A KIERKEGAARDIAN ETHICS OF MYSTICISM

by

Matthew Brake
A Thesis
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A Kierkegaardian Ethics of Mysticism

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DEDICATION

To my parents, who have made this seemingly unprofitable venture in the Humanities possible, but I wouldn’t have it any other way.
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ABSTRACT

A KIERKEGAARDIAN ETHICS OF MYSTICISM

Matthew Brake, M.A.
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This thesis argues that a positive reading of mysticism in the writings of Søren Kierkegaard is possible. I argue that mysticism is capable of the same transfiguration as the aesthetic within Kierkegaard’s thought. Since mysticism is an open and fluid concept and the ethical in Kierkegaard has multiple meanings, I establish the meaning of the mystical in dialogue with William James’ Varieties of Religious. This is followed by a brief description of the various ways the ethical is defined in Kierkegaard, and I established the uniting theme between them all. Through an analysis of Kierkegaard’s Either/Or Part II and The Book on Adler, I establish resonances across Kierkegaard’s corpus that demonstrate that the mystical, like the aesthetic, is made complete and transfigured by the ethical.
CHAPTER ONE: KIERKEGAARD AND MYSTICISM – A DILEMMA

Kierkegaard’s emphasis on the individual’s absolute relation to God has caused many people to wonder if Kierkegaard is himself a mystic. There is, however, some difficulty with giving Kierkegaard the label of “mystic.” Scholars themselves are divided on the topic. Some hold that Kierkegaard was in fact a type of mystic¹ while others deny this.² Still some claim that Kierkegaard was entirely ambivalent about mysticism.³ This lack of consensus can make any writing on the topic of mysticism in Kierkegaard difficult.

The purpose of this project is to articulate a positive view on mysticism in the writings of Kierkegaard. More specifically, I will endeavor to show that it is possible to read the Kierkegaardian corpus in a way that opens up the conditions for the possibility of a positive understanding of mysticism in his writings, and through these readings, I suggest that it is possible to begin to articulate an idea of mysticism that is beneficial to the religious life through its “transfiguration” by the ethical. I will do this by focusing on two specific Kierkegaardian works: Either/Or Part II and The Book on Adler. In Either/Or, Kierkegaard’s pseudonym, Judge William, critiques mysticism, accusing it of

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being one-sided⁴ and leading its adherents away from concrete, everyday existence.⁵ *The Book on Adler* revolves around Petrus Minor’s critique of a Danish pastor who claimed to have received a direct communication from God but later indicated that he had merely felt a “deep emotion.”⁶ Kierkegaard criticizes the pastor for his inconsistency, demonstrating that this lack of consistency is due to a deficient ethical development in Adler’s life. However, both of these texts also present the possibility of a positive perspective of mysticism. In *Either/Or*, Judge William accuses mysticism of leading one away from concrete existence, but a similar charge is laid at the feet of the aesthetic sphere of existence; however, Judge William allows for the possibility of the transfiguration of the aesthetic into ethical, allowing it to become a beneficial part of concrete existence. I will argue that the same possibility may be true of the mystical as well.

While one ought to avoid treating the words of the pseudonyms as if they were Kierkegaard’s own thoughts, one does see similar resonances regarding the idea of mysticism throughout Kierkegaard’s writings. From Kierkegaard’s journals, to *Concept of Irony*, to *Either/Or II*, to *The Book on Adler*, one can trace these resonances, and when put into conversation with each other, a much more positive (if at times cautious and ambiguous) picture emerges of the mystical in Kierkegaard’s authorship.

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⁵ Ibid., 247.
Mysticism and Kierkegaard

When one finds the term “mysticism” in Kierkegaard’s works, one must ask what kind of mysticism this term is referring to. There is a very telling passage in *The Concept of Irony* that gives the reader an indication of Kierkegaard’s own understanding of the topic.

He writes:

Insofar as I can grasp Oriental mysticism, whatever dying away…is to be found there consists in a relaxation of the soul’s muscular strength, of the tension that constitutes consciousness, in a disintegration and melancholic relapsing lethargy, in a softening whereby one becomes heavier, not lighter, whereby one is not volatized but is chaotically scrambled and then moves with vague motions in a thick fog. Therefore the Oriental may indeed wish to be liberated from the body and feel it as something burdensome, but this is really not in order to become more free but in order to become more bound, as if he wished for the vegetative still life of the plant instead of locomotion. It is wishing for the foggy, drowsy wallowing that an opiate can procure rather than for the sky of thought, wishing for an illusory repose in a consummation connected with a…[sweet idleness] rather than the energy of action.\(^7\)

Christopher Nelson makes the following comments about this description:

[T]here is an unmistakable continuity that resonates throughout his description of what he wants to call “Oriental mysticism.” It is lethargic, soft, heavy, chaotic, vague, thick, vegetative, foggy, drowsy, illusory, hazy, deadening, etc. In other words, it is a tendency toward nothingness.\(^8\)

One sees a similar description of mysticism in Judge William’s critique of mysticism in *Either/Or Part II*.

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While Judge William lists a number of criticisms of mysticism, they can be summarized by one characteristic: the rejection of the world of actuality and existence and rejection of the subsequent responsibility for one’s own history and concreteness. The result is the dissolution of relationship between the individual and the world of concrete existence. Judge William writes, “The mystic chooses himself in his perfect isolation; for him the whole world is dead and exterminated.”\(^9\) Instead the mystic seeks to “creep into God…almost [vanishing] from himself.”\(^10\) Judge Williams notes the problem with this way of life:

Repetition in time is without meaning, continuity is lacking. To a great extent this is the case with the mystic’s life. It is frightful to read a mystic’s laments over the flat moments. Then when the flat moment is over comes the luminous moment, and thus his life is continually alternating; it certainly has movement, but not development. His life lacks continuity. It is a feeling, namely a longing, that really constitutes the continuity in a mystic’s life, whether this longing is directed to the past or to the future. But the very fact that a feeling constitutes the intervening period in this way proves that coherence is lacking. A mystic’s development is metaphysically and esthetically qualified to such a degree that one does not dare to call it history except in the same sense that one speaks of the history of a plant.\(^11\)

The judge continues by observing that the mystic regards temporality as “an enemy that has to be vanquished,” for “he would rather be all through with temporality.”\(^12\) Giving the reason, the judge writes:

Since the mystic chooses himself abstractly, his trouble is that he finds it very difficult to begin to move or, to put it more correctly, that it is an impossibility for him. The same thing happens to the mystic in his religious first love as happens to you in your earthly first love. He has tasted it in all its blessedness and now has nothing to do except to wait for

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\(^10\) Ibid., 243.
\(^11\) Ibid., 242.
\(^12\) Ibid., 249.
it to come again in just as much glory as before, and about that he can easily be tempted to harbor a doubt, which is the point I have frequently made, that development is retrogression, a falling off. For a mystic, actuality is a delay, yes, of such a precarious nature that he almost runs the risk that life will rob him of what he once possessed.\(^{13}\)

For the mystic, “the meaning of life is understood as an instant, not as succession.”\(^{14}\)

This way of living causes the judge to accuse the mystic’s life of having an obtrusiveness, which leads to a “softness and weakness of which he cannot be absolved.”\(^{15}\) He writes:

That a person wishes to be convinced in his innermost heart that he loves God in truth and honesty, that he often feels prompted really to make sure of it, that he can pray to God to let his Spirit witness with his spirit, that he does this—who would deny the beauty and truth in this? But it by no means follows that he will repeat this attempt every moment, test his love at every moment. He will have sufficient greatness of soul to believe in God’s love, and then he will also have the cheerful boldness to believe in his own love, and rejoicing abide in the circumstances assigned to him simply because he knows that this abiding is the surest expression of his love, of his humility.\(^{16}\)

While the judge acknowledges that “a person is supposed to love God with all his soul and all his mind” and that can be blissful, “it by no means follows that the mystic is supposed to reject the existence, the actuality, in which God has placed him, because he thereby actually rejects God’s love or demands another expression for it than that which God wills to give.”\(^{17}\) This obtrusive softness can also “take an even more dubious form—for example, if a mystic bases his relationship to God on his being precisely who he is, regards himself by virtue of some accidental characteristic as the object of God’s

\(^{13}\) Ibid., 249.
\(^{14}\) Ibid., 249.
\(^{15}\) Ibid., 244.
\(^{16}\) Ibid., 244.
\(^{17}\) Ibid., 243-244.
preference.” In doing so, the judge says that the mystic “debases…himself, because to be essentially different from others by virtue of something accidental is always a debasement.”

For the judge, “[a] human being’s eternal dignity lies precisely in this, that he can gain a history.” The problem with the mystic is that “he does not become concrete either to himself or to God; he chooses himself abstractly,” and doing so “is not to choose oneself ethically.” The judge explains:

Not until a person in his choice has taken himself upon himself, has put on himself, has totally interpenetrated himself so that every movement he makes is accompanied by a consciousness of responsibility for himself—not until then has a person chosen himself ethically…not until then is he concrete, not until then is he in his total isolation in absolute continuity with the actuality to which he belongs.

To choose oneself ethically means that the “individual…becomes conscious as this specific individual with these capacities, these inclinations, these drives, these passions, influenced by this specific social milieu, as this specific product of a specific environment. But as he becomes aware of all this, he takes upon himself responsibility for it all.” In choosing himself abstractly, the mystic avoids “the true concrete choice…by which I choose myself back into the world the very same moment I choose myself out of the world.” Judge William holds that the problem with the mystic is that he not only rejects actuality, but in doing so, he does not take responsibility for himself in the

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18 Ibid., 244.
19 Ibid., 244.
20 Ibid., 250.
21 Ibid., 248.
22 Ibid., 248.
23 Ibid., 251. Emphasis mine.
24 Ibid., 249.
circumstances of his actuality. The mystic views actuality “as vanity, [and] he…fails to appreciate the historical and…views it as futile soil.”\(^{25}\) The judge thus sees the mystical life as a failed attempt “to actualize an ethical life-view,”\(^{26}\) a concept to which we shall return.

Nelson has rightly observed Judge Williams’ very similar comments to Kierkegaard’s own in his dissertation.\(^{27}\) The judge comments, “Since I do not have a theological education, I do not regard myself as competent to deal with religious mysticism in greater detail.”\(^{28}\) Additionally, the issue of Oriental mysticism is raised again, particularly in relation to the character of Ludwig Blackfeldt, who “emerges as the prime candidate to look to in the quest of what may, with due reservation, be called Kierkegaard’s view (or personification) of ‘mysticism.’”\(^{29}\) Judge William describes Ludwig as having “lost himself one-sidedly in a mysticism not so much Christian as Indian.”\(^{30}\) This lostness eventually leads to Ludwig’s suicide\(^{31}\) with the text indicating that “it is a relatively small step from ostensibly refusing the world (relative withdrawal) to actually removing oneself from it (absolute withdrawal).”\(^{32}\) The judge makes his verdict based on Ludwig’s “disturbing application of the ‘annihilation of self’ motif” present in such mysticism.\(^{33}\)

\(^{25}\) Ibid., 249-250.
\(^{26}\) Ibid., 250. Emphasis mine.
\(^{27}\) Nelson, “Kierkegaard, Mysticism, and Jest,” 441-442.
\(^{28}\) Kierkegaard, Either/Or II, 247.
\(^{29}\) Nelson, “Kierkegaard, Mysticism, and Jest,” 443.
\(^{30}\) Kierkegaard, Either/Or II, 245.
\(^{31}\) Ibid., 245.
\(^{32}\) Nelson, “Kierkegaard, Mysticism, and Jest,” 445.
\(^{33}\) Ibid., 447.
A few things must be said about the mysticism presented in these references. William Narum has argued that the mysticism criticized in the judge’s account has a distinctly monistic character as opposed to genuine Christian mysticism. Narum states that such mysticism is focused on pure Being and escaping existence (and hence the ethical).  

Marie Thulstrup seems to agree, noting that mysticism’s relationship to Hegelianism in the discourses of Kierkegaard’s time, with the accusations of the latter’s pantheistic tendencies, overshadowed the way in which the Christian mystics understood themselves and their experiences as relating positively to actuality. As Šajda notes about mysticism as read about in *The Concept of Irony* and *Either/Or*, “It is therefore appropriate to bear in mind that Kierkegaard’s concept of mysticism reaches beyond the Western Christian tradition.”

It is important here to make a clarification regarding monistic mysticism’s relationship to the ethical and its depiction here. Nelson has pointed out, per Abrahim Khan, that Kierkegaard probably did not understand the nature of Oriental mysticism and that his knowledge was probably “derived second-hand” from other sources. Khan himself writes, “The Vedic texts do not indicate evidence to suggest a mysticism that is

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34 Narum, “Kierkegaard—A Christian Mystic?” 91-93.
characterized by…a longing that is hazy, low pitched, oppressive, and evaporating in a feeble lethargy.”  

On the contrary, he states:

In setting out the mystic doctrine of the Veda in the form of a discourse between teacher and pupils, that Upanishad puts the emphasis on the practicing of virtue, the heeding of duties, and on being truthful. Its ethical emphasis implies a recognition of the seriousness of responsibility and the feeling of respect for natural consequences in striving to attain the ultimate bliss of Brahman, man's highest end according to that tradition. 

