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AESTHETIC DEPRESSION AND THE RATIONALITY OF TRANSFORMING ONE'S LIFE

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I

There is a longstanding debate in Kierkegaard scholarship over the (ir)rationality of transitions between qualitatively different life-views. Alasdair MacIntyre's influential book *After Virtue* played an important role in shaping that debate. In the book, MacIntyre argues that, on a Kierkegaardian view, there can be no reasons for aesthetes to choose to live ethically. He develops this view on the basis of a reading of Kierkegaard's book *Either/Or* (*Enten/Eller*) (1843). *Either/Or* displays a confrontation between two very different life-views: the aesthetic and the ethical life-view. The first part of the book contains a collection of rather different texts, ascribed to an unknown author named 'A' by the pseudonymous editor of *Either/Or*, Victor Eremita. The second part of the book contains two very long letters by one Judge William addressed to A. In his letters he attempts to persuade A to leave his aesthetic life-view behind and adopt the ethical life-view. According to MacIntyre, *Either/Or* seeks to communicate that there are no reasons for A to become ethical. Hence, MacIntyre describes *Either/Or* in *After Virtue* as "the outcome and epitaph of the Enlightenment's systematic attempt to discover a rational justification of morality."[1] As such, MacIntyre claims, Kierkegaard paved the way for the emotivism – the idea that "moral judgments

[1] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 2008), 39.

are *nothing but* expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling"[2] – that has become so influential in our time and culture.

After Virtue inspired many Kierkegaard scholars to scrutinize and criticize MacIntyre's argument. These attempts culminated in the publication of *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre*[3], a collection of papers discussing MacIntyre's interpretation of Kierkegaard, including a response by MacIntyre against his critics. For some years, the issue was laid to rest. Recently, however, some Kierkegaard scholars have again expressed interest in the issue of reasons to become ethical. Among these are Ryan Kemp[4], Walter Wietzke[5], and myself[6]. Each of us has expressed hesitations with regard to earlier responses to MacIntyre's critique. The novelty of our approach, I think, consists in our conviction that in order to determine whether aesthetes have reason to become ethical, it is of vital importance to understand what it means to have a reason for action. Remarkably – or perhaps not so remarkably, given Kierkegaard's views on human existence – each of us has advocated a so-called 'internalist' account of practical reasons. (I will elaborate what this means below.) Nevertheless, there are deep and pervasive differences among the ways in which we approach Kierkegaard, as well as how we unpack the idea of 'reasons internalism' – and hence, among our responses to MacIntyre's charge of irrationality.

In a recent, rich paper in this journal[7], Kemp brings forward a challenging critique of the account of the transition to ethical life that I develop in my book *Kierkegaard, MacIntyre, Williams, and the Internal Point of View*. On his view, I am mistaken in arguing that the aesthete A has reason to embrace ethical life. Kemp's critique is particularly relevant because it denies an important idea that is at stake in these debates; an idea, moreover, that is intuitively very plausible. This is the idea

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[2] Ibid., 12.
[3] *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre. Essays on Freedom, Narrative, and Virtue*, ed. John J. Davenport and Anthony Rudd (Chicago: Open Court, 2001).
[4] Ryan Kemp, "A, the Aesthete: Aestheticism and the Limits of Philosophy," *Kierkegaard's Pseudonyms*, ed. Jon Stewart and Katalin Nun (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 1–26.
[5] Walter Wietzke, "Practical Reason and the Imagination," *Res Philosophica* 90, no. 4 (2013): 525–44.
[6] Rob Compaijen, *Kierkegaard, MacIntyre, Williams, and the Internal Point of View* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018).
[7] Ryan Kemp, "Kierkegaard on the Transformative Significance of Depression," *The Review of Metaphysics* 74, no. 4 (June 2021): 553–76.

that, if we are suffering from a kind of depression that is related to the particular way in which we view (and live) life, we have reason to change our current life(-view). As we will see, Kemp argues that *Either/Or*'s aesthete A is a counter-example to this view. Whether Kemp succeeds in establishing that A does not have reason to change his life(-view) even though he is depressed is the main topic of this article.

In the present contribution I aim to clarify some aspects of my account and respond to Kemp's critique. Section 2 discusses the fundamental issue of what it means to have a reason for action. I show that there are important differences between our views on this subject. Subsequently, in section 3, I explore how we should understand the aesthete A. Section 4 reconstructs my argument why A has reason to embrace ethical life. In the conclusion I extend the focus of the argument of this article by reflecting, as does Kemp, on Kierkegaard's views on education.

