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Søren Kierkegaard: The Humor of Kierkegaard

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

KIERKEGAARD WROTE: “I consider the power in the comic a vitally necessary legitimation for anyone who is to be regarded as authorized in the world of spirit in our day” (*Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992]—hereafter *CUPPF*—1:281).

Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855; often SK hereafter) explored comic perception to its depths. He also practiced the art of comedy as astutely as any writer of his time. This collection shows how his theory of comedy is integrated into his practice of comic perception, and how both his theory and practice of comedy are integral to his entire authorship.

THE COMIC SIDE OF A BRILLIANT MIND

What’s So Funny?

In these pages you will meet a host who offers his guests a menu rather than a meal and the wife of an author who burned her husband’s manuscript. You will learn of a book whose typesetting occurred through a misunderstanding. You will encounter a businessman who, even with an abundance of calling cards, forgot his own name. You will hear of an interminable vacillator whom archeologists found still pacing thousands of years later, trying to come to a decision. Then there is the emperor who became a barkeeper in order to stay in the know.

Kierkegaard’s humor ranges from the droll to the rollicking, from farce to intricate, subtle analysis, from nimble stories to amusing aphorisms. Some of these selections are merely a brief fantastic flight of

imagination or an amusing word picture. Think of them as flying glimpses into an outrageous comic premise. In some extracts we do not have a fully developed comic plot at all but merely a droll analogy, witty reasoning, or a ridiculous metaphor. All these levels of musings, from wild fancy to cerebral philosophical humor, are a part of the always dialectical and sometimes preposterous buffoonery that we find in SK. Still, he bears, unjustly, a reputation for deadly sobriety and unremitting melancholy.

Cautions

It is not fair to judge Kierkegaard by the standards of a modern stand-up comedian. Laughter as such is not his major objective but rather the understanding of laughter within the stages of development of the human spirit. Nonetheless, while writing intricately dialectical philosophy, he is often not only funny, but keenly aware of just why something is funny.

I implore the reader not to impose contemporary standards of humor on a nineteenth-century writer. Comic perception is often subtly geared to its own distinctive culture and language, hence difficult to transpose and not always easily translatable. This doubles the challenge of putting together a collection of this sort, which aims to reveal Kierkegaard's best comic moments without explaining them ad nauseum. If two hundred years from now someone read a collection of the best comic moments of Lewis Carroll, G. B. Shaw, P. J. O'Rouarch, or Woody Allen, they would miss some nuances that would be understandable only in our own particular cultural context. But there would still be a lot that would be amusing. So with SK.

In making these selections I have not sought to sustain any particular level of comic intensity throughout. This is not a Marx brothers movie. Do not expect every line to be hilarious, but do anticipate in each episode some level of comic incongruity. Consider this an un-hurried venture into the leisurely writings of a brilliant author who is enjoying himself immensely as he pushes and challenges and seduces his reader.

My primary criterion in evaluating a particular passage has been

single-minded and simple: Is it funny to me? I am asking not how important it is to world history or to the vast corpus of Kierkegaardian literature nor whether it contains deep philosophical insight or enriches self-awareness—only whether it is amusing. I admit to enjoying the privileged and highly subjective position of editor; I have tried not to exploit it. If you see something in this collection that you think is not so funny, be gentle, and at least be assured that someone else thinks it is. And remember: it is possible that you might have missed something.

For Whom?

This collection is for anyone ready to be amused by human follies. Even if you have never read a page of Kierkegaard, you may well find him to be a dazzling mind worth meeting. He is determined to entertain you.

This collection can be used like a crowbar, wedging open a treasure chest containing the literary craftsmanship of an otherwise complex and difficult philosophical figure.

Some may have read Kierkegaard intensively without having ever really noticed his comic side. Here they will find what they have been missing. Others will come to this collection already having read SK extensively, already aware of his comedic style, yet wanting to see it set forth and illustrated more fully. Here they will find the best of it. Some academic readers may even already be somewhat familiar with his theory of comedy but would like to see it concisely set forth and adequately exemplified. I welcome all these readers with the caveat that they will not find in this book a labored discussion of Kierkegaard's theory of comedy (aside from this spare introduction). It is primarily a modest collection of some instances of it. But I hope these few examples will do it at least partial justice. The selections that follow include both his thoughts on humor and examples of his humor.

