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Søren Kierkegaard Educating for Authenticity



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Educating for Authenticity

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Chapter 1

Existence and Education

1.1 Introduction: Why Kierkegaard Matters to Education

Søren Aabye Kierkegaard (1813–1855) is not usually seen as an educational thinker. He is best known for having founded the movement known as existential philosophy, pioneering ideas about absurdity, choice and authenticity that were to become highly influential in the twentieth century. He is also famous as one of the great poet-philosophers, as he presented his philosophical thoughts in writings of high sophistication, using a variety of literary genres and forms of expression. None of his works are primarily devoted to education. Still, as will be shown in this book, Kierkegaard was deeply concerned with questions of teaching, learning and personal development.

First, reaching back to the original Socratic understanding of philosophy as the seeking of wisdom, Kierkegaard thought about is really worth knowing, and how knowledge can acquire personal significance. He was deeply concerned about the relationship between the abstract content of teaching and learning and its actual impact on human life. His main objection to the dominant philosophical views of his age was not that they were wrong as such. He acknowledged that according to their own standards, they were both ingenious and impressively coherent. But he noted that for all their internal consistency and scientific rigour, the philosophical theories seemed unable to properly move an actual human being. Their generality, abstractness and purely rational nature made it impossible for them to make sense of the life of an individual person, at least as seen from her own point of view. While Kierkegaard intended this mainly as a criticism of philosophical systems, he thereby raised a more general question about the relationship between items of knowledge, or, put in modern educational terms, ‘learning contents’, and their appropriation by an actual impact on an individual. Put in other contemporary, admittedly un-Kierkegaardian terms, we might say that he was concerned the relationship between knowing that and existential knowing how.

Second, Kierkegaard was acutely aware of what has become known as the ‘pedagogical paradox’. Since the enlightenment, it has been widely assumed that teaching and education should aim at fostering autonomous individuals, making students capable of forming their own beliefs, choosing their own path in life and even criticizing the established order. Enlightenment, and thus education and learning, should serve emancipation and critical thinking. Yet actual teaching and education almost invariably consists in instruction and regulation of students’ behaviour. Students are taught to reproduce, adapt and adjust. This holds even for the allegedly more progressive attempts to foster creativity or intellectual independence. The pedagogical paradox consists in the fact that the student must, apparently, be ‘forced to be free’. Teaching is an asymmetrical relation and a constraining activity.

The paradox was first formulated by Kant, in his late lecture *On Education* (which was published in 1803):

One of the greatest problems of education is how to unite submission to the necessary *restraint* with the child’s capacity of exercising his *free will* – for restraint is necessary. How am I to develop the sense of freedom in spite of the restraint? I am to accustom my pupil to endure a restraint of his freedom, and at the same time I am to guide him to use his freedom aright (Kant 1900, 27f.).

Kant saw the solution to the apparent paradox in a process of *cultivation*. The child must be brought to understand that the restraint is not, after all, contrary to its own interest. It must also be made aware that its own actions can interfere with the liberty of others—and that this is not an expression of freedom in the genuine, valuable sense. Genuine freedom involves self-limitation and self-control. Kant’s pedagogical ideal is thus based on his idea of autonomy as rational ‘self-legislation’: becoming a free agent consists in coming to grasp the validity, and thus feel the binding force, of general norms of action—and so being able to consent to them freely, and not perceiving them as being imposed from the outside or contrary to one’s own will.

The romantics, from whom Kierkegaard took some of his main inspiration, saw the Kantian, ‘classicist’ paradigm as putting too much emphasis on restraint and rational insight. To them, the idea of achieving freedom and maturity by finding one’s place in the larger world and seeing the necessity of self-constraint seemed like a lukewarm compromise. Freedom, they insisted, must involve radical self-expression and passionate engagement. To submit to laws and regulations, however rational and humane these might be, will lead to a restriction of one’s freedom, and also a stifling of one’s sense of life. The romanticists were especially keen to point out that the Kantian notion of freedom is aesthetically and emotionally unsatisfying. This is a pervasive theme already in the writings of Schiller [notably in the essay *On Grace and Dignity* (1793/2005)], who influenced Kierkegaard strongly.

Yet even for the romanticists, and for later generations of intellectuals, the paradox remained unsolved. If the enlightenment ideals of freedom and autonomy were to be realized, if they should become more than just a noble dream, some kind

of adaptation, coordination and even compromise seemed necessary. In the field of education, it was hard to deny that there *is* something paradoxical, or even hypocritical, about celebrating autonomy, authenticity and the value of open dialogue, while at the same time carefully orchestrating and managing the whole learning process with the predetermined goal of inducing the student to adopt a specific view or attitude.

Kierkegaard grappled with this pedagogical paradox, as well as with the unresolved tension between the ideal of personal freedom as radical self-expression and the practical necessity of coming to terms with the social sphere and the norms governing it. His own use of diverse and sophisticated literary forms, including a variety of pseudonyms, was motivated precisely by a concern not to preach or otherwise force his readers into adopting a specific, preconceived set of ideas. The problem was particularly important to Kierkegaard because he defended an uncompromising view of human freedom. He was critical of the many attempts to somehow assimilate freedom to a kind of higher necessity, or to play down the individuality and subjectivity of human existence. His main concern was that a person should become *genuinely* authentic and autonomous. This meant that she had to be addressed not just as a rational creature or fellow citizen, but as a concrete, unique ‘existing individual’ (CUP 68; SKS 7, 81). Kierkegaard wanted not to teach general norms, but to literally teach how to become oneself. The kind of education with which he was concerned was an education for authenticity—not just authentic education—and this ruled out any simple solution to the pedagogical paradox. Instead, Kierkegaard devised and advocated a special form of non-coercive teaching, the so-called method of ‘indirect communication’. While Kierkegaard mainly intended this method to be used for existential and religious education, it arguably has much broader significance. Kierkegaard thought that humans should generally be understood and addressed as concrete individuals; it was only that the task of communicating in an appropriately non-coercive way becomes much more difficult when the topic is itself of existential nature. In the last of his pseudonymous, philosophical works, he let the champion of the method of direct communication, Johannes Climacus, say that ‘The secret of [...] imparting consists precisely in emancipating the other’ (CUP 63; SKS 7, 74). Even though an ‘all’ that is not found in the Danish original has been added to ‘imparting’ in the English translation, this does sound like a statement about the aim of communication more generally.

It may be argued that Kierkegaard’s thoughts about indirect communication are, at any rate, of more general significance in contemporary societies. The lack of a fixed set of norms and the need to continuously adapt to changing circumstances have led to a stronger emphasis on self-efficacy and autonomy, as has been emphasized by many sociologists. It may, of course, be argued that education that instrumentalizes autonomy and personal development is not really existential, or not education for *genuine* authenticity. But then again, Kierkegaard aptly diagnosed precisely this tendency to foster authenticity as a means rather than an end in itself, or to treat the authentic individual as a particular *type* of individual that may flourish under certain social circumstances. Besides, it is likely that authenticity, even when

valued for its own sake, also has some beneficial side effects. This makes it relevant for education under more practical circumstances. It should also be remembered that ‘instrumental’ is a word with a wide range of connotations. It is often associated with economic utility, but may also refer to the fact that something benefits a person on a deeper level, e.g. by contributing to her mastery of life or general well-being. As described by Kierkegaard, becoming oneself does imply something like fostering basic self-efficacy. This is arguably an important educational end that is not restricted to the more exclusive tasks of existential or religious education.

Third, Kierkegaard was deeply inspired by the ideal of *Bildung* (i.e. personal formation or self-cultivation) championed by Goethe, Humboldt and other German writers. It was widely held during the romantic (and the preceding classic) period that a human being should strive for self-perfection, and that this meant that all its capacities should be developed and integrated into a harmonious whole. One’s personality should be formed in much the same way as a work of art, according to the classicist notion of aesthetic perfection: form and content should be closely unified, the general should be reflected in the particular, and the whole should appear natural rather than artificial. This ideal is clearly visible in Kant’s aforementioned emphasis on cultivation. It was taken over by the romanticists, who further emphasized that the different elements of one’s personality should be closely integrated and animated by a pervasive feeling for life—reason and emotion should not just supplement and constrain each other, but literally merge. They thus attempted to modify Kant’s picture of the autonomous personality as comprising of different faculties and tendencies kept together by the exercise of rational assessment and control should be modified into a more strongly unified vision of the person as an organic, living whole (see e.g. Jamme and Schneider 1984).

The notion of *Bildung* has played a central role in educational thought and policy ever since (though more explicitly so on the European continent than in the English-speaking world). In contemporary discussions, it is often presented as an alternative to a more instrumental, utilitarian or piecemeal approach to education, which centres on the development of specific, labour-market relevant skills (see Horlacher 2015).

Kierkegaard gave the notion of *Bildung* a central place in his own thinking. It figures in the title of the most influential of all his texts, the section of *Either-Or* II entitled ‘Equilibrium between the Aesthetic and the Ethical in the Development of Personality’. But Kierkegaard’s attitude to it and other fashionable ideas of the classic and romantic period was ambivalent. He felt the undeniable force of ideals like *Bildung*, authenticity and autonomy. But he also noticed that they had a seductive power and could easily turn into idols. It seemed to him that many intellectuals of the romantic age pursued the ideals of self-formation and authenticity not to become themselves, but, paradoxically, to *appear* unique, remarkable and interesting and thus achieve social recognition, or simply to show off. Moreover, the ideal of *Bildung*, which had been connected to emancipation from social constraints, was adopted by the educated middle class (as became explicit in the German notion of *Bildungsbürgertum*) and used to distinguish a certain social

group. It came to stand rather for the amassment of knowledge and a certain refined code of conduct.

Part of Kierkegaard's relevance to education lies, therefore, in his highly nuanced, critical-yet-sympathetic, treatment of the ideal of *Bildung*. His analysis of the ways in which the ideals of authenticity or self-cultivation can become perverted is of obvious contemporary relevance in an age where continuous self-development and self-exposition on digital media have become part of the social conventions. It is especially significant because it is made not from an external standpoint of general cultural criticism, but based on a much more intimate understanding of the phenomenon in question. It enables us to identify more and less appropriate versions of the classic and romantic ideals which, for good and for bad, still for an integral part of Western culture and self-understanding.

Fourth, both Kierkegaard's criticism of certain ideals of self-cultivation and his own philosophical practice raise a question about the relevance of very ambitious and idealistic educational aims for practical educational thinking and research. It may be thought that developing one's personality as if it were a work of art, or communicating about almost unspeakably difficult matters of deep existential concern, are tasks that are simply too far removed from the actual options and challenges in mass education in contemporary schools and universities. Some might even think that it is not only futile, but simply dangerous to pursue these lofty ideals, since they take up resources needed for more realistic and useful educational tasks, and can—as Kierkegaard pointed out himself—very easily be abused or corrupted.

