

## **Bellow, Kierkegaard, and American Estheticism**

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A key theme of Saul Bellow’s 1970 novel *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* is humanity’s quest for self-understanding. Several approaches to that quest circulate in the dramatic world that Bellow crafts. Among the most prominent approaches are those guided by theories purporting to have comprehensive explanatory power – physics, psychoanalysis, and Marxist economics, for example – and popular “culture,” which, as a whole, seems to celebrate arbitrariness and the ability to defy explanation. Both approaches, the “scientific” and the “artistic,” respectively are distinctively modern in the sense that they abdicate on the question of whether or not human beings are characterized by having a proper end, or *telos*, let alone the question of what such an end might be. In Bellow’s modern America, the human quest for self-understanding is either reduced to an intellectual exercise in description (that is often materialistic) or rendered obsolete by an emphasis on complete self-fashioning. In the case of the former, understanding seems to imply a deterministic destruction of the self; in the latter, radical freedom preserves individuality at the price of understanding.

In this article, I examine Bellow’s dramatic critique of these approaches to the quest for self-understanding and his portrayal of an alternative existential approach that is more humane even as it is grounded in faith and accepts mystery as a permanent feature of the human condition. Bellow’s existentialism follows Kierkegaard, whose concepts I use in my examination because Sammler refers to them explicitly, in suggesting that the defining task of human life was to become a “true” or “authentic” self: a self that is passionately oriented toward and formed in light of an encounter with the source of existence and truth. This task often leads individuals through the three “spheres” of life Kierkegaard described: the ethical, the esthetic, and the religious. Bellow’s novel depicts characters moving through these spheres and suggests that while individuals who seriously embark on the quest for authentic selfhood cannot achieve perfection, they may gain self-understanding and find themselves prepared to assess and to confront the realities of finite or temporal existence in a way that avoids the pitfalls of the scientific and artistic approaches. For Bellow, self-understanding emerges as requiring a certain ethical-religious outlook consisting in a genuine concern for others that is grounded in openness to divine being and the obligations that knowledge of the divine imposes on human passion, action, and thought.

### **Kierkegaard’s Three Spheres**

Before discussing Bellow’s employment of Kierkegaard’s concepts, it will be helpful to mention some key features of Kierkegaard’s thought and authorship. First, many of his writings are

penned pseudonymously. Kierkegaard wanted to distance himself from the views presented by his pseudonyms for several reasons, including to avoid and to incriminate what he took to be Hegel's prideful location of the source of philosophic truth in his own mind. More importantly, Kierkegaard thought that the endeavor to become an authentic self required individuals to appropriate the objective truth subjectively, that is, in a manner that goes beyond intellectual mastery of propositions toward a life-determinative passion for moral and intellectual knowledge. The indirect teaching might induce individuals to become active participants in the process of discovering and realizing their natural calling and purpose.

In *The Sickness unto Death*, the pseudonym Anti-Climacus begins by stating that "a human being is spirit," and then asking, "But what is spirit?"<sup>1</sup> In a formulation that is more lucid than it first appears, Anti-Climacus goes on to state:

Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation's relating itself to itself. A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis. [...] Such a relation that relates itself to itself, a self, must either have established itself or have been established by another.<sup>2</sup>

If human beings are "established by another" – which Kierkegaard (and Mr. Sammler) believed to be the case – another relation, viz. to the "establisher" or creator, enters into the constitution of the self: a relation that "relates itself to that which established the entire relation" (13).<sup>3</sup>

Put simply, Kierkegaard thought that a self (or soul) is an entity that relates to God. The relation between the self and God is a necessary one and the fulfillment of man's essential humanity depends upon that relation being constituted properly. From the perspective of man *qua* man, the self has both an eternal and a temporal orientation that are in tension with each other. Man participates in and longs for eternal, infinite being as the source of his being, order, and purpose. The universal yearning for fulfillment through communion with God testifies to the common condition of humanity.<sup>4</sup> But because the self finds its existence in the finite realm, it also suffers a natural concern for the concrete particulars of spatio-temporal existence, or the features that make an individual's life unique. The relational tension between these two longings constitutes one of the partners of the relation that exists with the self considered as a whole.