Kierkegaard is addressing “that single individual” whom he affectionately called “my reader”—as if to say my one and only reader, one who has elected to risk entering into Kierkegaard's own special

world of reflection on human existence, his unique authorship. The collection is not designed primarily to serve a small coterie of veteran Kierkegaard aficionados but rather “my reader.” As I made my selections (from a vast supply of possibilities), I tried to keep these hawk-eyed veteran Kierkegaard specialists out of my mind. I know these experts are out there, and some may be ready to pounce upon my choices, for sins of either commission or omission. Nonetheless, even to seasoned readers, this collection may help identify stories or episodes they have read at sometime but cannot recall precisely where in the vast sea of Kierkegaard’s sentences. The indices, topical arrangement, and editorial apparatus are especially designed to help readers, old and new, to locate themes, aphorisms, raucous images, and amusing ideas quickly.

The erudite are those, in Kierkegaard’s view, most prone to ignore or misinterpret the comic dimension. It is to the “assistant professor” that Kierkegaard assigns the role of being the most “devoid of comic power,” and the least likely to grasp his or her own comic contradictions. “A ludicrous sullenness and paragraph-pomposity that give an assistant professor a remarkable likeness to a Holberg bookkeeper are called earnestness by assistant professors” (*CUPPF* 1:281).

The Gauntlet

This prompts a more serious question: Who might reasonably be nominated as the funniest philosopher of all time? I want to throw down this gauntlet: Bundle together any other ten philosophers who have made a major impact in the history of philosophy. I challenge any reader to assemble a selection of humor from all of them put together that is funnier than what you find in this volume of Kierkegaard.

Until this challenge is answered successfully, I provisionally declare Søren Aabye Kierkegaard (despite his enduring stereotype as the melancholy, despairing Dane) as, among philosophers, the most amusing. Just think of the frail, awkward, crippled Magister Kierkegaard actually being entered into Guinness’ *World Book of Records*! He might

also be the world's funniest psychologist and the world's funniest theologian, but I do not wish to exaggerate.

Whether There Is Any Scholarly Legitimation for Such a Project

I do not pretend to enter this batch of stories into some solemn arena in which it was never intended to compete. Such an entry would be, as Kierkegaard quips, “as welcome as a dog in a game of bowls” (*Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. David Swenson, [ed.] Walter Lowrie [Princeton: Princeton University Press, © 1941]—hereafter *CUPPF-L*—p. 29). Nor can it be my purpose to justify why a particular narrative is funny; the secondary corpus is already too heavily weighted with tedious footnotes to burden it with more. Readers who want help with SK's many allusions are referred to the Princeton University Press series *Kierkegaard's Writings* (hereafter *KW*).

Think of this collection simply as entertainment with no noble purpose. Any learning or edification or wisdom derived is wholly incidental and inadvertent. Furthermost from my mind is a work of moral counsel or religious instruction. Let these pages serve as a deserved break from heavy chores. After having committed the sin of writing thousands of scholarly footnotes in my previous books on ethics, theology, and patristic studies, I have been told that my pedantry dues are fully paid up. I can now break free from such expectations, and the reader can break free from insisting upon them.

Admittedly, it is true that I could not have accomplished this task without having taught repeatedly, for a quarter-century, a graduate seminar on Kierkegaard at Drew University and directed weighty dissertations on his work. But my purpose here is not to add to an already ponderous burden of bibliographies on Kierkegaard.

SK teaches us how to revel in the comedy of the contradictions inherent to human existence. I want to dispel the dreary myth that SK is full of despair, would never be caught laughing, and that waves of his despair flood like the surf into the reader's consciousness. In addition, this volume, I suppose, might serve some function at the lectern, in the pulpit, and on the after-dinner dais, with its topics and indices so conveniently arranged for easy access.