In spite of the fact that Kierkegaard’s critique of mysticism seems to be aimed at a form of mysticism apart from Christian theistic mysticism, and one that he himself may not have had a very good grasp of (which can be blamed in part on the Orientalism that Edward Said has famously brought attention to in his work), it is still worth considering whether or not one can claim a positive space for mystical experience in Kierkegaard’s writings.

**Defining the Mystical**

Defining a working definition of mysticism is a problematic task, for “there is no mysticism-in-general; there are only particular mystical systems and individuals, Hindu Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish, Christian, and so forth.” As Peter Moore observes,

The term *mysticism*, like the term *religion* itself, is a problematic but indispensable one. Identifying a broad spectrum of ideas, experiences, and practices across a diversity of cultures and traditions, it is a generic term rather than the name for any particular doctrine or mode of life.

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39 Ibid., 81.
40 See Footnote 7.
As such, Louis Dupré notes, “No definition could be both meaningful and sufficiently comprehensive to include all experiences that, at some point or other, have been described as ‘mystical.’”

As a category of analysis, mysticism is “a modern [term], serving the purpose of comparative study and theoretical analysis, drawing into a single arena ideas and practices otherwise isolated within their own local names and histories.”

At the same time, “the term remains colored if not hampered by the complexity of its own history” including its “popular uses…as a label for anything nebulous, esoteric, occult, or supernatural.” So how ought one define mysticism in light of the complex use of the term itself?

As Moore points out above, the term “mysticism” like “religion” itself is fraught with the baggage of its historical connotations; nevertheless, it still serves a necessary analytical function for describing certain phenomenon. J.Z. Smith’s counsel concerning the use and indispensable value of the term “religion” may serve as a helpful guide for coming up with a useful definition for “mysticism” as well:

The moral…is not that religion cannot be defined, but that it can be defined, with greater or lesser success, more than fifty ways…. “Religion” is not a native term; it is a term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and therefore is theirs to define. It is a second-order, generic concept that plays the same role in establishing a disciplinary horizon that a concept such as “language” plays in linguistics or “culture” plays in anthropology.

As with religion, it is often up to the individual scholar to determine the working definition of mysticism according to his or her own scholarly purposes. For this study, I

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43 Dupré, “Mysticism,” 6341.
44 Peter, Moore, “Mysticism,” 6355.
45 Ibid., 6355.
will apply the characteristics of mysticism as described by William James. James is useful for this study because his non-denominational, non-sectarian account of mystical experience allows for a broad account of mysticism without any confessional or metaphysical hang-ups.

In his classic study, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James remarks that “personal religious experience has its root and centre in mystical states of consciousness.” However, this statement leads him to ask, “What does the expression ‘mystical states of consciousness’ mean? How do we part off mystical states from other states?” James provides four indicators or “marks” for determining whether a state of consciousness is mystical: ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, and passivity. Ineffability refers to that which “defies expression” and is “directly experienced.” As James observes, “In this peculiarity mystical states are more like states of feeling than like states of intellect.” The noetic quality addresses the way that “mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge.” For the purposes of this study, the noetic quality of mysticism should not be understood as providing brand new infallible information to the mystic. Jan Van Bragt and Paul Mommaers explain:

> [W]hat makes a mystic a mystic is simply a particular kind of awareness. The doors of perception are thrown open to something that is new and unfamiliar to them as it is to the non-mystic…. The gift of mystical experience does not imply an absolute, self-justifying state of consciousness, possessed of a unique object, yielding an uncommon knowledge, and impervious to ordinary criticism. The mystic simply

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48 Ibid.
49 Ibid., 343.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
knows in a distinct manner what is open to all of us to know…. Thus the privileged gift of the mystic is not new information but a certain way of knowing. He or she does not know something “more” about God than theology or theodicy.53

Transiency simply refers to the temporary nature of mystical states of consciousness with James noting that they “cannot be sustained for long.”54 Passivity describes the way in which “the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance…[and]…as if he were grasped and held by a superior power.”55

It would be remiss to not mention that comparing Kierkegaard and James is putting two different “language games” into conversation, and given Kierkegaard’s language in The Book on Adler about the need for experience to be mediated by Christian concepts, James’s unmediated or ineffable mysticism would seem to be at odds with any attempt to put him into dialogue with Kierkegaard. However, this work is making a contribution to Kierkegaard studies, not to philosophical accounts of mysticism, and while others may have dismissed the relevance of mysticism for Kierkegaard’s writings, I am claiming that there is something that could be uncovered within the his corpus using James’s language about mysticism in a descriptive and heuristic fashion.

**Mysticism in the Life of Kierkegaard**

Between the years 1835-1838, Kierkegaard can be described as having an antagonistic relationship with the Christian faith, but overtime, his relationship with Christianity

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54 James, 343. Dupré states that transiency is a “more controversial characteristic.” He notes that “great mystics have remained for prolonged periods in enhanced states of consciousness. Intermittent intensive experiences figured therein as moments of a more comprehensive surpassing awareness.” He recommends that the term “rhythmic” may be more appropriate. See, Dupré, “Mysticism,” 6341-6342.
55 Ibid., 343-344.
became increasingly positive until at last on May 19, 1838, he had a religious conversion experience, which became a turning point in his life. He describes this experience in a journal entry:

There is an indescribable joy which enkindles us as inexplicably as the apostle’s outburst comes gratuitously: “Rejoice I say unto you, and again I say unto you rejoice.”—Not a joy over this or that but the soul’s mighty song “with tongue and mouth, from the bottom of the heart.” “I rejoice though my joy, in, at, with, over, by, and with my joy”—a heavenly refrain as it were, suddenly breaks off our other song; a joy which cools and refreshes us like the breath of wind, a wave of air, from the trade wind which blows from the plains of Mamre to the everlasting habitations.

This experience has led some to refer to Kierkegaard as a mystic since he himself didn’t tolerate “any instrumentality to intervene between the believer and God,” and this experience seems to have lacked any such instrumentality. Indeed, one sees James’s four marks of mysticism within this passage: 1) the ineffability of the “indescribable joy” and the “inexplicable kindling,” 2) the noetic awareness from joy and the heavenly refrain, 3) transiency inasmuch as this experience was temporary, and 4) passivity, in the unexpected way in which this expectation came upon Kierkegaard as a “breath of wind” which “suddenly breaks off our other song.” This experience may very well define the moment when Kierkegaard embraces the ethical sphere of existence, and it may provide the impetus for one of his earliest writings—his critique of Hans Christian Andersen’s Only a Fiddler in From the Papers of One Still Living.

Mysticism, the Ethical, and the Life-view

It is important to understand from the outset the circumstances surrounding the publication of Kierkegaard’s review of Andersen’s Only a Fiddler. While the two men, despite living in close proximity to each other, rarely interacted, the publication of Only a Fiddler served as the occasion for one of their most significant personal interactions on the streets of Copenhagen, as I note elsewhere, “Kierkegaard told Andersen that he was in the process of writing a review of Only a Fiddler. Initially, Andersen walked away from that encounter with the impression that Kierkegaard’s review would be positive.”

When Kierkegaard’s review came out, however, it was far from positive. In From the Papers of One Still Living, the pseudonymous author criticizes Hans Christian Andersen’s novel, Only a Fiddler, on the basis that it “totally lacks a life-view.” The author describes a life-view as follows:

For a life-view is more than a quintessence or a sum of propositions maintained in its abstract neutrality; it is more than experience…which as such is always fragmentary. It is, namely, the transsubstantiation of experience; it is an unshakable certainty in oneself won from all experience…whether this has oriented itself only in all worldly relationships (a purely human standpoint, Stoicism, for example), by which means it keeps itself from contact with a deeper experience—or whether in its heavenward direction (the religious) it has found therein the center as much for its heavenly as its earthly existence, has won the true Christian conviction “that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor the present, not the future, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

61 Ibid., 76-77.
More succinctly, a life-view “provides a comprehensive center of orientation that enables one to take a firm, positive stance toward life, with a sense of self-confidence in meeting the challenges of life rather than being overcome by them.”

For Kierkegaard, a life-view prevents a literary work “from being arbitrary or purposeless, since the purpose is immanently present everywhere in the work of art.”

Otherwise, one becomes susceptible to philosophical nihilism. George Pattison writes:

> The life-view is described as, firstly, optimistic, not in the world-historical sense but in the more everyday sense that it is always ready to see a hopeful aspect in events and circumstances at the individual, personal level; it is, secondly, positive in its attitude to people, being ready to see a “divine spark” glowing under the most trivial forms of personal life; it is, thirdly, acquainted with sorrows and disappointments to which all flesh is heir but none the less retains its essential optimism, which is thus tempered and mellowed by experience. In short it expresses “the joy which has triumphed over the world”; it is the outlook of “the individual who has run the race and kept the faith.”

A novel with a life-view will “transcend the vicissitudes of life.” Unfortunately for Andersen, *Only a Fiddler* does not have a life-view in Kierkegaard’s estimation.

Kierkegaard criticizes Andersen for writing a protagonist whose life is susceptible to the whims of external circumstances. Kierkegaard thought this “failure” was the result of Andersen’s own “dissatisfaction with the world,” a charge that Andersen all but confirms in his autobiography, *The Fairy Tale of My Life*, where he admits that *Only a*
Fiddler “sprung out of the terrible struggle that went on in me between my poet nature and my hard surroundings” and that he “was ready to give up.” Kierkegaard thinks Andersen has fallen into nihilism and “forget[s] the actual” existence he has been placed in and that his work contributes to the nihilistic disease of the present age by “producing literature devoid of a…life-view.” In this way, Andersen can be understood as falling within the category of the aesthetic sphere of existence due to his “mistakenly seeking the causes of his despair in the external world.” Nevertheless, there is hope for the aesthetic in what Kierkegaard refers to as a “transfigured personality.”

It is in evaluating Kierkegaard’s critique of Andersen that the influence of his mystical experience becomes most relevant. Andersen had been under the impression that Kierkegaard’s review of Only a Fiddler would be more positive, and perhaps it might have been. As Alastair Hannay points out, there is a noticeable gap in Kierkegaard’s journals between the end of April 1838 and July 1838 except for two entries, one in June and the other being the entry about Kierkegaard’s mystical experience on May 19. Hannay writes that this gap indicates Kierkegaard’s focus upon his review of Andersen, so it seems that Kierkegaard’s mystical experience happened in the midst of writing From the Papers of One Still Living. If so, and despite the uncertainty about the timeline of Kierkegaard’s face-to-face run-in with Andersen on the streets of Copenhagen

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70 Kierkegaard, Early Polemical Writings, 64
73 Kierkegaard, Early Polemical Writings, 82.
as well as Hannay’s protest about the relevance of the mystical experience for the writing of Kierkegaard’s review, I am more inclined to agree with Julia Watkin and Richard Summers that From the Papers of One Still Living should be read against the background of Kierkegaard’s mystical experience.\(^{75}\) Watkin in particular indicates that Kierkegaard’s initial good opinion of Andersen’s work may have been altered due to his mystical experience, subsequent conversion, and invigorated personal mission.\(^{76}\) We might also refer to this as his ethical transfiguration. It seems then that mysticism, while often treated negatively in the literature on Kierkegaard and even by Kierkegaard himself, may have served his personal development in ways that he himself did not acknowledge.

**Misunderstanding and Transforming Mysticism**

The literature on Kierkegaard and mysticism seems to suffer from a number of problems, the most prominent being a methodological narrowness in its conception of mysticism (even by Kierkegaard himself). If, however, one bears in mind the limited conception of mysticism in Kierkegaard’s own day and instead heuristically appropriates James’ framing of mysticism, we acquire a more expansive definition that allows us to evaluate Kierkegaard’s relationship with mysticism in a new light. Applying James’ framework, a brief overview of Kierkegaard’s own mystical experience and its after-effects in his writing against Andersen reveals that the mystical serves a more prominent function in the beginning of Kierkegaard’s authorship than it is often given credit for. While it can certainly be true, per the criticisms of Judge William, that people can seek


\(^{76}\) Watkin, *Historical Dictionary*, xvii.
mystical experiences for their own sake, mystical experiences may also be useful for and be integrated into the ethical life much in the same way that aestheticism can be.
CHAPTER TWO: TRANSFIGURING THE AESTHETIC

If we are going to put forward the possibility that mystical experiences can be ethically integrated into an individual’s life in the same manner as the aesthetic sphere of existence, then we must establish the groundwork for such an endeavor. In this chapter, I will clarify the relationship between the aesthetic and ethical spheres of existence in Kierkegaard’s thought. First, I will define the aesthetic sphere of existence, largely drawing from Either/Or I, Kierkegaard’s most extensive treatment of the topic. Second, I will define Kierkegaard’s understanding of the ethical. Given the diverse use of this term across the pseudonymous authorship, I will briefly examine three of the main uses of the term in Either/Or II, Fear and Trembling, and the Concluding Unscientific Postscript before providing a definition which captures the essence of the term across the authorship. Finally, I will examine Kierkegaard’s writings on first love and marriage in order to explicate the process whereby the aesthetic is transfigured into the ethical sphere of existence.