Concern for the particulars of finite, spatio-temporal existence is not of itself detrimental to a proper order of the self because genuine communion with God requires the realization that there is an infinite difference between human being and divine being. Grasping the particularities of his existence better equips the individual to perceive the ontological gulf between human and divine being. What does impede authentic selfhood is when an individual's concern for the particulars of temporal existence becomes radical and overshadows his concern for communion with God. Focusing on the immanent features of existence more than the transcendent ones, compromises the balance of relations that is crucial to living well.

Another way an individual may become unbalanced is by accepting conventional standards of order as the necessary and sufficient conditions for living well. Although the focus on community standards represents a shift toward something beyond the particular self, an individual's orientation is still aimed at immanent reality rather than the genuine source of order that is eternal and transcendent. Kierkegaard thought these immanent, communal standards of order, or "universals," often distract individuals from their existential task just as much as radical individualism does.<sup>5</sup> Often individuals dispassionately presume that the "universals" are fully rational and, consequently, that living well means acting according to society's conception of the ethical.

### **The Esthetic Life**

The esthetic life is portrayed in *Either/Or I* in the papers of a young man, known simply as "A." The esthetic life aims at restoring to life the immediacy and passion which all but evaporate under the sterile rationality of Hegelian esthetics and social theory.<sup>6</sup> While it presents a critique of Hegelianism that is basically coherent, the esthetic life presented in *Either/Or I* lacks substantive internal consistency. It is a life driven by revolt against a dominant way of thinking (the "universals") and is essentially reactionary. Esthetes have no overarching passion that unifies life; they live for the moment, for possibilities, and for an "interesting" succession of sensations. They crave distinction and diverse experiences in order to preclude others from arriving at explanations of their lives. In their reaction against rationalism, esthetes try to retain the maximum level of freedom by refusing either to make moral commitments or to accept responsibility for the constitution of their personality.

Esthetes are characterized by their immediacy or reflectiveness: immediate esthetes are driven to act by carnal and spiritual passion, not thought; reflective esthetes try to create an "artistic" or unique life experience by using thought to activate and deactivate various passionate responses. The reflective esthete develops his powers of recollecting and forgetting, for these help him to manipulate his experiences infinitely, to create new and interesting experiences of old experiences, or to "play shuttlecock with all existence."<sup>7</sup> Whereas the immediate esthete enjoys the excitement of the opera in which he is carried away by the music, the reflective esthete prefers ancient tragedy, in which there seems no way to pinpoint accurately the responsibility for the dramatic conflict.

### **The Ethical Life**

In *Either/Or II*, Judge William presents an ethical critique of the esthetic life that demonstrates the aimlessness of the esthete's passion. The Judge argues that selfhood requires coherent passions anchored in some guiding principle. The ethical life does not rehabilitate Hegelian social ethics; rather, it demands passionately choosing to take responsibility for the development of one's self. The Judge argues that A's refusal to take responsibility for fashioning his life is

still a choice to live a certain way; through such “choices,” selves inevitably acquire a certain momentum or habit. Therefore, the Judge tries to shake A from his existential paralysis, arguing that passion, distinction, and individuality are not obliterated by decisions that happen to be in line with accepted social conventions; instead, they are intensified by the formation of one’s emotions and personality around a consistent set of commitments. In the Judge’s presentation, the ethical man observes socially-accepted religious practices and has a general idea that human beings need to be devoted to God.<sup>8</sup>

Again, Kierkegaard explores both positive and negative aspects of the ethical life. The positive side is the infusion of passion into choices that uphold social order rather than compromising it by radical individuality. The ethical individual takes seriously his duties to others which derive from the roles (such as husband, father, employee, citizen, etc.) he has chosen to assume and to execute passionately. The negative side is that his concern for fulfilling such duties can obscure the conflicts that inevitably arise between the various roles he holds and the limitations spatio-temporal existence places on human agency. In *Either/Or II*, the ethical man seems to be unaware of the magnitude of such conflicts at times presuming that “ought” really does imply “can.” In this way, the ethical man often overlooks the particular features of existence which must factor into any genuinely good moral choice.