In how far such worries pertain to Kierkegaard's thinking is a question we shall deal with in Chap. 5. Here it should suffice for maintaining its relevance to point out that it is to a large extent concerned with (and not simply an example of) the risk of pursuing overly lofty ideals. Again, Kierkegaard's treatment of the ideals of authenticity and self-cultivation is a case in point. It could indeed be argued that Kierkegaard was not concerned with the elementary aspects of education. He has virtually nothing to say about the acquisition of basic skills like reading and calculating, and almost always assumes a situation in which the learner is intellectually on par with the teacher. On the other hand, the fact that Kierkegaard is concerned with the human condition in general, and not with the teaching of specific skills, makes likely that his thinking should have some bearing on education in all its forms and on every level.

There is, however, still a potential barrier to the relevance of Kierkegaard's thought for contemporary education. This is the fact that Kierkegaard was an avowed Christian thinker. He was, moreover, not just religious in the liberal, accommodative fashion typical of most nineteenth-century thinkers, but subscribed to a rather stern version of Lutheran Christianity. Religious topics are present throughout his works and pervade not least those parts that are most obviously relevant to education. Many scholars have argued that his thinking is essentially Christian; that it can only be adequately understood in this background, and that it is impossible to isolate certain ideas and use them in a purely secular way.

Such an interpretation appears to find considerable justification in Kierkegaard's own description of his philosophical project (notably in the short intellectual biography *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, EK 455-481; SKS 16). I think, however, that it is misguided, and in this book I will assume, quite to the contrary, that central ideas of Kierkegaard's can be understood and evaluated independently of their religious context. There are two main reasons for this: First, it is generally—and rightly—assumed that authors' statements about their own work should be taken with caution and not given more weight than those of other interpreters. Authors are naturally inclined to post-rationalize their work. In the case of Kierkegaard, it is obvious that his religious tendency became more pronounced in his later years, and that his self-interpretation was given from a different standpoint than that of the author of his early works.

Second, even if it should be admitted that Kierkegaard's work is essentially Christian in nature (whatever that means), that does not rule out that parts of it can be appreciated and even adopted without buying into the particular brand of Protestant Christianity that Kierkegaard himself subscribed to. Part of the originality of Kierkegaard's thinking lies in its explorative character. He outlines and examines a variety of modes of existence, in an experimental manner, without making any definite judgments as to what one should or should not do. This obviously makes it possible to appreciate his work without following in his own footsteps. (As a matter of fact, there is something paradoxical about insisting that one should buy part and parcel the thoughts of a thinker who was so deeply concerned about *not* coercing or compelling his reader!).

Finally, it should be noted that although Kierkegaard's understanding of Christianity was indeed stern—i.e. uncompromising—it was also very modern and by no means fanatical or fundamentalist. He objected to assimilating Christianity to liberal, humanist ideas. To be truly religious, he thought, must involve an absolutely unconditional commitment. But he likewise insisted, contrary to typical orthodoxy or fundamentalism, that Christianity is all about faith as an exclusively personal attitude, and had nothing but disdain for religion based on outward rituals, social conventions or moral or legal rules.

It should also be remembered that even in our allegedly secular age religion has not necessarily become obsolete. To see contemporary culture as being dominated by science and reason alone is grossly one-sided. When it comes to the most basic beliefs and attitudes of contemporary Westerners, especially about personal matters, the religious inspiration is easy to discern. There are clear traces of Protestant thinking in contemporary, allegedly secular ideals of personal commitment, conscience, authenticity and the importance of following one's heart rather than reason. They are ubiquitous themes in commercials, popular novels, Hollywood films and pop tunes.

It could, in fact, be taken as a further mark of its contemporary relevance that Kierkegaard's educational thinking takes religion seriously. In the multicultural learning environments of today, it may be considered important that students are able to maintain their religious beliefs as such, without being forced to compromise by giving up what is distinctive about them, but in a way that does not prevent them

from developing a critical attitude or hamper their social integration. Kierkegaard's conception of Christianity arguable provides a model for this. I shall not, however, pursue this line of thought further, as I will mostly ignore the religious aspects of Kierkegaard's thinking.

Finally, it should be stressed that Kierkegaard is in no way an unproblematic role model for educational thinking. He was a radical, provocative thinker. If some of his ideas seem obviously correct or sensible, this is often a sign that one has not grasped their full significance. Kierkegaard's religious adherence may have been more nuanced than it seems at a first glance, and its significance to his philosophical thinking may have been exaggerated—but it does have implications that can be difficult to stomach for a modern reader. He generally leans towards a form of irrationalism and decisionism that will seem extreme to many. He espouses a form of subjectivism and individualism that became widely rejected in twentieth-century philosophy. As we shall see, his thoughts on education, more specifically, are also far from uncontroversial. But not least because of its challenging, provocative character, Kierkegaard's thinking remains inspiring and relevant to contemporary educational issues. It is anything but trivial.

1.2 Kierkegaard's Life and Works: Between Aestheticism, Duty and Faith

From early on, Kierkegaard was torn between a conventional life as a dependable member of society, the life of an artist and *bohème*, and his devotion to a radical Lutheran Christianity inherited from his father. These three types of orientation are reflected in his doctrine of existential stages. The fact that he maintained a deep respect for all three, and to various degrees embodied them all, not just successively but simultaneously, is further reflected in his doctrine of existential 'equilibrium': the idea that the defining qualities of different modes of existence must somehow complement and pervade each other. Kierkegaard despised of the purely conventional life. But he acknowledged the value of taking on social responsibilities and making steady commitments. He deliberately abandoned a conventional life, most vividly expressed in his demonstrative cancelling of the engagement with his fiancé, Regine Olsen, and chose instead to pursue a solitary career as a writer. Yet he took his own case to be an exception and not in any way a role model. And although he eventually came to consider the life of Christian faith as being in some sense superior, he saw himself mainly as an aesthetic character. His advocacy of religion was mixed with an equally strong emphasis on positive freedom and the importance of self-expression. He also maintained that life should be aesthetically satisfying, in all of its forms.

Kierkegaard's struggle to balance the different tendencies in himself—and different views of human existence—can be seen as an expression of a radical notion of *Bildung*. He tried to unite very diverse orientations and qualities in the most

intimate way. He rejected the popular attempts at a 'synthesis', as he thought it robbed the individual elements of their distinctive character. He wanted, in a way, to have it all, without compromise or restriction.

In contrast to most of his contemporaries on the intellectual scene, however, he never came to see human life and thinking as self-sufficient. His religious upbringing installed in him a sense of human weakness and a conviction that if life is to have a foundation at all, it must be something that transcends the human sphere. In his journals, he spoke himself of the 'dark background which, from the very earliest time, was part of my life' (PJ 341; SKS 21, 159), probably referring to his father's strong belief in human sinfulness, sense of guilt and melancholic temper, which he assumed to have inherited and found impossible to shake off. His writings are full of humour, albeit often of a dark kind, and he was keen to emphasize that a religious person should not be overly grave. He championed the ideal of human freedom and; but pursuing a line of thought that came to be typical of modern philosophy, he conceived of this freedom as being nevertheless dependent on, and constrained by, factors not completely within human control.

Kierkegaard studied theology from the age of 17, at first very conscientiously, so that he was expected to take up a clerical career. However, around 1835, he became attracted to the more leisurely sides of student life, adopting a lavish lifestyle he would later label 'aesthetic'. He began to study for his own curiosity rather than preparing for his exam. While this change may be explained partly by his giving into the attractions of the life of a pleasure-seeking dandy, it seems to have been also motivated by an experience of his university studies as dull and boring. In the earliest of his journal entries, he expressed growing doubts about the importance of the subjects and traditions to which he had been exposed (that is, natural science, orthodox and rationalist theology and law)—indeed, doubts about the very significance of objective knowledge quite generally:

What I really need is to get clear about *what I am to do*, not what I must know, except insofar as knowledge must precede every act. What matters is to find my purpose ... The crucial thing is to find a truth that is truth *for me*, to find *the idea for which I am willing to live and die*. Of what use would it be for me to discover a so-called objective truth, to work through the philosophical systems so that I could, if asked, make critical judgments about them, could point out the fallacies in each system; of what use would it be for me to develop a theory of the state, getting details from various sources and combining them into a whole, and constructing a world I did not live in but merely held up for others to see...? (Journal Entry August 1, 1835; JP 32; EK 8; SKS 17, 24).

In Sect. 1.4, we shall go deeper into Kierkegaard's views on the limitations of objective truth and the importance of existentially appropriating or animating knowledge.

Though his studies dragged on for several years, Kierkegaard eventually obtained his degree in theology in 1840, and the following year his masters' thesis on the concept of irony was accepted. Around the same time, he made a last attempt to embark on a conventional life, by becoming engaged to Regine Olsen, the daughter of a highly placed civil servant. But he almost immediately began to doubt his decision, and in October 1841 finally broke off the engagement, explaining to

Regine that both his dark temper and his calling as an independent thinker and writer made him unsuitable as a husband. In *Either-Or*, he describes a poet's life as 'human sacrifice' (E/O 512; SKS 3, 202), thereby also hinting at his own painful decision to renounce the joys of ordinary life.

A visit to Berlin in the same year had given Kierkegaard the opportunity to reflect on his recent engagement and what to make of his life, as well as to attend lectures by the famous German philosopher Schelling. Though disappointed by his personal appearance and pompous lecturing style, Kierkegaard was sympathetic to Schelling's criticism of Hegel. Like Schelling, Kierkegaard would oppose Hegel in emphasizing the limitations of conceptual thinking and the priority of actual existence as revealed in concrete experience.

In the years following his decision to wholeheartedly pursue a philosophical career, Kierkegaard was immensely productive. His mature work falls into two distinct phases: The earlier writings, published between 1843 and 1846, are pseudonymous. Kierkegaard referred to this phase in his authorship as 'aesthetic', mainly to indicate that it is literary and experimental and not committed to advocating any particular point of view. In contrast, his later works (as well as the *Edifying Discourses* written simultaneously with the pseudonymous texts, but published later) are of a more explicit and unambiguous religious orientation, and written in a more insistent tone. Some of them, however, are still quite philosophical and explorative, notably the (also pseudonymous) *Sickness unto Death* from 1849, which contains elaborate analyses of despair, Kierkegaard's favourite term for self-alienation, and of the structure of the self.

In the last years before his early death in 1855, Kierkegaard mounted a ferocious attack on the Danish State Church, charging it with hypocrisy and insincerity. He had become increasingly mentally unstable, suffering from the public ridicule he had been subjected to due to his eccentric appearance and obstinate behaviour, probably also from constant ruminations over matters of religious faith and what he saw as his personal, important but painful vocation.

