

Kierkegaard the Teacher¹

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The scene: A sunny Sunday afternoon in Copenhagen in late January of 1850. Four men, deeply immersed in conversation, are strolling through Frederiksberg Park. They are well known to each other, two of them, Johannes Climacus and Anti-Climacus, appear to be related to each other, although the relation is obviously strained and somewhat cool. An elderly, noble friend, Johannes de silentio, is also among the group which is led by the ever watchful Vigilius Haufniensis, a man who always has his finger on the pulse of the city.

Vigilius Haufniensis, guiding the discussion just as he guided his friends out of the city and down to the park:

«Immediately considered, the genius is predominantly subjectivity [...]. Therefore the genius continually discovers fate, and the more profound the genius, the more profound the discovery of fate. To spiritlessness, this is naturally foolishness [*he casts a quick glance at de silentio*], but in actuality it is greatness, because no man is born with the idea of providence, and those who think that one acquires it gradually through education are greatly mistaken, although [*a slight nod toward Anti-Climacus*] I do not thereby deny the significance of education².» (KW VIII, 98-99)

Johannes de silentio, to himself: «Nullum unquam exstitit magnum ingenium sine aliqua dementia.»

«For such dementia is the suffering of genius in the world, is the expression, if I dare say so, of divine envy, whereas the genius aspect is the expression of preferment. Thus from the beginning the genius is disoriented...» (KW VI, 106-107) [*Suddenly catching himself and addressing the others*] «What, then, is education? I believed it is the course the individual goes through in order to catch up with himself, and the person who will not go through this course is not much helped by being in the most enlightened age.» (KW VI, 46)

1. «The Wise Contradict Themselves». WILDE, O. (1996) p. 57.

2. *Kierkegaard's Writings*, tr. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, vol. I- XXVI, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978-1998.

Johannes Climacus, his eyes brightening:

«Viewed Socratically, any point of departure in time is *eo ipso* something accidental, a vanishing point, an occasion. Nor is the teacher anything more, and if he gives of himself and his erudition in any other way, he does not give but takes away. Then he is not even the other's friend. This is the profundity of Socratic thinking, this his noble thoroughgoing humanity, which does not exclusively and conceitedly cultivate the company of brilliant minds but feels just as akin to a tanner, and for that reason [*squaring his shoulders in quotation as only an academic wannabee can do*] he soon "became convinced that the study of nature is not man's concern and therefore began to philosophize about the ethical in workshops and in the market place" (Diogenes Laertius, II, V, 21) [*He seeks out admiring glances, but none are forthcoming*], but philosophized just as absolutely with whomever he spoke. With half-thoughts, with higgling and haggling, with claiming and disclaiming, as if the individual to a certain degree owed something to another person but then again did not, with vague words that explain everything except what is meant by this "to a certain degree" —with all such things one does not go beyond Socrates or reach the concept of revelation—, either, but simply remains in empty talk. In the Socratic view, every human being is himself the midpoint, and the whole world focuses only on him because his self-knowledge is God-knowledge. Moreover, this is how Socrates understood himself, and in his view this is how every human being must understand himself, and by virtue of that understanding he must understand.» (KWVII, 11)

Anti-Climacus, exasperated:

«No. Why not? Because one cannot *know* anything at all about *Christ*; he is the paradox, the object of faith, exists only for faith.» (KWXX, 25)

Johannes Climacus, petulantly whining:

«Socrates, however, was a midwife examined by the god himself. The work he carried out was a divine commission.» (KWVII, 10)

Anti-Climacus, with a wry smirk:

«Assuming that the distinctive mark of being God is (indeed, who in the whole world would have thought of this; how true that such a thing did not arise in any human heart!) to look exactly like everybody else, neither more nor less: then we are all gods. *Quod erat demonstrandum.*» (KWXX, 51)

Johannes de silentio, quietly brooding:

«Socrates was the most interesting man who ever lived, his life the most interesting life ever led, but this existence was allotted to him by the god, and inasmuch as he himself had to acquire it, he was not a stranger to trouble and pain. To take such an existence in vain is not becoming to anyone who thinks more earnestly about life [*de silentio casts a meaningful look in Anti-Climacus' direction*], and yet in our age, we frequently see examples

of such an effort. Furthermore, the interesting is a border category, a *confinium* between esthetics and ethics. Accordingly, this examination must constantly wander into the territory of ethics, while in order to be of consequence it must seize the problem with esthetic fervor and concupiscence. These days, ethics rarely involves itself with a question like this. The reason must be that the system has no room for it. Therefore, one could do it in monographs.» (KWVI, 83)

Vigilius Haufniensis, warming to the subject:

«Ethics is still an ideal science, and not only in the sense that every science is ideal. Ethics proposes to bring ideality into actuality. [...] This ideal characteristic of ethics is what tempts one to first use metaphysical [*he looks at Climacus*], then esthetic [*he nods to de silentio*], and then psychological categories in the treatment of it [*with a self-mocking smile*]. But ethics, more than any other science, must resist such temptations. It is, therefore, impossible for anyone to write an ethics without having altogether different categories in reserve.» (KWVIII, 16-17)

Anti-Climacus, knocking his walking stick on the ground for emphasis:

«Truly it is high time for the requirements of ideality to be heard. [...] Only the consciousness of sin is absolute respect. [...] The simple soul who humbly acknowledges himself to be a sinner, himself personally (the single individual), has no need to learn about all the difficulties that come when one is neither simple nor humble. But where this humble consciousness of personally being a sinner is lacking [*throwing a sidelong glance at his erstwhile relation*]-- well, if a person such as that otherwise possessed all human wisdom and sagacity and all human gifts, it will be of only little benefit to him.» (KWXX, 67-68)

Johannes Climacus, testily rising to the bait:

«In this way the Socratic principle that all sin is ignorance is correct; sin does not understand itself in the truth.» (KWVII, 50n)

Johannes de silentio interrupts, heedless of his namesake:

«An ethics that ignores sin is a completely futile discipline, but if it affirms sin, then it has *eo ipso* exceeded itself» (KWVI, 98-99). [*Here he pauses for thought*] «As soon as sin emerges, ethics founders precisely on repentance; for repentance is the highest ethical expression, but precisely as such it is the deepest ethical self-contradiction.» (KWVI, 98n)

Vigilius Haufniensis rubs his gloved fingers under his chin:

«A consciousness of sin profoundly and seriously formed in the expression of repentance is a great rarity. However, for my own sake, as well as for the sake of thought and neighbor, I shall take care not to express it as Schelling probably would, who speaks somewhere of a genius for action in the same sense as for music etc. Thus, without being aware of it, one can at times annihilate everything with an explanatory word. [*He taps Anti-*

Climacus on the arm significantly.] If every man does not participate essentially in the absolute, then everything is over. Therefore, in the sphere of the religious, genius must not be spoken of as a special gift that is bestowed only upon a few, for here the gift is that of willing, and [*here he looks away*] whoever does not will should at least have the respect of not being pitied.» (KWVIII, 114)

Johannes Climacus, a bit disdainfully:

«The consciousness of sin [...]. Only the god could teach it —if he wanted to be teacher.» (KWVII, 47)

Anti-Climacus, assuming his most paternalistic tone:

«Christ is a person and is the teacher who is more important than the teaching [...] It is true only of a human being that his teaching is more important than he himself; to apply this to Christ is blasphemy, inasmuch as it makes him into only a human being.» (KWXX, 124)

Johannes Climacus, agreeing-sardonically:

«Faith, then, must constantly cling firmly to the teacher.» (KWVII, 62)

Anti-Climacus nods emphatically:

«When a person lives in such a way that he knows no higher criterion for life than that of the understanding, then his whole life is relativity, working only for relative goals; [*he sighs*] he does nothing unless the understanding with some help from probability can make more or less clear the advantages and the disadvantages, can answer his question “why and to what end.” [*And here he starts picking up speed.*] It is different with the absolute» (KWXX, 116), «the understanding comes to a standstill at the absolute. If there is to be any triumphant breakthrough, there must be faith, for faith is a new life.» (KWXX, 120)

Johannes de silentio with a sad drooping of his head:

«I cannot make the movement of faith, I cannot shut my eyes and plunge confidently into the absurd; it is for me an impossibility. [...] [*With a hopeless certainty he adds:*] I am convinced that God is love.» (KWVI 34)

A spindly-legged stranger addresses de silentio directly:

«To hold fast this way to the thought that God is love just the same is the abstract form of faith, faith *in abstracto* [...] [*The stranger turns to the others and points at de silentio with his umbrella.*] This is a sign that he is being educated or brought up to faith [...] Then the time will come when he will succeed in concretizing his God-relationship.» (JP, 1401)³ [*He puts a thin hand on de silentio's shoulder and looks into his eyes*] «God in heav-

3. Søren Kierkegaard's *Journals and Papers*, ed. and tr. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, assisted by Gregor Malantschuk, vol. 1-6, vol. 7. Index and Composite Collation, Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1967-1978.

en is my teacher, and I count it an honor to be his disciple, that he educated me.» (JP, 785)

Vigilius Haufniensis, shaking his head in perplexity as the stranger walks away:
«The true autodidact is precisely in the same degree a theodidact, as another author has said...» (KWVIII, 162)

Suggested Bibliography

Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers, ed. and tr. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, assisted by Gregor Malantschuk, vol. 1-6, vol. 7. Index and Composite Collation, Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1967-1978.

See especially vol. 1, 649-657 (VIII 2 B 81-89-1847).

Kierkegaard's Writings, tr. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, vol. I-XXVI, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978-present. *See especially the following:*

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