The Editorial Apparatus

Following Howard and Edna Hong's protocol in *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers* (ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, 4 vols. [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967–75]—hereafter *JP*), a series of five periods (.) indicates an ellipsis found in the Danish text and English translation, whereas a three-dot ellipsis (. . .), sometimes following a period, indicates an omission I have made to eliminate extraneous material. To facilitate smooth reading, I have begun all excerpts with a capital letter whether or not there was a capital at that point in the original.

This volume is intended to serve as a sequel to one I previously assembled, *Parables of Kierkegaard*, published in 1978 by Princeton University Press, which has remained in print with a steady readership for almost a quarter-century. Untold numbers of readers have treasured his narrative genius as exhibited in that collection. When asked about a sequel, I thought the next obvious step would be a long-awaited collection of his humorous stories. Following basically the pattern of *Parables of Kierkegaard*, each selection begins with a *topical heading* in the upper left corner, followed by a *centered title* and a *lead question*. The lead question frames the situation in which the passage appears; the topical heading gives it focus; the title names it. None of this editorial bridging is supplied by Kierkegaard; it is derived from the context and suggests something of the argument surrounding the selection without intruding on the reader's discovery. All this is to save the reader's time and avoid the necessity of writing a dreary essay about each comic episode. The format also assists the reader in locating quickly the issue or concern central to the selection.

Since I have chosen to arrange these selections by theme rather than voice, after each selection the voice speaking (if other than SK's) has been noted in brackets. Where no pseudonymous voice is indicated, it is Kierkegaard's own voice. A dash (—) before the title indicates that a single title is being referenced in a multititled volume.

Wherever the concept of "Christendom" appears, I have ordinarily enclosed it in quotation marks, to remind the reader that what is meant is not Christianity as such but so-called Christianity, especially of the sort that prevailed in nineteenth-century Denmark.

An asterisk indicates that a translation has been amended. I have

sometimes divided long sentences with semicolons into shorter sentences, reduced archaisms, and shifted punctuation for easier reading. Where more than one translation of a selection was available, I carefully examined the differences. The literary quality of some of the earlier translations of Kierkegaard into English in my view equals or exceeds the later translation. I have made a meticulous case-by-case decision, in most cases preferring the rendition of Howard and Edna Hong, but in some cases that of Walter Lowrie or David F. Swenson or some other translator. The titles of Kierkegaard's works may appear differently in various translations, and where they do, the book title used indicates by inference the translator, as in the case of *Attack on "Christendom"* (Lowrie) or *The Moment* (Hong and Hong). KW (Kierkegaard's Writings) is always a clue that the current Princeton critical edition is being used. (If KW does not appear in the reference, the extract has been taken from some other source.) Thus the bibliography of primary sources contains both older and newer translations.

Text and Context

Is this or any other anthology justified in lifting texts out of their contexts? Some texts have some measure of narrative detachability. These are the ones I have tended to select, the ones that can transfer as independent narratives (anecdotes or comic metaphors) out of the larger text without too much deadly explanatory background. The reader may explore the context further as desired.

Literary purists may complain. What a shame to cut the text up into little pieces! How negligent to miss the context! (Implicitly: How offensive to contextuality to assemble any anthology whatever!) With the purists I agree, so far as purity goes. Those who want the text rather than an anthology will surely be happier putting this book down immediately and reading the full, uncut text rather than any editor's short selections. But purists may forget that there are others not so pure who need a map to travel the countryside.

It is the editor's task to set parameters that serve the reader. This I have done by deciding not to weight this book heavily with clarifications of Kierkegaard's probable intent. That, though possible to do,

and tempting for any scholar, would hardly have served the ordinary reader's interest.

I have gleaned these selections from SK's published authorship, leaving aside his journals and papers to be explored by another scholar. I have deliberately avoided selections that appeared in my previous anthology on Kierkegaard and have largely tried not to repeat selections that have appeared in other anthologies. To Kierkegaard experts who can't find their favorite story in this collection, I would commend *The Laughter Is on My Side* (ed. Roger Poole and Henrik Stangerup [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989]).