II

Answering the question of whether A has a reason to embrace ethical life, presupposes an understanding of what it means to have a reason for action. It is probably redundant to remark that we cannot find such an account in Kierkegaard's authorship. He is not interested in such issues (which, of course, does not mean that we cannot find in his writings considerations that bear on them). When we are asking whether A has a reason to become ethical, then, we will have to develop an independent account of practical reasons, which we can then use to illuminate and evaluate the Kierkegaardian theme of the transition to ethical life.

There is a lively though highly technical debate over the topic reasons for action in contemporary metaethics. Bernard Williams, in his seminal article 'Internal and External Reasons'[8], makes a general distinction between two possible views one could take: internalism and externalism. Internalism holds that, if it is to be true that an agent has reason to perform some

[8] Bernard Williams, "Internal and External Reasons," *Moral Luck. Philosophical Papers 1973-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 101–13.

action, she has to be motivated, in some way, to perform that action. For example, one has a reason to visit one's parents-in-law, only if, 'inside' one, there is a motivation that is fulfilled in visiting them. Externalism, on the other hand, denies that there is a necessary connection between an agent's practical reasons and her motivations. On this view, one could have a reason to visit one's parents-in-law, even though one is currently not in any way motivated to do so.

One of the things I aim to do in *Kierkegaard, MacIntyre, Williams, and the Internal Point of View* is to use this distinction to draw out the views on practical reasons that are implicit in the arguments developed by Kierkegaard scholars in response to MacIntyre's charge of irrationality. I discuss, for example, Michelle Kosch's[9] constructivist argument and Anthony Rudd's[10] teleological argument for the rationality of the transition to ethical life. Most of these arguments turn out to assume externalist conceptions of reasons for action. I criticize these conceptions, using a specific kind of internalism.

The internalist (like the externalist) position can be unpacked in a number of ways. The most straightforward internalism – deemed 'the sub-Humean model' by Williams[11] – equates 'being presently motivated to Φ' with 'having reason to Φ'. On this view, the idea of having a reason for action has lost all normative force: here, 'A has a reason to Φ' has been reduced to a factual statement about the agent A's current psychology. To be able to retain the normativity of the idea of having a reason – when you say that I have a reason to Φ, you usually want to say more than just telling me what my current motivational make-up looks like; you want to tell me that I should Φ, or that Φ-ing is the right thing for me to do – theorists typically add a constraint. This constraint is usually understood in terms of practical rationality: our motivations should be rationally related to our intended actions. Williams himself introduces the notion of 'sound deliberation', which

[9] Michelle Kosch, *Freedom and Reason in Kant, Schelling, and Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).
[10] See for example: Anthony Rudd, "Reason in Ethics Revisited. *Either/Or*, "Criterionless Choice", and Narrative Unity," *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook 2008*, ed. Heiko Schulz, Jon Stewart, and Karl Verstrynge (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 179–99; Anthony Rudd, *Self, Value, & Narrative. A Kierkegaardian Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
[11] Williams, "Internal and External Reasons," 102.

entails the idea that reasons for action are dependent on correct beliefs and correct reasonings. On this view, an agent has a reason to visit his parents-in-law only if there is (as he calls it) a 'sound deliberative route'[12] from his present motivations to visiting his parents-in-law. This makes the idea of a reason for action normative (although critics have argued a kind of normativity that is too weak[13]), because it allows us to say, for example, that the agent might be mistaken in believing that he has a reason to Φ. The agent, motivated to Φ, might conclude that she has reason to Φ, but Williams wants to be able to say that she is actually wrong because her conclusion is the result of false information and/or incorrect reasoning.

In the book, I criticize Williams' account for presupposing an understanding of deliberation that is, I believe, too demanding. Because it makes reasons for action dependent on the facts (on how things actually are), it implies the point of view of an ideal deliberator: someone who has access to all relevant facts and reasons correctly. By contrast, I propose a more modest account, which I summarize as follows: an agent has a reason to Φ, only if he could reach the conclusion to Φ when he deliberates to the best of his ability from the motivations he already has.[14] This view departs from Williams' account by emphasizing, in Kierkegaardian vein, the importance of acknowledging the agent's particular epistemic situation. What we have reason to do, depends, on this view, on the situation we find ourselves in: the information that we have access to, our cognitive abilities, the amount of time we have to deliberate, and so forth.