1.3 Stages of Existence

Kierkegaard famously distinguished three main existential stages, or 'spheres of existence': The aesthetic, the ethical and the religious. The contrast between the former two is set out in *Either-Or I-II* (1843). The first volume presents a variety of aesthetical characters, whose general attitude to life is then analyzed and criticized in volume two by a self-professed representative of the ethical, Judge Vilhelm. There are hints at a further stage in the closing passages of *Either-Or*, where the judge turns to quoting a sermon which he apparently takes to support his own position, but which in fact expresses a less self-assuredly humanist and more distinctively Christian view. The particularity of the religious attitude is further emphasized in *Fear and Trembling* (published later in 1843), which envisages a 'suspension of the ethical'. It was not, however, until the third section of *Stages on*

Life's Way (1845) that Kierkegaard explicitly distinguished the religious stage from the ethical and the aesthetical (SKS 6, 439). In the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846), Kierkegaard further elaborated his theory of existential spheres. He now added notions of intermediate stages or 'borderline areas' (*confinia*) and subdivided the religious stage into A and B, the latter representing the true, passionate faith, which fully embraces the absurdity of the Christian teachings.

Put very briefly, the idea is behind the doctrine of existential stages is this. A human being can (1) live for the sake of external gratification, very broadly conceived—typically for the sake of pleasure, but this *aesthetic* form of life can also consist in exploiting one's inborn talent or a favourable condition of life. She can also, however, (2) base her life on her own choice and commitments, while acknowledging (i.e. consciously affirming) her dependence on and obligations to other people. Such an *ethical* existence can be manifested in various ways, but must include the establishment of close personal bonds—notably marriage (though from a contemporary perspective, there is no need to see the ethical as requiring some specific kind of relationship, in terms of gender, legal status etc.). The ethical attitude also requires one to have some kind of meaningful occupation (though again, this does not necessarily have to take the form of salaried work or business). This engagement in social affairs must be based on a free decision and not just come from habit or a desire to exploit favourable opportunities. In this way, a person may be said to choose herself and give continuity and meaning to her life as a whole. Yet with time, a person living ethically may come to doubt that her own self-conception, and the human projects and values to which she is committed, can be robust enough to serve as a real basis for her life. Acknowledging her own fundamental limitations, she may finally take a leap of faith and give herself over to something incomparably greater, which she is not able to fathom but nevertheless willing to believe in. This leap into (3) the *religious* sphere does not mean that the person ceases to live by her own choices and commitments. Rather it means that she now invests her commitment into her religious belief; in return, she may obtain the kind of constancy and fulfilment in her life that the ethical person also wished to achieve, though Kierkegaard does not depict even the religious stage as being free of uncertainty. Much like the ethical stage, it is marked by a constant striving for maintaining the right attitude, with doubt, anxiety and despair now being kept in check, but never eliminated.

The details of the various existential stages and sub-stages are not crucial to Kierkegaard's educational thinking. But the very idea of a range of distinctive existential stages is significance. It is not, it should be noted, a theory of gradual personal development. While Kierkegaard did see, or come to see, the religious stage as being in some sense superior to the others, he did not deny that aesthetic or ethical existence constitute serious alternatives, and that a person can remain at each of these stages for the whole of her life.

Thus Kierkegaard's own preferred expression, 'spheres of existence', is actually more apt: They are spheres in the sense of being complete, 'rounded' and autonomous existential attitudes. They might be compared to the notion of a *paradigm* famously introduced by Kuhn (1962) into the philosophy of science: they form a

comprehensive system of norms, habits and assumptions, which determines what counts as meaningful and meaningless questions and tasks to the person in question. They ‘colour’ her particular thoughts and experiences and confer on them a particular significance, directing her attention to certain matters and away from others—and so they are, in a way, ‘incommensurable’.

The spheres of existence are *not* incommensurable in being equally ‘good’ or completely beyond criticism. Kierkegaard’s whole work is full of such criticism. But the criticism has inevitable limitations, which should always be taken into account. It can be given from the standpoint of another stage, formulated in its particular terminology and based on its fundamental premises. This does not disqualify it but makes it more of an open question how fitting it really is. A superficial reading of *Either/Or* may give one the impression that the ethical sphere is flatly superior to the aesthetic, because Judge Vilhelm mounts an impressive case against the latter, apparently showing it to be shallow and unsatisfying. Yet it should be borne in mind that the critical standards by which he measures the aesthetic sphere, for example when objecting that it allows for no real development or is marked by indifference, are simply not shared by the aesthetic character. According to the latter, there simply is no convincing alternative to indifference and no possibility of real development. The best one can do is to try to cope with this predicament by seeking and cultivating various kinds of pleasures and diversions.

More important is, therefore, perhaps, the *internal* criticism of the stages found in and between the lines of Kierkegaard’s work. Kierkegaard lets the existential attitudes play out in ways that reveal, often implicitly, doubts and tensions that put into question their adequacy and point beyond them. These are so to speak existential anomalies that are officially played down or explained away, but which linger and reoccur and might eventually trigger a real existential crisis. For example, the aesthetic character advocates a life marked by constant change of perspective, wit and ingenuity, but at times makes it appear repetitive and pointless. The ethical character occasionally indulges, or boasts of, his happiness and mastery of life, in effect succumbing to aesthetic temptation. He is also repeatedly unable to live up to his high ethical ideals; and his favourite remedy for coping with this problem, to express remorse, does not really seem sufficient to come to terms with this aspect of the human condition.

Moreover, while there is some kind of hierarchical order among the stages, it is not necessarily the same as the order in which they are presented. The aesthetic stage is seemingly presented as the lowest and—in a sense—most primitive, yet it is also superior to the ethical stage in some respects; for example, by being marked less marked by exaggerated self-confidence, and possibly also by allowing for the kind of unconstrained passion that Kierkegaard takes to be the essence of the religious stage.

The most significant difference to a conventional notion of personal development is the *discontinuous* nature of the range of existential stages. For Kierkegaard there can be no question of a stepwise accumulation of traits and virtues, leading gradually into a new a superior mode of existence. He does admit that one can develop oneself gradually *within* a particular stage, perfecting its peculiar qualities (e.g.

cultivating one's capacity for gaining and enjoying sensory pleasure, developing strategies for fighting off boredom within the aesthetic sphere). But there is no comparable way of gradually approaching a new existential stage. Every improvement of one's qualities is constrained by the defining features of the stage. The move into another sphere of existence must take the form of a *leap*. This means both that it cannot be brought about by any amount of intellectual insight. (We shall see below—in 1.4—how Kierkegaard is generally sceptical of the power of knowledge to effect deep personal changes). It also means that it has to be accomplished by the person herself. A forced or induced change of attitude cannot amount to a entering a new existential stage. If a person should, apparently, be talked into adopting something like the ethical mode of life, she would per definition not really have done so; for she would then still base her life on external circumstances.

This has obvious consequences for education. For one thing, it points to the limits of educational efforts—in particular, the limits of instruction-based education. One cannot, at least in any straightforward sense, be taught to live e.g. the ethical or religious life. No completely independent reason can be given for adopting it. Besides, the doctrine of existential stages highlights the organic nature of personal development and learning. You may learn this or that; but according to Kierkegaard, it will take on a completely different significance depending on the larger sphere of existence within which it becomes embedded. Really significant learning, learning that has a personal or impact, must consist not of adding new skills or items of knowledge to one's repertoire, but in effecting a more fundamental change in outlook. This points towards an ambitious notion of cultivation or *Bildung*, according to which what is learned must form an organic whole and to be animated by the student's existential attitude and self-understanding.

The doctrine of stages can thus be said to anticipate something like the contemporary idea of *transformative* learning that has been developed by Mezirow (2000). Transformative learning focuses on general changes in the student's worldview and self-understanding. The theory, moreover, assumes that such changes are usually difficult to bring about, but may be triggered by life crises or major life transitions. There are, however, notable differences between the two views. The theory of transformative learning emphasizes the role of reflective assessment in bringing about a change in fundamental outlook. It thus gives greater priority to rationality, deliberation and knowledge. It also recognizes the possibility of transformation through an accumulation of experiences, thus suggesting a stepwise development that is ruled out by Kierkegaard's more radical view of the process as fundamentally discontinuous. Nevertheless, it is hardly wrong to say that Kierkegaard did put forward a doctrine that not just resembles, but also provides a philosophical foundation for, contemporary notions of transformative learning.

A further important consequence of Kierkegaard's doctrine of stages for education is that it prompts us to look for that on which a person bases—or might base—her life. The stages do have typical manifestations. The libertine or romantic bohemian and the dutiful, *bourgeois* judge are obvious representatives of aesthetic and ethical existence, respectively. However, the existential stages are matters of

attitude rather than outward appearance or external actions. Two people can be very alike in their outward doings, yet embody a different stage. In educational contexts, acknowledging something like the idea of existential stages urges us not—as one might initially assume—to categorise students into different social or personality types, but rather to gauge and respond to their fundamental self-understanding.

The fact that two persons can be alike in their outward appearance and actions, yet on a different existential stage, points to a last notable, educationally relevant feature of Kierkegaard's doctrine of stages. While the stages are defined as fundamentally different, and more or less incommensurable, Kierkegaard nevertheless describes them as in many respects similar and even overlapping. This is because their essential difference is one of fundamental attitude and not of content or outward expression. The aesthetic person can be concerned with duties and obligations, with moral and even religious matters. The ethical person can be engaged in artistic pursuits or love and passionate lovemaking. But the aesthetic person will primarily take pleasure in fulfilling her obligations or performing her religious worship—and doing it for the sake of this pleasure—whereas the ethical character will engage in artistic practice or sensual pleasures mainly for the sake of realizing herself and fulfilling her general human obligations. It is thus striking that all of Kierkegaard's characters employ roughly the same battery of notions and ideas, for example, that life should be aesthetically satisfying—this is affirmed by Judge Vilhelm no less than by the aesthetic characters—or that what matters is the attitude rather than the content of one's doings and experiences, something which the aesthetic character is also prone to emphasize (e.g. in the manifesto-like essay *Crop Rotation*, E/O 223ff.; SKS 2, 271ff.). The difference is, in itself, merely one of attitude; the representatives of the different stages accentuate different parts of their apparently shared views or interpret them differently. Hence we may speak of an ethical aesthetics, or an aesthetical ethics (as even the aesthetic character cannot but subscribe to certain social rules of conduct).

The educational significance in this idea of a kind of mutual interpenetration of the stages—or an 'equilibrium' between the various elements, as Kierkegaard calls it (E/O 475ff; SKS 3, 153ff.)—lies in the implication that a fundamental transformation in outlook and attitude need not require the student to absolutely give up anything which has hitherto meant something to her. Kierkegaard actually urged one to endorse one's former habits and pleasures. He was not concerned with lifestyle-changing measures. He assumed that adopting a certain existential attitude would inform one's actions and choices, generally making them more appropriate. But he did not, however, expect or demand that it should lead one to restrict one's range of interests or activities.

