

A New Formulation of the Ethical Self through Kierkegaard's Notion of Subjectivity: In Search of a New Moral Education

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This paper examines in detail the distinctive features of Kierkegaard's notion of subjectivity in an attempt to find a new theoretical formulation of moral education; that is, a self-regarding - as opposed to an other-regarding - ethics of moral education. Heavily relying upon an existentialist line of ethical questioning, my aspiration underlying this investigation is not presumptuous in claiming that the self-regarding approach to moral education can - or should - compensate the other-regarding one. For it reveals an ethically non-trivial aspect of human subjectivity which has been overlooked by dominant approaches to moral education, like the moral reasoning and care-ethics models, in such a way as to suggest a way of diagnosing the moral predicament in the contemporary (Korean) society.

The Socratic Question as a New Way of Posing the Ethical Question

We have a common-sense expectation that the more educated one is the ethically better he or she *will* become - not only in the sense of being serious enough to seek a meaningful life but also in the sense of being responsive enough to care about people in trouble. This common-sense expectation seems to presuppose that there is or should be some necessary connection between being educated and being good. Thus when we witness that the successful beneficiary of a long and high quality formal education turns out to lack ethical sense we conclude that there is something wrong with our schooling since such an individual is schooled (objectively educated) but is not genuinely educated (there is no change in their ethical attitude). Educational failures of this kind lead us to raise questions such as "What is wrong with our schooling?" or "Why is being intellectual or being creative not necessarily transferable to being good?"

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Moral education in Korea has been dominated by the *cognitive* approach based on the moral reasoning model, on one hand, and by the *cultural* approach based on traditional morality, on the other hand. While the former emphasizes the teaching of universal moral knowledge in regard to what is the right action to do in a certain situation, the latter focuses on the inculcation of conventional moral codes and manners that are usually defined by a notion of the good within a specific tradition one happens to be born into, i. e., Confucianism in our case. But what seems to dissatisfy me about both approaches is their failure to properly respond to the discrepancy between *what we know* and *how we are*, discrepancy especially salient in those who are the successful beneficiaries of formal schooling. I consider that Kierkegaard's critique of the intellectual and social climate of his own time might provide us with one compelling perspective to diagnose this problem of discrepancy just identified with schooling in the Korean context. I also think that Kierkegaard's notion of subjectivity will suggest an alternative approach to moral education by putting the ethical question in a radically different form.

According to Kierkegaard, the problem with his contemporary society seen from an ethical point of view did not lie in the lack of other-regarding concern or

world-historical concern but in an ill-conceived ethical question. For him, the fundamental ethical question which is essential to us all as human beings is the Socratic question "How should I live?." On Kierkegaard's view objective knowledge, which includes both historical and speculative knowledge, is not only irrelevant to the ethical but rather has become a main obstacle preventing us from facing the genuine ethical question.¹ Therefore Kierkegaard claims that in order to be ethical we need to turn our back to the worship of objectivity and to face the Socratic question.

There seems to me to be two unique aspects of Kierkegaard's account of the nature of the Socratic question. One is that we can only confront the Socratic question by decision. This means that, for Kierkegaard, the ethical is not a matter of understanding which can be described as that of being quantitatively close to the ethical, but is a matter of decision, namely, that of qualitatively leaping to it at a moment. The other, which seems much more original, is that the Socratic question is irreducibly referred to each single individual. That is to say, we are not able to collectively take up the Socratic question "How should I live?" nor reach a collective answer to it. For Kierkegaard, to be ethical requires each of us to face the Socratic question in our own way alone and to make our own leap of faith. Thus this irreducibility of being ethical is categorically stated in the key sentence in Kierkegaard's *Concluding unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*: "to be ethical is to become subjective." This means that we can be ethical only *subjectively*, not objectively.

The originality of Kierkegaard's idea of irreducible subjectivity as ethical substance comes from its showing *the difficulty* in the task of being ethical by making our concern turn into ourselves not outward from ourselves. I think the originality of Kierkegaard's idea can provide a radical perspective to our current educational problems. Therefore we can say that Kierkegaard's diagnosis tells us two things about our educational practice. One is that we are mistakenly dealing with the ethical by misunderstanding the nature of it when we ask "What is wrong with schooling?" as if we could easily fix the problem we face by inventing new educational theories or reforming school and curriculum policies. Thus what we should do now is to do justice to the ethical by returning to the nature of it, namely, by coming to know the difficulty in being ethical. The other point goes further and then notes that being ethical is being subjective and that the greatest

difficulty in being ethical is derived from the difficulty in becoming subjective. This suggests that the question of the ethical has to do with the formation of subjectivity.