Søren as a One-Man Performance

As I have assembled this collection, I have often fantasized of a one-man show in which an actor portraying Kierkegaard might narrate some of this material in his own name, and then assume different masks or hats to represent Kierkegaard's various fictional personae. Others intrigued by such a fantasy could use this book as a resource, selecting from it the episodes suited to their particular thematic interests.

So I invite you to think of all these many pseudonymous voices as a one-man comic performance, expressing the contradictions of life through a series of outrageous and often disreputable characters, not all of whom speak in Kierkegaard's own personal voice. Pseudonyms like John the Seducer and Judge William do not self-evidently or directly represent SK's views any more than Falstaff or Iago represent Shakespeare's. But through all of these voices Kierkegaard describes alternative modes of consciousness and relationship. A clarification of the pseudonyms does not belong in this inquiry but is readily available in the secondary literature.

THE THEORY OF COMEDY

Most of the major themes of Kierkegaard's authorship can be observed, and even studied, through the

window of his humor. His theory of humor stands up well against others in the history of ideas: those of Aristotle, Schopenhauer, Bergson, Freud, and Suzanne Langer, among others. This study could be an undergraduate's first look at the intellectual life and language games of modern academia. But no doubt SK would forewarn us that this would diminish the seriousness of the university curriculum.

Despite my resistances, I have supplied the following brief account of Kierkegaard's intriguing theory of humor. Although it makes the overture a little long and delays the performance, I have conceded this. I say "resistances" and "conceded" because when this manuscript was first produced in 1993, the publisher requested a more scholarly introduction, and I resisted and parried for almost ten years. Why did I resist? As an editor, I thought this would be the dullest part of an otherwise stimulating book. I may have been wrong all along. In any case I urge the impatient reader to skip over this theoretical section if not intensely dedicated. I refer really serious readers to the last two hundred pages of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, and to *The Concept of Irony* for SK's own extensive thoughts on ironic and comic analysis. To those wishing to see a useful analysis of Kierkegaard's theory of comedy, I commend Lloyd Ellison Parrill's ("The Concept of Humor in the Pseudonymous Works of Søren Kierkegaard" diss., Drew University, 1975—hereafter CH) written under my direction. Long before that the seeds of this volume were planted in conversations with H. Richard Niebuhr, Joseph Mathews, and W.B.J. Martin.

Contradiction as the Defining Category of the Comic

"The category of the comic is essentially contradiction" (*JP* 2:266 [1737]). "If a king disguised himself as a butcher and a butcher happened to resemble the king in a striking way, people would laugh at both of them, but for opposite reasons—at the butcher because he was not the king, and at the king because he was not the butcher" (*JP* 2:267 [1744]). The comic incongruities hinge on the fact that we expect a king to be a king and a butcher to be a butcher, so far apart are they in social location and prestige. That social distance

makes funny the very thought that each might be disguised to look like the other.

Kierkegaard tells the story of a horsefly that “sat on a man’s nose the very moment he made his last running leap to throw himself into the Thames” (*JP* 2:257 [1697]). The extreme seriousness of suicide is here utterly incongruous with the entirely accidental landing of the fly.

Among SK’s earliest writings is the outline of a play called “The Battle between the Old and the New Soap-Cellars.” The name comes from a fierce competition between rival soap dealers near the University of Copenhagen, one of whom had a sign that read “Here is the genuine old soap-cellar where the genuine old soap-cellar people live.” His rival’s sign: “Here is the new soap-cellar; the old soap-cellar people moved in on May 1, 1808” (*Early Polemical Writings*, ed. and trans. Julia Watkin [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990], 260n). In this play, Kierkegaard includes as one of his characters “A Fly, who has wisely wintered for many years with the late Hegel and who has been so fortunate as to have sat on his immortal nose several times during the composition of his work: *Phaenomenologie des Geistes*” (*Early Polemical Writings* 106).