That the same elements can be present in different existential spheres does not, according to Kierkegaard, make them any less different. It should not be seen as a compromise or an instance of 'mediation', a notion Kierkegaard regarded with contempt. The apparently 'aesthetic' elements take on completely new significance when they become part of the ethical sphere, he insisted; they become subjugated to the ethical outlook and endowed with a profoundly ethical quality. This has consequences for Kierkegaard's very ambitious notion of self-cultivation or *Bildung*:

Activities and elements of knowledge should not merely be integrated into a comprehensive whole, they should be infused by, and made dependent of, the fundamental attitude of the person in question.

It should be noted that some interpreters reject the very idea of different stages or spheres of existence. They see it as inconsistent with the overall tendency of Kierkegaard's philosophy. In one place he says, famously, that 'there can be no system for life itself' (CUP 92; SKS 7, 105; in Danish 'tilværelsens system', i.e. literally 'system of existence'). This has been taken as evidence that he did not put forward any kind of existential theory. The notion of different stages of existence has been seen as normative—prescriptive and hierarchical—in a way that also seems to clash with Kierkegaard's open, dialogical, experimental and apparently descriptive approach to matters of human existence.

It should, however, be clear from what has been said above that such a dismissive attitude is mistaken, or at least grossly exaggerated. Kierkegaard distinguished consistently and elaborately between different stages throughout his pseudonymous—that is, philosophical—work. Hardly any of his central notions make sense independently of this framework. The critics are on to something. But it is a matter of understanding the doctrine of stages in a sufficiently nuanced way, rather than simply dismissing it. As noticed above, the doctrine does not purport to show how one ought to live, or even how one ought to live as an aesthetic, ethical or religious person. The decisive impulse, which might move the individual to adopt a certain mode of existence (but can never be predicted with certainty to do so), must come from the person herself.

Hence the doctrine of stages is no system in Hegel's sense, which, by contrast, shows what must happen by necessity. Yet it is still a *theory* in that it describes certain general patterns and their implications. It also posits various *conditionally* necessary relationships: *If* you should choose to live aesthetically, *then* your life cannot but have this or that fundamental character. The doctrine of stages also is normative and even hierarchical in a certain sense. The stages are depicted as inferior or superior to each other in various, often complex, ways. But as already noticed, the descriptions are not, given from an independent standpoint: They are always given for the standpoint of one or another of the stages in question. This relativizes what is said to a certain degree, but not so much as to undermine its claim to being objectively correct. It is conditional or hypothetical, but that is something else, and a feature of a great many claims commonly regarded as both theoretical and valid.

To conclude my discussion of Kierkegaard's doctrine of stages, let me notice that it does, in a way, combine all the three modes of life between which Kierkegaard himself was torn. In sum, it requires that existence must be pleasant and aesthetically satisfying; that it must involve stable commitments and universal obligations; and it must be based on unrestricted passion and a will to embrace the absurdity of existence. As a fitting response to his own quest and experience, the doctrine does envisage such a combination as a possibility, but also as a task of almost heroic proportions.

1.4 The Limits of Systematic Knowledge

An important task in the philosophy of education is to assess the value of different kinds of knowledge and compare them to other values and aspects of life. This is necessary in order to balance different learning goals and as a guide to content and method selection. Kierkegaard did not provide any detailed analyses of specific forms of knowledge. But he did assess the benefits, drawbacks and limitations of particular forms of knowledge and belief. Moreover, in his attempt to show limitations of systematic or objective knowledge, he also came to highlight certain important forms of knowledge that have generally attracted little attention, viz. various forms of subjective and existential-practical knowledge. There was much focus on practical knowledge in general in twentieth-century philosophy, under the headings of ‘knowing how’ (Ryle 1949) and tacit knowledge (Polanyi 1966), and also as ‘embodied’ or ‘situated’ knowledge (e.g. Haraway 1988). But until this day, relatively little has been written about what might be called existential knowledge (and which probably comprises several distinctive forms of knowledge). Kierkegaard was the first to describe this in any detail, and remains one of the few to have done so.

Kierkegaard points to three basic shortcomings of objective knowledge of the kind produced by science: (1) It is knowledge from a purely third-person perspective—which is, in effect, knowledge from no particular perspective whatsoever. (2) For this reason, it has insufficient motivational power; in fact, by itself it is virtually powerless. (3) It is conditional and uncertain, at least inasmuch as it pertains to reality (and not just logical relationships), and so cannot provide a real foundation for human life.

The impotence of pure knowledge was one of the very first philosophical ideas Kierkegaard articulated clearly. It is a central theme of his earliest journal entries. He came to think that what really matters cannot be any kind of knowledge content as such. The crucial factor is how the content is taken up and animated. Truth, understood as a correct representation of a state of affairs, is in itself a matter of indifference:

What good what it do me if truth stood before me, cold and naked, not caring whether I recognized her or not? (EK 8; JP 33; SKS 17, 25)

Later, in *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard criticizes objective knowledge for ‘its helplessness at getting a man to act’ (EO 489; SKS 3, 171)

It might seem that Kierkegaard is merely repeating a point made, most famously, by David Hume: A mere belief that something is so-and-so is insufficient to motivate an action. In order to be genuinely motivated, one also needs a *desire* to achieve a certain object. Only in conjunction with such a desire can a belief—for example the belief that I am presented with a plate of food—motivate an action (e.g. eating the food), Hume claimed. In his *Treatise of Human Nature*, he asserted that ‘reason alone can never be a motive to any action of the will’ and ‘never oppose passion in the direction of the will’ (Hume 1978, 413).

Kierkegaard did broadly share Hume's view. He went even further in the same direction, holding not only that action has to be based on a desire—which, as Hume understands it, may amount to nothing more than a mere *preference*—but that it must flow from genuine *passion* (e.g. CUP 171). But Kierkegaard also noticed another deficiency of systematic or theoretical knowledge. Systematic knowledge, he pointed out, is concerned with 'outward' work and is unable to grasp the individual's 'inward work' as such. For it is essentially objective and *impersonal*:

Philosophy looks at the outward work and sees it [...] as it is absorbed into and transformed by the world-historical process. It is this process that really forms philosophy's object and philosophy looks at it under the category of necessity. Therefore it keeps at a distance the reflection which would point out that everything might have been otherwise. It looks at world history in a way in which there can be no question of an either/or [...] though it cannot occur to any philosopher to deny there is one for the acting individual. Hence the lack of concern ... with which philosophy regards history and its heroes, for it considers them under the category of necessity (EO 489; SKS 3, 70f.).

The events of world history are described with a 'lack of concern' (*sorgløshed*, perhaps better translated as *carelessness*), that is, without ever adopting or taking seriously the point of view of the individual, who at each instance is required to act and so choose a particular path of action and leave other possibilities unrealized. The basic contingency at the root of the historical process is abstracted away. That, moreover, has ramifications for the epistemological status of historical knowledge as such; even granted that it can lay claim to necessity, it is only necessary relative to what actually happens in history.

This is part of a polemic against Hegelian idealism, which need not concern us here. But although much of Kierkegaard's talk of 'science' and 'systematic knowledge' seems to refer, in the first place, to Hegelian philosophy, most of what he says applies to theoretical knowledge in a much broader sense as well. He argues that theoretical knowledge is essentially incapable of grasping the primary task that confronts the acting individual, and so cannot adequately grasp her basic situation and what it really means to *be* her. One need not buy into Hegel's peculiar view of a philosophical knowledge as consisting in a 'mediation' of opposites to appreciate Kierkegaard's point that theoretical knowledge generally tends to *relativize* and so render insignificant its object. It does so by placing it in a larger scheme of things, by seeing it from a broader, impersonal perspective; something which is generally considered an epistemic virtue, but makes it unable to deal with human existence as such. For from the point of view of the individual, possibilities of action present themselves as having absolute significance, and as being significantly different from each other. As long as these possibilities are mere objects of contemplation, their value may be tempered by other concerns; action, by contrast, requires a whole-hearted, indivisible commitment.

The situation confronting an acting individual should not be conceived as a mere 'option space'. When shopping in the supermarket, I am presented with a variety of products with various apparent qualities. My choice is not, however, a genuine choice as Kierkegaard understands it. The shopper's attitude is more similar to the theoretical, scientific perspective. The products and their qualities belong to the

same general kind. Their differences are merely relative; and I am likely to make my choice simply by reacting to the available information and choosing what appears cheapest and/or most attractive. Moreover, even though it will probably turn out that I prefer some of the products to the others, it does not follow that I really care much about them. It is unlikely that I will invest my personality in the act of choosing or identify with my choice. Therefore, it is arguably not really made by *me*. I am merely effecting a certain action that has already been determined by the circumstances. This is true regardless of whether I just grab something out of habit or deliberate quite extensively. For even in the latter case, I will still let myself be moved by the objects and principles that present themselves to me. This foreshadows Kierkegaard's notion of authenticity, which differs from standard notions of autonomy in not involving reflection or deliberation (see Chap. 2).

Kierkegaard regards scientific knowledge as being both too compelling and not compelling enough. It is intellectually compelling to such a degree that it leaves no room for genuine freedom. Demanding that one should act from necessity, Kierkegaard notes, is nothing less than a contradiction (E/O 489; SKS 3, 171). On the other hand, scientific knowledge is very far from emotionally compelling. Since it is also unable to deal with the fundamental contingency and individuality that, according to Kierkegaard, are basic aspects of reality as revealed by experience, its necessitating character turns out to be a double-edged sword: It actually deprives it of any power not only to motivate, but also to truly understand human action. Hence Kierkegaard contends that the tendency to accumulate scientific knowledge has hindered and obscured the attempt to come to terms with existence. True, there had been an increase also in psychological knowledge, and an apparent recognition of the role of subjectivity. After all, German Idealism, the romantic movement and even the empiricist countermovement had been preoccupied with questions of self-consciousness and self-awareness, the moral and epistemic significance of emotions and the like. Their efforts had, however, led to the production of theoretical knowledge of such subjective matters, and thus objectified them.

My main thought was that in our time, due to the quantity of knowledge, one has forgotten what it is to *exist* and what *inwardness* means (CUP 209; SKS 7, 226)

Inwardness (*inderlighed*), as Kierkegaard understands it, is not just a kind of internal, mental reality complementary to physical reality. Nor does it describe a state of introversion. The Danish *inderlighed* has a strong emotional connotation; it expresses a state or process in which one unreservedly, passionately and exclusively commits oneself to something, like when one really and fully hopes or loves. It denotes a kind of essentially subjective, that is, non-objectifiable, subjectivity. But it differs essentially from an objective perspective not so much by being private or exclusive as by characterised by involvement and affection rather than by indifference.