This view of practical reasoning has several implications. Let me highlight one in particular, as it is of great importance for the issue that is at stake in this paper: deliberating to the best of one's ability implies an openness to the views and advices of others. It implies being open to alternative views on the matter at hand as well as the correction of my own views. Denying that this is so, seems to turn deliberating to the best of one's ability into a kind of solipsism or, worse,

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[12] Bernard Williams, "Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame," *Making Sense of Humanity and Other Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 35.
[13] See for example: Derek Parfit, "Reason and Motivation," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 71 (suppl.) (1997): 99–130.
[14] Compaijen, *Kierkegaard, MacIntyre, Williams, and the Internal Point of View*, 67.

self-centred stubbornness. Yet, deliberating to the best of one's ability is neither a kind of gullibility, where one uncritically accept the views and advices of others. In the book I have tried to express this idea by pointing out that "[a]n 'outsider' might [...] point out that there is a rational connection between my actual motivations and the [intended] action, but, crucially, this gives me no reason to perform the action *unless* I myself could also 'perceive' or recognize this deliberative route."[15]

There are, of course, many questions to be asked at this point, but I do not have the required space to go into the details of these issues here. (Readers who are interested in them might want to take a look at chapter 3 of the book.) There is, however, one crucial question that needs to be asked: why I am discussing these technical issues here? The answer is twofold. As was explained above, the account of practical reasons we hold is crucial in answering our main question. Moreover, drawing out some of the details of this account of practical reasons helps to make clear that, contrary to what Kemp seems to suggest, we do not agree on this issue. Let me spell that out.

Kemp emphasizes that, when he thinks through the significance of A's depression, he is restricting himself to A's views. Taking A's views about aesthetic life seriously is very important and one of the strengths of Kemp's reading of the aesthetic life-view is that he is trying to understand it in its own terms. In Kierkegaard studies, scholars have often interpreted the aesthetic life-view from the perspective of Judge William (who is, to recall, the protagonist of the ethical life-view) and/or Kierkegaard, where its weaknesses and (eventual) demise seem clear from the outset. That being said, I have two problems with the way this methodological assumption plays out in his essay. On the one hand, Kemp does not always stay true to this idea. For example, when he sets out to argue "that A can find his depression enjoyable"[16] and "that depression might unlock pockets of enjoyment that A would otherwise have no access to"[17] – which are, as we shall see below, vital ideas for his argument – he makes crucial use of the views of Dostoevsky, Schopenhauer and Solomon. On the other hand, Kemp – by wanting to limit his account to A's views about aesthetic

[15] Ibid.
[16] Kemp, "Kierkegaard on the Transformative Significance of Depression," 573.
[17] Ibid.

life – seems overly restrictive. There is, I think, an important difference between taking someone's views seriously, and uncritically taking them at face-value. Kemp's account runs the risk of doing the latter. On the account of practical reasons that I defend, deliberating to the best of one's ability implies taking the views of others seriously. We will see in section 4 below how this plays out in the case of A.

This brings me to a more fundamental problem in Kemp's argument: his conception of what it means to deliberate is vague as well as too limited. While he writes that he shares my understanding of practical reasons, he actually presupposes an understanding of deliberation that is significantly different. On his view, our capacity for practical reasoning is concerned with discovering what we are (most strongly) motivated to do. This, at least, is suggested by his description of what it means to have an all-things-considered reason: an agent "has an all-things-considered reason to act when he deliberates and concludes that, on balance, his motivation to perform a particular action outweighs any counter motivations not to act."[18] Such a view of practical reasoning is problematic for two related reasons. *First*, it implies a view of human agency that is, I take it, not very recognizable for us: it paints the picture of human beings as persons who, concerned about acting, primarily seek to establish the strength of their motivations, without asking themselves whether their motivations will actually be fulfilled in their intended actions. That is, practical reasoning, on this view, does not seem to be concerned with the correctness of our practical inferences, and this seems implausible in light of our experience of ourselves as practical agents. *Second*, it is also problematic, because – by not being concerned with the question whether our motivations are actually fulfilled in our intended actions – it cannot do justice to the normativity of the idea of a reason for action. Like the 'sub-Humean model' referred to above, Kemp's account in effect treats 'A has a reason to Φ' as identical to 'A is presently motivated to Φ'. That is, the ascription of reasons to A boils down to a mere description of A's psychology.

[18] Ibid., 565.

Let me stress again that I am not suggesting that these ideas can be found in Kierkegaard's writings. Kierkegaard, I think, is not very interested in such topics. When we ponder the question of whether aesthetes have reason to adopt the ethical life-view, we will need to develop our own, independent answer to the question of what it means to have a reason. For internalist accounts such as Kemp's and my own, the agent's motivations are vital for determining what she has reason to do. In his authorship, Kierkegaard provides us with a very rich and lively description of the psychology of aesthetic life. How to characterize that psychology is another important issue that divides Kemp's work from my own.