Comic perception is drawn to incongruity, especially when the incongruity is unexpected or accidental: “Just as a shriek wrung from pain could very well appear to be laughable to someone at a great distance who had no intimation of the situation of the person from whom it came, just as the twitch of a smile on the face of a deaf-mute or a taciturn person could appear to someone to be laughable” (*JP* 2:260 [1706]). Kierkegaard does not hesitate to push his comic analogies to gross extremes: he imagines a man who pretends to let “himself be skinned alive in order to show how the humorous smile is produced by the contraction of a particular muscle—and thereupon follows this with a lecture on humor” (*JP* 2:262 [1718]). The comic incongruity lies in the contrast between the safe setting of the lecture hall and a man presumably being skinned alive in order to demonstrate that an involuntary contraction of a tiny muscle appears to be a smile.

Kierkegaard tells the story of the “man who, standing two miles away from the windmill, makes it go by laying his finger on one

nostril and blowing through the other” (*JP* 2:257 [1695]). The comic incongruity (here I am explaining what I promise not to explain in the performance itself) is that one nostril could never affect a windmill two miles away. The nose itself is that part of the face that most easily yields to comic caricature. If the man blew through his mouth or if the windmill were only two feet away, there would be proportionally less incongruity, and hence less comedy.

“A drunken man can have such a comic effect because he expresses a contradiction of motion. The eye insists upon evenness in walking; the more there is some reason to insist upon it, the more comic is the effect of the contradiction (thus a stone-drunk person is less comic). If a superior, for example, comes along and the drunken man, aware of him, wants to pull himself together and walk straight, the comic becomes more obvious because the contradiction becomes more obvious. He succeeds for a few steps, until the spirit of contradiction once again carries him away. If he succeeds completely while passing by his superior, the contradiction becomes a different one, that we know he is drunk and yet this is not visible. In the one case, we laugh at him when he staggers because the eye insists upon evenness; in the other case, we laugh at him because he is holding himself straight when our knowing that he is drunk insists upon seeing him stagger” (*CUPPF* 1:516–17n).

Locating Comic Contradiction within the Human Contradiction

Understanding comic consciousness requires understanding human nature in its three existential stages: aesthetic, ethical, and religious. It is fairly easy to locate the stage in which one is currently operating if one understands comic sensibilities. And it is easy to see where a person stands in the “stages on life’s way” by looking toward how that person experiences and understands the comic.

The dynamic between existing and suffering is the heart of comic perception. That dynamic reveals a person’s grasp of the contradiction which the human self is. “On the whole, the comic is present everywhere, and every existence can at once be defined and assigned to its particular sphere by knowing how it is related to the comic”

(CUPPF 1:462). To run short of a comic sense is to lack an essential aspect of matured self-awareness.

Here is the theoretical part of this book, about which readers have already been forewarned. Take a deep breath for a thousand-fathom plunge.

Extreme Opposites Constitute the Human Self

Human existence is a synthesis of extreme opposites that make for ironic-comic awareness:

- body/soul
- temporality/eternity
- possibility/necessity
- finitude/freedom

These contradictories give comedy plenty to play off of: I exist as a body here and now, yet I also remain, through reason and fantasy, capable of imagining infinite possibilities worlds away. I am a finite body in time while also being a self in relation to eternity. The human situation is by these very polarities enmeshed in ongoing contradictions “of the extremest opposites,” caught in persistent discrepancies, hence fraught with pathos and existential suffering, characterized by the uneasiness of freedom with itself. *The very arena in which the comic appears is a juxtaposition of these opposites—internally conflicted passion—which is the most basic feature of being human.* It is in this unremitting interplay, of finitude and freedom, temporality and eternity, that human life is daily lived out. Hence *incommensurability, polarity, and contradiction are the always-available makings of comedy.* Incongruity is the feast on which comedy feeds.

Thesis: This incommensurability is seen at its apogee in the religious consciousness, in which *the temporality/eternity incongruities are heightened to the utmost in suffering, but finally transmuted in Christianity, which views the human situation in the light of the Incarnation. This event is the most humorous and unexpected reversal: God is born into time to save humanity, whereby the comic is resolved in praise.*

How the Comic Appears in the Stages on Life's Way

Comic consciousness is viewed in relation to a distinct sequence of modes of existence:

- immediacy,
- immediacy with reflection,
- aesthetic existence,
- irony,
- ethical existence,
- comic perception,
- suffering and guilt,
- immanent forms of religious consciousness, and
- Christianity.