I will discuss in this paper, first, Kierkegaard's critique of Hegel as a criticism of objective knowledge inadequate to the nature of ethical question. I will then explore Kierkegaard's notions of subjectivity and subjective difficulty as central to what it means to be ethical. Finally, I will briefly discuss Kierkegaard's idea of indirect communication to show what (liberal) learning would be like among individuals who pursue their own ethical selves. This will give us a sense of what a new picture of the educated is like, a picture that contains the Kierkegaardian sense of the ethical self as central to itself.

Kierkegaard's Notion of Subjectivity for a New Formulation of the Ethical Self

The charge Kierkegaard makes against Hegel's philosophy is that it lacks an ethics. For Kierkegaard the fundamental question of ethics is the basic Socratic question "How should I live?" and Hegel's philosophy does not address directly this question. The nature of the primitive question of ethics, "How should I live?" is, according to Kierkegaard, that it is purely the first person's subjective task, so that any objective or collective answer to it is fundamentally impossible. Since the Socratic ethical question belongs to a single individual subject the notions of the subject or subjectivity are crucial to the account of the ethical for Kierkegaard.

However, it is said that Hegel's philosophy, especially his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, also intended to give an account of the concept of the subject as substance. But, compared to Kierkegaard's, Hegel's concept of the subject seems to be conceived for a qualitatively different kind of project. Hegel's account of the subject as consciousness is aimed at articulating objective conditions that are necessary to make sense of our subjectivity.² What Hegel's account of subjectivity shows is all the presuppositions that are embedded in the notion of subjectivity. By dialectically spelling out what they are he reveals that, although our consciousness tries to assert its subjectivity or individuality in immediate terms, it always finds its conception of itself mediated by something else, such as the external world, another self-consciousness, and/or ethical institutions of custom or ethical order. In other words, for Hegel, the individual or

subject seems to be conceptualized ultimately in social terms since broader and collective social or political conditions need to be in place for us to have the concept of ourselves as subjects.

According to Kierkegaard's Hegel keeps turning from subjectivity or individuality into objectivity or collectivity but he never comes back to the ethical subjective question of how we should live. Thus Kierkegaard asserts that Hegel evades the basic ethical question of how we should live by deliberately replacing it with a qualitatively different sort of question, the one about the world historical. Therefore, according to Kierkegaard, Hegel tends mistakenly to reduce the role of the individual in making moral decisions to the reflection of the ethical spirit of one's own time.

There are two points to be made about Kierkegaard's criticism of Hegel which disclose the chief characteristics of Kierkegaard's notion of subjectivity. One is that, while Hegel's view of subjectivity seems to assume that whatever a subject knows is eventually going to be knowable objectively, this assumption is exactly what Kierkegaard objects to. For Kierkegaard there is an asymmetry between subjective knowledge and objective knowledge, so that the former is irreducible to the latter. The irreducibility of subjective knowledge to objective knowledge is another way of saying the subject's ethical task is not reducible to the collective task. In other words, on Kierkegaard's view, there is some inwardness of a subject that is never graspable objectively and that this inwardness is the very ethical dimension of the subject.

The other point to be made is that Kierkegaard notes that Hegel deliberately avoids the Socratic question because this question is fundamentally *unsettling*. Here some deeper questions arise: "What kind of question is the Socratic question?;" "In what sense is it unsettling?;" "Why is this question so important to Kierkegaard in the first place?" I find these questions directly related to Kierkegaard's view of the human condition as one of *existing*. Kierkegaard considers the Socratic question essential to creatures like us. But what kind of creatures are we? He responds to this question saying "We are *existing*." For Kierkegaard the Socratic ethical question is deeply rooted in the human condition as *existing*, and accordingly the question is in principle as unsettling as the nature of our existence is.³

Thus what is critically wrong with Hegel's speculative philosophy lies in its forgetting that we are existing, so as to advance something world historical as

the ethical task for the individual by skipping the genuine ethical task. Even though Hegel builds up a wonderful and magnificent system that makes everything run together into one it looks absurd to Kierkegaard since this system makes sense only by forgetting the fact that we are existing - and it is this fact which we have not to avoid.

Kierkegaard holds that the ethical question of "How should I live?"- in its nature the existential question - cannot be replaced by Hegel's qualitatively different kind of question - the world historical or political question - as long as we are existing. And this ethical question irreducibly belongs to *a single existing subject*. The question of how I should live or what is good for *me*, conceived in an existential sense, not in a political sense, is basically independent of how *you* should live or what is good for *you*, just as the significance of my own death is completely different from that of your own death. On Kierkegaard's view the only proper way to respond to the ethical question of "How should I live?" as an existing subject is to become subjective; that is to say, for him, to be ethical is to *become subjective*.