III

In *Kierkegaard, MacIntyre, Williams, and the Internal Point of View*, I attempt to provide a detailed picture of A's psychology. This presentation of A's aestheticism focuses on his depression, his desire to be rid of his depression, and a method he describes as 'crop rotation' as his way of dealing with depression. Kemp disagrees with that interpretation and argues that I have a misguided view of A's depression as well as of 'crop rotation' as an aesthetic strategy to deal with depression.

Kemp points out that the foundational value of the aesthetic life-view – that which all aesthetes pursue in life – is pleasure. A, on his reading, is different from many other aesthetes because he is not interested in "immediate enjoyment."[19] Rather, he seeks reflective enjoyment, 'the interesting'. Kemp helpfully illustrates the distinction between immediate and reflective aestheticism as follows: "You can enjoy the immediate experience—the pleasure you get from tasting the wine or seeing the sunset or hearing the opera. Or you can enjoy the thought of it—the pleasure you get from reminiscing about the wine or imagining a sunset."[20] In this context, he refers

[19] Ibid., 559.
[20] Ibid.

to A who significantly claims that "[r]eal enjoyment consists not in what one enjoys, but in the idea."[21]

However, Kemp points out that, at the same time, A expresses repeatedly that he is depressed. The *diapsalmata* contain many passages indicating that A is suffering from depression and has contemplated suicide. (I will discuss some examples below.) Now, the gist of Kemp's account is that, while he acknowledges that A's depression is painful at an immediate level (which, of course, is hard to deny), A is able to use his depression to further his pursuit of pleasure: "it [A's depression] plays an integral role in the success of his aesthetic program."[22] Highlighting A's characterization of his depression as a 'castle', Kemp writes that "A's depression is a source of deep (and apparently unassailable) security."[23] Although it is important to see that security is, of course, not identical to enjoyment, let us look at how, on Kemp's view, depression plays a role in securing pleasure. He provides us with three interrelated reasons. *First*, A "finds his depression enjoyable."[24] This might seem a flat-out contradiction, but Kemp uses Dostoyevsky and Schopenhauer to suggest that this is possible given the kind of reflective aestheticism A embodies: rather than simply being tormented by depression, A – taking a higher-order perspective on it – regards it as an interesting experience. *Second*, referring to Solomon's description of his own struggle with depression, Kemp writes that depression "gives the mind 'something to do', […] it accentuates the beauty of everyday objects."[25] The *third* reason why depression provides pleasure is regarded by Kemp as most important, but I have to admit that I find it hard to fully comprehend. The idea seems to be that, to be able to effectively enjoy *reflective* pleasure (the kind of pleasure A is after), a mood such as depression is vital. In some way, such moods result from A's dealings with immediate reality. Promoting and living in these moods, A has detached himself from immediate reality,

[21] Ibid. EO1, 31/SKS 2, 40. Citations to Kierkegaard's published works are to English translations by Howard and Edna Hong, published by Princeton University Press. Abbreviations are as follows: EO1 = *Either/Or* Part 1, EO2 = *Either/Or* Part 2. I also include references to the fourth Danish edition, *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter* (SKS). Abbreviations are as follows: SKS [volume number], [page number].
[22] Kemp, "Kierkegaard on the Transformative Significance of Depression," 568.
[23] Ibid., 569.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid., 570.

enjoying the contents of his imagination while being safely wrapped up in a castle high above from the concreteness of actuality.[26]

For these reasons Kemp concludes that "depression actually plays a positive role in the maintenance and success of his [A's] aestheticism."[27] Interestingly, he phrases this point more carefully later on in his article, writing that "A *can* find his depression enjoyable"[28] and that "depression *might* unlock pockets of enjoyment that A would otherwise have no access to."[29] Kemp uses this understanding of the significance of A's depression to criticize my claim that A, suffering from his depression, desires to be rid of it.[30] Although I do not think that Kemp's interpretation, in the end, is successful, he is right to draw our attention to A's images of his depression as a 'faithful mistress' and as a 'castle'. This shows that A's relation to his depression is ambiguous. That being said, I am afraid Kemp's views on this issue do not take seriously enough the depth of A's suffering. I want to bring forward three reasons why I believe Kemp's understanding of (the significance of) A's depression is ultimately unsuccessful.