### **The Religious Life**

In *Fear and Trembling*, Johannes de Silentio explores the religious life: the life of faith in which the individual self relates to God properly because his passion is correctly ordered with regard to both its temporal and eternal objects. Silentio claims not to understand personally the religious life. He nevertheless recognizes the biblical Abraham as an exemplar of the faith and endeavors to understand how Abraham’s faith manifests itself in the particulars of his life. Silentio is concerned especially with how Abraham’s willingness to follow God’s command to sacrifice his son demonstrates that faith, whatever it may be, simply cannot be reducible to an ethical decision because in no ethical system would a father’s decision to murder his son be permitted.

In particular, Silentio is baffled that Abraham could, upon being commanded by God not to continue with the sacrifice of Isaac, resume the relationship with Isaac that preceded his decision to follow the divine command to kill. Silentio cannot fathom how Abraham could “receive Isaac back,” concluding that it follows from the absurdity that accompanies faith. Silentio thinks it more comprehensible that Abraham would find himself unable to participate fully in one’s concrete, temporal existence because of his concentrated focus on eternal being. Being unable to identify with Abraham, whom he calls “the knight of faith,” Silentio finds his analysis of Abraham insufficient to unravel the mystery he witnesses: how a single individual before God can cope with both the temporal and eternal orientations of his soul. Silentio remains the “knight of infinite resignation,” the individual who is prepared to give up and cannot conceive of regaining that which wholly constitutes his temporal identity in the hopes of communing with the eternal.

### **Kierkegaard in Bellow**

Bellow draws on Kierkegaard's spheres of existence for the novel *Mr. Sammler's Planet*. Not only does he explicitly mention Kierkegaard, the esthetic standard, the knight of infinite resignation, and the knight of faith, but also his characters exhibit the key qualities of each of the spheres. In the messy world of modern America, the characters often oscillate among the spheres. But generally speaking, most of them live, so Sammler thinks, the esthetic life. Moreover, society as a whole seems esthetic, having lost its sense of self, its dignity, and its sense of duty. Brief sketches of Walter Bruch and Angela Gruner will show Sammler's sense that in modern America, the spirit and self are diseased, suffering under the malady of infatuation with the finite, particular features of human existence.

Walter Bruch is an acquaintance of Sammler who is introduced just as Sammler has been thinking about Dr. Lal's conception of moon-life and the incident on the Riverside bus. For Sammler, both Lal's technical plan of escape and the pickpocket's demonstration of carnal force exhibit the deification of Nature. "Make Nature your God, elevate creatureliness, and you can count on gross results," Sammler thinks.<sup>9</sup> At that moment, Walter arrives at Sammler's apartment in order to confess one of his dark, carnal secrets: his obsession with the climax-inducing stimulus of heavy, dark, Puerto Rican arms. This disclosure is not an isolated incident: Walter has confessed to playing with children's toys, sending rude letters to other musicians, and acting the corpse at mock-funerals.

Like the esthete, Walter relishes sharing these indicators of his unique pathology. He acts as if the arm obsession is a burden and revels in the particularity it bestows upon him. Sammler reassures Walter's that his fetish is common nowadays, but then realizes the effect his reassurance will have: "Walter, when his crying stopped, would be hurt by the Krafft-Ebing reference, by the assertion that his deviation was not too unusual. Nothing seemed to hurt quite so much as being ravaged by a vice that was not a top vice" (50). Walter exhibits, in Sammler's mind, the esthetic characteristics of seeking particularity in perverse physical deeds, which are assumed to be the overt symptoms of a deeper, spiritual disease that is meted out by fate. For the esthete, acting according to "nature" means resigning to and reveling in the oddities that one cannot help but exhibit – oddities, which are not, as the drama of the novel shows, actually unique.

Elya Gruner's daughter Angela also lives esthetically according to Sammler. She engages in taboo sexual activities and enjoys endlessly rehashing the original experiences. She discloses her secrets in psychoanalytic sessions and then again to Sammler, omitting not even the most intimate detail. Angela is "educated" and "cultured"; an alumna of Sarah Lawrence College, she attends the opera, visits museums, and supports whichever causes are in vogue at the time (defense funds for young black men accused of rape, for example). Both Walter and Angela try to distance themselves from the ordinary majority, but wind up engaging only in a snobbier, more self-deluded bourgeois conformism.