What does Kierkegaard precisely mean by "subjectivity," then? What is the objectively irreducible aspect of subjectivity? Kierkegaard says that "the self is a relation which relates itself to its own self"(Kierkegaard, 1968, p. 146). What this definition especially notes is that the significance of subjective knowledge does not lie in the objective meaning of the knowledge but in *the subject's having it*, namely, the subject's relation to the content of the knowledge. A typical example of subjectivity can be shown in the case of erotic love. If I confessed my feeling to my lover for the first time by saying "I love you" the significance of this utterance would be completely different from the case when I informed my friends of this fact. For, although the two cases describe the same objective fact, what is lacking in the latter case is the significance of *my* having the feeling, that is, my enthusiastic passion for and commitment to my lover. Thus, Kierkegaard says, "objectively the emphasis is on *what* is said; subjectively the emphasis is on *how* it is said" (Kierkegaard, 1992, p. 202).⁴

What should be noted here is that this sense of subjectivity is also a kind of reflection or thinking. In fact Kierkegaard calls the thinking involved in subjectivity double-reflection. He says:

The reflection of inwardness is the subjective thinker's

double reflection. In thinking he thinks the universal but, as existing in this thinking, as acquiring this in his inwardness, he becomes more and more subjectively isolated (Kierkegaard, 1992, p. 73).

The above passage describes that subjective thinking starts with the universal or objective knowledge but then the existing subjective thinker turns his or her concern inward in relation to the universe; that is, he or she strives to establish a new relationship with himself or herself in regard to universal knowledge. But what makes his or her concern turn inward, instead of identifying himself or herself with the universal knowledge? Kierkegaard might answer this by saying *the recognition of the human condition as existing*. But how can our recognition of the human condition as existing possibly lead our concerns to turn to ourselves? In order to seek another plausible answer it might be helpful to draw out his view of the relation between being and thinking in an existing subject.

According to Kierkegaard, existing subjective thinkers are well aware that they are not destined ever to arrive at absolute knowledge or the infinite. But at the same time they are still capable of conceiving the concept of the absolute or the infinite, whether in the form of God or of some indefinable image. Hence there is an insurmountable gap between being and thinking in the existing subjective thinkers. For Kierkegaard, existing human beings are never able to unite or reconcile their being and their thinking into an integrated whole within themselves, whereas a speculative thinker like Hegel attempts to unite what existence separates, misconceiving truth as agreement of being and thinking. Kierkegaard's existing subject is always well aware that he or she is existing while thinking, i.e., that his or her being is apart from his or her thinking. In other words, for Kierkegaard, the existing subject is always shuttling between being and thinking. I think that this is another description of double-reflection of inwardness.

However, this portrait of the existing subject still gives us no clue to answering the question "What makes exactly our concern turn inward?" Rather, it leaves us with another way of posing the same question: "What motivates us to strive between being and thinking?" The previous response, "the recognition of the human condition as existing," still seems short of a satisfactory answer because the negativity of human existing - never being able to achieve the absolute - is not enough to

account for our motivation to strive. For the recognition of the negativity of human existence could bring to us fatal despair, so that we can take another direction along the road, such as the road of Nietzschean nihilism, instead of that of inwardness. In other words the negativity or limitation of our existence could be the ground of our way to nihilism just when we stop being bothered by the concept of the absolute any more. Since there is no accessible absolute, nor immanent necessity which is destined for human beings, we can decide to live for whatever finite objective we choose as the aim of our lives. Here is the point where Christianity plays a crucial role in Kierkegaard's notion of subjectivity.⁵

According to Kierkegaard what makes us keep turning our concerns to ourselves is, despite the limitation of our existence, our *desperate* desire for "eternal happiness." I think that "eternal happiness" here can designate the infinite, the highest good, perfection, or the image of God, whatever appeals to us as unbelievers. And, for Kierkegaard, our having a desire for eternal happiness itself implies that God as the absolute good is within us looking at us. The absolute's persistent staring at us compels us to keep returning to ourselves.⁶

Kierkegaard suggests a graphic representation of this subjective inwardness as "The little private theater where God certainly is the spectator, but where on occasion the individual also is himself a spectator, although essentially he is supposed to be an actor" (Kierkegaard, 1992, p. 157). From this passage we can say that there are three elements in the theater of inwardness of an existing thinker: absolute self as God, thinking self as a spectator, doing self as an actor. And we can also imagine from the earlier account of the existing subject that within this theater there is always an incessant tension or striving between the thinking self and the doing self coming from his or her desperate desire for the absolute self. The way the thinking self and the doing self strive for the absolute self, which determines the I-God relationship, is attributed to the individual's inwardness. That is, my inwardness is how I (the thinking self) relate myself (the doing-self) to God (the absolute self). This is exactly the structure of inwardness of the existing subjective individual.