First, I think it is no coincidence Kemp frequently refers to the same aphorisms to argue that A's depression provides him with joy and security. Examining the *diapsalmata* reveals that the aphorisms which speak positively about depression (or, for that matter, express joy or other positive emotions in general) are far outnumbered by the aphorisms that express deep suffering. Although we should be careful to simply revert to numbers, this fact does suggest an important point: if A's aesthetic strategy of deriving joy out of depression would be successful, it is reasonable to suppose that we would see this reflected in the *diapsalmata*. Yet, even a quick reading of these aphorisms suggests the opposite, namely that – despite attempts to live aesthetically – A is troubled by deep and pervasive suffering. For instance, he writes that he battles with "pale, bloodless,

[26] Ibid., 571–72.
[27] Ibid., 561.
[28] Ibid., 573. Emphasis mine.
[29] Ibid. Emphasis mine.
[30] Compaijen, *Kierkegaard, MacIntyre, Williams, and the Internal Point of View*, 203.

tenacious-of-life nocturnal forms,"[31] that his "life is turned around and dreadful, not to be endured"[32] and his "eyes are surfeited and bored with everything."[33] Life, he claims, "has become a bitter drink,"[34] and is "utterly meaningless."[35] In a particularly vivid passage, A writes: "I lie prostrate, inert; the only thing I see is emptiness, the only thing I live on is emptiness, the only thing I move in is emptiness."[36] He ends this passage by observing that "my soul's poisonous doubt consumes everything. My soul is like the Dead Sea, over which no bird is able to fly; when it has come midway, it sinks down, exhausted, to death and destruction."[37] Thus, while I do not want to deny that A attempts to deal with his depression in aesthetic fashion, I believe that an examination of the *diapsalmata* makes clear that he fails. In any case, passages such as these make implausible Kemp's claim that A finds his depression enjoyable.

The *second*, related reason why I think Kemp's interpretation of A's aestheticism fails is that, on his reading, it is very hard to explain why the *diapsalmata* repeatedly express the desirability of death. Let us again look at some examples. Sometimes A makes clear that he regards death as a way out of his predicament: "If a stone fell down and killed me, that would still be a way out."[38] Writing about his life, A remarks: "No variation, always a rehash. Come, sleep and death; you promise nothing, you hold everything."[39] At other times he seems to entertain the idea of suicide, such as when he writes: "So I am not the one who is the lord of my life; I am one of the threads to be spun into the calico of life! Well, then, even though I cannot spin, I can still cut the thread."[40] And expressing the pointlessness of life poignantly, he exclaims: "Why not settle it all at once, why not stay out there [in the graveyard] and go along down into the grave and draw lots to see to whom will befall the misfortune of being the last of the living who throws the last three spadefuls

[31] EO1, 23/SKS 2, 32.
[32] EO1, 24/SKS 2, 33.
[33] EO1, 25/SKS 2, 34.
[34] EO1, 26/SKS 2, 34.
[35] EO1, 36/SKS 2, 45.
[36] EO1, 37/SKS 2, 46.
[37] Ibid.
[38] SKS 2, 46/EO 1, 37.
[39] SKS 2, 39/EO 1, 30.
[40] SKS 2, 40/EO 1, 31.

of earth on the last of the dead?"[41] If, as Kemp argues, A would be successful in keeping himself safely wrapped up in the castle of his imagination; if, that is, A's reflective aestheticism would enable him to creatively use his depression for enjoyment, it is difficult to see why we encounter passages such as these in his writings.

The *third* reason why I do not agree with Kemp's picture of A concerns the issue of how to interpret A's method of 'crop rotation' (which A develops in the essay 'Rotation of Crops'[42]). I believe, as we have seen, that we should ascribe A a desire to overcome his depression. That argument depends not only on the passages that were discussed above, but also, to an important degree, on the idea that we should view crop rotation as aimed at securing that goal. Crop rotation, to be clear, is a method born out of a desire to fight off boredom. It aims to do so by introducing constant change in one's life. In effect, A proposes that we should become creative observers of life, always trying to see our lives (and the circumstances we find ourselves in) in new ways.[43] More concretely, the detached standpoint A thus advises us to cultivate implies, on his view, that we should abstain from thorough friendships, marriage and serious jobs.[44] These things are particularly dangerous, since they 'imprison' us, make us become attached to our current lives, and thereby inevitably introduce boredom.

