

## DISCUSSION

### KIERKEGAARD AND THE VALUES OF EDUCATION\*

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Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* can be used in a more or less futile effort to construct a total philosophy of Kierkegaard, or it can be taken at face value, as an independent writing covering a great variety of subjects. The latter use is the more fruitful for those concerned with the crisis of higher educational institutions, such as universities, in affluent societies. Taking it as a completely independent work by a seeker and humorist, Johannes Climacus, its key-terms (the ethical, inwardness, passion, involvement, subjectivity etc.) are interpreted solely in their context within one particular text. It turns out that its importance, thus considered, is much broader and its application much wider, than if key-terms are interpreted in the light of what, e.g. is said in *Either-Or*.

There are in the *Postscript* at least a dozen subjects with a bearing on the educational crisis:

#### 1. *Against pretentious and premature systems*

The delightful anti-Hegelian sayings of Johannes Climacus are today applicable to every pretentious explicit or implicit systematization covering controversial matters. They hit the belief in any scientific world view based on a (normative, decision making) observational methodology. Such views are systems, and the question, 'How do they start?,' is relevant: "How does the System begin with the immediate? That is to say, does it begin with it immediately?" Textbooks used in schools and universities propagate special points of view in an authoritarian way. The young are asked to kneel down before nationalist, theological, historical, "scientific" dogmas and myths. Their own sources of mythbuilding and belief are ignored or made fun of. The system-building most dangerous to the inner, individual sources of belief, including valuation, is today the interpretations provided by popularizers of science and by "experts" in administration. We need a neo-Duhemian stress on the difference between more or less certain and indubitable results of scientific or technical research, on the one hand, and interpretations and interpolations, on the other. The latter can exhibit vast differences in direction, but due to ideological and other idiosyncrasies of teachers and parents, the young are stuffed with one interpretation, to the accompa-

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niment of a negative inducement to allow their phantasy to play with other possibilities. Consequently the very sources of creative personal belief are apt to dry up, with resulting loss of individuality and interest in spiritual matters.

The vast textbook systematizations foster the illusion of a pre-existing world common to all individuals in which they all live and which is known in all important respects. We need to stress a pluralism of world views, of historical interpretations, of views on human existence. The unspoiled young feel that what is already there, preexisting and unchangeable for the individual living *now*, is only a skeleton of a world, an abstract structure, a set of invariances, without colour and individuality. It is up to them to shape and give color to the world of today and tomorrow.

It is the choices of each individual, the process of finding himself, which gradually illuminates that particular world he is living in. Kierkegaard teaches us that there is a source of inner life which, if not clogged, generates values and sets of value priorities, that is, in short, an inwardness; and truth in the abstract, as mere agreement with external observation, has no place for the individual if not related to that inwardness. In our time we stress the difference between results that can be recorded and stored in a machine, and a result incorporated in the personal world view of an individual. The aim of the educator cannot be to multiply the former, but to bring about the latter.

Lack of space unfortunately precludes quoting the *Unscientific Postscript* in detail; I can only invite readers to see for themselves how the critical remarks on Hegel's system and on *systems in general* are admirably suited to contemporary textbook authoritarianism and intolerance towards pluralism.

## 2. *Correct versus deep choices*

There are a number of unsurpassed maxims in the *Unscientific Postscript* stressing the importance of an individual making personal choices. What counts according to Johannes, is the seriousness, pathos, energy, genuineness, enthusiasm and depth of choice. A choice may be taken the deeper or the more it touches the system of attitudes as a whole, that is, the more radical or fundamental it is. Every deep choice creates a discontinuity; the individual develops into something different from what he was before, and something more self-made, autonomous. Only through such choices can the youngster develop into a strong personality. Only if he is able to "go into himself," concentrate and listen to more or less immature impulses, and have the courage to follow them, only then can the growth of personality withstand the external pressures of parents and teachers trying *directly* to influence choice. Kierkegaard stresses this "consolidation of personality" through personal choices. The ability to choose is itself a function of success in choosing – not success in the external sense of doing the right thing (socially) or believing the truth (scientifically or theologically), but success in overcoming compulsion from the outside or inside.

In higher education, there are choices to be made: what to learn, how to learn, how much to learn, how to use free time, how to establish genuine personal relations – and which kinds of relations – with fellow students and teachers. In principle the choices must be made every day: there is no *automatic* transfer of decisions from day to day. These choices are classifiable as correct or incorrect only at superficial levels. The deeper choices have a purely personal relation, an individual component: is the chooser *in truth*?

### 3. *To hold true opinions and to “be in truth”*

Kierkegaard does not belittle the importance of facts and factual knowledge. On the contrary, the inner tension of the Christian believer can only develop if he takes the facts of historical and other sciences seriously, for only then can the paradoxical character of belief make an impact upon him. Kierkegaard’s maxim, that truth is subjectivity, has the function of stressing the importance of the relation of the individual to what he believes is true. The individual can be in truth or be in untruth in relation to propositions which have personal relevance. If the personally relevant factor of objective truth has been contemplated and chosen, the individual is in truth; where there is social pressure, there is untruth. *In moments of choice the individual is alone.* Through the artistic use of paradoxical terminology Kierkegaard has provided us with a rich store of expressions stressing the personal aspect of knowing.