Kierkegaard says that "there is something distinctive in being a subjective individual" (Kierkegaard, 1992, p. 133). What does he mean by "something distinctive" here? I think that he implies, first of all, that to be subjective is not how we are as we are but how we become with something distinctive in it. I also think that Kierkegaard tries to

allude with the phrase "something distinctive" that there is something difficult in becoming subjective. Indeed, this difficulty might be already anticipated in the account of the human limitation as the nature of human existence.

If we have already realized that we by existing are destined to fail to achieve eternal happiness why do we struggle to achieve it so desperately by becoming subjective? Whether we try or not eternal happiness is beyond our destiny. If so, what is the point of our struggle for it? The tremendous difficulty in being ethical or becoming subjective is rooted precisely here: striving for the absolute looks absurd since it is not something achievable in the first place. In the face of this fated difficulty or despair, Kierkegaard holds, to be ethical or to be subjective requires not an objective understanding as approximation to truth, but a subjective *decision* against the objective understanding, namely, a leap of faith. Since this decision is against our understanding it looks objectively absurd; but subjectively it is the very thing that makes the subjective individual's life meaningful.

I think there is one thing worth noting in regard to Kierkegaard's idea that the ethical is not a matter of understanding but that of decision. If we accept his idea it brings about the removal of any distinction between a simple person and a wise person in becoming ethical to the extent that both of them fully commit themselves to what they choose. In fact Kierkegaard seems to agree to this point when he says that "the wise person ought to understand the same thing that the simple person understands" (Kierkegaard, 1992, p.159), that is, "we are existing." For him there is no absolute difference between what the wise person knows and what the simple one knows as far as the ethical is concerned.

However, Kierkegaard points out that there is a *relative* difference between them. He says:

The more the wise person thinks about the simple the more difficult it becomes for him. Yet he feels gripped by a deep humanness that reconciles him with all of life: that the difference between the wise person and the simplest person is this little evanescent difference that the simple person knows the essential and the wise person little by little comes to know that he knows it or comes to know that he does not know it, but what they know is the same (Kierkegaard, 1992, p. 160).

This passage indicates that, even though what the wise know and what the simple know are the same objectively, their subjective attitudes to what they know are different. According to Kierkegaard while the simple have no idea

about the nature of what they know, i.e., about the difficulty of subjectivity, the wise exactly understand it since they come to know the nature of the paradox in their becoming subjective, i.e., the existing subject's desperate pursuit of eternal happiness while existing. Thus, for the wise, the question of being ethical becomes infinitely difficult when it is made simple, not when the question is about a new demonstration, about stringing on a thread the opinions of Tom, Dick, or Harry, or about the best way of string the opinions on a thread. What makes it most difficult for the wise to become ethical is the fact that to be ethical is simple: just a leap of faith in God.

Given Kierkegaard's notion of subjectivity, it seems to be necessary that subjectivity can be communicated only *indirectly*. Our objective thinking concerning the world can be understood directly since that kind of thinking is completely indifferent to subjectivity. Even if we sometimes have a trouble in communicating our objective thinking this trouble can in principle be removed by asking each other to be clearer, by exploring further research and so on. But our subjective thinking cannot be understood directly because it concerns our inwardness.

For Kierkegaard the point in saying that subjective thinking is communicated only indirectly is not that subjective thinking is impossible to communicate, but that there is always a danger of losing the meaningfulness of subjective thinking whenever we try to communicate it directly. In other words Kierkegaard's idea of the indirect communication of subjectivity does not mean to deny the possibility of the communication of it, but to call forth our *attention* to the double-reflections in the communicators' inwardness.

What is it exactly in subjective thinking which is likely to lose its point by way of communication? Why does it become pointless when it is communicated directly? According to Kierkegaard there is always something left out or unsaid in communication; that is the speaker's own relation to what is said. This is the speaker's double-reflection in which he or she relates himself or herself to himself or herself, namely, his or her God-relationship. If the speaker's double reflection is communicated directly it means that the listener relates the speaker's double reflection directly to himself or herself without his or her own double reflection; that is to say, the listener reduces the speaker's subjectivity to objective knowledge. This is exactly what Kierkegaard keeps warning us not to do. Without the listener's own double reflection on the speaker's subjectivity, that is, unless the listener tries to appropriate the speaker's subjectivity for his or her own

deeper inwardness, the communication fails to be meaningful for the two existing subjects. Thus, those who are concerned with preserving their own subjectivity should be engaged in indirect communication, by attending to others' double-reflections and then by appropriating them in their own double-reflection. For Kierkegaard, this indirect communication is a unique way for double-reflective thinkers to encounter each other.