Against my view, Kemp argues that A – indeed – uses crop rotation to overcome *boredom* and not, as I claim, depression. The important presupposition on Kemp's part is that boredom and depression are importantly different such that crop rotation cannot be viewed as a way of dealing with depression. I think this is wrong. *First* of all, A's descriptions of his boredom as something he is tormented by suggest that his boredom and depression cannot be separated. Reflecting on life, A remarks: "You bore me; it is still the same, an *idem per idem*. No variation, always a rehash. Come,

[41] SKS 2, 38/EO 1, 29.
[42] EO1, 281–300/SKS 2, 271–89.
[43] EO1, 292/SKS 2, 281.
[44] EO1, 295–98/SKS 2, 284–87.

sleep and death; you promise nothing, you hold everything."[45] And in a particularly revealing passage, which begins with noting "[h]ow dreadful boredom is," he writes:

> I lie prostrate, inert; the only thing I see is emptiness, the only thing I live on is emptiness, the only thing I move in is emptiness. I do not even suffer pain. The vulture pecked continually at Prometheus's liver; the poison dripped down continually on Loki; it was at least an interruption, even though monotonous. Pain itself has lost its refreshment for me. If I were offered all the glories of the world or all the torments of the world, one would move me no more than the other; I would not turn over to the other side either to attain or to avoid. I am dying death.[46]

This makes clear that it is (at the very least) wrong to want to categorically distinguish between boredom and depression in A. That is, *secondly*, also suggested by a more general phenomenology of boredom. While it might the case that not everyone suffering from depression will describe their depression in terms of boredom, those suffering from genuine boredom will characterize their experience in terms that are reminiscent of depression. When boredom has us in its grip, we experience apathy, we lack motivation, we are unable to enjoy things, we cannot help but perceive the meaninglessness of things, and so forth. In his *A Philosophy of Boredom*, Lars Svendsen writes: "What is the difference between profound boredom and depression? My guess is that there is a considerable overlap."[47] The intimate relation between boredom and depression is also described by the 17th century French thinker Blaise Pascal, who – like Kierkegaard – is fascinated by our desire for diversion, and writes in his *Pensées*: "Man finds nothing so intolerable as to be in a state of complete rest, without passions, without occupation, without diversion, without effort. Then he feels his nullity, loneliness, inadequacy, dependence, helplessness, emptiness. And at once there

[45] EO1, 29–30/SKS 2, 39.
[46] EO1, 37/SKS 2, 46.
[47] Lars Svendsen, *A Philosophy of Boredom*, trans. John Irons (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), 15.

wells up from the depths of his soul boredom, gloom, depression, chagrin, resentment, despair."[48] In light of both A's remarks on boredom and these more general observations, then, it is reasonable to understand crop rotation as A's way of dealing with depression. This implies, in turn, that we can reasonably ascribe A a desire to overcome depression, and that, *contra* Kemp, we cannot understand A as enjoying it.

IV

Answering the question of whether the aesthete A has reason to embrace ethical life involves, as I have pointed out above, two things. We need an account of what it means to have a reason for action, and – given the choice for an internalist account – we need to have a thorough understanding of A, specifically of his motivations. Up to this point in this paper, I have criticized Kemp's views on these issues and I think his objections against my approach of these matters have thereby been debunked. In this final section I want to show why – given the understanding of what it means to have a practical reason that was argued for above, and given my views on the aesthete A – I think we should ascribe A a reason to choose ethical life. This will bring out some additional differences between Kemp's views and my own.

Before addressing the main question – could A, by deliberating to the best of his ability, reach the conclusion that his desire to overcome depression is fulfilled in the choice for ethical life? – it is worth noting that up to this point, I have not said anything about what it might mean to choose ethical life. I do not have the requisite space here to develop a full (or even sufficiently detailed) exposition of ethical life as it appears in Kierkegaard's authorship. Nevertheless, some things can be said, and let me do that by responding to an idea that Kemp gestures at in his article. He suggests that an important reason why A cannot be said to have a reason to embrace ethical life is that, from A's perspective, ethical life is dull and petty. Kemp writes: "He looks around, notices people like Judge William living what appear to be petty and insignificant lives […] and

[48] Blaise Pascal, *Thoughts*, trans. Alban J. Krailsheimer (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1966), 208.

then decides, by his lights quite rationally, that he will be a mere seeker of pleasure."[49] The implication of this line of thought is that the choice for ethical life should be understood as a choice for the ('petty and insignificant') kind of life that Judge William himself leads. However, I do not think that this is what Judge William is getting at when he urges A to choose ethical life. To be exact, 'to choose ethical life' does not even seem to be the most adequate expression as Judge William urges A to choose *himself*.[50] Choosing oneself, in Kierkegaard's authorship, is a matter of taking responsibility for who one is. It involves the double task of accepting oneself as being this particular person, and striving to realize one's ideal self. This formulation might raise more questions than it answers[51], but the important point for our present purposes is that the choice for ethical life allows for the preservation of the agent's particularity. Judge William is not forcing A to choose the life of "civil councilor[s]"[52] or "civil servants."[53] Instead, he urges A to commit to who he already is.