Defining the Aesthetic and the Ethical

Defining the categories of the aesthetic and the ethical in Kierkegaard’s writings can be as difficult as defining the mystical. There is a fluidity in the definition of both concepts in part because of the nature of his pseudonymous authorship whereby different authors use the terms differently depending on the type of existence-relation they represent. We
might find ourselves, as Judge William writes, asking the question, “But what does it
mean to live esthetically, and what does it mean to live ethically? What is the esthetic in a
person, and what is the ethical?”77 William provides his own answer to this question: “the
esthetic in a person is that by which he spontaneously and immediately is what he is; the
ethical is that by which he becomes what he becomes.”78 In what follows, I will unpack
exactly what William means in this description of the aesthetic and the ethical.

**The Aesthetic in Kierkegaard**

The fullest treatment of the aesthetic sphere of existence can be found in *Either/Or* part
one. In this work, Kierkegaard elucidates the fragmented and disparate nature of the
aesthetic by crafting a performative work whose style itself provides a representation of
the aesthetic’s own discontinuous nature. As C. Stephen Evans points out, “What all the
different senses of the aesthetic have in common is some connection to what Kierkegaard
calls ‘the immediate,’ a term that I shall...take to refer to the natural, spontaneous
sensations that lie at the heart of conscious human existence.”79 These moments,
however, lack continuity with each other in the thought and existence of the individual.

The aesthetic is defined by its connection to the immediate, and the different
forms of the aesthetic reckon with reflection’s removal of immediacy and the attempts to
re-attain that immediacy or a “second immediacy.”80 Key to aesthetic immediacy is its

78 Ibid., 178.
relationship to “desire itself.” As Evans comments, “What the aesthete wants is simply to have what he or she wants, whatever that might be.” Evans here refers to a passage from the “Diapsalmata” from Either/Or I in which A states:

> If I had in my service a submissive spirit who, when I asked for a glass of water, would bring me all the world’s costliest wines, deliciously blended in a goblet, I would dismiss him until he learned that enjoyment does not consist in what I enjoy but in getting my own way.

For the aesthete, what is important is “the satisfaction of immediate desire” without interruption or delay. Related to this is the “in the moment” nature of aesthetic existence, “for immediate desires have just this momentary character.” The aesthetic “seek[s] to make one’s life a series of [disconnected] satisfying moments.”

> As Evans observes, the aesthetic comes in multiple forms spanning “a continuum ranging from… ‘the immediate aesthetic’ to a highly reflective form of the aesthetic life.” This range is represented by the figures of Don Juan and Faust respectively. Don Juan represents “the most primitive form” of the aesthetic as “a sensuous being naively immersed in nature who enjoys a presubjective, irreflective existence.” The nature of this form of the aesthetic is best expressed through music, as more of “a force of nature”

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81 Evans, Kierkegaard: An Introduction, 71.
82 Ibid., p. 71.
84 Evans, Kierkegaard: An Introduction, 72.
85 Ibid., 72.
86 Ibid., 72.
87 Ibid., 72.
88 Ibid., 72.
in which “everything is merely an affair of the moment,” and like music, disappears when the moment passes.\textsuperscript{90} As Kierkegaard writes:

Don Giovanni is absolutely musical. He desires sensuously; he seduces with the demonic power of the sensuous; he seduces all. Words, lines, are not suitable for him, for then he immediately becomes a reflective individual. He does not have that kind of continuance at all but hurries on in an eternal vanishing, just like the music, which is over as soon as the sound has stopped and comes into existence again only when it sounds once again.\textsuperscript{91}

Don Juan desires what he wants in the moment, “but he cannot possess, cannot have his object, and he readily sets it aside as soon as natural impulse arises again in him.”\textsuperscript{92} He is “continually finishing and continually being able to begin all over, for his life is the sum of…moments that have no coherence, and his life as the moment is the sum of moments and as the sum of moments is the moment.”\textsuperscript{93}

The aesthete’s inability to possess his object, however, produces a lack of satisfaction of desire. The aesthetic immediacy is interrupted by the problem of the positive world outside of his immediacy. The world of actuality is perceived as an obstacle to the satisfaction of desire, the inability of which to attain leads to boredom.\textsuperscript{94} This boredom reflects “the dissolution of the naively presupposed givenness of immediacy”\textsuperscript{95} and initiates the role of reflection in the aesthetic project whereby the aesthetic seeks an increasing “disengagement from the external world, so that the

\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 102.
\textsuperscript{92} Stern, “The Ties That Bind,” 256.
\textsuperscript{93} Kierkegaard, Either/Or I, 96.
\textsuperscript{94} Stern, “The Ties That Bind,” 258-259.
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 259
experiences one has become raw material for imaginative recreation.”96 Through the aesthete’s conscious activity, he hopes to attain a type of “second immediacy” whereby he is able to possess life as a work of art that he can control.97 As Stern writes:

The aesthete seeks to emancipate himself from immediacy, so that he has no dependence on any otherness that transcends the sphere of his own egological program of activity. The aesthetic understands its capacity to invalidate norms, to sublimate even natural, biological determinations, to disengage itself from the fixed and the given, as manifestation of an infinite power, in a dual sense. It is infinite in opening up a limitless horizon of possibilities, and also in making the subject itself into an indefinitely plastic being, a pure potentiality.98

I should point out that this passage on immediacy refers not to immediacy as containing an inherent otherness that prevents the aesthetic from possessing his object, as in the case of Don Juan, nor as an obstacle to the ego’s self-conscious activity but immediacy as an attempt to re-attain a type of immediacy that was lost with the immediate aesthetic. There is an attempt to overcome the otherness of the world inasmuch as it stands in the way of the egological project of the aesthete. It is worth noting as we explore the ethical that the ideas of development and continuity of the self within the world of actuality are prominent, and while there is certainly an intellectual development of the aesthetic, Evans notes that intellectual development does not constitute the development of the self.99

The Ethical in Kierkegaard

To speak of the ethical in Kierkegaard is almost as difficult as defining the nature of mysticism, for there is a multiplicity of meanings for the ethical in Kierkegaard’s writings. Noting Kierkegaard’s indirect style of communication, C. Stephen Evans

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96 Evans, Kierkegaard: An Introduction, 78-79.
98 Ibid., 267.
99 Evans, Kierkegaard: An Introduction, 73.
observes, “[Kierkegaard’s] goal is not to have readers who can intellectually ‘patter’ or recite Kierkegaard’s view of the three spheres of existence, but readers who have a kind of emotional understanding of these life-possibilities.” What Kierkegaard does for his readers is to give them pseudonymous characters, “people with whom [they] may identify or be attracted to, or, alternatively, feel compassion or even repugnance for.” Even if some of these characters share the same sphere, “it is important to recognize that Kierkegaard gives different characterizations of the various spheres at different times, for different purposes.” At times, it seems that “these differences might appear to be contradictions…. However, the spheres of existence are each complicated and come in a variety of forms.”

Rather than seeking one exhaustive definition of the ethical in Kierkegaard which Evans and Robert C. Roberts note is impossible to do, I will instead merely provide a working definition that is faithful to the overall themes of the ethical found in Kierkegaard’s works. I will do this in two steps. First, I will briefly survey the meanings of the ethical in three of Kierkegaard’s most popular pseudonymous works: Either/Or Part II, Fear and Trembling, and The Concluding Unscientific Postscript, and second, I will provide a working definition for this study.

*The Ethical in Either/Or Part II*

100 The aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious.
102 Ibid., 70.
103 Ibid., 70.
104 Ibid., 70.
In *Either/Or Part II*, Judge William writes, “to choose is an intrinsic and stringent term for the ethical.”\(^{106}\) He goes on to state, “if one does not choose absolutely, one chooses only for the moment and for that reason can choose something else the next moment.”\(^{107}\) To understand these statements, one must recognize that the pseudonymous Judge William is writing in response to another pseudonym, A the aesthetic, the writer of the papers in *Either/Or Part I*. In his work, A had written:

Marry, and you will regret it. Do not marry, and you will also regret it. Marry or do not marry, you will regret it either way. Whether you marry or you do not marry, you will regret it either way. Laugh at the stupidities of the world, and you will regret it; weep over them, and you will also regret it. Laugh at the stupidities of the world or weep over them, you will regret it either way…. Hang yourself, and you will regret it. Do not hang yourself, and you will also regret it. Hang yourself or do not hang yourself, you will regret it either way. Whether you hang yourself or do not hang yourself, you will regret it either way. This, gentlemen, is the quintessence of all the wisdom of life.\(^{108}\)

Here, one finds A “ironically [attacking] the significance of choice.”\(^{109}\) However, the Judge writes to A to convince him of the superiority of choosing the ethical life over the aesthetic life. He warns him, “you are at all times only in the moment, and for that reason your life disintegrates, and it is impossible for you to explain it.”\(^{110}\) By contrast, the judge argues that by his resolute choices, the judge is “raised above the moment, I am in freedom.”\(^{111}\) In overcoming the aesthetic tendency to live only immediately so that one’s choices are not absolute but change arbitrarily from moment to moment, ethical choice

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\(^{106}\) Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 166.
\(^{107}\) Ibid., 167.
\(^{110}\) Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 179.
\(^{111}\) Ibid., 179.
consolidates the personality and integrates the consciousness so that the self becomes itself.112

The Ethical in Fear and Trembling

Johannes de Silentio, the pseudonymous author of Fear and Trembling, writes, “The ethical as such is the universal, and as the universal it applies to everyone, which from another angle means that it applies at all times.”113 He goes on to say that the individual’s “ethical task [is] continually to express himself in this, to annul his singularity in order to become the universal.”114 One must think of the universal as what Silentio refers to as “social morality.”115 One clearly sees the influence of Hegel upon Silentio’s conception of the ethical. The Hongs make this clear in a footnote, writing that the Danish det Sædelige corresponds to Hegel’s German Sittlichkeit, which is usually translated “ethical life.”116 The Hongs go on to provide a relevant quote from Hegel’s Philosophy of Right that provides insight into this idea of social morality:

For the good as the substantial universal freedom, but as something still abstract, there are therefore required determinate characteristics of some sort and the principle for determining them, though a principle identical with the good itself. For conscience similarly, as the purely abstract principle of determination, it is required that its decisions shall be universal and objective. If good and conscience are each kept abstract and thereby elevated to independent totalities, then both become the indeterminate which ought to be determined.—But the integration of these two relative totalities into an absolute identity has already been implicitly achieved in that this very subjectivity of pure self-certainty, aware in its vacuity of it gradual evaporation, is identical with the abstract universality

112 Ibid., 167, 177.
114 Ibid., 54.
115 Ibid., 55.
116 Ibid., 346.n7.
of the good. The identity of the good with the subjective will; an identity which therefore is concrete and the truth of them both, is Ethical Life.117

It is worth briefly noting that there is some question about the nature of the ethical in Fear and Trembling. As C. Stephen Evans point out, there are those who see the ethical in this work as being Kantian in nature; however, despite the Kantian language concerning the universal, the above considerations seem to indicate a more Hegelian orientation.118 This becomes particularly clear when one reads the above observations in light of Evans’ commentary:

Hegel had criticized Kant’s ethic as overly formal, incapable of giving guidance to human beings in particular situations. For Hegel, the individual satisfies the demands of reason, not by autonomous self-legislation, as Kant thought, but by recognizing the way in which the laws and customs of a concrete community, a people, satisfy the demands of reason. For Hegel, social morality, or what he terms Sittlichkeit, trumps the individual morality of Kant.119

In keeping with Hegelian social morality, the individual’s “ethical task is to work himself out of his hiddenness and to become disclosed in the universal.”120 The ethical understanding of Fear and Trembling demands that the individual disclose his own particular interiority.121 For Silentio, “Hegelian philosophy assumes no justified hiddenness, no justified incommensurability.”122 As Silentio explains, “Thus in the ethical view of life, it is the task of the single individual to strip himself of the qualification of interiority and to express this in something external.”123 The entire

117 Hegel, Philosophy of Right, 103, cited in Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, 347.n.7.
118 Evans, Kierkegaard: An Introduction, 103.
119 Ibid., 103.
120 Ibid., 103.
121 Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, 82.
122 Ibid., 112-113.
123 Ibid., 82.
discussion of the ethical in *Fear and Trembling* ties into Silentio’s argument about faith. His argument is not that Hegel gets the ethical wrong, but the argument has to do with whether ethics or faith is “the highest,” a question whose concerns are beyond the scope of this study.

