

**Kierkegaard, Either/Or**

21-108

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**A, The Aestheticist**

**The Rotation Method: An Essay in the Theory of Social Prudence**

**The Problem of Boredom**

Let us start with a principle: all men are bores (21).

- “The influence it exerts is altogether magical, except that it is not the influence of attraction, but of repulsion” (22).
- People are passionless (33).

Common thought: idleness is the root of all evil. To prevent this, one is advised to work. (24).

- “There are men who have an extraordinary talent for transforming everything into a matter of business, whose whole life is business, who fall in love, marry, listen to a joke, and admire a picture with the same industrious zeal with which they labor during business hours” (24).
- But work is boring.

**Question/Problem:** How do we avoid boredom?

**Answer:** The method of “crop rotation” as applied to one’s life.

**Crop Rotation**

Two meanings of *rotation*: i) constant change of land, and ii) change of crop and mode of cultivation (25).

As for (i): this method defeats itself; it is plain endlessness (25).

As for (ii): The “principle of limitation[:]...“The more you limit yourself, the more fertile you become in invention.” (25).

- *E.g.* a prisoner in solitary confinement finding a spider fascinating, a child playing with a fly, focusing on the dripping of water (25).

**Question:** What ought are goal to be?

**Answer:** You must **a)** keep yourself entertained, and **b)** learn how to remember and forget in the right way.

**As for (a):**

- Never go into business; “you will become...a tiny little cog in the machinery of the body politic; you even cease to be master of your own conduct...You receive a title, and this brings in its train every sin and evil” (31).
- “The whole secret lies in arbitrariness” (31-2).
- For example, “you look at everything in life from the standpoint of a wager” (32).
- “The so-called social pleasures for which we prepare a week or two in advance amount to so little; on the other hand, even the most insignificant thing may accidentally offer rich material for amusement” (33).

**As for (b): Remembering and Forgetting**

- Remembering and forgetting are approaches we take towards our own experience; if our experiences are to be good ones, we must deal with them in the right way.
  - Experience isn’t (just) a mere given; we are not (just) passive with respect to it. It is partly made up of our reactions to it; we *actively participate* in shaping our experiences.

**Question:** What does remembering and forgetting in the right way entail?

**Answers...**

**1. Forgetting not the same as being forgetful:** “The art of forgetting can be developed. However, this art does not consist in permitting the impressions to vanish completely; forgetfulness is one thing, and the art of forgetting is something quite different” (27).

- Being forgetful is passive, forgetting is active. (Recall Nietzsche’s claim that forgetting can be a symptom of strength).

**2. We can forget the unpleasant:** “No misfortune or difficulty is so devoid of affability, so deaf to all appeals, but that it may be flattered a little...The art in dealing with such experiences consists in talking them over, thereby depriving them of their bitterness” (28).

- For example (perhaps): coming to find the painful event comical, tiresome, ultimately unimportant, “coming to terms” with the wrong done (by oneself or the other), seeing it as necessary for progress, *etc.*

**3. But you can forget the unpleasant in the wrong way:** “If one attempts to dismiss the unpleasant absolutely from mind, as many who dabble in the art of forgetting, one soon learns how little that helps. In an unguarded moment it pays a surprise visit, and it is then invested with all the forcibleness of the unexpected.” (28).

**4. Don’t just forget the unpleasant:** “It is easy to see that most people have a very meager understanding of this art, for they ordinarily wish to forget only what is unpleasant, not what is pleasant. This betrays a complete one-sidedness” (27).

**5. Forgetting the pleasant:** “A pleasant experience has as past something unpleasant about it, by which it stirs a sense of privation; this unpleasantness is taken away by an act of forgetfulness” (27).

- “Remember the good old days.” Al Bundy: “I played high school football.”

**6. “[O]ne must be careful how one lives, how one enjoys” (26).**

- Enjoying an experience to its full intensity to the last minute makes remembering or forgetting impossible; one only remembers a certain satiety that one cannot forget.
- Some advice: if you notice you are too enthralled by the pleasure, take a step back “for the purpose of remembering” (27).
- “[O]ne should keep the enjoyment under control, never spreading every sail to the wind in any resolve; one ought to devote oneself to pleasure with a certain suspicion, a certain wariness” (27).

**7. Hope is inimical to remembering and forgetting**

- i. Plunging into one’s experiences with hope, one remembers in a way that one *cannot* forget.
- ii. But all moments should be capable of being forgotten when it is convenient.
- iii. Therefore, one should not experience with hope.
  - “It is impossible to live artistically before one has made up one’s mind to abandon hope; for hope precludes self-limitation...hope is a faithless shipmaster” (26); could the prisoner find the spider entertaining if he were filled with hope of escape?