Crucially, the reason Judge William writes that A should choose himself is precisely because he (Judge William) is convinced that this will relieve A of his depression. Judge William has a specific understanding of depression which he brings forward in his letters in order to help A understand the real causes of his depression. Judge William writes: "What, then, is depression? It is hysteria of the spirit. There comes a moment in a person's life when immediacy is ripe, so to speak, and when the spirit requires a higher form, when it wants to lay hold of itself as spirit. […] If this does not happen, if the movement is halted, if it is repressed, then depression sets in."[54] On this view, depression sets in when a person frustrates his or her spiritual development. Judge Williams wants A to see that his spirit 'requires a higher form', but that he frustrates this

[49] Kemp, "Kierkegaard on the Transformative Significance of Depression," 562.
[50] EO2, 177, 206/SKS 3, 173, 203.
[51] See for a detailed discussion of these issues: Rob Compaijen, "Authenticity and Imitation. On the Role of Moral Exemplarity in Anti-Climacus' Ethics," *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook 2011*, ed. Heiko Schulz, Jon Stewart, and Karl Verstrynge (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2011), 341–64.
[52] EO1, 34/SKS 2, 43. Kemp, "Kierkegaard on the Transformative Significance of Depression," 558.
[53] Kemp, "Kierkegaard on the Transformative Significance of Depression," 573.
[54] EO2, 188–89/SKS 3, 183.

development by repressing it. A's way of repressing this development is by staying within aesthetic life, that is: by cultivating aesthetic strategies for diversion such as crop rotation.

The question that my account of practical reasons presses us to ask is whether A has reason to believe Judge Williams' views about depression and how to overcome it. It is important to see that, by wanting to limit himself to A's current beliefs, this is not a question that Kemp thinks should be asked. Yet, as I have argued above, I believe that deliberating to the best of one's ability implies being open to the views of others. Now, I think that A has good reason to take Judge Williams' views on these matters seriously. The *diapsalmata* show, as we have seen, that A himself acknowledges that his attempts to overcome depression are unsuccessful. Judge William captures this point well, writing that A "has seen through the vanity of everything" and has "absorbed the consciousness of the nothingness of such a life-view."[55] These observations are in line with the fact that A contemplates death and even suicide. More importantly still, A has good reason to give credence to Judge Williams' views because A himself seems aware of the kind of frustrated development and transformation Judge William describes. A writes, for example, that he expects some kind of major upheaval in his life: "Over my inner being broods an oppressiveness, an anxiety, that forebodes an earthquake."[56] And in a revealing aphorism, A observes:

> How strange! With what equivocal anxiety about losing and keeping, people nevertheless cling to this life. At times I have considered taking a decisive step compared with which all previous ones were but child's play—to set out on the great voyage of discovery. As a ship is saluted with a cannonade when it is launched, so I would salute myself. And yet. Is it courage that I lack? If a stone fell down and killed me, that would still be a way out.[57]

[55] EO2, 194/SKS 3, 188.
[56] EO1, 29/SKS 2, 38.
[57] EO1, 37/SKS 2, 46.

This important passage (which is nevertheless generally neglected among Kierkegaard scholars) gives us reason to believe that A has deliberated about leaving his current life behind as well as that he realizes he can do that either through death, or by taking 'a decisive step'. Given *Either/Or*'s presentation of ethical life in terms of choice (which, of course, is echoed in the book's title), it is hard not to interpret this as gesturing towards ethical life. I think we should say, then, that A has reason to take Judge Williams' views about these matters seriously.

Let me return to the issue at hand. Could A, by deliberating to the best of his ability, reach the conclusion that his desire to overcome depression is fulfilled in the choice for ethical life? In light of the above analysis I believe we should say that he could. Some of the *diapsalmata* already give witness to something that resembles that conclusion, and he also has reason to believe Judge William's (alternative) views of depression and how to overcome it. We should conclude, then, that A has reason to embrace ethical life.

V

In this article I have attempted to formulate a response to Kemp's critique of the account of ethical conversion that I bring forward in *Kierkegaard, MacIntyre, Williams, and the Internal Point of View*. His general critique, to repeat, is that I am mistaken in claiming that the aesthete A has reason to embrace ethical life. He develops this critique by arguing that, while they agree in advocating an internalist understanding of practical reasons, I have a misguided view of A's motivations. Put more concretely: on Kemp's view, we cannot ascribe A a desire to overcome his depression – as a matter of fact, A is able to use his depression to further his aesthetic project of pursuing pleasure.