**The Ethical in The Concluding Unscientific Postscript**

Where *Fear and Trembling*’s idea of the ethical centers on “a kind of socially mediated ethic, in which an individual is defined by the roles assigned by his or her place in a given society,” Johannes Climacus’s account of “the ethical is precisely what allows an individual to escape from such a network of socially assigned roles.” As Evans states, “For me to discover the ethical is to discover myself as something more than a social ensemble.” Climacus seems to overtly confirm this in the following comments:

> The longer life goes on and the longer the existing person through his action is woven into existence, the more difficult it is to separate the ethical from the external, and the easier it seems to corroborate the metaphysical tenet that the outer is the inner, the inner the outer, the one whole commensurate with the other. This is precisely the temptation.…

Climacus laments that ethics “has been replaced with a surrogate that confuses the world-historical and the individual and confuses the bewildering, bellowing demands of the times with the eternal demands of conscience upon the individual.” He goes on:

> Ethics focuses upon the individual, and ethically understood it is every individual’s task to become a whole human being, just as it is the

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125 Ibid., 112.
126 Ibid., 112.
128 Ibid., 346.
presupposition of ethics that everyone is born in the state of being able to become that.\textsuperscript{129}

As Climacus observes, “ethically the individual is simply and solely interested infinitely in his own actuality.”\textsuperscript{130} The ethical individual is infinitely interested in his own existence.\textsuperscript{131} The individual’s task then is to become the self one is supposed to be\textsuperscript{132} with the “pathos of interestedness.”\textsuperscript{133}

\textbf{Working Definition}

Having briefly surveyed the different views of the ethical found in the pseudonymous works, there are many themes that could be highlighted and used as a working definition for this study. Choice, duty, and commitment are some of the themes that are often equated with the ethical in Kierkegaard, particularly in the light of the judge’s description of the ethical in \textit{Either/Or Part II}.\textsuperscript{134} Inner and outer commensurability were mentioned in \textit{Fear and Trembling}. One could point to the ethical call to be interested in one’s own existence, as in the \textit{Postscript}. This theme is in keeping with Frederick Sontag’s observation that for Kierkegaard the ethical is not indifferent to one’s own life, for the ethical individual “deplores aimlessness.”\textsuperscript{135} As Sontag states, “Life ought not to be lived neutrally—this is S.K.’s chief message in stressing the ethical.”\textsuperscript{136} C. Stephen Evans

\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., 346.
\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., 324.
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 325.
\textsuperscript{132} Evans, \textit{Kierkegaard: An Introduction}, 114.
\textsuperscript{133} Kierkegaard, \textit{Concluding Unscientific Postscript}, 390.
\textsuperscript{135} Frederick Sontag, \textit{A Kierkegaard Handbook} (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1979), 18.
\textsuperscript{136} Ibid., 21.
provides a unifying theme that seems to include all of these elements and subsume them within itself. He writes:

What all forms of the ethical life have in common is what I would call the quest for identity. The ethicist sees that the aesthetic life that is lived for “the moment” ultimately reduces the self to a collection of moments. Such a self lacks coherence and in some sense fails to be a self in the proper sense. The ethical life is thus a struggle to become a unified self in a twofold sense. The first sense is that the self seeks to be something more than a collection of hopelessly warring desires; it seeks some degree of coherence and unity at a given point in time. The second sense is that this unified identity is one that endures over time. For Kierkegaard to be a self is to know who one is, and to know who one is one must have something to live for, commitments and “values” that permeate all one does and is and that do not change on a daily or hourly basis.137

Elsewhere, Azucena Palavicini Sánchez affirms Evans’ view, noting:

To choose the ethical is thereby a means of unifying the self, or at least of committing to striving to realize a vision of oneself in one’s ‘eternal validity.’ The choice of the ethical sphere is not only a point of departure but also the chief means by which all of an individual’s actions and attitudes towards life can be seen as a unity or as a continuous history.138

Thus, this study is most concerned with the continuous unification of the self in the ethical, or of the ethical individual becoming what he or she becomes by gaining a unified history and continuity of the self.

Transfiguration

Judge William’s entire treatise is in response to the aesthetic writer, A, from Either/Or Part I. The gist of the judge’s critique of the aesthetic life is summarized by Charles

137 Evans, Kierkegaard: An Introduction, 90-91.
Bellinger: “From the Judge’s point of view, the aesthetic sphere is a failure to be a whole person.”\textsuperscript{139} The judge himself writes:

Consequently, it is manifest that every esthetic view of life is despair, and that everyone who lives esthetically is in despair, whether he knows it or not. But when one knows this, and you certainly do know it, then a higher form of existence is an imperative requirement.\textsuperscript{140}

This critique, however, should not be read as a rejection of the aesthetic; rather, the aesthetic is incorporated into the ethical where it can be truly enjoyed.\textsuperscript{141} Commenting on the difference between aesthetic first love and the ethical commitment of marriage, the Judge assures A that first love is not lost in marriage. He writes, “Consequently, if marital love has no place within itself for the eroticism of first love, then Christianity is not the highest development of the human race.”\textsuperscript{142} Subsequently, the judge states that his task is “to show that romantic love can be united with and exist in marriage—indeed, that marriage is its true transfiguration.”\textsuperscript{143} Likewise, the ethical “does not want to destroy the esthetic but to transfigure it.”\textsuperscript{144} This transfiguration involves an “ethical striving”\textsuperscript{145} involving “the energy, the earnestness, and the pathos with which one chooses. In the choosing the personality declares itself in its inner infinity and in turn the personality is thereby consolidated.”\textsuperscript{146} In this way, the aesthetic is taken up into the ethical, and one is

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{140} Kierkegaard, Either/Or II, 192.
  \item \textsuperscript{141} Bellinger, “Kierkegaard's Either/Or,” 63.
  \item \textsuperscript{142} Kierkegaard, Either/Or II, 30-31.
  \item \textsuperscript{143} Ibid., 31.
  \item \textsuperscript{144} Ibid., 253.
  \item \textsuperscript{146} Kierkegaard, Either/Or II, 167.
\end{itemize}
able to ground in the aesthetic in an ethical life-view. In order to provide clarity, it will be necessary to explicate the Judge’s understanding of first love and marital love and their relationships with the aesthetic and the ethical and to provide an explanation for the process of transfiguration.

First Love and the Weakness of the Aesthetic

To speak about romantic or first love is to speak about an initial infatuation. As Judge William points out, like the aesthetic itself, first love is immediate. The nature of first love is such that it seems to ‘accidentally’ happen to a person, for “it is the nature of first love to take by surprise.” It is momentary like the sensuous, but it is more than sensuous by virtue of “a stamp of eternity.” As Judge William writes:

Romantic love manifests itself as immediate…. It is based on beauty, partly on sensuous beauty, partly on the beauty that can be conceived through and in and with the sensuous, yet not in such a way that it becomes visible through deliberation, but in such a way that, continually on the point of manifesting itself, it peeks out through it. Although this love is based essentially on the sensuous, it nevertheless is noble by virtue of the consciousness of the eternal that it assimilates, for it is this that distinguishes all love from lust: that is bears the stamp of eternity.

However, as Judge William points out, first love on its own may feel like an eternity, the moment of erotic embrace may feel like “a sensuous eternity,” but first love ultimately contains a weakness that lends itself to ridicule.

Because in first love “the instant becomes the main thing,” first love, like the aesthetic, has “a secret horror of any contact with life” outside of itself. Its character is

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147 Ibid., 7.
148 Ibid., 19.
149 Ibid., 23, 43.
150 Ibid., 21.
151 Ibid., 21.
152 Ibid., 21.
153 Ibid., 22.
unhistorical, with Judge William chastising the aesthete, “When you have your way, it becomes an element that lies outside time, a mysterious something about which any lie can be told.”\textsuperscript{155} Without a historical character, first love “has undergone no ordeal, has found no higher justification, it proves to be an illusion and therefore it is so easy to make it ludicrous.”\textsuperscript{156} Judge William provides an analogy of an equally weak, immediate version of faith:

If I were to regard faith in personal life as equally immediate, first love would correspond to a faith that in the power of the promise would believe itself capable of moving mountains and would then go around and perform miracles. Perhaps it would succeed, but this faith would have no history, for a recitation of all its miracles is not its history, whereas the appropriation of faith in personal life is faith’s history...it will fight together with God for itself, will gain itself in patience.\textsuperscript{157}

A faith that recounts the past without being actualized in the present is vacuous, as is a love that only lives for the moment. When the moment moves on, the individual is left unhappily remembering the past moment, which no longer exists,\textsuperscript{158} which leads likewise to a failure to engage with actual life. Judge William writes to the aesthete:

Another observation, one that for me also accounts for your excessive anxiety about all sociality and commotion, is that you are afraid you will miss out on the erotic moment. You know how to keep your soul as apathetic and motionless as a bird of prey pausing motionless before it plunges down; you know that the moment is not in one’s power, and that nevertheless the most beautiful lies in the moment; that is why you understand how to keep watch, do not wish to anticipate anything with the restlessness in which you await the moment…. you harbor a heretical and superstitious belief in first love.\textsuperscript{159}

\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., 22.  
\textsuperscript{154} Ibid., 25.  
\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., 96.  
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., 21.  
\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., 96-97.  
\textsuperscript{158} Ibid., 41.  
\textsuperscript{159} Ibid., 102.
This is the weakness of A’s understanding of the first love, that he “believes it cannot be actualized in any other way than by taking flight” from everyday existence, and “this is a misunderstanding rooted in [first love’s] unhistorical character.”¹⁶⁰ This leads the Judge to the following conclusion:

This turns out to be one of the points to which we continually return…the point that the illusory or naïve eternity of the first love or romantic love must cancel itself in one way or another. Precisely because you now seek to maintain it in this immediacy, seek to delude yourself that true freedom consists in being outside yourself, intoxicated with dreams, you fear this metamorphosis.¹⁶¹

For Judge William, the metamorphosis of the first love takes place through marriage, which takes the first love up within itself, an image that serves as an analogy for the aesthetic’s preservation within the ethical. Whatever this metamorphosis or transfiguration involves, Judge William goes to great lengths to argue that this, far from leading to the destruction of the first love, leads to its strengthening and preservation.

**Transfiguring the First Love in Marriage**

Far from doing away with first or romantic love, Judge William seeks to “salvage the esthetic prestige of marriage.”¹⁶² Judge William lays out his task: “to show the esthetic meaning of marriage and to show how the esthetic in it may be retained despite life’s numerous hindrances.”¹⁶³ The latter point obviously takes aim at aesthetic first love’s aversion to contact with everyday life, with the Judge asserting “that it is possible to preserve the esthetic even in everyday life” and that marriage (and by analogy the ethical)

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 104.
¹⁶¹ Ibid., 145-146.
¹⁶² Ibid., 6.
¹⁶³ Ibid., 8.
attaches “a much more profound significance to the accidental in life” such that “every feeling, every mood, gains a higher meaning.”

Judge William is extremely critical of a view of marriage that neglects the importance of erotic love. He says the following about such erotic-less, “respectable” marriages:

[I]t ought to be called the marriage based on calculation….Insofar as such a relation renounces real love, it is at least consistent but also shows thereby that it is not a solution of the problem. Therefore, a marriage based on calculation is to be regarded as a capitulation of sorts that the exigencies of life make necessary…it obviously is despair that makes such a connection acceptable. Therefore, it is usually entered into by persons who have long since reached their years of discretion and who also have learned that real love is an illusion and its fulfillment at most a…[pious wish]. Therefore, what is involved is the prose of love, making a living, social status, etc. Insofar as it has neutralized the sensuous in marriage, it seems to be moral, but a question remains whether this neutralization is not just as immoral as it is unesthetic.

Here, Judge William calls into question a marriage that is driven by external factors and practical considerations of life instead of the passion of first love. He continues:

Or even though the erotic is not completely neutralized, it is nevertheless daunted by a pedestrian, commonsensical view that one ought to be cautious, not all too hasty to reject, that life never does yield the ideal, that it is a really respectable match, etc. Consequently, the eternal, which…belongs to every marriage, is not really present here, for a commonsensical calculation is always temporal. Therefore, such a connection is at the same time immoral and fragile.

164 Ibid., 9.
165 Ibid., 27.
166 Ibid., 27.
Judge William scolds a view of marriage with no place for erotic love, noting that
without this element, “married life is either merely a satisfaction of a sensuous appetite or
it is an association, a partnership, with one or another object in mind.”

Judge William actually assigns a high value to erotic love, commenting that “so
much the worse, many marriages are entered into without the deeper eroticism that surely
is the most beautiful aspect of purely human existence.” Marriage, in fact, “ought not
call forth erotic love; on the contrary, it presupposes it.” It is “the real constituting
element” of marriage. Praising the power of first love, Judge William writes, “The first
love, then, has in itself complete spontaneous, original security; it fears no danger, defies
the whole world…. In the first love, the individual possesses enormous power…. The
first love, then, is sufficiently secure, it needs no support.” Marriage needs this power.
The Judge writes that marriage is a mere association without it because it needs the
qualification of eternity, which this love contains. But first love on its own lacks the
moral fulfillment that only marriage can give, for marriage contains “an ethical and
religious element that erotic love does not have.” As good as the feelings of first love
are, they disintegrate without the unifying element of marriage, which brings coherence
to one’s love and transfigures it. There are three key elements that define the
transfiguring power of marriage: will, actuality, and duty.