**8. The art of remembering and forgetting also insure against sticking fast in some relationship, and so makes possible the realization of complete freedom (28).**

- a. One must guard against friendship.
- b. One must never enter into marriage.

**As for (a):** What is friendship?

- You hang out until it is odd to address each other formally.
- But the relationship is still superficial: “Two friends form a close association in order to be everything to one another, and that although it is impossible for one human being to be anything to another human being except to be in his way” (28).
- **Proposal:** Go in for “social contracts,” but be able to leave at a moments notice (29).

**Objection:** This is painful; a relationship that has meant something now vanishes and becomes as nothing.

**Response:** The unpleasant is merely a piquant ingredient in the dullness of life.

- You may meet them again some time, and hopefully, they have changed.

**As for (b):**

- Marriage always ends in unhappiness for both parties (29-30).
  - That's why we bolster marriage with moral supports.
- Marriage destroys freedom.
  - "When you are one of several, then you have lost your freedom; you cannot send for your traveling boots whenever you wish, you cannot move aimlessly about in the world. If you have a wife and perhaps a child, it is troublesome; if you have a wife and children, it is impossible" (30).
- "Marriage brings one into fatal connection with custom and tradition, and traditions and customs are like the wind and weather, altogether incalculable."
  - In Japan, I have been told, it is the custom for husbands to lie in childbed" (30).
- The single life has "poetic infinitude" (30).

**B. Judge William**  
**The Aesthetic Validity of Marriage**

Modern literature occupies itself with mocking old stories about knights overcoming great obstacles to find their way to a woman (81).

- But “it requires no great art to have courage and shrewdness enough to fight with all one’s might for the good which one regards as the only good; but on the other hand it surely requires discretion, wisdom, and patience to overcome the lassitude which often is wont to follow upon a wish fulfilled” (81).

**Central claim:** we must distinguish between romantic and conjugal (“reflective”) love.

**Romantic Love**

**Claim:** Romantic love is immediate (81).

**Question:** What does it mean for love to be immediate?

Response:

- i) Its *coming into existence*, is not the result of a slow process, but rather occurs suddenly: “to see her was to love her; or, though she saw him only once through a slit in the shuttered window of her chamber, nevertheless from this instant she loved him, him alone in the whole world” (82).
- ii) “[I]t follows a natural necessity”: it “is based upon beauty, in part upon sensuous beauty, in part upon the beauty which can be conceived through and with and in the sensuous” (83); in short, the love is, and is no more than, desire.
- iii) It is *not reflective*; that is, not the result of deliberation, or thought.

But though it is immediate, “it is ennobled by reason of the consciousness of eternity which it embodies; for what distinguishes all love from lust is the fact that it bears an impress of eternity.”

- “I’ll always love you; I’ll love you forever.”

**The problem of romantic love:**

1. Romantic love represents the love as everlasting.
2. Romantic love is founded “upon a natural determinant,” specifically, desire or attraction to (sensuous) beauty.
3. Desire/attraction to beauty is temporary; it is “based upon the temporal,” “momentary,” “seeks instant satisfaction.”
4. Thus, romantic love *falsely* represents the love as everlasting. It is an illusion (83).
  - It is thus easy to mock romantic love.

**Claim and question:** Our age has ridiculed romantic love; what has it put in its place?

**Answer:** “On the one hand, [a] something immoral, on the other, [b] something more respectable but that “misses the deeper values of love” (84).

**As for (a):**

One marries knowing it will fail, and the “greatest fear becomes being loved without loving; they wish only to focus on the present moment because they know “that the sensuous is transient” (84).

- One keeps “open a way of escape so as to be able to choose if a happier choice might offer itself” (85).
- [O]ne need only report to the proper magistrate that this marriage is ended and another contracted, just as one reports a change of domicile” (85)

**Objection to (a):** All this “is an attempt to live every day as though that day were the decisive one, an attempt to live as though every day were a day of examination” (86).

- And so the reason for abolishing marriage is not because the single life is perfect, but because of cowardice and self-indulgence.

**As for (b):** One marries out of “a cool common-sense consideration that one must be prudent, not be too quick in sorting and rejecting, that life after all never presents the ideal, that it is quite a respectable match, etc.” (87); such marriages improve one’s social standing and allows one to subsist more easily.

- But this is despair, resulting from recognition that love is an illusion (87).
- The eternal which...is properly a part of every marriage is not really present here; for a common-sense calculation is always temporal. Such an alliance is therefore...immoral and fragile” (87).