My response to this critique was twofold. *First*, that Kemp holds a view of reasons for action that is significantly different from mine. I have tried to make clear that the account brought forward by Kemp is not critical enough and, consequently, is unable to do justice both to our experience of ourselves as agents, and to the normativity of the idea of a reason for action. *Second*, that, while interesting and ingenious, Kemp's interpretation of A's psychology is unconvincing in

light of A's writings. On the view defended by Kemp it is very difficult to account not only for the numerous aphorisms that poignantly describe how A *suffers* from depression, but also for the fact that a number of passages express a desire for death. Moreover, I think that Kemp is wrong to strictly distinguish between boredom and depression in A. I think we *can* interpret crop rotation as an aesthetic strategy to overcome depression. I therefore think that my conclusion that we can ascribe a reason to embrace ethical life to A – and, by extension to aesthetes sufficiently like A – survives Kemp's critique.

Thus, while Kemp has attempted to use Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* to defend a fascinating claim – namely that, at least in some cases, depression can be used to further one's pursuit of enjoyment and therefore does not constitute a reason to change one's life(-view) – I think we should conclude that the attempt fails. To be clear, on a purely formal level, it seems possible to reach that conclusion using an internalist view of practical reasons. One would then have to make plausible the idea that while one is depressed, one is not actually suffering from it; or, to phrase it more accurately, that while one is depressed, one is not motivated to overcome one's depression. I do not want to deny that depression cannot provide one's life with any meaningful aspects. I do, however, believe that it is impossible to be genuinely depressed and not desire to be rid of it. At the very least, what this contribution has sought to undermine is the idea that we can use Kierkegaard's aesthete A to argue that suffering from depression does not give one a reason to change one's life(-view).

Drawing the conclusion that A has reason to embrace ethical life, it is obvious that I disagree with MacIntyre's influential picture of *Either/Or* as advocating the idea that there are no reasons to become ethical. Although Kemp and MacIntyre agree in defending that view, there is an important point of difference between them. Whereas MacIntyre's reading of *Either/Or* expresses discontent and worry, one of the startling features of Kemp's article is that it does not articulate any distress with regard to the conclusion that (some) people do not have reason to become ethical.

Perhaps this has to do with his views on ethical conversion, as they are developed in the conclusion of his article. Kemp writes that, for Kierkegaard, "[e]thical conversion, like its religious counterpart is largely passive."[58] Kemp seems to suggest that we should not despair over the fact that (some) people do not have reason to become ethical, because ethical conversion is a real phenomenon nonetheless. He relates this idea of ethical conversion as happening to us by bringing forward a specific view on Kierkegaard's role as educator. This move should not surprise us, because Kierkegaard repeatedly expresses that his authorship is meant to be edifying: instead of merely communicating ideas about what it means to become, for example, an ethical person, his works seek to assist aesthetic readers in *actually becoming* ethical.[59] What *is* surprising, however, is the specific view Kemp brings forward. He writes: "Kierkegaard bucks the Socratic tradition of education that emphasizes maieutic reform. […] He thinks ethical and religious conversion requires intervention. The teacher impresses her students with desires and motivations that they do not already have. She doesn't assist with the labor process; she impregnates."[60] And he concludes by claiming that "Kierkegaard's [pseudonymous] works are designed to bait his readers. Kierkegaard as educator; educator as seducer."[61] I think that this view cannot explain why Kierkegaard, throughout his career, models his own activity on Socrates, whom he clearly regarded as an exemplar. Moreover, this view of Kierkegaard's role of educator, and by extension the view of the passivity involved in both religious and ethical conversion, obscures the vital distinction between the Socratic and the Christian in his authorship. That is, in his writings, Kierkegaard is at pains to emphasize that there is an essential difference between, on the one hand, the 'natural', 'immanent', or 'merely human' and, on the other, the 'specifically Christian'. A specific function of this distinction is precisely to highlight the difference between the passivity that is integral to the

[58] Kemp, "Kierkegaard on the Transformative Significance of Depression," 576.
[59] See for a detailed exposition of this topic Chapter 4 of *Kierkegaard, MacIntyre, Williams, and the Internal Point of View*.
[60] Kemp, "Kierkegaard on the Transformative Significance of Depression," 576.
[61] Ibid.

transition to the Christian life-view[62] (for example, a crucial element in this conversion is sin-consciousness, which, several pseudonymous authors in Kierkegaard's authorship argue, should be revealed to one) and the activity that is central to the transition to the ethical life-view. If human choice were not central to ethical conversion, then not only would large parts of Judge Williams' fascinating letters become incomprehensible, but the very title '*Either/Or*' would become meaningless.

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[62] Which is not to say that human agency has no role to play whatsoever; Kierkegaard does not seem to ascribe to (the fatalism inherent in) some currents of Protestant Christianity that highlight the idea of predestination.