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167 Ibid., 32.
168 Ibid., 30.
169 Ibid., 36.
170 Ibid., 32.
171 Ibid., 46.
172 Ibid., 32.
173 Ibid., 36.
174 Ibid., 11.
Judge William writes, “But to bring forth this true eternity [of first love] requires a determination of will.”\^175 Elsewhere, he indicates that the first love “is caught up in a higher concentricity” of the ethical by “the work of willing to hold fast to this love.”\^176 The elevation of the first love, like the elevation of the aesthetic, happens not through seeking another “moment” nor through reflection, but through “the baptism of the will, which assimilates this into the ethical.”\^177 As the Judge reflects on his own marriage:

> I truly do feel keenly that she really loves me and that I really love her, not as if over the years our marriage has not attained just as much stability as that of most other people, but it still gives me joy to rejuvenate continually our first love, and in such a way, furthermore, that is has for me just as much religious as esthetic meaning, for God has not become so supramundane for me that he does not concern himself about the covenant he himself established between man and woman, and I have not become so spiritual that the worldly aspect of life has no meaning for me. All the beauty implicit in the erotic of paganism has its validity in Christianity insofar as it can be combined with marriage. This rejuvenation of our first love is not just a sad looking back or a poetic recollecting of past experience, whereby one is finally enmeshed—all that kind of thing is exhausting—it is an action.”\^178

It is the power of action that the Judge highlights to his young aesthetic friend, and it is the power of the will in action that gives marital love its greater power. The “daily winning [of his wife] through a whole lifetime…not a brief supranatural power of infatuation” “occurs with immediacy” such that “the real life of the first love remains, but the raw spirits…are distilled.”\^179 The bad “hangover” of purely aesthetic first love is done away with in marriage. Comparing the unstable immediacy of first love with the first love preserved within marriage, Judge William tells A:

\^175 Ibid., 22.
\^176 Ibid., 47.
\^177 Ibid., 169.
\^178 Ibid., 10. Emphasis mine.
\^179 Ibid., 57.
So let us now once and for all settle the account. You talk so much about the erotic embrace—what is that compared with the marital embrace? How much more richness of modulation there is in the marital “mine” than in the erotic. It resonates not only in the eternity of the seductive moment, not only in the illusory eternity of imagination and idea, but in the eternity of consciousness, in the eternity of eternity. What power there is in the marital “mine,” for will, decision, intention have a far deeper tone; what energy and suppleness, for what is as hard as will, and what so soft.  

Concerning the deeper tone of the will, Kierkegaard writes in a supplement that the will “is a tone deeper; it is a bass tone that cuts under the lighter.”  The power of the will in marriage is the bass tone that holds together the melody of first love.

The second qualification of marriage is that it has the characteristic of historicity because it engages with the actuality of everyday life by allowing the relationship between the lovers “to appear in the external world.” The judge writes, “[M]arriage is precisely that immediacy which contains mediacy, that infinity which contains finitude, and that eternity which contains temporality.” Instead of an unhindered immediate experience unimpinged upon by actual historical experience, marriage contains the immediacy with itself, transfigures it, and joins it with historical time. Marriage has a history, continuity, and constancy that first love on its own lacks. Time itself is “the life principle of history,” and “when one struggles with time, the temporal and every single little moment thereby has its greater reality.” And despite A’s allergy to time and existence, the Judge insists “that time is affirmed, is not a disparagement of the esthetic; on the contrary,” time’s presence means that the esthetic becomes “richer and

181 Ibid., 373.
182 Ibid., 93.
183 Ibid., 94.
184 Ibid., 98.
185 Ibid., 134.
In fact, the judge states that only “by being lived…only by living it, by realizing it in the life of actuality…[can] the esthetic [elevate] itself and [reconcile] itself with life.” As the Judge notes, “we are not to read about or listen to or look at what is the highest and the most beautiful in life, but are, if you please, to live it.”

Without time, romantic love is ultimately doomed. The judge points this out: “Romantic love continually remains abstract in itself, and if it can find no outer history, death is already lying in wait for it, because its eternity is illusory.” Despite the illusory nature of its sense of permanence, the Judge says that even though marital love is faithful, so is romantic love in its own way. He describes the difference in the following passage, quoted at length:

The faithful romantic lover waits, let us say for fifteen years; then comes the moment that rewards him…. A married man is faithful for fifteen years, and yet during these fifteen years he has had possession; therefore in this long succession he has continually acquired the faithfulness he possessed, since marital love has in itself the first love and thereby the faithfulness of the first love…. At the end of the fifteen years, he seems to have come no further than he was in the beginning, and yet to a high degree he has been living esthetically. For him his possession has not been inert property, but he has been continually acquiring its possession. He has not fought with lions and trolls but with the most dangerous enemy, which is time. But now eternity does not come afterward…but he has had eternity in time, preserved eternity in time. Therefore only he has been victorious over time, for it may be said of the [aesthete] that he has killed time, just as one whom time has no reality always wishes to kill time, but this is never the right victory. Like a true victor, the married man has not killed time but has rescued and preserved it in eternity.

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186 Ibid., 136-137.
187 Ibid., 137.
188 Ibid., 139.
189 Ibid., 138.
190 Ibid., 138.
191 Ibid., 138.
It is in the struggle with time and history that marital love preserves what romantic love strives to attain on its own, and in the process, marital love gains an “inner history” where “every little moment is of utmost importance.”\textsuperscript{192} Love is thus able to be preserved in time through marital love’s faithfulness and longsuffering.\textsuperscript{193} By contrast, the aesthete is always fighting “for a bygone time” or rather “fighting for the moment against time,” merely floating apathetically through actual existence “fighting for what has disappeared.”\textsuperscript{194}

The word that is able to capture both the element of will or choice and faithfulness over time is “duty.” Marriage has the power of duty that “penetrates the whole body of existence to the uttermost extremity and prepares the way and gives the assurance that in all eternity no obstacle will be able to disturb love!”\textsuperscript{195} Duty is “the divine nourishment love needs, for duty says ‘Fear not; you shall conquer’—says it not just in the future tense, for then it is only a hope, but in the imperative mood, and therein rests a conviction that nothing can shake.”\textsuperscript{196} It combines the command to choose to act along with the historical, for in saying “You shall” in the future tense, Judge William believes that this indicates duty’s historical character.\textsuperscript{197}

The aesthetic might raise a criticism at this point, contrasting the rigidity of duty with that of love. As Judge William notes to his aesthetic friend, “But you think it is quite in order in romantic love, for the moment duty is mentioned, love is finished and duty’s

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{192}{Ibid., 134.}
\footnote{193}{Ibid., 136, 141.}
\footnote{194}{Ibid., 141.}
\footnote{195}{Ibid., 59.}
\footnote{196}{Ibid., 146.}
\footnote{197}{Ibid., 149.}
\end{footnotes}
arrival is your signal to take your leave with a polite bow."  

However, the Judge takes issue with his young friend, “For me, duty is not one climate, love another, but for me duty makes love the true temperate climate, and for me love makes duty the true temperate climate, and this unity is perfection.” Duty and love have a mutually beneficial effect upon each other, for as the judge points out, “If duty is hard…then love pronounces it, actualizes it, and thereby does more than duty; if love is about to become so soft that it cannot be kept stable, duty sets boundaries to it.” It is the fear of boundaries, we saw earlier, that disturbs the aesthetic, and similarly disturbs him in his understanding of love, but again, the judge reassures his young friend, “But I have not been afraid of duty; it has not appeared to me as an enemy that would disturb the fragment of joy and happiness I had hoped to rescue in life, but it has appeared to me as a friend, the first and only confidant in our love.”

Like marriage, the ethical itself requires duty, the ability to see one’s existence “as a task, as something for which you are responsible,” the task being one’s responsibility to God “for himself personally.”

So while first or romantic love has its place, it needs marriage in order to stabilize it and give it a significance that lasts across time. Likewise, the beautiful moments of aestheticism find a higher meaning in the ethical self, which engages in actuality and creates a history of its own self through will, actuality, and duty. And if the aesthetic can be transfigured by such means, perhaps the mystical can as well. The seeker of mystical experience runs the risk, like the aesthetic, of focusing on the pursuit of the experience at

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198 Ibid., 147.
199 Ibid., 147.
200 Ibid., 149.
201 Ibid., 153.
202 Ibid., 260.
the expense of his or her everyday concrete existence. But the judge seems to believe the aesthetic is capable of been redeemed and transformed through an ethical transfiguration, which gives the aesthetic longevity over time. If the aesthetic and the mystical are described similarly by the judge, then it is my contention that the possibility exists that the mystical is capable of an analogous transfiguration. It is to a comparative description of the aesthetic and the mystical to which I now turn.
Chapter one established that Kierkegaard has been thought of as being opposed to mysticism. However, a closer look at Kierkegaard’s life and writings indicate that this position may be more nuanced than it first appears, with Kierkegaard himself having had a mystical experience of his own. Even if Kierkegaard is considered a mystic or at least has a place for mysticism in his thought, even if such a place is only implied by certain logical implications from his writings if not his explicit intentions, we must still establish where mysticism may fit into his thought. Perhaps we can imagine that a similar transfiguration is possible for the mystical as occurred for the aesthetic. For one thing, the mystical is itself a form of aestheticism in Judge Williams’s thought. As Julia Watkin indicates:

Yet, as the judge is made to admit, what he is attacking is not authentic mysticism but pseudomysticism or a self-indulgent preoccupation with the idea of God divorced from ethical action. In other words, for such a person the religious has become divorced from the ethical; it has become an aesthetic, self-centered pursuit and thus in fact has nothing to do with any form of authentic religiosity, insofar as the ethical is an essential part of the religious life.²⁰³

Watkin’s observation that authentic elements of the religious life can become aesthetic in nature is reflected in the judge’s own observations that “even the spiritual can become sensuous—for example, if a person took his spiritual gifts in vain, he would then be

Without ethical grounding, many features of the religious life can be “aesthetically abused.” The judge makes a similar comparison when speaking of the ethical ground that his feelings find in marriage: “every feeling, every mood, gains a higher meaning for me by having her share it,” but “[a]ll feelings, even the highest religious ones, can take on a certain indolence if one is always alone with them.” So here, we find the Judge drawing a comparison between the aesthetic feelings he experiences with his wife, grounded in the ethical reality of marriage, and the “higher religious feelings,” which I argue could extend to those experiences referred to as “mystical.” The implication of the judge’s comparison indicates that one’s religious feelings are legitimate if grounded in the ethical, as his own romantic feelings for his wife are.

In thus stands to reason that if aesthetic first love can be transfigured in the ethical, then perhaps mysticism can be transfigured in the ethical as well. While the judge himself seems to deny the possibility that an ethical transfiguration of the mystical is possible (while he never says this explicitly, his comments toward mysticism portray a deep suspicion of mysticism), he does describe experiences that one could name as mystical and notes how beneficial they can be for the existing individual:

The reason one promptly and specifically thinks of something religious as soon as the word “mysticism” is mentioned is that the religious has a tendency to isolate the individual, something of which the simplest observation can convince you…. Have you not noticed that even though in a certain sense one receives the impression of a congregation, yet the individual feels isolated; people become strangers to one another, and they are united again only by way of a long detour, as it were. And what is the

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204 Kierkegaard, Either/Or II, 49.
reason for this except that the individual feels his God-relationship so powerfully in all its inwardness that beside it his earthly relationships lose their significance? For a sound person this moment does not last long and a momentary distancing like this is so far from being a deception that instead it augments the inwardness of the earthly relationships. But that which as an element can be sound and healthy becomes a very grave sickness if it is developed one-sidedly.206

Gerry Heard recognizes, like the Judge William, that mysticism can lead to aesthetic self-indulgence and isolation; however, he notes that it also “has the potential for stimulating an individual’s ability for extending love” and “strengthen [an individual’s] ethical capacity.”207 Judge William’s comments above seem to open the door for such a possibility, whatever his actual intentions in the statement may have been.

While Judge Williams’ criticisms of mysticism may be focused on a non-Christian version of mysticism, his criticisms may still be relevant for excesses in Christian mysticism; however, one may be able to conclude that Judge William would approve of a mysticism that was transfigured through the adoption of an ethical life-view. Such a mysticism would not withdraw from actuality, but it would enhance one’s ethical commitments. In this way, Either/Or seems to present the possibility for the redemption of the mystical. In order to demonstrate this, I will begin by comparing the similarities between aestheticism and the mystical in Kierkegaard’s writings. Next, I will examine Kierkegaard’s Book on Adler, which evaluates the claims of a Danish pastor to have received a new revelation from God, itself a type of mystical experience. Kierkegaard’s critique of the pastor and his experience helps us to present the possibility for the ethical transfiguration of mysticism within Kierkegaard’s writings.

The Aesthetic and the Mystical

One word which Kierkegaard applies to both aestheticism and mysticism is “hovering.”

In *Either/Or I*, Kierkegaard speaks about both Don Juan and Faust, two aesthetic figures, as hovering—in Don Juan’s case, between “being an individual and a force of nature” and in Faust’s case, “[a]s the idea hovering over all actual forms.”208 In *Either/Or II*, Judge William tells A:

> You continually hover above yourself, but the higher atmosphere, the more refined sublimation, into which you are vaporized, is the nothing of despair, and you see down below you a multiplicity of subjects, insights, studies, and observations that nevertheless have no reality for you but which you very whimsically utilize and combine to decorate as tastefully as you can the sumptuous intellectual palace in which you occasionally reside. No wonder that existence for you is a fairy tale….209

This language of hovering can also apply to mysticism, with its “shadowy character, its floating above, rather than penetrating into, reality.”210 This lack of penetration into everyday existence is Kierkegaard’s primary critique of both the aesthetic and the mystical. More specifically, there are a number of characteristics of the aesthetic that can also apply to mysticism: living for the moment, lack of engagement with existence, and not choosing one’s self.