Comic forms of self-deception and self-recognition are seen in all of these stages, viewed in relation to the mutations of passion and pathos that accompany this sequence or journey of stages.

Simply put, the comic can best be analyzed, as can the rest of human existence, in terms of esthetic, ethical, and religious stages along life's way.

The comic is always based on an experienced contradiction or incongruity. Christianity is blessed with many such incongruities: God in time, joy amid suffering, sin forgiven. Hence Christianity is the most humorous of all forms of religion (*JP* 2:252–53 [1682]; *JP* 2:255 [1689]).

Stages or Spheres of Relationship to Existence as Platform for the Comic

Comic episodes may appear at any of these stages:

- the unreflective immediacy of the *aesthetic* stage,
- its movement into immediacy with reflection,
- its recognition of the necessity of *ethical* decision,
- its despair over the necessity of decision,
- its recognition of suffering and guilt,
- its relating to the *religious* ground of its existence

in faith, and finally
the joy of living with suffering amid time as
viewed in relation to eternity.

The more one enters into a relation with oneself, an active recognition of who one is as body/soul, temporal/eternal incongruence, the more one becomes a self, owns one's personhood and personal freedom, the more one is welcomed into comic consciousness.

The comic appears at each stage along life's way (aesthetic, ethical, and religious), but has an essential relation with the religious, and especially with Christianity, where the self is understood decisively in relation to the Incarnation and the Atonement.

HOW THE COMIC APPEARS IN AESTHETIC CONSCIOUSNESS

What Kierkegaard means by the aesthetic is very close to what Augustine meant by the natural human condition and what Luther meant by natural man prior to the law. The three stages which Augustine described as human existence under *nature*, under *law*, and under *grace*, Luther delineated as natural, legal, and evangelical existence. Kierkegaard is appropriating this familiar sequence in his description of aesthetic, ethical, and religious existence.

His early pseudonyms are replete with comic forms of aesthetic strife. The comic appears in aesthetic consciousness in the voices of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous masks: John the Seducer, Hilarius Bookbinder, the Fashion Designer, Nicolaus Notabene, etcetera. The prototype of the first stage, aesthetic existence, is a Young Man who is known in *Either/Or* only as "A." There is much that is amusing about "A," which Judge William, the prototype of ethical criticism, is constantly pointing out.

Despairing over their human limitations or possibilities or both, the aesthetic non-deciders and can't-deciders such as "A" elicit comic occasions in abundance. These incongruities are viewed by "A" as misfortunes, not as essential, ongoing expressions of the human contradiction; to him they are accidental, not intrinsic, to the human situation. These comic contradictions are so built into human existence that they keep presenting the aesthetic way of life with challenges to grow beyond its despair and frustration. Typically the aesthete responds to each of them by fleeing from himself (= de-

spair), grieving over the sorry and irrevocable nature of finite human freedom. That is, he does not want this freedom (but cannot get rid of it), and at the same time wishes it were infinite.

Kierkegaard tells the story of “One who walked along contemplating suicide—at that very moment a stone fell down and killed him, and he ended with the words: Praise the Lord!” (*JP* 2:249 [1672]). The incongruity of this situation is that suicide is a violent act of freedom against oneself, whereas the entirely coincidental falling of the stone, which kills him without involving his intention, is briefly glimpsed by the dying man as an unexpected gift or blessing, hence a reason for praise. He no longer has the burden of ending his own life, since it is happily ended by an absurd, unexpected falling stone. This is an example of contradiction, and it appears within the sphere of the aesthetic because it is focused on pain avoidance.

There is a keen awareness of finite limitation in the earliest (aesthetic, immediate) stage. The aesthetic character constantly fantasizes infinite possibilities within these limitations. He gasps for possibility. His motto: Give me air! Yet in gasping for possibility, one remains here and now always enmeshed in finitude. Aesthetic existence wants desperately to escape into possibility, but that is never accessible to a person who dwells in time.