A further limitation of theoretical knowledge is that in so far as science is able to deal with empirical, historical realities, it can at most justify its claim to the extent of making them highly *probable*. But this, again, is both too much and too little (CUP 13; SKS 7, 21). It is too much in that it circles in on the historical events,

leaving no room for an appreciation of the element of free choice or personal experience and outlook that has, presumably, also been a crucial factor in history. It is too little in that it still does not provide the individual with any real certainty. Kierkegaard does not generally require that one's actions should be based on an indubitable foundation. Quite to the contrary, he urges that one should dare act on beliefs that seem highly doubtful from a rational standpoint. But he does acknowledge a need for something that can prompt and sustain a *categorical*, unreserved attitude (cf. his notion of inwardness), and theoretical knowledge is unsuited for this role both because of its neutral, detached character but also because it deals in mere probabilities.

Put in contemporary terms, Kierkegaard seems to argue that science merely provides reasons for *accepting* certain views. What is needed in order to have a sufficiently robust foundation for action is more than mere acceptance, namely genuine *belief*, which is categorical and essentially connected to our emotional responses (Cohen 1992).

In contrast to scientific or theoretical knowledge, Kierkegaard speaks of 'essential knowing' as knowing that concerns existence and is 'inwardly':

All essential knowing concerns existence, or only such knowing as has an essential relation to existence is essential, is essential knowing. Knowing that does not concern existence, inwardly in the reflection of inwardness, is from an essential point of view accidental knowing, its degree and scope from an essential point of view indifferent (CUP 166; SKS 7, 181).

The English translation 'knowing' (rather than 'knowledge') nicely captures the active character of such essential knowing. It is not an abstract knowledge content, but rather a way of being in which one is present to oneself as an acting individual.

Kierkegaard's point, or various aspects of it, has since been made in a number of instructive ways. Contemporary philosophers of mind and language have emphasized the essential difference between the first-person and third-person perspective. One cannot derive a first-person description of a situation from a third-person description. But neither is a third-person description sufficient to explain everything that goes on in the world—in particular, it is not able to explain the beliefs and actions of human beings. For they seem to depend crucially on the perspective of the person whose beliefs and actions they are, on her understanding of herself and her place in the world.

The knowledge that 'someone is in hungry' cannot motivate me to eat. Even the knowledge that 'Søren is hungry', or that 'the person who is at latitude 54.786554 and longitude 9.423555, 1 PM, January 22, 2017, is hungry', cannot motivate me, as long as it has not dawned upon me that *I* am the person concerned. In order to really explain people's actions, we need to take into account their unique subjective perspective. We must, in a way, base our explanations on a kind of *subjective knowledge*—knowledge that we, as individuals, have certain interests, beliefs or experiences, and that we are *situated* in specific circumstances (Perry 1979; Baker 2013).

A more striking illustration of Kierkegaard's point can be found in a short story by the Argentine author Jorge Louis Borges. In the story *The Writing of the God*, Borges tells—in the first person—of an Aztec priest, Tzinacán, who has been tortured and incarcerated by the Spanish conquistadors. Tzinacán searches desperately for a magic formula, which, if said aloud, will make his prison disappear, cause the leader of the conquistadors to be killed by a Jaguar, rendering himself effectively omnipotent. He does find the formula—fourteen ‘apparently random’ words—but eventually decides not to say it aloud. By coming to know the formula, he has come to view himself and his predicament as insignificant, as a mere part of an immensely larger picture. Since he has obtained the allegedly precious knowledge, he is no longer able to make sense of the particular situation he is in, or the particular person he is; they have become relativized to the point of virtually disappearing. So the knowledge renders itself practically irrelevant. Borges story vividly illustrates Kierkegaard's point: An absolute knowledge of the world is supposedly all-powerful, but actually impotent; absoluteness and objectivity go hand in hand with indifference.

It should be noted, however, that Kierkegaard does not deny the immense value of theoretical knowledge. Not all knowing has to be essential knowing; essential knowing is essential to existential matters, but completely inadequate for all other sorts of issues. There is, however, a connection, which makes the notion of essential knowing more widely relevant (and turns out to be of consequence to Kierkegaard's notion of *Bildung* or self-cultivation, cf. Sect. 2.4). Kierkegaard considers essential knowing a prerequisite for the sound appropriation and enactment of knowledge in general. In his journal, he noticed that

I certainly do not deny that I still accept an *imperative of knowledge* and that through it men must be influenced, *but then it must come alive in me* ... (JP 33; EK 8; SKS 33).

Without essential knowing, all other knowledge one may have remains insignificant. Again, this does not mean that it cannot be useful. Furthering knowledge in the absence of existential knowledge can make perfect sense as long as it is done for the sake of society, welfare, employability or the like. Yet Kierkegaard assumes that there is a more fundamental, and in some sense overriding, objective. Only knowledge that becomes integrated into and pervaded by the student's self-understanding and contributes to her personal development is really valuable.

What is the specific relevance of Kierkegaard's thoughts about knowledge to education? It lies partly in his demonstration that there is important knowledge which must, in some sense, be learned, even though it cannot be taught by instruction or acquired from books or other learning materials. This motivates—and foreshadows—his notion of indirect communication, which shall occupy us in Chap. 4. It points to the shortcomings of an overly *didactical* approach to education, which focuses one-sidedly to relations between knowledge contents and learning goals and pay too little attention to the mode of communication and appropriation.

In essence, the important knowledge in question is simply that one is a subject in a strong, irrelative and irreducible sense; that this confronts one with a task that can

neither be solved nor evaded by any theoretical knowledge; and that in order to really know that this is so and act accordingly, one has to commit wholeheartedly to it—knowing oneself in the relevant sense is inextricably bound up with becoming and caring about oneself (more about this in Chap. 2).

Kierkegaard thus points out how different *modes* of knowing are important to education. Were it only a matter of coming to believe the proposition that one is a subject in a strong and existentially obligating sense, this could be easily conveyed by conventional means (for example, like I have just done it; by expressing the point in an indicative sentence). The difficulty arises because is predominantly a matter of knowing *what it is like to be* such a subject and *reacting appropriately to it*, that is, adopting the appropriate emotional and volitional stance.

No doubt this problem is both more important and more difficult when it comes to distinctively existential knowledge. Still, Kierkegaard's observation that the mode of knowledge matters no less (and sometimes more) to learning than the content is capable of generalization. There is a strong focus on *deep* versus *superficial* learning in contemporary educational research. But deep learning is usually considered mainly as a matter of achieving a comprehensive and coherent understanding, that is, of embedding items of knowledge in a larger knowledge structure. Important though this undoubtedly is, it hardly qualifies as deep learning in a more profound sense, since the process is described as operating on a qualitatively uniform level. At most, first-order knowledge is combined with higher order knowledge, as when experiential or testimony-based factual knowledge is connected with knowledge of laws and principles.

By contrast, Kierkegaard shows how another, complementary kind of depth may be achieved by adopting a more appropriate mode of knowledge of the same facts or matters (typically by transforming propositional knowledge into a more practical format) and by attaching it to the right pattern of emotional and volitional response.

Still, more generally, it can be said that Kierkegaard champions the unity of passion and reason. He emphasizes the importance of students' emotional reactions to learning. Yet in contrast to much contemporary educational thinking, and most philosophy, he does not treat emotions as a separate factor having to do with students' overall well-being or functioning as an independent motivating factor. He suggests a more integrated view, according to which knowledge contents have to be realized emotionally and personally in order to be genuinely learned at all. He contends that coherence and systematicity of a body of knowledge is not enough, and may even be a hindrance to the kind of existential integration he considers essential to genuine learning. It is an open question whether such a notion of essential and existential knowledge is too exclusive or ambitious to be relevant to contemporary educational concerns (see Chap. 4). It also remains debatable in how far the content of knowledge is really inessential to motivation and action. But there can be no question that these are important issues, which have been mostly neglected in educational theorizing, or that Kierkegaard's views deserve to be taken seriously, in spite—or rather because—of their radical nature.

Chapter 2

Authenticity as Ideal and Idol

2.1 Introduction

Authenticity is a fascinating, but also a quite puzzling notion. It has become almost a platitude that one should be oneself. Yet, it is puzzling precisely because it appears almost trivial and thus so ill-fitted for the role as a substantial and a challenging ideal. For it seems that one cannot but be oneself. And the more specific version of the ideal that Kierkegaard championed appears even more puzzling: If one cannot but be oneself, there seems to be little point in urging, as Kierkegaard does, that one should *become* oneself (E/O 525/SKS 3, 215). Kierkegaard was well aware of the apparent oddity of the demand that one should become oneself:

Now, of course, every human being is in a way also somewhat of a subject. To become what one in any case is, yes who would want to waste time on that ... ? Quite so, but just for that reason it is extremely hard, the hardest task of all, simply because every human being has a strong natural bent to become something else and more (CUP 108; SKS 7, 122).

This is an observation that is not just fundamental to Kierkegaard's thinking, but which has become a central tenet of the whole tradition of existential philosophy: Human being tends toward inauthenticity. They either fail to realize who they are or distance themselves from it by trying to live up to some kind of role model. For that reason, the apparently trivial task of becoming oneself is actually both important and difficult.

There is a fairly straightforward understanding of the 'become yourself!'-maxim, which is rooted in classical teleological thinking. It is perhaps best known from Aristotle, who conceived of a human being as analogous to a plant: It embodies a certain potential and should be understood, even in its actual, not yet fully developed state, by what it might become under sufficiently favourable circumstances. Thus, it is sometimes said that 'a tree is contained in the seed'. Accordingly, by growing and learning, an individual might approach a state of greater perfection and so come to realize its blueprint to an ever larger degree.

Kierkegaard was surely inspired by this kind of thinking, which informed much of the German tradition of self-cultivation. Yet his own understanding of authenticity was much more distinctively modern. He did not see the process of becoming oneself as a pre-programmed unfolding of an innate potential. Though the Aristotelian tradition, and still more its idealist and romantic heirs, had pictured self-development as an interactive process, requiring the individual to respond to and even at times to alter external circumstances, it still saw it as a largely natural, orderly process. On this conception, becoming oneself was mainly a matter of immersing oneself in the process of maturing, and letting things run their course.

By contrast, Kierkegaard sees becoming oneself as a genuine task; something that requires a resolute determination and concentrated effort. It is not something that can be expected to simply happen to one, even under the most favourable circumstances. Becoming oneself involves an act of self-assertion in the face of one's natural inclinations, even if it also, in the end, makes it possible, and even requires one, to embrace one's past and psychological character (E/O 552f.; SKS 3, 239).

A further contrast to the classical teleological view is that Kierkegaard's notion of authenticity is not perfectionist. He did not assume that there is a definite blueprint for human beings. He did believe in the importance of self-cultivation, as we shall see in the subsequent sections. But he emphasized that becoming oneself had nothing to do with exploiting one's inborn talents (E/O 496; SKS 3, 178). Rather, by becoming oneself, one frees oneself from any reliance on such talents or character traits. I do not become myself by developing my natural dispositions to the greatest possible extent. It is the other way round: By becoming myself, I enable myself to develop my talents in a way that makes them really matter, and genuinely my *own*. Authenticity is the precondition for self-cultivation, not its product (although, as we shall see, at least according to the ethical character, the relationship between the two is very close).