*Living for the Moment*

While Judge William praises the piety of the mystic, he points out “how little the mystic’s life is ethically structure.”211 This is largely because the mystic lacks a real personal history and development. As Judge William explains, the mystic may “choose

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God,” and thereby “having chosen, is…one who is acting,” and “insofar as he is acting, his life has movement, a development, a history.” However, the judge qualifies these statements by adding, “But a development can be metaphysical or esthetic to the point where it becomes doubtful whether it can properly be called a history,” for “a movement can be so erratic that it can be doubtful to what extent one dares to call it a development.” This is particularly true if a “movement consists of the return of a feature again and again, [then] undeniably there is motion…but there is no development.” For the mystic’s movement to be a truly ethical development, there must be continuity and “[r]epetition in time,” which are lacking from the mystic’s life. Just as we noted in chapter two, not all development is ethical development, for the aesthetic is capable of developing, but that development is not ethical.

Judge William lays out his trepidation about the life that the mystic leads, saying, “It is frightful to read a mystic’s laments over the flat moments. Then when the flat moment is over comes the luminous moments, and thus his life is continually alternating; it certainly has movement, but not development. His life lacks continuity.” The judge observes that the feature to which the mystic returns to is his own mystical feeling, writing:

> It is a feeling, namely a longing, that really constitutes the continuity in a mystic’s life, whether this longing is directed to the past or to the future. But the very fact that a feeling constitutes the intervening period in this way proves that coherence is lacking.

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212 Ibid., 242.
213 Ibid., 242.
214 Ibid., 242.
215 Ibid., 242.
216 Ibid., 242.
217 Ibid., 242.
With this focus on feelings, Judge William states, “A mystic’s development is…esthetically qualified to such a degree that one does not dare to call it history.”\(^{218}\)

This is where the first comparison between the mystic and the aesthetic comes out. The focus for both is on the feelings of love they feel in the moment. As the judge tells the aesthete, “The same thing happens to the mystic in his religious first love as happens to you in your earthly first love. He has tasted it in all its blessedness and now has nothing to do except to wait for it to come again.”\(^{219}\) For both the mystic and the aesthetic, “life is understood as an instant, not as succession.”\(^{220}\) They both live to experience the feelings of first love again, and they both fear the intervening flat moments between the experience of these feelings. But Judge William, as we have seen, believes there is hope for the aesthete, and by extension, the mystic. He writes concerning the love between a hero and a forest nymph:

If [the hero] had won the forest nymph and had not married, he would have been afraid that their love would flame up in certain beautiful moments that would leave dull intervals. Then they perhaps would have wished to see each other only if the sight of each other would be really momentous; if this misfired a few times, he would have been afraid that the whole relationships would gradually dissolve into nothing. But the humble marriage that made it a duty for them to see each other daily, when they were rich and also when they were poor, had infused into the whole relationship an equality and steadiness that made it so very gratifying for him. In its humble incognito, the prosaic marriage had concealed a poet who not only transfigured life on special occasions but was always present and by his cadences gave a thrill even to the more impoverished hours.\(^{221}\)

\(^{218}\) Ibid., 242.
\(^{219}\) Ibid., 249.
\(^{220}\) Ibid., 249.
\(^{221}\) Ibid., 306.
No matter how much one’s feelings of love or religiosity become elevated, “there nevertheless come moments when time drags,” when existence and actuality intrude upon one’s isolated feelings of exultation. For the Judge, however, ethical transfiguration, symbolized by marriage, allows one to embrace existence and actuality in a way that gives romantic and religious feelings meaning over the long haul, for “it is time and its qualification that give the [first] kiss absolute value.”

**Embracing Actuality and Existence**

Judge William warns that the ethical person cannot “withdraw from life,” for “[t]he person who has ethically chosen himself possesses himself defined in his entire concretion.” He becomes “a concrete self in living interaction with these specific surroundings, these life conditions, this order of things.” To be transfigured by the ethical, one must ask, “What am I supposed to do?” and this answer must involve more than “sitting and contemplating the past.” It involves engagement and action with the actual existence one finds oneself a part of over the course of time. However, Judge William points out to A, “You are a hater of activity in life—quite appropriately, because if there is to be meaning in it life must have continuity, and this your life does not have.”

The aesthetic lives in the moment such that finite existence “cannot survive in [its] thought,” for it “is finished with the world.” For the aesthetic, “nothing that is finite, not even the whole world, can satisfy the soul of a person who feels the need of the

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222 Ibid., 306.
223 Ibid., 126.
224 Ibid., 240, 262.
225 Ibid., 262. Emphasis mine.
226 Ibid., 171.
227 Ibid., 195.
228 Ibid., 202.
eternal,” for something beyond the changing, uncertain character of everyday existence. As such, the aesthetic is “unwilling to carry the burden of life.”

In this regard of embracing existence and actuality, Judge William’s criticism of mysticism mirrors his criticisms of the non-transfigured aesthetic. Judge William criticizes the mystic for rejecting “the existence, the actuality, in which God has placed him.” The mystic has a softness about him regarding actuality which the Judge cannot abide. He wants an experience to constantly reaffirm his love for God and God’s love for him. One must not seek a constant renewal of the experience of mystical enlightenment in every moment. Instead, the Judge writes:

He [must] have sufficient greatness of soul to believe in God’s love, and then he will also have the cheerful boldness to believe in his own love, and rejoicing abide in the circumstances assigned to him simply because he knows that this abiding is the surest expression of his love.

The mystic, much like the aesthetic, lives in the moment and rejects the finite world “without regard for any relation to the given actuality, [and] wants to place himself in immediate rapport with the eternal.” By contrast, the transfiguration brought about by the ethical sphere of existence requires the embrace of one’s actual life circumstances. However, despite the importance of embracing the external circumstances in life one find’s oneself in, this alone does not constitute the defining feature of ethical existence.

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229 Ibid., 203.
230 Ibid., 207.
231 Ibid., 244.
232 Ibid., 244.
233 Ibid., 244.
234 Ibid., 246.
Choosing Oneself

Judge William writes that many freethinkers “have let themselves be blinded by the external, but with the ethical there is never a question of the external but of the internal.”235 The aesthete and the mystic both make the mistake of believing that their “trouble is somewhere in the multiplicity outside [themselves].”236 For the Judge, however, ethical transfiguration ultimately relies upon what is within a person. He states, “When the personality is the absolute, then it is itself the Archimedean point from which one can lift the world.”237 The ethical is defined not simply by the embrace of life’s outward circumstances, but by one’s embrace of one’s own self “as a task that has been assigned to him.”238

The problem with the aesthetic is that “he wants to enjoy life [but] always posits a condition that either lies outside the individual or is within the individual in such a way that it is not there by virtue of the individual himself.”239 Judge William uses the example of desire. Though desire resides within a person, its fulfillment relies on something external. In order to live for one’s desire, one “must possess a variety of external conditions, and this fortune, or more correctly, misfortune, is rarely one’s lot…[and] when the conditions are no longer present, they feel that they surely would have attained the joy and happiness they craved in life if only the conditions had been at their disposal.”240 In this way, the aesthetic’s problem is very much like that of the mystic.

235 Ibid., 265.
236 Ibid., 208.
237 Ibid., 265.
238 Ibid., 262.
239 Ibid., 180.
240 Ibid., 184.
Judge William tells A as much: “The same thing happens to the mystic in his religious first love as happens to you in your earthly first love. He has tasted it in all its blessedness and now has nothing to do except to wait for it to come again in just as much glory as before.”\textsuperscript{241} In both cases, there is a desire for an experience or a feeling whose condition is outside of one’s self. One puts one’s self on hold waiting for the conditions of desire to be met. This is a type of “accidental immediacy” whereby “the condition for enjoyment is still an external condition that is not within the individual’s power.”\textsuperscript{242}

The judge makes it clear that “a person’s unhappiness never lies in his lack of control over external conditions.”\textsuperscript{243} In fact, if what a person needs is outside of himself, Judge William says that he should take off his entire concrete existence and remove himself from actuality.\textsuperscript{244} However, when one chooses his own self as a task, all of the “accidental qualities” and the concrete circumstances he finds himself in are ennobled as well.\textsuperscript{245} Judge William writes:

The person who has ethically chosen and found himself possesses himself defined in his entire concretion. He these possesses himself as an individual who has these capacities, these passions, these inclinations, these habits, who is subject to these external influences, who is influenced in one direction thus and in another thus. Here he then possesses himself as a task in such a way that it is chiefly to order, shape, temper, inflame, control—in short, to produce an evenness of soul, a harmony, which is the fruit of the personal virtues. Here the objective for his activity is himself, but nevertheless not arbitrarily determined, for he possesses himself as a task that has been assigned to him, even though it became his by his own choosing.\textsuperscript{246}

\textsuperscript{241} Ibid., 249.
\textsuperscript{242} Ibid., 190.
\textsuperscript{243} Ibid., 188.
\textsuperscript{244} Ibid., 262.
\textsuperscript{245} Ibid., 262.
\textsuperscript{246} Ibid., 262.
The problem with both the aesthetic and the mystic is that neither of them chooses themselves and their own personalities as a task in and of itself in a way that embraces their everyday actuality.

**Mysticism, Suicide, and Self-Annihilation**

One thing that is highlighted in the literature on Kierkegaard and mysticism is the relationship that Judge William draws between mysticism and suicide. Judge William sees the inherent danger of a one-sided devotion to the mystical life as leading to the attempt to annihilate one’s self and escape from actuality. The judge provides the example of a young man named Ludvig Blackfeldt to support this claim. Judge William notes the increasingly eccentric behavior of Ludvig as he attempts to attain an “immediate rapport with the eternal.” For Ludvig, as for any mystic in Judge William’s opinion, the actuality in which he finds himself gets in the way of his ultimate goal—to “creep into God.” For the mystic, “the whole world is dead” and “actuality is a delay,” and not just the world, but the mystic “vanishes from himself” as well. For Ludvig, as for all mystics, the world, and even his own self, get in the way of loving God.

In the footnotes, Judge William includes the suicide note of Ludvig Blackfeldt, quoted in part here:

Most Honorable Mr. Councilor,
I am writing to you because in one way you are the one closest to me; in another way you are no closer than other people. When you receive these lines, I am no more. If anyone should ask you the reason, you may say that once upon a time there was a princess whose name was Morning Glory or

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249 Ibid., 243.
250 Ibid., 242-243, 249.
something like that, for this is the way I myself would answer if I could have had the joy of surviving myself.…. I do not regard a suicide as something commendable. It is not out of vanity that I decided on it. On the contrary, I believe in the correctness of the thesis that no human being can endure seeing the infinite. It once appeared to me in the intellectual sense, and the expression of this is ignorance. Ignorance is precisely the negative expression for infinite knowledge. A suicide is the negative expression for infinite freedom. It is a form of infinite freedom, but the negative form. Fortunate is the one who finds the positive.  

There is an “annihilation of the self motif” present in this letter, with Ludvig noting that he was unable to “survive himself.” He draws a parallel in this letter with the notion of freedom and the self and Socrates’s ignorance, as Christopher Nelson explains:

Taking his cue from Socrates, whose parabolic encounter with divine wisdom yielded the rightly infamous proposal of the relative worthlessness of human wisdom – ignorance as the negative expression for infinite knowledge – Ludvig extends the lesson drawn from the sphere of intellectual endeavor to that of endeavor in general – suicide as the negative expression for infinite freedom.

Part of living a life defined by the ethical sphere is the choosing of oneself, and doing so in freedom. Judge William even states that “it is in freedom that the distinctive characteristic of Christian piety lies.” But we know that for the judge, freedom involves choosing one’s self, which also involves choosing one’s concrete, actual existence. This might be referred to as a “positive infinite freedom.” By contrast, equating Socrates’s encounter with the divine as bringing about a negative form of infinite knowledge, i.e., “he knows that he knows nothing,” Ludvig sees his encounter with the divine as leading to a negative infinite freedom or the choice to entirely end

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251 Ibid., 246. Emphasis mine.
253 Ibid., 447.
255 Ibid., 241.
interaction with the world of actuality, and indeed, with himself. As Nelson points out, “This is all that the judge needs to hear in order to render his verdict.”

Mysticism in particular leads to the folly of self-annihilation.

But why should all of the indictments Judge William levels against mysticism not be leveled against the aesthetic as well? The eccentricity of the mystic finds a twin in the eccentricity of the aesthetic. The aesthetic, like the mystic, seeks uninterrupted contact with the eternal, and he is just as capable of incorrectly grasping his own freedom and his own self, “taking the ethical choice esthetically in vain.” I quote at length a description of the aesthetic that resounds with language the judge uses to describe the mystic:

When the individual has grasped himself in his eternal validity, this overwhelms him with all its fullness. Temporality vanishes for him. At the first moment, this fills him with an indescribable bliss and gives him an absolute security. If he now begins at it one-sidedly, the temporal asserts its claims. These are rejected. What temporality is able to give, the more or less that appears here, is so very insignificant to him compared to what he possesses eternally. Everything comes to a standstill for him; he has, so to speak, arrived in eternity ahead of time. He sinks into contemplation, stares fixedly at himself, but this staring cannot fill up time. Then it appears to him that time, temporality, is his ruination; he demands a perfect form of existence, and here in turn there appears a weariness, an apathy, that resembles the lethargy that accompanies enjoyment. This apathy can so engulf a person that suicide seems the only escape for him. No power is able to tear him from himself; the only power is time. It certainly cannot tear him from himself either, but it stops him and delays him; it retards the embrace of the spirit with which he grasps himself. He has not chosen himself; like Narcissus, he has become infatuated with himself. Such a condition has not infrequently ended in suicide.

