

Anthony Eagan, *Kierkegaard's Concept of the Interesting: The Aesthetic Gulf in Either/Or I* (London: Lexington Books, 2024).

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Anthony Eagan's *Kierkegaard's Concept of the Interesting: The Aesthetic Gulf in Either/Or I* provides a compelling analysis of one of the most intriguing concepts in early Kierkegaard, namely his explorations of the concept of the interesting. Eagan believes that the entirety of *Either/Or I* can be read through the concept of the interesting, and with his analysis he seeks to demonstrate this. It is Eagan's bold claim that "no thorough exegesis of the first volume of *Either/Or* exists" (xix), and whether or not this is the case, it is my assessment that Eagan succeeds in his endeavor. As a rule, Eagan dedicates a chapter to each chapter in *Either/Or I*, thus mimicking the structure of the book he analyzes. The soundness of his methods is demonstrated by the fact that his analysis confirms mainstream views on Kierkegaard and his work, while also providing new insights and perspectives.

Eagan deserves praise for his analytical rigor and clear reasoning. Despite the complexities of his subject matter, the reasoning is always clear, and the presupposed knowledge of Kierkegaard, his works, and his time is as a rule either kept to a minimum or accompanied by a thorough explanation. This quality makes the book suited for a variety of uses—in addition to appealing to the experienced Kierkegaard scholar, Eagan's book could also serve as a general introduction to *Either/Or I* and the intellectual context of its time for the interested student. Chapter 1, "From the Beautiful to the Interesting," deserves special mention in this regard, wherein Eagan in a concise but never unfairly reducing manner lays out the philosophical history of aesthetics and beauty leading up to the intellectual milieu in which *Either/Or I* was written. This chapter alone could serve as an introductory text to the historical views on aesthetics and beauty from the mid-eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century.

In this chapter, Eagan demonstrates how aesthetics in these years changed from a focus on the beautiful to a focus on the interesting, and how especially Schlegel's establishing of the interesting as a distinct philosophical category should be viewed as a turning point away from the aesthetic universalism of ancient Greek thought, as well as from his immediate predecessor, Kant. Whereas these aesthetic concepts of the past viewed beauty as the core category of the aesthetic, the modern turn to the interesting poses many difficulties. While the beautiful as viewed by Kant is a harmonious experience of union between oneself and the objective world, the interesting is an inherently unstable concept in constant conflict with its surroundings, since the

fundamental quality of the interesting is the conflict between what is outwardly visible and determined and what is internally experienced. According to Eagan, the emergence of the interesting as an aesthetic category was a result of a crisis in Kantian thinking, since the latter's harmonious view on aesthetics could not account for the pleasant quality of much seemingly unpleasant art. Yet, according to Eagan, Kierkegaard's aim in *Either/Or I* is not primarily to discuss various views on the interesting. Eagan writes: "The modern aesthetic category is elevated to a heightening existential dilemma in Kierkegaard, and these works express how deeply embedded within the modern experience is the evidently aesthetic issue which the concept of the interesting ultimately illuminates" (23). Eagan shows that Kierkegaard's discussion of the interesting distinguishes itself from the discussion of his contemporaries in that the category of the interesting for Kierkegaard is not only aesthetic, but also existential. According to Eagan this is exemplified by the fact that Kierkegaard easily could have defined a clear philosophical understanding of the interesting yet decides not to. Thus, *Either/Or I* should probably not be viewed as a discussion but rather as an exploration of the interesting from different points of view.

From Don Giovanni to Johannes the Seducer, the unifying principle in Eagan's analysis is the conflict between inner and outer as the foundational quality of the interesting. Eagan even gives his analysis a narrative structure of its own by exemplifying how the insights of one chapter in *Either/Other I* can logically lead to the chapter following. This provides great clarity to his analysis. However, when considering the literary aspects of *Either/Or I*, this approach might give rise to some challenges. As expressed by Viktor Eremita in the foreword to *Either/Or I*, A's theses (the chapters in *Either/Or I*) are found in what appeared to him to be a random order, and he decided the structure for the published work. It should be noted that Eagan does acknowledge this in his argument for excluding Diapsalmata in his analysis (xviii), but when at the end of his chapter 3 on "Ancient Tragical Motif as Reflected in the Modern" he writes "Where, then, is an aesthete to turn?" (83), this could be read as presupposing a continuity in A's reasoning, the absence of which might in itself be a deliberate literary device. I want to emphasize that this does not necessarily weaken Eagan's analysis, but it risks giving the impression that *Either/Or I* is a more coherent and structured work than seems intended by the author.

Eagan is right, however, that from "Immediate Stages of the Erotic, or Musical Erotic" there seems to be a progression in consciousness of the conflict of the interesting, from the near-unconscious Don Giovanni to the conscious culmination with Johannes the Seducer. According to Eagan, Don Giovanni is characterized not only by a lack of knowledge of the conflict between inner and outer; his entire *modus vivendi*

as a seducer is oriented around not acknowledging this conflict. By indiscriminately seducing as many women as possible, Don Giovanni manages to keep his anxiety at bay. This is possible due to his low consciousness of himself and the conflict of the interesting.

According to A, art can heal the interestingly tormented individual in two ways: through escapism, as seen with Don Giovanni, or through mirroring, as seen in the following chapter in both books: "Ancient Tragical Motif as Reflected in the Modern." Here the interesting is situated in contrast not with the universal as earlier discussed but with fate, which in itself is a mode of the universal. Oedipus has two choices. If he surrenders to fate, he brings himself in alignment with the universal, and thus he relinquishes his interestingness. Only when he decides to defy his fate, a conflict between inner and outer emerges, and Oedipus becomes an interesting character in the modern sense and thus transcends his ancient Greek origins.

In "Shadowgraphs," Eagan makes the interesting the cornerstone of the analysis by investigating how the status of the deceived is not shown in the outer, thus again making the inner-outer conflict the center of his analysis of the interesting. In the following chapters on "The Unhappiest One," "The First Love," and "Crop Rotation," Eagan makes similar analyses and reaches rewarding insights, before the book culminates in an analysis of "The Seducer's Diary," where the concept of the interesting reaches its climax. According to Eagan, the word "interesting" and its derivations appear more than 50 times on the approximately 120 pages that constitute "The Seducer's Diary." Eagan demonstrates how the interesting is not only a feature of the modern, replacing Kant's concept of the universal as the predominant aesthetic category, but also serves as its existential heir. Since the modern individual cannot rely on a feeling of universal connectedness to satisfy their existential needs, the interesting must serve this function. In his analysis, Eagan shows how Johannes exemplifies this new way of living, as he through repeated seductions tries to make as many interesting moments as he possibly can. Eagan also shows how this not only has internal consequences but social consequences as well, since Johannes tries to transform Cordelia from a beautiful individual to an interesting one, thus making a literary gestalt out of Cordelia as exemplary of the development from beauty to the interesting in the eighteenth century. Thus, Johannes' mode of seduction is demonstratively different from that of Don Giovanni, even though the conflict of the interesting is the foundational principle behind both.

In addition to his thought-provoking and compelling analysis, Eagan also possesses an admirable ability to communicate his ideas and concepts clearly. As such *Kierkegaard's Concept of the Interesting* comes highly recommended.