Angela and Walter are simultaneously obsessed with existentialism and psychoanalysis: the former an assertion of radical freedom and individuality (the “artistic” viewpoint), the latter a deterministic reduction of everything to material forces (the “scientific” viewpoint). In these two trends, the contradicting forces of freedom and necessity, of particularity and universality, wed in the paradoxical manner that esthetes relish. This also accounts for Walter’s and Angela’s fixations on physical as well as spiritual abnormalities. The sexual activities mimic the immediate esthete’s carnal passions; the endless confessions (which “communicate chaos”) and explanations mimic the reflective esthete’s love of interesting psychic twists and turns. These esthetes live in the moment for a time and then move into the role of observer trying time and again to create an interesting and unique self for themselves. Their selves lack coherence.

Sammler thinks Walter and Angela are accurate reflections of the American psyche. At one point he reflects:

What one sees on Broadway while bound for the bus. All human types reproduced, the barbarian, redskin, or Fiji, the dandy, the buffalo hunter, the desperado, the queer, the sexual fantasist, the squaw; bluestocking, princess, poet, painter, prospector, troubadour, guerrilla, Che Guevara, the new Thomas à Becket. Not imitated are the businessman, the soldier, the priest and the square. The standard is aesthetic. (120)

Sammler thinks that the modern world has slid into the spiritual despair of estheticism. In this milieu, Sammler sees himself as “not quite human” and largely alienated from those around him. In general, modern individuals remind Sammler of:

Kierkegaard’s comical account of people traveling around the world to see rivers and mountains, new stars, birds of rare plumage, queerly deformed fishes, ridiculous breeds of men – tourists abandoning themselves to the bestial stupor which gazes at existence and thinks it has seen something [...] [People] wished to be what was gaped at. They themselves wanted to be the birds of rare plumage, the queerly deformed fishes, the ridiculous breeds of men. (50)<sup>10</sup>

Sammler’s critique of the surrounding estheticism seems to place him in the ethical sphere. He is concerned about duties, he longs for a return to the order that had made America’s beginnings worthy ones, and tries to be devoted to God and family. He tries to “declare for normalcy” (96). In a world obsessed with throwing off duty altogether, Sammler takes all the weight of it onto his own shoulders.

### **The Knight of Infinite Resignation**

Despite the similarities, Sammler differs from the Judge of *Either/Or II*, for the latter is passionately concerned for temporal affairs.<sup>11</sup> Sammler, by contrast, “wanted, with God, to be

free from the bondage of the ordinary and the finite. A soul released from Nature, from impressions, and from everyday life. [...] He should be perfectly disinterested” (96). While Sammler is deeply nostalgic for older times and their definitive conception of order, he concentrates on the metaphorical escape to the moon and its solitude and peace: “Sammler did feel somewhat separated from the rest of his species, if not in some fashion severed – severed not so much by age as by preoccupations too different and remote, disproportionate on the side of the spiritual, Platonic, Augustinian, thirteenth-century” (34).<sup>12</sup>

Sammler’s experiences with the extent of human cruelty illuminate the deep incoherence of the human condition; because human nature tends toward evil, it is not worth trying to redeem. Sammler reflects upon when he killed the unarmed German, an act which could be justified in the name of self-preservation. Yet Sammler’s immediate response to his deed belied its reasonableness. At the moment, killing gave Sammler “pleasure” and “joy”:

His heart felt lined with brilliant, rapturous satin. To kill the man and to kill him without pity, for he was dispensed from pity. There was a flash, a blot of fiery white. When he shot again it was less to make sure of the man than to try again for that bliss. To drink more flames. He would have thanked God for that opportunity. If he had had any God. At that time, he did not. For many years, in his own mind, there was no judge but himself. (115)

Confronted with his own dark action and passion, Sammler begins to seek the meaning of human existence in a transcendent source. Resigning himself from happiness and fulfillment in this world, Sammler longs for escape to another world that is free from the temptations of viciousness.

