccentric* circles. But the truth is that they are *concentric*. Marriage includes romantic love (just as ethics includes esthetics). They are not exclusive to each other. A merely esthetic life excludes ethics, but ethics does not exclude the esthetic principles. So it is a higher life with higher esthetic pleasures.

Another criticism is that the esthetic person lives in a constant present, without a history. It stops the enjoyment just when it would begin to open at a deeper level. The esthetic person (both Don Juan and Faust) stops when the seduction is completed. From this it follows that they always start the whole thing from the beginning. Their lives consist of unrelated points. There is no progression. It is cyclical, not linear. There is no memory, for there is no history to remember. The same old circle all the time.

According to the B., the esthetic person is not really a self. A self is created when there is a choice. The choice is always a choice between good and bad. It is therefore always ethical. The esthetic person should transcend the esthetic realm and get into the ethical realm to become a real self. There is no need for a choice in the esthetic sphere, so there is no created self in that level. To be able to choose between good and bad, one has to possess oneself, but this is what the esthetic person cannot do. Unless he makes the movement to the ethical sphere, he is not a real self, his existence is not authentic.

The choices of the esthetic man are determined by chance, for they are not ethical choices based on the general. The choices of the esthetic person are, therefore in contradiction with the absolute, but the harmony of life is dependent on our relationship to the absolute.

Of course, the most obvious problem with the esthetic life is that the esthetic life has certain boundaries. The seducer complains in the *Diary* that he has a bad tooth. But it is a small problem compared to other insurmountable problems confronting all esthetic men. Lack of money, sickness, and death make the chances of an esthetic life pretty low.

It is important that Kierkegaard does not endorse the point of view of the ethical person, though we can be sure many of the criticisms are his own, too. But for Kierkegaard the solution was not an ethical civic life, but faith in Jesus Christ. A real understanding of the Savior would be a stumbling block to the ethical person, too. In other books Kierkegaard makes sure (even by personal example!) that we understand his view: marriage is not the ultimate answer to the problems of the esthetic life.