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256 Nelson, “Kierkegaard, Mysticism, and Jest,” 447.
258 Ibid., 203.
259 Ibid., 231.
260 Ibid., 231.
Much of the language Judge William uses here to describe the aesthetic could also apply to the mystic: he is world weary, absorbed in contemplation, and sees actuality as a delay to attaining the thing that he wants, whether God or himself.\textsuperscript{261} For the judge, both can lead to suicide, but the judge extends the possibility of the aesthetic being capable of transfiguration. This is a possibility he does not extend to mysticism, despite the similarities shared between the aesthetic and the mystic.

It is my contention that the judge does a disservice to mysticism, not only by his narrow (and misunderstood) Orientalist perspective of it, but also by not recognizing its similarities with the aesthetic. In the previous chapter, we saw that Kierkegaard allows for the transfiguration of the aesthetic into the ethical, and it is my contention here that the same thing may be possible for mysticism. Like the aesthetic, it may be fully capable of being transfigured and enriching for the ethical life. How might this happen? One of Kierkegaard’s other pseudonyms, Petrus Minor, author of \textit{The Book on Adler}, may provide us insight here.

\textbf{The Book on Adler}

\textit{The Book on Adler} is one of Kierkegaard’s more obscure works. Written by the playfully chosen pseudonym Petrus Minor, the work deals with the concept of revelation and divine authority. It addresses the claims of a Danish pastor, Adolph Peter Adler, who claimed he had received a divine revelation and received a new doctrine. Kierkegaard was fascinated by Adler and appears to have had some respect for the man. He did,
however, find Adler’s revelation to be an occasion for writing about the concept of authority and the need for the ethical in religious life.

**Mysticism and Adler**

There are some initial objections I must address regarding the use of the term “mysticism” in relation to Adler’s revelation. The argument could be made that the concepts of mysticism and revelation are different enough so as to warrant separate treatments. This might normally be true, but in Adler’s case, his own multiple descriptions of the experience fit the description of mysticism, particularly if we keep in mind James’s criteria. Petrus Minor quotes Adler’s account of the experience:

> One evening I had just given an account of the origin of evil; then I perceived (*noetic, passivity*) as if in a flash (*ineffable, transiency*) that everything depended not upon thought but upon spirit, and that there existed an evil spirit. The same night a hideous sound (*ineffable*) descended into our room. Then the Savior commanded me (*passivity*) to get up and go in and write down (*noetic*) these words (*passivity*).\(^{262}\)

I realize that my designation of certain parts of the phenomenon as reflecting “passivity” could be disputed; however, Adler himself indicates passivity on his end, writing, “I know that they were written with Jesus’ collaborating grace, so that I have been only an instrument,”\(^{263}\) a point that Petrus Minor reiterates.\(^{264}\)

> Even if one was to acknowledge the difference between the experience of receiving a revelation versus a mystical experience, this line is blurred where Adler is concerned. In a line that Petrus Minor will go on to criticize for the inconsistency in thought it represents, Adler writes about his experience, “Even if my *Sermons* and

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\(^{263}\) Ibid., 53.

\(^{264}\) Ibid., 54.
Studies are regards only as a child’s first babbling, lisping, imperfect voice, I nevertheless believe that the words testify than an event through which I was deeply moved by faith did occur.”265 Something far less definite than a “revelation” is communicated here, bringing to light the seeming ineffability of the experience, bringing it far more into line with what James and I would call mysticism than what might be called revelation.

In James’s own account of mysticism, we find a number of experiences listed that are akin to Adler’s, which in another analyses may even fall under a separate category of “religious experience” instead of mysticism, but for my purposes, are treated as forms of mysticism. First, we must consider James’s contention that “personal religious experience has its root and centre in mystical states of consciousness.”266 Mysticism then lies at the very foundation of religious experience. In James’s own examples that he gives of mystical experiences, he counts among them the ability to receive prophetic revelation and even seems to count Luther’s conversion experience as mystical.267 Whatever else can be said of James’s understanding of mysticism, he seems to count the “deep emotion” and feelings of conversion and other “affective experience[s],” which he gives the name “faith-state,” as being interchangeable with any talk of mysticism.268 He writes, “[F]aith-state and mystic state are practically convertible.”269 For James, mysticism, deep emotion, and spiritual affectation blur together, such that the description of Adler’s experience as “mystical” seems apt.

265 Ibid., 61.
266 James, Varieties of Religious Experience, 342.
267 Ibid., 344-345.
268 Ibid., 224-228, 356, 358, 451-452.
269 Ibid., 382.
*Adler and the Ethical*

In the editor’s preface, Kierkegaard, who lists himself as editor and Petrus Minor as the author, notes that the whole book is “an ethical inquiry into the concept of revelation.”\(^{270}\)

In the introduction, Petrus Minor writes, “The religious sphere includes or ought to include the ethical; therefore no esthetic critic dares to involve himself with it, and, above all, no critic dares to involve himself esthetically with the religious if the ethical makes an objection.”\(^{271}\) This comment by Petrus Minor is important for our inquiry. Earlier I noted Watkin’s observation that the spiritually of the religious is capable of becoming aesthetic and devoid of the ethical, with mysticism becoming a kind of aesthetic religiousness.\(^{272}\)

For Petrus Minor, one of the key differences between ethical religiousness and aesthetic religiousness is consistency. He writes, “consistency is the only thing I require.”\(^{273}\) As Adler’s writings stand, they are confused such that he himself seems to not understand what he event means.\(^{274}\)

For Petrus Minor, a key element required for consistency is the possession of a self. From analyzing Judge William’s writings, we know that the possession of the self is a key component of the ethical life. Like the aesthetic, Adler writes as someone who thinks what he needs is outside of himself and passively hopes that “the circumstances will seize him and, as it were, force him into the character, force him to become and be

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\(^{270}\) Kierkegaard, *The Book on Adler*, 3.

\(^{271}\) Ibid., 21.


\(^{274}\) Ibid., 22-23.
what he certainly has said he is but which he does not himself know for sure whether he is or not.”  

Petrus Minor says elsewhere:

In a tottering, irresolute, unsteady age, where in so many ways the individual is in the habit of seeking outside himself...what is essentially to be found only in the individual himself: the decision—in such an age a man steps forth and appeals to a revelation, or, more correctly, he rushes out like one who is terrified, with frightful horror in his countenance, still shuddering from the moment of contact, and proclaims that a revelation has fallen to his lot.... [Ye gods], there must certainly be help here, there must certainly be steadfastness here!  

One cannot depend on outward circumstances, even an alleged revelation or other spiritual experience, for resoluteness, steadfastness, or the attainment of the self. Only the individual can choose himself, and “he must understand himself in this” revelation.  

Petrus Minor’s concern is not with whether extraordinary religious experiences can happen in the modern world. In fact, he indicates that they can. Nor is he concerned with whether Adler is a heretic. What concerns Petrus Minor is ethical earnestness or the possession of the self.  

He writes, “earnestness is the quiet composure of responsibility” and not “to make a noise, to become red in the face, to look strained, to use the almost terrifying, extreme expressions and yet inwardly to be uncertain about what one is and what one is not.”  

This ethical earnestness, the possession of one’s self, is something that Adler lacks, hence his inconsistency and confusion. Without being grounded in the

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275 Ibid., 24.
276 Ibid., 23.
277 Ibid., 23.
279 Ibid., 25. Emphasis mine.
ethical, his experience brings about confusion. Instead of choosing himself and knowing what he wants to say, he starts a discussion that goes nowhere.\textsuperscript{280}

Adler is “a person whirled around and slung out like a warning terror.”\textsuperscript{281} This is indicated by his inconsistency in the description of his experience. For Petrus Minor, part of Adler’s problem seems obvious, “Adler does not hold fast to it, although he still does not feel called upon to revoke it \emph{decisively}.\textsuperscript{282} If it is true that Adler’s first account of his experience was wrong and it was merely a more nebulous type of religious experience, then he must revoke his first statement. As Petrus Minor writes, “The confusion is due only to his allowing the first statement to stand. If there is to be the least ethical meaning or earnestness in Adler’s whole endeavor, he must revoke his first statement and be satisfied with his last.”\textsuperscript{283} In his confusion, however, Adler has misunderstood his own religious enthusiasm.\textsuperscript{284}

This mention of “religious enthusiasm” is interesting for our purposes. Adler’s experience is being described as a type of religious enthusiasm, and as I established earlier, Petrus Minor’s description of Adler’s experience, understood as a type of religious enthusiasm, has the qualities of James’s account of mystical experience, and James himself can be argued as lumping such experiences in with other mystical states of consciousness. So what is Petrus Minor’s opinion of religious enthusiasm? Is it an inherently negative, self-negating experience? Can it be ethically transfigured?

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\item Ibid., 10-11.
\item Ibid., 50.
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**Ethics and Religious Enthusiasm**

Throughout the text, Petrus Minor never disputes that people can receive a revelation from God, nor does he necessarily dismiss religious enthusiasm. His discussion is not “about to what extent Adler has been enthusiastic, since the question is still about his having said that he had a revelation and has a doctrine according to the Savior’s dictation.” In fact, Petrus Minor praises Adler’s religiousness, writing:

> The good, the excellence in Magister Adler is that he was shaken, was deeply moved, that his life has thereby acquired a rhythm very different from the cab-horse trot…in which most people, in the religious sense, dawdle…through life…. Magister Adler’s excellence is that in the earnest and strict sense he must be said to have been fetched home by a higher power.

He goes on to say, “All religiousness lies in subjectivity, in inwardness, in being deeply moved, in being jolted, in the qualitative pressure on the spring of subjectivity.” So Adler is praised for being more subjective and being more religious than most in a world of objectivity that Kierkegaard criticizes throughout his writings. One is put in mind here of Kierkegaard’s own mystical experience and the way in which he felt touched by a higher power. Perhaps Petrus Minor is channeling some of Kierkegaard’s own thoughts about the role played by religious enthusiasm in deepening one’s religiosity and subjectivity. In fact, even as I drew an analogy between romantic or first love and the mystical experience, so Petrus Minor makes a similar comparison:

> But it is an excellence in Magister Adler to be shaken in this way…and I certainly will not begrudgingly disparage the worth of this excellence. Just

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285 Ibid., 75.
286 Ibid., 103-104.
287 Ibid., 104.
as it is an excellence to be truly in love, truly enthusiastic, so it is also an excellence, in the religious sense, to be shaken.\textsuperscript{288}

Such a religious enthusiasm happens “neither in thinking nor in scholarship, but at the most tender and most subjective point of inwardness,” and “[w]hen one is deeply moved there, one is properly positioned and in place. And this emotion is in turn the true working capital and the true wealth.”\textsuperscript{289} It appears in Petrus Minor’s comments here that religious enthusiasm, which we are understanding as a type of mystical experience, is compared to the feeling of being in love (read: first love), valued for its subjective nature, and positions one for a potentially robust religious life, in the same way that first love can position a person to want to embrace the commitment of marriage. Thus, Petrus Minor acknowledges the deep religiosity and subjectivity of the mystic and his “deep” nature as compared to the mediocrity of the “dawdling” religious life Petrus Minor refers to. But like Judge William, and despite his praise for the Adler, Petrus Minor has his own concerns about the role of a religious enthusiasm such as Adler’s.

Given the public nature of Adler, Petrus Minor worries that Adler’s experience will merely serve as a distraction to those with “a cowardly, soft religiousness that does not want to be out upon the deep in decisions” but would prefer to merely watch the religious enthusiasm of others “at second hand.”\textsuperscript{290} Adler suggests that religious enthusiasm can indeed be helpful to spur on and correct the soft religiousness of others:

\[ T \]he one who has been deeply moved should not in his inwardness give up, that in holy anger he should know how to get behind these cowardly

\textsuperscript{288} Kierkegaard, \textit{The Book on Adler}, 108. Emphasis mine.
\textsuperscript{289} Ibid., 108.
\textsuperscript{290} Ibid., 108.
soft ones in order to force them out in the current, instead of abandoning himself to them for entertainment and drama.\(^{291}\)

Per Judge William, in the same way that mysticism can cause a religious softness in the person experiencing it,\(^{292}\) so too can it cause religious softness in those who observe it.

Again, the problem is that mysticism in either case prevents people from engaging with actuality in an existentially decisive way. In terms of Adler’s influence upon others, Petrus Minor finds the following to be the case:

But for that Magister Adler lacks reflection and composure and schooling and holy discipline, and therefore it cannot be denied that even if everything else about him were in order, he nevertheless does harm because instead of helping others out into decisions he provides diversion to the cowards and soft ones, who love voluptuous shudders.\(^{293}\)

For Petrus Minor, it is left to Adler to “really master himself and his thinking” before he can be fully commended.\(^{294}\) We have seen in other parts of Kierkegaard’s corpus that possessing one’s own self is part of what the ethical sphere consists of, and Petrus Minor confirms that Adler’s lack of ethical earnestness stems from not becoming “fully conscious of himself.”\(^{295}\) What does Petrus Minor think would help Adler become fully conscious of himself and attain ethical earnestness?