A Preliminary Remark on a New Moral Education

One of the ironies of the Kierkegaardian diagnosis when it is applied to thinking about our current educational problems with regard to the ethical is that it does not suggest to us any promising solution but rather makes us realize how difficult it is to educate students to be ethical. It sounds all the more so considering a mindset dominant in our contemporary schooling, which is governed by a theory-oriented problem-solving paradigm. But this realization of the difficulty with being ethical at least allows us to see another source of the educational problems we face today by demanding us to transpose the question "What is wrong with schooling?" into another question "What is wrong with ourselves as educators?" And Kierkegaard's notion of subjectivity leads us to shift our focus in moral education from the moral reasoning model, concerned with our moral action in a given concrete situation, to the self-reflecting model, concerned with *the way* we lead our everyday lives. What should be noted is that, while the former is interested in responding to the question of "What ought we to do?", the latter attends to the question of "How should I live?".

An important insight arising from Kierkegaard's idea of indirect communication regarding the self-reflecting model is that there are no teachers as such but only learners in the ethical dimension of the life. For nobody can directly help others be ethical. Only the first person can help himself or herself by way of his or her own *appropriation* of others' wisdom. This picture of the educated might look too solitary, solipsistic, or even anti-social to be desirable. But, my own appropriation of Kierkegaard's idea of indirect communication tells that his emphasis is not on an aspect of the *isolated* self, who is shut off from any engagement with others in pursuit of his or her own inner world, but on an aspect of the *enthusiastic* self, who commits himself or herself to the

process of his or her own appropriation in relation to *the ways* others say, think, feel, and behave, by way of patiently and caringly attending to them. This means that, as much as the Kierkegaardian ethical self is concerned with *how* he or she should relate himself or herself to what he or she says, he or she is likely to be attentive to *the ways* others relate themselves to what they say. What is educationally so illuminating about this view of the ethical self is that the ethical self tends to be attentive to the ways others say, feel, and do in such a way as to affect the way he or she relates himself or herself to his or her lives.

What is the most powerful about a new moral education grounded on this notion of the ethical self is not merely that (unlike other approaches) it explains why there is a discrepancy between what we know and how we are; it acknowledges the discrepancy as the condition of human existence. But it is rather its taking the discrepancy as a condition essential to our being ethical since being attentive to it and struggling with it are constitutive of our being ethical. On the other hand, the view that being ethical is a mode of *self-relation* in regard to this discrepancy makes the Kierkegaardian sense of being ethical look conceptually closer to being educated. Thus it is not completely wrong to say that a new moral education based on the Kierkegaardian ethical self is in agreement with our common sense expectation that the more educated one is the ethically better one will become. This means that the ideas underlying the new moral education seem to be as educationally sound as the common sense expectation is.

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Notes

1. It is said that Kierkegaard stood against the intellectual and

rationalistic climate in general, dominant in his time. Yet, in attacking world historical objectivity he had specifically in mind Hegelian philosophy.

2. I am using here two terms "subject" and "subjectivity" interchangeably. I think, although there is difference in a lexical meaning between these two terms, it is acceptable to use them interchangeably in the context of this paper where both Kierkegaard and Hegel look at subjectivity as the substance of subject, namely, as what constitutes subject.
3. It might be helpful to explain here what Kierkegaard means by "existing" just for the sake of argument, even if his sense of "existing" will be better understood in the later part of the argument in this paper. For Kierkegaard, that we are existing means that we, you and I and he, are human beings who are each existing on one's own terms in the sense that each of us faces one's own mortality irreducibly on one's own.
4. Kierkegaard adds to this the following: "This (how) is not to be understood as a manner, modulation of voice, oral delivery, etc., but it is to be understood as the relation of the existing person, in his very existence, to what is said" (Kierkegaard, 1992, p. 202).
5. Kierkegaard's frequently suggested intention to go beyond the Socratic recognition of self-ignorance and then to make a transition to faith in God seems to come from this worry about the possibility of nihilism.
6. We can notice that there could be a controversy over this notion of God due to its ontological connotation. But, Iris Murdoch wisely suggests that we should replace the notion of God with the notion of "perfection" which is described to be equivalent to the conception of non-representable and indefinable Good within us as moral source for contemporary unbelievers. See her book, *The Sovereignty of Good* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971).

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