This recalls Kierkegaard’s treatment of the religious life, for post-War Sammler resembles Silentio, or the knight of infinite resignation. In trying to comprehend the faith of Abraham, Silentio posits several alternate scenarios as foils for understanding how the anxiety wrought by the command to sacrifice Isaac must have worked upon Abraham. Silentio’s description of what he himself would have done if faced with the command to kill Isaac nicely illuminates Sammler’s existential outlook:

The moment I mounted the horse I would have said to myself: “Now all is lost; God demands Isaac, I sacrifice him and with him all my joy – yet God is love and continues to be that for me, for in temporality God and I cannot converse, we have no language in common.” [...] I could not make more than the infinite movement in order to find myself and once again be in equilibrium. Nor could I have loved Isaac as Abraham loved him. That I was determined to make the movement could prove my courage, humanly speaking; that I loved him with my whole heart is a precondition without which the whole thing becomes a misdeed. But I still did not love as Abraham did [...] What came easiest for Abraham would have been difficult for me – once again to be

joyful with Isaac! – for whoever has made the infinite movement with all the infinity of his soul, of his own accord and on his own responsibility, and cannot do more only keeps Isaac with pain.<sup>13</sup>

The knight of infinite resignation gives up that which has given coherence to his entire life, and in the case of Sammler, what he has given up is his place in the finite world and his belief in the general goodness of humanity. He has given up his previous self – the optimistic, Anglophile intellectual who thought that temporal existence could be made to conform to the rationality of a philosophic system – and has become, like the esthete, something of a detached observer.

Sammler's ethical religiosity (he prays, he longs for the infinite, he tries to live well by treating others according to moral standards that are beyond those of culture and society) may be an improvement upon the rampant estheticism of his day, but it brings him no closer to true friendship, love, or "receiving Isaac back": "His onetime human, onetime precious, life had been burnt away" (185). Thus, Sammler's criticism of other characters' inconsistency and lack of genuine self-awareness masks his own tendency to treat others with "dignity" without treating them as "human."

### **Towards Transcendence**

Bellow reveals his own thought about what it means to live well through Sammler's experiences with three characters: Margotte, Shula, and Elya. All are united in their genuine concern for others, their sense of duty, and willingness to make the best of the absurd situations in which they find themselves. Their graciousness is a foil for Sammler's reticence through which Sammler's reconciliation with God, humanity, and himself begins.

Through Sammler's eyes Margotte, Shula, and Elya are sympathetic, yet overly simplistic creatures. They seem too unaware of themselves and the world around them for Sammler's taste: Margotte is cheerfully careless and German; Shula is wacky and compulsively devoted to her father and the intellectual enterprise; and Elya is overly affectionate, boastful, and concerned with superficial appearances. He craves public displays of affection, attempts to be the ideal patient, and is obsessed with ancestors. Sammler eventually discovers that each of these characters is motivated by a sensitivity to a higher standard of order that guides their thought and action about themselves and others. They are, each in their own way, oriented simultaneously toward the absolute duties that derive from the existential perception of God and toward the particular duties that derive from their situation within temporal existence.

In contrast to Sammler's other-worldly detachment, Margotte attends to the mundane things: during the chaotic events of the novel, she fixes dinner for the company, makes transportation arrangements, and pays attention to small details of concern so that the larger concerns may be resolved. "Margotte was prompt to help when difficulties were real. [...] Margotte was a good soul. No persisting mechanically in her ways when the signal was given. As others did, jumping into their routines" (108). Margotte is an example of human freedom, and Bellow shows that she



is still capable of love. Despite the loss of her husband (a relationship which appears to have been more loving than Sammler's), she has not given up on life or companionship, and she and Dr. Lal look forward to courting. Margotte's comportment shows that happiness in this world is possible and desirable.