Adler “lacks the ethical firmness” he needs and does “not strive to understand himself.”\(^{296}\) He lacks consistency and thus produces “a continuation of confusion.”\(^{297}\)

What Adler needs is “the desirable proportionality…between subjectivity’s deep emotion

\[^{291}\text{Ibid.}, 109.\]
\[^{292}\text{Kierkegaard, Either/Or II, 244.}\]
\[^{293}\text{Kierkegaard, The Book on Adler, 109.}\]
\[^{294}\text{Ibid.}, 111.\]
\[^{295}\text{Ibid.}, 115.\]
\[^{296}\text{Ibid.}, 127.\]
\[^{297}\text{Ibid.}, 126.\]
and the qualitative unshakability of the categories of thought."²⁹⁸ What categories of thought are necessary for Adler to attain ethical firmness? For Petrus Minor, the answer is simple: Christian concepts.²⁹⁹ In his religious emotion and enthusiasm, he has sought the most powerful concept imaginable to describe the experience: “Subjectively his emotion is carried to the extreme; he wants to select the most powerful expression to describe it and by means of a mental deception grasps...having had a revelation.”³⁰⁰ Adler’s confusion, which he passes onto his readers, is from his lack of mastery of Christian concepts.³⁰¹ It is because of “the misrelation between Magister Adler’s subjective emotion and his education in Christian concepts” that he is tossed around by his extreme emotions.³⁰²

In speaking about the need for Adler to “funnel” his religious emotion through the proper concepts, I must return briefly to Kierkegaard’s criticism of Hans Christian Anderson. Petrus Minor’s critique of Adler is basically that of Kierkegaard’s critique of Anderson: Adler and Anderson both need life-views. This is confirmed by Petrus Minor’s multiple references to Adler as a “premise-author,”³⁰³ which is “Kierkegaard’s term...for those writing without a genuine life-view or perspective on life.”³⁰⁴ Indeed, Petrus Minor bemoans premise-authors who lack a life-view.³⁰⁵ Petrus Minor’s would seem to be equating the proper understanding of Christian concepts as being and integral part of

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 123.
²⁹⁹ Ibid., 116.
³⁰⁰ Ibid., 117.
³⁰¹ Ibid., 117.
³⁰² Ibid., 116.
³⁰³ Ibid., 18, as one example.
³⁰⁵ Kierkegaard, The Book on Adler, 8.
developing the right perspective on life or life-view in order for Adler’s experience to be
given its proper significance, in the same way that marriage provides first love its proper
and fullest significance.

Earlier, Petrus Minor affirmed religious emotion as a “true wealth.” However, religious emotion itself is not enough. What is needed is “Christian emotion.” As Petrus Minor explains, “One does not become a Christian by being religiously moved by something higher; and not every outpouring of religious emotion is a Christian outpouring.” Petrus Minor then claims that religious enthusiasm akin to Adler’s is the basis of all religiousness. He writes: “To be shaken…is the more universal basis of all religiousness; being shaken, being deeply moved, and subjectivity’s coming into existence in the inwardness of emotion are shared by the pious pagan and the pious Jew in common with a Christian.” To describe such a shaking as the universal basis of all religiousness reminds us of James’s statement “that all personal religious experience has its root and centre in mystical states of consciousness.” So there is something universal about mystical experiences, but Petrus Minor desires to differentiate what makes Christian mystical experience different from a more general religiousness. This recalls Judge William’s critique of Little Ludvig’s mysticism how it was more Eastern than

306 Ibid., 108.
307 Ibid., 114.
308 Ibid. 113.
309 One is put in mind here of Rudolf Otto’s claim that experience of the numinous feeling constitutes the essential quality of religion.
311 James, Varieties of Religious Experience, 342.
Here, we find the possibility opened up in Kierkegaard’s corpus that perhaps a specifically Christian mysticism is acceptable—as with mysticism, so with eroticism and marriage. Judge William himself wrote:

That marriage belongs essentially to Christianity, that pagan peoples have not perfected it, despite the sensuousness of the Orient and all the beauty of Greece, that not even Judaism has been able to do it, despite the truly idyllic marriages found there, this you will no doubt concede to me without my needing to go into it in more detail, and all the more so since it will be sufficient merely to remind you that sex differences were nowhere else so deeply reflected that the other sex thereby attained its full right.\(^{313}\)

Judge William refers to marriage, the metaphor for the ethical, as the essentially Christian. It is marriage for Judge William that transfigures eroticism into something more. Given our comparison of eroticism and mysticism, it is interesting that Petrus Minor makes that claim that mysticism requires the addition of the essentially Christian in order to be infused with the ethical—so that Adler can himself gain ethical earnestness in his experience. According to Petrus Minor, Adler would obtain Christian emotion under the following conditions: “emotion that is Christian is controlled by conceptual definitions.”\(^{314}\) As I noted earlier, this invokes the development of a proper life-view. Regarding the relationship between religious emotion or the mystical and the erotic, Petrus Minor says:

Let us take being in love in the purely erotic sense. With regard to being in love purely erotically, there is no specific qualitative difference between a Greek, a Jew, and a Christian. The lyrical outbursts of being in love are solely within the qualifications of the purely human and not within specific qualitative definitions. The lyric is evaluated according to the

\(^{312}\) Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 245.


expression of the purely human…which *qua* difference is still a vanishing aspect in the immanent human equality, eternally viewed.\textsuperscript{315}

Petrus Minor here uses the same example of ethical transfiguration that Judge William does: eroticism or first love. Eroticism, like religious emotion or mysticism, needs to be transfigured by something qualitatively higher.

It should be noted that Petrus Minor is applying the religious taxonomy of Kierkegaard’s teacher Hans Martensen for whom all that counts as religion can be summarized in the categories of the pagan, the Jew, and the Christian.\textsuperscript{316} For Martensen, paganism and Judaism “each contain true insights into the God-idea, but these insights are fragmentary and incomplete.”\textsuperscript{317} While paganism and Judaism contain partial insights into God and religion, Christianity contains the “fully developed notion of a personal God,” making Kierkegaard “very much a man of his own time,”\textsuperscript{318} and this taxonomy is in the background of Petrus Minor’s critique of Adler. The difference between mystical experience apart from Christian concepts and mystical experience controlled by Christian concepts or a Christian life-view is that between immanence and transcendence or between the merely human and the truly divine. Petrus Minor writes:

In connection with all the inwardness that reflects on the purely human, the merely human (*thus in connection with all inwardness in the sphere of immanence*), to be deeply moved, to be shaken, is to be taken in the sense in which one speaks of shaking a man until he wakes up. The historical is only that he has been shaken; he is not to become something else through the shaking but is to wake up and become himself.\textsuperscript{319}

\textsuperscript{315} Ibid., 113-114.
\textsuperscript{317} Ibid., 35.
\textsuperscript{318} Ibid., 35.
\textsuperscript{319} Ibid., 113.
Petrus Minor indicates that a mystical experience does not ensure that one becomes themselves, but it *does* provide an opportunity (perhaps we could say an occasion, per Johannes Climacus in *Philosophical Fragments*)\(^{320}\) to become one’s own self. One might also understand Kierkegaard’s own “shaking” or mystical experience as positioning him to become himself but requiring that he acquire a Christian life-view to keep the experience from becoming a matter of confusion and to make it an essentially Christian experience by which one really becomes one’s self; otherwise, it is still merely a disappearing human experience.\(^{321}\) Petrus Minor continues:

> It is different with the qualification: a Christian religious awakening, *which lies in the sphere of transcendence*. The individual’s being deeply moved by something higher is far from being an adequate qualification, because completely pagan views, pagan conceptions of God, can be expressed in deep emotions. In order to be able to express oneself Christianly, proficiency and schooling in the Christian conceptual definitions are also required in addition to the more universal heart language of deep emotion, just as it is of course assumed that the deep emotion is of a specific qualitative kind, is Christian emotion.\(^{322}\)

Here, we have the tools to contrast a mysticism that is acceptable to Kierkegaard from one that is unacceptable. Like the non-Christian mysticism of Little Ludvig, the pagan mysticism or deep emotion Petrus Minor critiques is the occasion for confusion on the part of Adler whereby he loses his sense of self apart from Christian concepts, which shape the mystical experience and transfigure it. Adler’s uncertainty about his experience, based in his lack of familiarity with “*basic Christian conceptual language*”

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\(^{321}\) Kierkegaard, *The Book on Adler*, 113-114. One could think here of Kierkegaard’s critique of Anderson, that he needs a life-view in order to be transfigured.

\(^{322}\) Ibid., 114.
makes him uncertain and prevents him from having the decisive sense of self we have come to equate with the ethical.\textsuperscript{323}

**The Importance of Adler**

What is significant for our own inquiry about Adler is not necessarily what Kierkegaard may mean by “Christian conceptual language” or even his exclusive claims of the superiority of Christianity among the religions. What needs to be highlighted with the case are the following three points that shed light on the possibility of the ethical transfiguration of mysticism in Kierkegaard’s writings if we equate religious emotion with mysticism, which I established earlier. First, not all mysticism is the same for Kierkegaard. While Judge William certainly seems to condemn his own idea of “Oriental” mysticism, and Petrus Minor certainly sees pagan and Jewish mysticism as falling short in some ways, there are mysticisms that might be useful for positioning one to become a self and attain ethical earnestness. Secondly, in light of this, forms of mysticism may be capable of being ethically transfigured. For Kierkegaard, it is a Christian mysticism in particular that can do this (if any can), given that for Kierkegaard the essentially Christian contains the ethical.

\textsuperscript{323} Ibid., 115.
CONCLUSION

We began this inquiry by questioning whether or not there was any place in Kierkegaard’s thought for mysticism. While the literature itself is divided on this point, with the very definition of the word “mysticism” being ambiguous, using William James four criteria of mysticism as ineffable, noetic, transient, and passive, I have demonstrated not only the presence of the mystical in Kierkegaard’s own life, but the possibility of it being “transfigured” and redeemed within his own schema.

To understand transfiguration, I examined the relationship between the aesthetic and the ethical. Where the aesthetic concerns one’s life being focused on a series of unconnected spontaneous moments, like the feelings of first love, the ethical concerns one’s decisive interactions with one’s daily existence whereby one sees the development of one’s own self in these daily conditions as a means of building one’s personal history over time. For the ethical, Kierkegaard used the metaphor of marriage to describe the dutiful commitment, which causes first love to transcend its momentary status and gain longevity.

Next, I compared the aesthetic and the mystical to one another, and it is on this comparison that my argument rests. In Either/Or II, the pseudonymous author Judge William gives one of the most extensive treatments of mysticism in Kierkegaard’s entire corpus. While the judge seemingly rejects mysticism, I pointed out how much of the
language the judge uses to describe mysticism was also used to describe the aesthetic, and asked why one was capable of being transfigured while the other was not.

Finally, I examined *The Book on Adler* in which Kierkegaard, through the pseudonym of Petrus Minor, examines the claim of a pastor named Adler to have received a divine revelation. In looking at this account, I asserted that Adler’s experience of religious enthusiasm is synonymous with the mystical experience and argued that Kierkegaard provides a way in this writing for understanding how mysticism might find a place in his writings. While Kierkegaard’s views are certainly Christian-centric, I argued that the resonances in Kierkegaard’s authorship make it possible to understand mysticism in a positive light. Such a mysticism must be well-defined within a life-view, which makes its meaning clear (not muddled like Adler). This conceptual clarity helps to provide the focus and self-assurance that ethical earnestness requires. Additionally, such a mysticism cannot retreat from the everyday hustle and bustle of life, but it must engage with the circumstances one finds himself or herself in. It must decisively choose one’s self. Such a mysticism, one would hope, could meet the approval of the great Dane!

This project does, however, leave a number of avenues left to explore for future research. While I have sought merely to show that the Kierkegaardian corpus makes an ethically transfigured mysticism possible, it has yet to be determined exactly what such a mysticism would look like and what its characteristics would be. What would a mysticism governed by a Christian life-view look like when constructed through the lens of Kierkegaard’s writings? For that matter, would that have any bearing on mysticism in other religious traditions?
In the pursuit of the question of the relationship between Kierkegaard and mysticism, I have used William James’s characteristics of mystical phenomenon merely in a descriptive sense inasmuch as I thought James’s language was useful for illuminating the presence of the mystical in Kierkegaard’s life and writings. What has been left unsaid is any discussion of Kierkegaard’s own Lutheran background and how that may come into conflict with the Neo-Platonism inherent in much of the Christian mystical tradition. Additionally, work could be done relating the language and experience of medieval mysticism, with its Neo-Platonic background, with that of 19th century revivalism that Kierkegaard, given his Moravian background, no doubt had some exposure to. For my purposes, James was most useful in this project, given indications in his own text that he “lumps” all of these phenomena together and indicates that they could very well be “converted” into the other’s language game. Heuristically, James serves as a valuable partner to get the conversation going, but the minutia of the details needs to be fleshed out in future research.
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