The aesthete fixates upon the self’s keen awareness of its vulnerabilities, whether in the direction of an inordinate assertion of freedom or an inordinate compliance with destiny. The aesthete wishes despairingly to go back to the fantasized situation of total non-risk. He seeks to be eternally happy in time, but that is not possible without meeting and dealing with suffering and guilt. This is precisely what constitutes the chronic frustration of the aesthete (or “esthete” as the translation requires).

The Resolve to Marry as the Prototype of Decision Making

The transition from aesthetic to ethical consciousness appears in the correspondence between the two major figures of *Either/Or*: the Young Man or “A” (aesthetic archetype) and Judge William (ethical archetype). They are presumably good friends, one young and unestablished, the other older and established, who differ in viewpoint, especially toward marriage. Their interaction constitutes the dynamic

drama of Kierkegaard's first masterpiece, *Either/Or* (ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987]—hereafter *E/O*), *Either* being the papers of "A," collected by William Afham, and *Or* the observations of Judge William.

The key to the transition from aesthetic to ethical existence is seen in the decision to marry. In this presumably irrevocable decision, one transmutes erotic love into covenant fidelity. The ethical relation to existence is expressed prototypically in the marriage vows and their fulfillment, whereby eroticism is constrained and nurtured by enduring commitment and fidelity. The erotic in marriage stands under moral and social requirement, and does so in relation to eternity. The aesthetic consciousness views the erotic as a spontaneous pursuit of pleasure, while the ethical consciousness views the erotic as a commitment between two persons with the welfare of children in mind. One who lives in ethical consciousness has already learned how to bind time. But aesthete's awareness of time is focused more primitively on immediacy, on avoiding pain and seeking gratification now. The ethical relation with time is always placed in a durable time-frame, a decisive commitment that binds time. This decision is what the aesthete studiously (and comically) avoids.

In the commitment to marriage, the erotic is seen not only in relation to the whole of one's life but also in relation to eternity. Time is bound in relation to eternity. That is what is freely agreed in the wedding vows. Marriage binds time in the context of one's accountability to eternity, in an irrevocable commitment of one's erotic energies in relation to the whole of time, and beyond time. That is what makes marriage so frightening to the aesthete and so comforting in the ethical sphere.

How does the comic find its way into this transition? Both ironic and comic perception are always acutely attentive to present incongruities and contradictions, wherever they emerge. Endless situational incongruities arise as one moves from indecision to decision, from singleness to marriage, from "Either/Or" (deciding) to "Or" (having decided). These indecisions are narrated in the aesthetic pseudonyms, and the need for decision is invoked in ethical pseudonyms. There is much comic potential embedded in this solemn event of marriage and its consequences.

Binding Time in the Transition from Aesthetic to Ethical Consciousness

Any decision binding time challenges the self to move beyond the esthetic into the ethical sphere of existence. Ethical existence is not understood just in terms of the decision to marry but in relation to any decision to bind time in durable commitment. Yet marriage is undoubtedly its most solemn and obvious example. The ethical binds eroticism within time in the presence of eternity.

What incongruities appear at this juncture, the moment of deciding to marry? This, in fact, is the moment the young male aesthete of SK's "Banquet" face and debate and bungle and try fitfully to work through. The aesthetic life does not want to give up the free possibilities that abound prior to decision making. It accentuates the real or pretended pleasures of the moment and seeks to avoid its limitations. This is precisely how aesthetic consciousness is focused: maximize pleasure now, avoid suffering. Yet suffering is the doorway to becoming more fully human, more aware, more fully oneself.

Irony

The way to comic perceptions is always being signaled by irony. What is irony? SK illustrates: "In the case of Swift, it was an irony of fate that in his old age he entered the insane asylum he himself had erected in his early years" (*JP* 2:264 [1727]; cf. *E/O* 1:21, *Stages on Life's Way*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988], 99–200).

Irony is at work throughout aesthetic existence to reveal its incongruities and to prepare the way for the comic. Irony is not merely a literary genre but "a mode of existence, and there is nothing more absurd than to suppose that it is a manner of speech, or for an author to congratulate himself on having here and there expressed himself ironically. Whoever essentially possesses irony possesses it as long as the day lasts, and it is fettered to no form because it is the expression in him, of infinity" (*Søren Kierkegaards Samlede Værker*, ed. A. B. Drachmann et al., 14 vols. [Copenhagen: Gyldendals, 1901–6]—hereafter SV—7:438; cf. Hermann Diem, "The Dialectician's Irony and Humour," *Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Existence*, trans. Harold Knight [Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1959]—hereafter KDE—44).