Bellow's portrayal of Shula functions similarly. Through most of the novel, Shula seems merely to be a complication for Sammler. Though he loves her, it seems to be based primarily on her role in relation to him rather than any specific characteristics of her personhood; he does not understand her. Her antics confuse and burden Sammler, and he thinks that she too represents the chaos that animates American society and the failure to heed what is proper or real in life. However, Shula proves that her father's detached, objective views seldom result in a truthful evaluation of others. For after Shula actually finds money hidden in Elya's home (which Sammler thought not to exist), she tells Sammler she would like to buy some nicer clothes: "If I was dressed at Lord and Taylor, maybe I'd be less of an eccentric type, and I'd have a chance with somebody" (257). During this discussion, Sammler finally realizes that Shula is aware of herself, that she acts "deliberately," that "there *was* a degree of choice" (257). Shula, like Margotte, wants to find love and has not given up on the idea that one can be happy in the temporal world. This is why Shula broke "ethical" norms by stealing the manuscript. Nutty as her plan was, it was marked by a genuine concern for her father: she thought that reading the manuscript would inspire him to participate in this world again. Shula shows one striving in the world to live, and while "eccentric" she does not exhibit Angela's or Walter's self-centered estheticism; rather, she is devoted, believes in love, and is able (though perhaps unintentionally) to show Sammler that the particulars must oftentimes correct the universals.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, Bellow uses Elya Gruner to educate Sammler. In some ways Elya resembles Kierkegaard's Judge William: he is deferential to family and traditions, through his life one can see that he has conformed to rather than to try to set himself apart from certain societal norms, he seems to be the epitome of American success. Born in a "hoodlum neighborhood," he became wealthy through the medical practice and then made a fortune in real-estate and other business dealings. He sent his children to the top schools, supports distant relatives financially, and tries to be affectionate to everyone. If he has some character flaws – being overly gregarious, proud, perhaps having had some corrupt dealings – they are overshadowed in the end by his generosity and sincerity.

Elya is not exactly like Kierkegaard's knight of faith, since we see little devotion to God or spirituality in him, but the two share the belief that living well requires "meeting the terms of one's contract with God," which obliges one to treat others with compassion and dignity (260). Elya acts out of a passionate sense of personal responsibility for his own moral goodness and exemplifies in practice what Sammler thinks is the substance of the "contract":

[...] knowing that present arrangements were not, *sub specie aeternitatis*, the truth, but that one should be satisfied with such truth as one could get by approximation. Trying to live with a civil heart. With disinterested charity. With a sense of the mystic potency

of humankind. With an inclination to believe in archetypes of goodness. A desire for virtue was no accident. (111)

Faced with his own death, Elya's concern is for the good of those around him and for the strength of "human bonds." We learn that despite all of the "failures" of Elya's life – the coldness of his wife, the esthetic excesses of his children, other unrequited affections – he never gives up on the idea of "receiving Isaac back." Sammler notes in Elya a longing, a demand from the "singular human creature [...] when the sum of human facts could not yield more" (68). He faces his death and the eternal without giving up on the temporal world. He complies with tests that will not prolong his life and tries not to burden those whom he will leave behind: "He was the sort of individual from whom help emanated. There were no arrangements for return" (235). Sammler describes this as Elya's "moment of honor [...] that moment at which the individual could call upon all his best qualities" (66).

Throughout the novel, Sammler goes to check in on Elya at the hospital and tries to make sure that he is comfortable. From Sammler's other-worldly perspective, the best course is to make the transition to non-being or eternal-being as painless as possible. But Sammler discovers that his retreat from humanity is not what was desired by Elya or required of himself. What Elya needed was to communicate, to be alive even at the end, to have the chance to put things in order. Sammler realizes that by his retreat, he wronged Elya, though Elya would never say so, and probably would not even think so. Sammler is confronted with a duty on this earth that cannot be set aside even if he does not feel at home here. Elya's example teaches Sammler that he must come back, a second time, to the land of the living.

Bellow thus shows that he does not despair of the human capacity for goodness, happiness, and virtue. Not by reading or thinking more, not by better explanations or unique art, but rather through humane encounters with other human beings Sammler learns what his moral and spiritual duties are. Bellow shows that genuine ties to friends and family, grounded in the recognition of a common human condition, can provide the corrective to radical individualism, ethical passivity, and other-worldly orientations. After Elya dies, Sammler utters a prayer that indicates Sammler's movements toward reconciliation with God, humanity, and himself:

Remember, God, the soul of Elya Gruner, who, as willingly as possible and as well as he was able, and even to an intolerable point, and even in suffocation and even as death was coming was eager, even childishly perhaps (may I be forgiven for this), even with a certain servility, to do what was required of him. At his best this man was much kinder than at my very best I have ever been or could ever be. He was aware that he must meet, and he did meet – through all the confusion and degraded clowning of this life through which we are speeding – he did meet the terms of his contract. The terms which, in his inmost heart, each man knows. As I know mine. As all know. For that is the truth of it – that we all know, God, that we know, that we know, we know, we know. (260)

Bellow shows that the sacredness and dignity of human life will shine through and scatter even the darkest estheticism. Sammler learns that even Angela and Wallace are not as spiritually bankrupt as he first thought. All human beings are naturally oriented toward the transcendent source of order, meaning, and purpose; and from this orientation, goodness flows into humanity making it possible to receive the finite back – just like Abraham received Isaac back. There is an uncertainty in all of this (call it faith), but that is precisely wherein the dignity of humanity lies – it cannot be explained away through a system.