### **Conjugal Love**

**Claim:** Romantic love loses the fight against time; conjugal love wins by “preserving love in time” (91).

- i) Love is possible only if it can be preserved in time.
- ii) The sensual/desiring element of love ties it to “now.”
- iii) Love can only be preserved in time if it can be founded upon something other than desire.
  - “The true eternity in love...delivers it, therefore, first of all from the sensual” (83).

**Question:** What can love be founded upon such that the love is preserved in time?

**Answer:** Choice, which is institutionalized with the practice of marriage.

- “[I]n order to produce this true eternity a determination of the will is called for” (83).
- “The individual is not fighting with external foes but fights with himself, fights out love from within him” (90).
- “[M]arriage is the transfiguration of first [romantic] love...it is its friend, not its enemy” (88).

**Claim:** One must live in both hope and recollection (91-2).

- Hope is important for getting that which is important: the reality of love.

### **A’s complaints about marriage**

1. Duty/obligation in marriage: “‘Conjugal love conceals in itself something quite different. It seems so mild and heartfelt and tender, but as soon as the door is closed behind the married pair, then before you can say Jack Robinson out comes the word *duty*’” (94).

- **Response:** Obligations preserve love. “For you, therefore, love is obviously not the highest thing, for otherwise you would be glad there was a power capable of compelling you to remain in it” (94, 95).

2. “‘How disgusting it is...to see the languor with which such things are performed in married life, how perfunctorily, how sluggishly it is done, almost at the stroke of the clock’” (90).

- **Response:** These activities carry the relationship across time, which is what conjugal love requires (91).

3. The monotony of married life: “‘the total lack of events, its everlasting vacuity, which is death and worse than death’” (93).

- **Response:** The modest home life of marriage actually contains many “changements” (93).

### **Is romantic love really more aesthetic than conjugal love?**

Consider the life of the romantic lover:

- a. The death of his love “already is lying in wait” (88).
- b. “The faithful romantic lover waits, let us say, for fifteen years – then comes the instant which rewards him...It hastens on, then, to the moment” (88).

Consider the conjugal lover:

- “A married man is faithful for fifteen years, yet during those fifteen years he has had possession, so in the long succession of time he has acquired faithfulness.”
- “His possession has not been like dead property, but he has constantly been acquiring his possession. He has not fought with lions and ogres, but with the most dangerous enemy – with time” (88, see also 89).

### Equilibrium Between the Aesthetical and the Ethical in the Composition of Personality

“There are many people who reach their conclusions about life like schoolboys: they cheat their master by copying the answer out of a book without having worked the sum out for themselves” (19, from K’s journal).

#### **Claims:**

- i) One must choose between the aesthetic and the ethical lives.
- ii) Choice requires a strong or unified “personality” or self.
- iii) A self is something you can lose, and so fail to have (97).

**A complication concerning (ii): a) Personality is needed for choice, but b) choice is needed for personality.**

- The choice is at once an expression of one’s personality (or self) and the way in which the personality is formed.

#### **As for (a), that personality is needed for choice:**

- i) Choice is an expression of one’s self.
- ii) If one has no self, one cannot make a choice.
- iii) Rather, the choice is made for you, or by “obscure powers within.”
- iv) Were one to perpetually deliberate, one would never choose, and thereby never express one’s self (103).

#### **As for (b), that choice is needed for personality:**

- “The choice itself is decisive for the content of the personality, through the choice the personality immerses itself in the thing chosen, and when it does not choose it withers away in consumption” (102).
- Consider one who ultimately does not choose to commit him/herself: (104).

#### Self-Alienation

- i) Choice is an expression of one’s self.
- ii) A choice is a failed choice to the extent that it fails to truly be an expression of one’s self.
- iii) One must be “in touch with” oneself; one must have self-knowledge.
- iv) But one fails to attain self-knowledge if one is always with others; one must be with oneself (sometimes) (100).
  - A accused of being afraid to be with himself: (93, See also p.90, 107, and the first paragraph under ‘1836’ on p.7).
  - A as having no self: (99).
  - But you can win yourself back! (102, see also 99).

#### Ethical Evaluation Is Necessary for Choice

**Claim:** True choice is ethical choice, that is, choice between good and evil. The aesthetic choice is no choice at all (105).

**Question:** But why is the aesthetic choice no choice?

**Answer:** The aesthetic choice is either too “immediate” to count as real choice, or not sufficiently grounded for the choice to take hold of the person (105).

- i) Choice requires reflection.
- ii) Acting on the basis of desire is to act without reflection.
- iii) Choice cannot be the result of desire; it cannot be a matter of what one wants most.
- iv) Judgment based on good and evil is not “immediate”; it is “absolute.”
  - “The ethical is “that which makes the choice a choice” (106-7).
  - True choice, true personality or self or agency, requires judging between good and evil (compare with Butler).