2.2 Becoming Oneself

What, then, does it mean to become oneself, according to Kierkegaard? Since one is, as noted, already oneself in a straightforward sense of the word, it is clear that it must be about a more specific, *normative* notion of the self. Moreover, Kierkegaard directly contrasts 'becoming oneself' with 'being oneself', seeing the latter as an expression of the aesthetic mode of existence (EO 492; SKS 3, 173). Hence it is not merely a matter of *finding* oneself, of seeing and accepting how one already is. On the other hand, Kierkegaard vehemently rejected the stronger notions of 'self-constitution' that border on self-creation (more on this in Sect. 2.3). With his ideal of authenticity, he attempted to walk the fine line between an understanding of the self as determined by natural and social factors and the almost megalomaniac idea of self that creates itself out of nothing. As we shall see, he considered the

latter an even more problematic expression of inauthenticity than traditional views of the self as constrained by its own nature.

All this, however, is still mostly negative. It delineates the notion of authenticity, but does not say directly what it is about. Turning to the positive characteristics, it can be said of Kierkegaard's notion of authenticity that it is *dynamic*, *conative*, *affective* and *structural*.

It is *dynamic* because it is essentially about *becoming* oneself. Human existence is at root *action-like* or *procedural*. It essentially unfolds in time. Hence, authenticity is *not* about arriving at a privileged end state. It is about essentially being on the way towards something. It is about continually *accomplishing* or *enacting* oneself.

Authenticity is *conative* in that it is constituted by an act of *willing* or *choosing*. As noted above, becoming oneself not just happens to one. It requires a continuous and concentrated effort. In a way, it simply *is* this very effort: only so far as you try to become yourself *are* you actually yourself. Kierkegaard not merely regards willing and choosing as essential aspects of becoming oneself. He *identifies* the self with choosing, thereby, again stressing that it is not an end state or product, but a process, or, still better, the act of engaging in or effectuating a process (with the *attitude* being the primary factor, as opposed to the actual accomplishing of effects).

Authenticity is *affective* since the act of willing is not driven by knowledge but of *passion*. Again, it is not just that passion is an aspect or precondition of authenticity—it is taken by Kierkegaard to be simply identical to subjectivity (CUP 29 (the identification is not obvious in the English text due to a mistranslation); SKS 7, 39). Genuine passion is simply to be unreservedly involved in the process of accomplishing oneself.

Lastly, authenticity is a *structural* notion. It requires one to become, so to speak, aligned with oneself. Inauthenticity is always characterized by some kind of discord between different aspects of the self. Kierkegaard's technical term for such a discord is *despair*. In Sect. 2.3 we shall look more closely at the various forms it might take. The positive relationship one might establish to oneself has several different dimensions, corresponding to different ways in which one may match or be in concord with oneself. It consists of *self-knowledge*, *self-acceptance*, *self-control* and *self-responsibility*. To be authentic thus requires one to know oneself (the Socratic maxim); to accept or come to terms with oneself; to master oneself, to be in charge of one's life; and to take responsibility for what one does and is. Kierkegaard illustrates the latter aspects by saying that the individual may be considered the 'editor' of her own life, but stressing that she is the editor *in chief*, and so carry full editorial responsibilities (E/O 551; SKS 248).

The self-knowledge in question is, perhaps unsurprisingly, no ordinary knowledge. Kierkegaard conceives of it in terms of *transparency* (EE 549; SKS 3, 246). The authentic person does not in any way hide from herself; she is aware of everything she is and wants to be. However, this kind of self-knowledge is not achieved by any kind of theoretical reflection, self-observation or the like. As long as one keeps to these usual knowledge formats, a gap will remain between the knower and the known, and the essential character of the 'object' of knowledge—

which is, in this case, one's own subjectivity—will elude one's grasp. The task-character of human existence, the fact that it necessarily affects and matters to oneself, will not be revealed in such a theoretical attitude.

Instead, the source of self-knowledge is authenticity itself. In becoming oneself, one also knows oneself—not in the sense that one forms a conception of or belief about oneself, but in the form of an immediate awareness of being in harmony with one's thoughts and doings, or, stronger still, of being *identical* to them. It is a kind of *knowing by acting*. This should serve to demystify the otherwise controversial notion of transparency. The idea of the subject enjoying a privileged access to its own conscious states has been severely criticized during the twentieth century (though it has also recently been reasserted (e.g. Farkas 2008), and may be considered partially rehabilitated). What Kierkegaard has in mind is not, however, that the subject possesses an 'inner eye's capable of infallibly observing the innermost workings of the soul. It is rather that we are, at any rate, capable of knowing what we do, not in terms of our external accomplishments but in terms of what we attempt to bring about or care for. Kierkegaard probably also thinks that we have a kind of pre-reflective awareness of *how* we are doing, in the sense of our basic emotional state and existential commitments. This, however, is hardly essential to his general view of authenticity. Even if one is sceptical of Kierkegaard's undeniably 'internalist' tendencies and rhetoric of immediacy, one should be able to accept, with the necessary modifications, his analysis of authenticity as involving some kind of privileged self-awareness that manifests itself in the very enactment of one's life.

Self-*acceptance* is an important component in authenticity, which in Kierkegaard's view requires a willingness and ability to confront one's past and embrace one's personality. Hence, authenticity is not an idealizing normative notion that requires one to give up one's sorry present or past state and aim for something more perfect. That would be a flight from oneself and thus an example of inauthenticity. Kierkegaard does conceive of authenticity as dynamic and forward-directed. He does not consider it *sufficient* to come to terms with one's self in its present state. Yet he considers it a *necessary* component in becoming oneself. The self-acceptance requirements are in fact very strong: It is not just that one should accept the overall characteristics of oneself, or a set of basic, defining core values and commitments. One is not allowed to leave out *anything*, but has to embrace it all:

The person who has chosen himself and found himself ... has himself as specified in all his concretion. He has himself then, as an individual who has these abilities, these passions, these inclinations, these habits subject to these external influences ... for the self that is the aim is not an abstract self which first fits in everywhere, and so nowhere, but a concrete self which stands in living interaction with these determinate surroundings ... (E/O 552; SKS 3, 249f.).

Self-acceptance is of course not the same as *self-approval*. It should not be confused with the self-help literature's insistence that we are all perfect as we are, or ought to believe it. Confronting oneself invariably means facing up not just to one's

accidental mistakes, but to one's essential imperfections. (As a Lutheran Christian, Kierkegaard was keen to emphasize this, perhaps even somewhat exaggeratedly). But Kierkegaard saw that by judging all too rashly that one's actual self is far from perfect and ought to be improved, one is likely to neglect one's characteristic imperfections and mistake the ideal one is striving towards for one's real self. One is also likely to forget that any existing self must be concrete, whereas ideals and role models are not really existing individuals, but abstractions—that is, incomplete sets of selected properties.

2.3 Self-choice and Autonomy

Authenticity also involves *autonomy*. It entails being one's own master and acting in accordance with principles that are not imposed from the outside, but laid down by oneself. Because Kierkegaard emphasizes the role of free choice in becoming oneself, the notions of authenticity and autonomy are in fact very closely related, and can be difficult to distinguish clearly. Living authentically means living on a condition posited by oneself. Whatever can be said in favour of the aesthetic mode of existence, it does appear deficient inasmuch as it is not authentic in this sense. An aesthetic character may exhibit creativity and originality, but because of the arbitrary nature of her life and its fundamental dependency on external conditions of life (including her own talents and whims), she cannot be said to be in charge of her own life. Part of the radicalism of Kierkegaard's notion of authenticity consists in the inclusion of psychological traits and tendencies into the category of 'external circumstances'. Living in accordance with one's nature, using and developing one's inborn talents, do not suffice for living in accordance with *oneself* (E/O 496; SKS 3, 178). Kierkegaard does not consider e.g. a poetical talent "one's own" or "part of oneself" anymore than is an outward condition like wealth or fame.

But does this not contradict the idea that one should take responsibility for, and so in a way identify with, one's complete, concrete self—including habits, inclinations and traits developed through external influences? There is indeed a tension, and the relationship between the self that is free to choose and the more comprehensive and deterministically constituted (or 'heteronomous') self is one of the most difficult problems for interpretation of Kierkegaard's work.

On the one hand, Kierkegaard seems to require complete autonomy, in the very radical sense that no preexisting state of affairs—including the individual's own nature—can be allowed to determine one's choice. On the other hand, he polemicizes against subjectivist-idealist views like that of the early Fichte, who took the basis of all reality to be the 'absolute I', which posits itself (and basically *is* this very act of self-positing) (Fichte 1982), thus coming close to postulating a self-creation *ex nihilo*. Kierkegaard distances himself from such views by explicitly distinguishing *choosing oneself* from *positing oneself*: 'What I choose, I do not posit, for if it were not posited, I could not choose it (E/O 516; SKS 3, 205). Choosing and becoming oneself, he repeatedly insists, are not to be understood as

an act of *self-creation* (e.g. E/O 549; SKS 3, 246). The authentic person does not have “absolute power to make himself into what he want[s]” (E/O 551; SKS 3, 249).

Yet in some places Kierkegaard describes the self as extremely ‘thin’, nothing but a fundamental activity of choosing, making it seem like a non-psychological, purely ‘transcendental’ self—the difference to Fichte’s absolute, self-positing I being only that in contrast to the latter it is not intended to function as principle in a general philosophical system. In the same passage in which Judge Vilhelm distinguishes choosing from positing the self, he also says that if the self ‘were not posited through my choosing it I would not choose it’ (E/O 516; SKS 3, 205). Likewise, his main objection to the aesthetic mode of existence is that it is based on a condition which is not posited by the individual herself (E/O 493; SKS 3, 178). At other times, as we have seen, Kierkegaard describes the self as extremely ‘thick’, counting not just psychological traits but also relations to other persons and one’s historical situation, including one’s past, among the factors that belong to the self and must not be ignored.

Without pretending to be able to demystify Kierkegaard’s view completely, a possible way to resolve at least some of the tension is this. There is only one self, which includes everything that pertains to one’s character or identity. But there are different *modes* of this self, different ways of being (and becoming) oneself, and more central as well as more peripheral aspects of the self. An authentic self will not just let itself be moved by external or psychological factors. It *will* of course be moved by them; to assume otherwise would be to ascribe to the self-magic or Münchhausen-like powers of absolute self-movement. But having achieved transparency, the authentic person will be aware of the determining factors as such, and this ‘insight into existential necessity’ already makes them into *more* than just determining factors. The insight in question is not an instance of theoretical knowledge, and doesn’t have to be *explicit* at all. It is rather a knowing *by* existing in a certain manner, by experiencing one’s personality and situation while in the process of enacting or being in it. However, it is only by being *chosen* that the self—still the one and only, complete and ‘thick’ self—is elevated to the status of an autonomous subject. Kierkegaard speaks about ‘remaining in one’s contingency’ but ‘ennobling it’ by choosing it (E/O 552; SKS 3, 249).