Socrates was the supreme master of irony. He worked by pretend-

ing ignorance and asking questions. His maieutic (birth-assisting) method helped the learner walk through human incongruities first by recognizing them and then by seeking the truth, immanent already within oneself, that will to resolve or transcend them. By presuming ignorance in the questioner and asking questions about the truth as if already embedded in the learner, Socrates was constantly moving the learner through this indirect communication toward a greater recognition of the truth and of selfhood.

The movement of irony at its early stages proceeds by indirect communication. This is a necessary process of revealing the truth to the self-deceived, which is not otherwise possible because of self-deception. SK does this brilliantly by means of pseudonymous voices describing episodes of consciousness and decision during these stages and substages. A consciousness aware of irony every moment will draw the learner toward recognition of the incongruities and deceptions that pervade aesthetic consciousness. Ironic awareness moves the self from an immature pure immediacy, eroticism, despair, and finite freedom toward a maturing awareness of the ongoing human contradiction. This contradiction is constantly revealing one's own finite freedom, amid the time-eternity and soul-body relationship.

The contradiction which is human existence is manifested prototypically in the decision to be married, or to back out of a decision to marry, which "binds time" erotically—or any other decision that binds time. Kierkegaard's own personal history was full of these ambivalences. Any vocational decision to which one is committing oneself over time is prone to expose the human contradiction. The more the aesthete is frustrated by the constraints of finitude, the more he glimpses the unremitting incongruence in which the body-soul relationship (which is the self) constantly exists.

The incognito of irony and the potentiality of humor accompany any decision requiring time-binding choice. The person who is deciding to bind time, hence moving from the aesthetic to the ethical, is caught in various moments of incongruity that irony reveals and comedy transmutes into jest. The ironic-comic dynamics of the aesthetic stages are only adequately grasped from the viewpoint of the subsequent stages of ethical and religious consciousness.

Ironic consciousness beholds and reveals the contradiction be-

tween who one is and how one misconstrues who one is. The pose of the clergy, the gossip with a forbearing smile, etcetera—the ironist sees through these, searching for the truth of how they reveal one’s relation to one’s existence. The ironist is always keenly aware of the extraordinary difficulty of being human. His spyglass is focused on the arena between ideal self-image and actual behavior. Imagine an actor who says on stage: “It is I who speak, these are my words—and then has not a single word to say the second the prompter is silent” (*JP* 2:225 [1616]). The incongruity lies in his claiming ownership of words he does not own.

Repetition and recollection play into a comic perception of aesthetic consciousness. In recollection one hopes to recapture a moment of pleasure, or repeat it, or sustain it in time. Meanwhile time continues to spin away to another moment, always fleeting, constantly pursued.

Locating Irony within the Stages

Although the ironic mode of existence may appear in any stage, it lurks especially in the transitions and interfaces between aesthetic and ethical existence. It grasps and reveals by indirect communication the incongruence between the universal ethical requirement and the uncertainties of finitude. When the demands of absolute truth telling collide with the demands and special finite conditions of the moment, the critique of the ironist hovers over that collision, ready to leap into action.

“A pastor who uses a manuscript in the pulpit and steals a look at it. Just at the moment when, with a bold, sweeping, upward motion, he says the words, ‘The soul rises upward,’ [with feeling], he discovers he has not looked at the manuscript long enough to make such an expansive gesture—and he must now look at the paper” (*JP* 2:269 [1750]). The contradiction in this case lies in the pretentious motion contrasted with the humbling necessity of having to look at the paper to see where his sweeping gesture was supposed to lead. Thus he himself made his gesture comic by shifting abruptly from imagined infinitude to the lowliness of the finite.

Again: “A man knows that God exists—and he says: I know it, damn it all!” (*JP* 2:268 [1747]). The comic incongruity here lies in