If Bellow does not resolve the tensions in the lives of all of the characters, he surely points to some who have not turned their backs on themselves or on others. And he shows us that even someone as “self-contained” as Sammler can still learn from those around him. Bellow, like Kierkegaard, did not think that the task of becoming a true self was either inevitable or impossible, even in modernity. Instead, he shows that what appears to be “bourgeois philistinism” can mask the truly religious individual, while all of the reflective flirtations with the eternal can cover up a soul that still needs much improvement. Bellow’s work shows that part of being an authentic self is to care for others, a task that cannot be done adequately without knowing who one is in relation to the divine, and who one is in relation to the others. But simply knowing cannot be the end of the truest life, for compassion and love must come through in one’s actions and passions, which can change individuals and entire nations.

## Notes

1. Kierkegaard 1980, 13.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.* Anti-Climacus also states that “Every human existence that is not conscious of itself as spirit or conscious of itself before God as spirit, every human existence that does not rest transparently in God but vaguely rests in and merges in some abstract universality (state, nation, etc.) or, in the dark about his self, regards his capacities merely as powers to produce without becoming deeply aware of their source, regards his self, if it is to have intrinsic meaning, as an indefinable something – every such existence whatever it achieves, be it most amazing, whatever it explains, be it the whole of existence, however intensively it enjoys life esthetically – every such existence is nevertheless despair” (46). Sammler makes a similar reflection: “You have been summoned to be. Summoned out of matter [...] whether originating in a God or in an indeterminate source [obliges man] to wait, painfully, anxiously, heartachingly, in this yellow despair” (Bellow 2004, 72).
4. I equate Kierkegaard’s own thought on this point with the view presented by Anti-Climacus.
5. When Kierkegaard or his pseudonyms use the term “universal,” he intends to designate the predominant ethical norms that a society passes on to its youth as the

- correct ways of living, not eternal or necessary truths in the Kantian sense (Evans 2006, xx–xxii).
6. Kierkegaard 1987, 50ff.
  7. Kierkegaard 1987, 294.
  8. The religiosity of the ethical life is far from the genuine faith of the religious life. In the former, suffering and guilt are far from the individual's consciousness, whereas in the latter, they factor prominently into the constitution of the individual's personality.
  9. Bellow 2004, 44. All subsequent in-text citations will be from this reference.
  10. Sammler criticizes and analyzes most of the other characters in a similar fashion. He comments on Shula's erratic dress and behavior, her oscillations between Catholicism and Judaism, and her wild insistence that Sammler should write his memoir of Wells. He notes how Wallace, Gruner's son, has amassed myriad strange experiences but has failed to settle into a profession or a relationship. Even Sammler's evaluation of Margotte, whom he describes as a "good soul" (108), includes several descriptions of the seeming lack of order in her life: her house is filled with dead plants and useless appliances, she sees no ethical dilemma in accepting reparation money from the German government, and she prattles off intellectual arguments *ad infinitum*.
  11. During his "Bloomsbury days," Sammler shared more fully the Judge's optimism. During those pre-War years, Sammler thought that enlightened planning could generate remedies to humanity's problems and that social progress was possible.
  12. See Bellow 2004, 36, 43, 46, 73, 75, 88, 94, 96, 98, and 105 for only a few of the other references to Sammler's "longing for the eternal."
  13. Kierkegaard 2006, 29.
  14. See Bellow 2004, 163: "And of course in Shula's view [Sammler] had been getting too delicate for earthly life, too absorbed in unshared universals, excluding her [...] she wished to implicate him and bring him back, to bind him and keep him in the world beside her."

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