Applied to institutions of higher education, this means that they serve depersonalization, uniformity, indifference, “other-directedness,” if they limit their concern to teaching truths (which are in any case mostly mere conjectures), neglecting the individuals’ own relation to truths.

The authority of Kierkegaard is sometimes used to belittle scientific research and objectivity. But the researcher tries to be intellectually honest and open-minded in his choices, and the life of the dedicated researcher requires its own kind of endurance and faithfulness, proceeding (as the historians of the Bible) along the infinite “road of approximations.” Research, therefore, is one of the professions admirably adapted to test inwardness and ethical stamina. Actually, many youngsters have a clearer view of the scientific attitude than many teachers. By giving them suitable personally (but not necessarily socially relevant tasks their respect for unending research (but not necessarily for the *results* of research) can be maintained.

### 4. *The ethical and the inward.*

The neglect of *Unscientific Postscript* as a coherent, selfsufficient unit of thinking has had bad effects on the interpretation of the term “the ethical” in that work. Researchers have linked this term with specific moral doctrines, e.g. those of Assessor Wilhelm in *Either-Or*, or with topics which are of central importance in other writings by Kierkegaard, but not in the thinking of Johannes Climacus, the alledged author of *Unscientific Postscript*. In that work, “the ethical” is mainly another term for “the genuine,” “the

inward” and there is no propagation whatsoever of any definite morality, e.g. that of duty.

Applied to educational philosophy this means the limitation of moralizing to stressing the duty of the person to choose in all seriousness, and to follow a decision faithfully, working out all the consequences of his or her choice. The educator can only help the individual with information relevant to the *preparation* of the choice and the derivation of consequences. Any indoctrination or direct influence, especially as regards norm systems and theological, moral or political propositions, is poison; it either destroys or undermines the ability of the growing individual to consolidate a personality, or supports negativism: The uncritical acceptance of views in opposition to those of authoritarian teachers.

##### 5. *The illusion of greatness and the unimportance of results*

In *Unscientific Postscript* there is a rich variety of maxims stressing that an individual should not concern himself or herself with *success*, with the external results of choices, efforts, or acts, because they are only indirect at the moment of choice. The only concern is that of being ethical, – reaching a high level of inwardness, – to be in truth. It is clear that to obtain a high score here does not require intellectual ability, social position, or smartness. For the educational philosophy of higher educational institutions, the consequence is to minimize the stress on the external success of the pupils, on competence measured by objective tenability of views and effectiveness of handling “problems.” There are, of course, kinds of training such as that of a future surgeon, in which external criteria are all-important. But no institute of learning can, or should, limit itself to such training. In all training, including that of mathematicians, the stress on success can safely be minimized in relation to the importance of the personal relations, e.g. that to “the mathematical,” to mathematical contemplation and phantasy to the value of individual mathematical exploration. We have our *machines* to store results, and to carry out tasks with the sole view of obtaining results.

With the increasing centralization and uniformization of world culture, and with the accompanying increase in the comparability of results, the attainment and success of the average individual are less and less conspicuous. The young boy or girl is confronted with persons who have achieved a level which it is utterly improbable that they can reach. The constantly recurring implicit and sometimes even explicit rating of individual attainments based on external criteria makes it more difficult than ever for the average youngster to feel important, to feel what Kierkegaard stresses: that he or she is something unique, worthy of development and care. In so far as education favours inwardness, the rich and intensive inner life, exposure to superior scholastic talent does not endanger it.

##### 6. *Indirect communication*

Nothing essential can be communicated from one individual to another, according to *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. In so far as the maxims on

inwardness are essential to the welfare of the individual, they cannot be communicated directly. Ordinary, informatory language is direct; it does not elicit or let free the inner forces. Therefore the teaching of Johannes Climacus, if he *does* teach, cannot be made part of any curriculum. The philosophy of inwardness, if there is any, cannot itself be made the subject of any textbook or any educational indoctrination. The spirit of that philosophy can only manifest itself in the personal relation between teacher and student.

Unfortunately there is no time here for mapping out specific applications of a philosophy of education based in part on the above interpretation of the maxims of *Unscientific Postscript*. There is, of course, scope for various interpretations of those maxims and application cannot be immediate, but must carefully take account of how each of the contemporary educational institutions is operating.

Of the various objections that might be made by leaders of such institutions, there is at least one that deserves to be mentioned here: It is said that the institutions must adapt the young to the present complex, technical society.

In this society it is the external, the smooth functioning and the successful that count, not richness, variety and intensity of inner life. The answer to this must be that such a smooth society turns things upside down. Such social smoothness is of lower priority than community, and personal togetherness with fellow beings. For in being together smoothness and external success do not count, and there are no technicalities to adapt to. Further, even the norms of being together have a lower priority than those of the inner life of each individual; to that inwardness, which is the ultimate reference for any norm whatsoever. Thus, the higher educational institutions must make it easier for the young to remain unadapted, or imperfectly adapted. Otherwise they contribute to the life of the big, impersonal, affluent society, with its external richness and inner poverty.

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