Kierkegaard is sceptical of any attempt to step outside the general scheme of things. Yet he does think it possible to remain within in the scheme of things but act or be in a way that can be considered free and autonomous. In some places, he even indicates that the self is able to temporarily break free from external influences and take up a somewhat detached stance:

At the instant of choice, then, he is in the most complete isolation for he withdraws from the surroundings, and yet is at the same instant in absolute continuity for he chooses himself as product; and his choice is freedom’s choice, so that in choosing himself as product he can just as well be said to produce himself (E/O 542f.; SKS 3, 239).

This does seem to ascribe to the self some kind of radical freedom; an ability to make nondeterministic choices and mould oneself from an Archimedean point

outside the flow of one's historical and psychological life. But it would probably be a misinterpretation to read into the quotation a two-step model, with the subject briefly withdrawing from worldly, deterministic affairs to make a sovereign choice, before returning to the turbulent civic life. Judge Vilhelm speaks of the individual who chooses as being in the same instant in absolute *continuity*. The withdrawal takes place while the subject is still immersed in her ordinary, worldly activities. In another place, the Judge even says that

... just when he seems to be becoming most isolated, he is entering more deeply than ever into the roots through which he is linked with the whole (E/O 518; SKS 3, 207).

So there is no real Archimedean point, no complete isolation (or else the individual will have missed out on herself and chosen an abstraction instead). There is a *movement* of the self, in which its concentrates on its most central features—its ability to choose, its passionate, active nature, and not least its individuality, without which the other aspects would still be mere abstractions. But the culmination of this movement is not an overcoming of one's contingency but rather a discovery and appropriation of it. And the 'dual existence' of which Kierkegaard speaks (E/O 489; SKS 3, 171) is not that of a split self or a shifting between states of detachment and involvement. It means that the self is simultaneously both free and a product of the historical circumstances.

This, again, shows that for Kierkegaard authenticity, and with it autonomy, is a special *mode* of existing, or existential *attitude*. It is a way of relating existentially to the very same events that might occur in the life of an inauthentic or indifferent individual. Authenticity, and the kind of autonomy implied by it, consists in the adoption of this mode or attitude. It pertains to—and pervades—all of the self, but is at the same time only an *aspect* of the self. This can also be seen from the fact that Kierkegaard requires the individual to posit the basic *condition* of her life; this is different from demanding that she posit herself *tout court*, that is, as a complete, 'thick' self. Note also that Kierkegaard speaks of self-*production*. This could seem like a synonym for self-creation. But the latin *producere* means 'to bring forth', and this is what Kierkegaard has in mind: not a creation out of nothing, but a taking over and bringing forth of something which has already come into existence.

Another, complementary way to make sense of Kierkegaard's autonomy requirement in the light of his apparent determinism is to see his view of autonomy (and, more generally, of authenticity) as being of a typical *structural* variety. He describes the act of choosing oneself as the 'original' choice, which, however, "is constantly present in every subsequent choice" (E/O 520; SKS 3, 210). He moreover describes it as the choice of not this or that, nor even of good or bad, but of the very difference between good or bad (that is, that there should be some kind of meaning and normativity, as opposed to indifference) (E/O 486; SKS 3, 165); a choice which he somewhat puzzlingly equates with choosing oneself (E/O 516; SKS 3, 209). It thus appears to be a kind of *higher order* choice. It is not the choice of some specific item or option over another, but rather establishes the principle according to which such choices are to be evaluated. It is in fact a distinctively higher order choice in that is not, in the last instance, even concerned with general

moral or prudential principles, but solely with one's basic existential attitude or condition of life.

This view has obvious affinities to a contemporary view defended by Harry G. Frankfurt. According to Frankfurt, one acts freely when one acts on a desire (or 'choice', as Kierkegaard would put it) that is supported by one's higher order desires—that is, one not only wants something, but *wants to want it*. Frankfurter moreover contends that such higher order desires reflect one's true self. They are the desires and choices persons *identify* with (Frankfurt 1982). By contrast, giving in to an addiction is usually not an example of free action, because the addict most likely does not want to have the desires in question, and do not want them to be effective. The addict does not identify with her first-order desires, but experiences herself as being compelled by them. Frankfurt's account of free action does not presuppose that the agent could actually have done otherwise, or that she has chosen to be the kind of person she is. It is compatible with a thoroughgoing determinism.

Kierkegaard's view is strikingly similar to Frankfurt's in a number of ways. He takes authenticity, freedom and autonomy to consist in an appropriate structural relationship between different aspects of the self—a kind of internal harmony or match. Whenever he diagnoses a case of inauthenticity or lack of freedom, he always explains it as stemming from some kind of internal discord; as a lack of an appropriate cognitive, affective or volitional relationship to oneself, or aspects of oneself. He does not care about the freedom to choose differently. It is all about choosing the one right thing—and so it is irrelevant whether the subject could have acted differently from what she in fact did. Kierkegaard also takes the most higher order choices to be constitutive of one's identity, and requires one to identify with one's basic choices and commitments.

A possible point of divergence is that Kierkegaard does not see it as essential to one's freedom that one's higher order choices should be formed through a process of deliberate reflection. Authenticity is *not* a question of living in accordance with a preconceived plan. It is not even a question of being *consciously aware* of the principles on which one bases one's actions. And it is not—and this is a clear difference to Kant as well—a question of being able to rationally justify one's actions. For Kierkegaard, the decisive higher order desires (which are actually *more* like desires and *less* like choices in the standard sense of the word) are formed intuitively, rather than deliberately. Otherwise, they will be only abstract descriptions of possible attitudes towards first-order desires that may happen to be one's own, but are not essentially so.

A third, complementary way to make sense of Kierkegaard's otherwise deeply puzzling thought on freedom and autonomy is this. He seems to be claiming both that the individual can change and remould herself and that she cannot, that her nature and culture have made her how she is and that this is something she just has to accept. But the apparent paradox might be resolved by considering that although one may not be able to change the objective facts, one could interpret them differently. By coming to terms with one's past and character, one is able to endow them with a new meaning. While this may not be much—or anything at all—from

the point of view of external reality, it could mean more than anything else from the point of view of an existing individual. An unhappy childhood cannot be changed retrospectively. However, if one is able to see it not as an excuse for one's current deficiencies, but rather as part of the process of self-development and self-improvement, one can alter its existential *significance* completely. It is still a determining factor, but it determines one in a different way, and does so because one has let it do so. By being taken into one's life as a concerned and responsible person, it becomes (re)produced and part of an altogether different life than would have been if the individual had not interpreted it thus. This way of understanding Kierkegaard's view is supported by his insistence that one's socially, historically and naturally formed self should not merely be taken over in the sense of being taken for granted and rested content with, but that it should be taken over as a *task* (e.g. E/O 551; SKS 3, 248).

There is thus a clear overall direction and coherence to Kierkegaard's thoughts about the autonomy of the self. But this does not mean that they are easy to fathom or without problems. A likely objection is that even something as subtle as an existential attitude or retrospective interpretation must still be considered a mental event and thus determined by further factors—or else radically indeterministic. It is hard to say which of these two possibilities Kierkegaard himself defended. A likely guess is that he did acknowledge some element of absolute, i.e. nondeterministic, freedom with regard to the basic choice of existential attitude.

Perhaps it is also relevant, at least in this case, to take into account the convoluted character of Kierkegaard's philosophical works and his use of pseudonymous characters to test views he considered worthy of close scrutiny, but did not necessarily share himself. It should be borne in mind that the elaborate reflections on self-choice in *Either-Or* II, on which this discussion has been mainly based, are carried out by the ethicist, Judge Vilhelm. There is a reason to assume that Kierkegaard did take an existential choice to be roughly the way it is described by the judge. But the Judge presents both the idea of an existential choice and the very notion of becoming oneself as expressions of an essentially ethical attitude; and as we know, Kierkegaard did not himself consider this attitude completely satisfying or free of internal tension. Some of this tension may be found even in the analyses of choice and freedom.

The Judge does frankly admit of the paradoxical character of his analysis. He intimates that it reflects the character of the subject matter in question, as answers to existential questions may defy ordinary logic. But this may be seen as a lapse into Hegelianism on his part. He begins by ridiculing the trendy Hegelian philosophy, defending the law of contradiction and advocating a strict either/or. Yet when it comes to the central question for his own philosophical inquiries, he resorts to a seemingly dialectical style of thinking. Kierkegaard also lets the judge briefly notice some of the problems pointed out above. In one place the judge himself briefly indicates that there may be a regress or circularity problem—autonomy is conferred on the self by being freely chosen, but free choice presupposes autonomy (E/O 491; SKS 3, 173). In other places, the judge comes close to defending a view suspiciously close to a Kantian or Hegelian account of autonomy, according to which

genuine freedom consists in bringing one's actions in alignment with some kind of general norm, or (in the case of Hegel), to take on a certain social role. The latter was obviously not Kierkegaard's own view; and in the later *Postscript*, which may come closer to expressing Kierkegaard's own position, becoming oneself is, characteristically, described as a less social, more inward process. It is still about a concrete self, but there is less talk about psychological traits and social influences.

By elaborating the tensions implicit in the idea of autonomy, Kierkegaard can also be seen as hinting towards a notion of relative or conditioned autonomy typical of the later stages of German Idealism and Romanticism. The idea is that the self is, at least in a sense, transparent and free; in so far, the traditional idea of an autonomous self is retained. But it is further thought that precisely in virtue of its transparency, the self is able to discover its dependency on some deeper or more comprehensive reality. It discovers the conditioned and limited character or its freedom in the very act of realizing it. Autonomy is *given* and may be found and taken over; but it is not a condition which the individual can bring about or maintain alone. Hence to become autonomous is not the same as achieving complete *self-sufficiency*. The latter is an illusion, and to believe in it or act as if one were, in fact, self-sufficient would be a manifestation of inauthenticity.

The idea of such a conditioned autonomy of the self becomes more explicit in Kierkegaard's later *The Sickness Unto Death*, where it says that

... the human self is such a derived, established relation, a relation that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another (SuD 13; SKS 11, 130).

This obviously has a religious connotation. Kierkegaard depicts the self as having been 'established' by a transcendent power. But it is an example of how Kierkegaard's religiously inspired views have more general significance and can be adopted without buying into their dogmatic implications. That the self is conditioned and that authenticity consists not least in becoming aware of this and letting it inform one's actions and self-understanding is a point that can be appreciated regardless of how precisely one understands the nature of the conditioning factor. Kierkegaard might have objected that this factor has to be something radically different from everything that can be found within the human sphere. His main reservation towards the ethicist's notion of autonomy may have been that it did not involve a relation to something thoroughly transcendent, and so remained under the illusion of self-sufficiency. But it is an open question how far one should follow Kierkegaard in his constant demand for radical and uncompromising solutions.

The deeper nature of autonomy may seem like a purely philosophical issue without relevance for educational concerns. In a way this is probably true; it may not matter much for such concerns whether the notion of self-choice is fundamentally coherent. But the idea of conditioned autonomy, and of authenticity as involving a taking over of one's historical and psychological self, is surely not without relevance. It provides a rationale for helping students to understand the historical and social conditions under which they have grown up, even when the aim of education is not to reproduce the dominant culture or build a collective identity. It also points to the risk of being too one-sidedly focused on emancipation,

opportunities, empowerment and personal development in education. There is a risk that such a focus will not really help to foster authenticity, but rather induce some kind of conformity—and, most importantly, create a tension in the student's self rather than overcoming it.

2.4 Modes and Failures of Self-realization

Kierkegaard wrote more extensively about misguided or mistaken forms of self-realization than about authentic existence as such. While there has been much criticism in recent times of the ideal of authenticity, especially of pop-psychological notions of self-development and -optimization (Brinkmann 2017), hardly anyone has diagnosed the discontents of self-realization as precisely and acutely as Kierkegaard. Social critics have described how the obsession with authenticity has contributed to the emergence of an individualist and narcissist culture (Bell 1973; Lasch 1979; Bloom 1987). Kierkegaard, however, went beyond the level of cultural criticism. He pointed to fundamental types of structural deficiencies in the self, some of which were prone to manifest themselves in exaggerated self-assertion. Perhaps the most original feature of Kierkegaard's analysis is that he understands such exaggerated self-assertion—and, more generally, excessive preoccupation with oneself—as forms of a *lack* or *loss* of self. He does not contrast self-realization with other, allegedly less self-concerned projects, as the social scientists and cultural critics tend to do. Instead, he takes for granted that whatever one may try or do, it will inevitable involve oneself, and thus be a form of self-realization—perhaps in the form of self-forgetfulness or self-denial, but these attitudes are, according to Kierkegaard, no less self-related than others. They are merely different modes of relating to oneself.

The different forms and manifestations of misguided self-realization are most elaborately described in the late (albeit still pseudonymous) *The Sickness Unto Death*. Kierkegaard here uses the term *despair* to denote any kind of discord between elements of a person's self. Another, more common theoretical concept with roughly the same meaning is *self-alienation*: Despair, as Kierkegaard sees it, consists in a person's inability to know, recognize, accept, identify with or being motivated by herself.

The most obvious case of a deficient mode of self-realization is when a person is simply *oblivious* to the task of becoming herself. In this case, Kierkegaard will say that the person does not recognize *having* a self (SUD 48; SKS 11, 157). This is characteristic of the philistine, who lives entirely by conventions. Since such a person is apparently in a state of perfect harmony—she identifies completely with the social expectations and opinions—she might be considered a case of unproblematic, innocent existence. After all, Kierkegaard takes lack of freedom to consist in an internal discord; and there does not seem to be any such discord in a person who is happily unaware of the task of becoming herself.

Yet, Kierkegaard argues that inasmuch as she is, after all, a human being—and a person—she does have a self, or the task to become herself; and so she is not really in harmony with herself (loc. cit.). In line with the idea of autonomy as conditioned or ‘given’, Kierkegaard seems to argue—in this case, more in line with the traditional Aristotelian ideal of self-realization—that because a person has been endowed with a potential for becoming herself, she *ought* to make use of this potential. Being human entails an obligation to be and act in a distinctively human fashion. A further argument turns on what would nowadays be called epistemic normativity: Kierkegaard contends that a person should not be guided by prudential rationality alone, that is, only care for her well-being even if this means sacrificing the concern for truth. On the contrary, Kierkegaard implies that the concern for truth, at least with regard to oneself, is the overriding one (loc. cit.).

These arguments may seem less convincing when considered in isolation. Why care for truth if one can do better without? Why give up the existential security characteristic of the existentially ignorant person? Why put to use a potential for something that is likely to lead one into troubles? Why does the very fact that one is a being of a certain type, that is, a human being, entail anything about what one should do or not?

Kierkegaard’s view gains more plausibility from his additional psychological observations. He takes it for granted that the self will, in any case, make itself be felt; as an integral part of every human being, it cannot be completely ignored. The fact that it has not been duly recognized will cast a shadow on the otherwise happily unreflective life of the philistine. She is likely to neglect this and so appear largely unaffected; but it suffices for describing her as being in a state of latent despair or disharmony, her apparent harmony and cheerfulness notwithstanding. Both the otherwise neglected self and the disharmony between the person’s self-understanding and true self are likely to become manifest, and a source of a negative emotional state that might be described as unhappiness, whenever her habitual ways of living or thinking are shaken up:

[T]he dread [*Angst*] in a spiritless person is recognizable precisely in his spiritless sense of security. Beneath it lies dread all the same, and also beneath it lies despair, and when the spell is broken, when life begins to quake, then it is immediately apparent that despair was what was lying beneath (SUD 50; SKS 11, 159).

It is debatable to what extent such a negative manifestation of the suppressed self is unavoidable, and how strongly it influences the happiness of the person in question. Maybe it is possible to refrain from using one’s potential for self-realization without actually feeling much dread or despair. It does seem plausible, however, to assume, as Kierkegaard does, that neglecting the task of becoming oneself is likely to lead to a latent insecurity. The observation is psychologically apt that apparent simple-minded buoyancy or complacency may often be a symptom of a less harmonious or assured self-understanding. What seems to be an uncomplicated immersion into social life is, in fact, the symptom of a deeper dissatisfaction with oneself.

This analysis has consequences for education. While it may not in itself carry any normative force (as long as one does not except Kierkegaard's more contentious claims about demands following from human nature as such), it provides a justification for intentionally disturbing apparently harmonious individuals, who seem happily immersed in their activities and social environment. Especially in contemporary societies, where no single set of social norms is likely to be absolutely dominant, it is highly likely that even students who appear content with conforming to conventional expectations will, sooner or later, come to experience conflicting values and self-doubt. Hence the observation that even the self-forgetful person may harbour an unresolved tension in herself provides a rationale for educating for authenticity.

The second kind of discord with oneself consists in having some notion of one's self, but shying away from it. A person may shirk from the *task* of becoming oneself, finding it too unpleasant or daring, or she may be unable to *accept* herself. In either case, the person does not really *want* to become herself (SUD 57; SKS 11, 165). This shows that there are motivational challenges even when it comes to matters of self-consciousness and self-realization. The knowledge that one has a self may not be sufficient for making one care for it. Kierkegaard does, however, assume that *adequate* knowledge of one's self *will* be instantly motivating. The lack of will reflects a lack of adequate self-consciousness. Adequate self-consciousness, on the other hand, takes the form of *knowing by acting*, and so cannot be dissociated from the act of becoming, and wanting to become, oneself.

Kierkegaard sees this kind of discord as constituting a progress compared with pure immediacy. In the latter case, some kind of external event is required to upset one's self-understanding and produce an awareness of the tension in it. In the case of not wanting to become oneself, there is consciousness of the task as such, and so a possible internal—and constant—source for an existential reorientation.

A further progression consists in the person remaining too weak to actually take on the task of becoming herself, but now being conscious of this very weakness (SUD 75; SKS 11, 176). This is both a lack of self-acceptance and motivational power. The person sees the point in becoming oneself; she even sees the point that this requires her to take over herself. She does not, as is otherwise often the case, want to be someone else, at least not in the first instance. Yet recognizing her own inevitable flaws and limitations, she is unable to really muster the will to realize herself *as such*. She does not merely lack the ability to do so, but does not really *want* it; for it she really did, she would also take up the task as such (at least this is what Kierkegaard assumes).

Finally, and probably most interesting, there is a third kind of discord consisting in various *exaggerated* forms of self-realization. Kierkegaard describes how one can 'be in despair to will to be oneself' (SUD 81; SKS 11, 181). That is, one can consciously attempt to realize oneself as a 'universal' or 'infinite' self; but such a self is different from the real self in that it is idealized and artificial. It is the idea of a self that is not conditioned by any external power, but freely constructed out of those parts that one has picked and chosen. The self attempts a complete *refashion* ('*omdannelse*') of itself:

However, this infinite self is really just only the most abstract form of the self ... And it is this self the despairer wants to be, severing the self from any relations to the power which has established it ... By means of this infinite form, the self wants in despair to rule over himself, or create himself, make this self the self he wants to be, determine what he will have and what he will not have in his concrete self ... [H]e first wants to undertake to refashion the whole thing in order to get out of it a self such as he wants ... and it is in this way he wants to be himself (SUD 82f.; SKS 11, 182).

At a first glance, this appears to match the ideal of authenticity very well: The self insists on being its own sovereign master, of freeing itself of all external constraints and positing the conditions for its own existence. Yet according to Kierkegaard, there are at least two problems with this. For *what* is constructed in such a process is not really *oneself*, but precisely a construction, an artefact. Exaggerated self-realization lacks the element of *taking over* one's concrete, limited self. A free-floating self with no inherent limitations or ties to concrete circumstances is not really a self at all. Moreover, by letting oneself be guided by such an abstract ideal, one does not really posit the conditions for one's own existence. Instead, one establishes a new dependency, viz. on the idealized notion of oneself. It is therefore rather another way of fleeing oneself. In a way it is more serious than not wanting to become oneself; for in the latter case, there is a more adequate conception of the task—even if the task thereby comes to appear too uninviting to be actually taken up.

2.5 Authenticity in Education

What is the educational significance of Kierkegaard's notion of authenticity? Bearing in mind that authenticity is not something that can simply be taught, there nevertheless seems to be several good reasons for adopting authenticity as an educational ideal.

First, achieving an alignment between different aspects of the self has obvious potential benefits. Kierkegaard assumes, somewhat overoptimistically perhaps, that such an alignment ensures that one will choose the right thing to do (E/O 556; SKS 3, 253). This is overoptimistic inasmuch as there is, of course, no guarantee that an authentic person will act in a morally good way. If she has developed amoral higher order preferences, for example by adopting totalitarian ideology or nihilism, she may be able to perform morally bad actions without thereby compromising her integrity and internal coherence. It is possible for a person to be transparent to and in control of herself, yet to engage in immoral and even cruel acts. Examples of this are known from history and biographical reports, even though it can often be doubted whether the persons in questions—for example allegedly self-discerning Nazis, terrorists or Mafiosi—have really achieved full authenticity.

Yet assuming that the moral principles adopted by the person are in fact legitimate, there is no question that internalizing them to the point of identifying with them will greatly enhance the likelihood of acting in a consistently and reliably

moral manner. In a way, Kierkegaard can be said to cash out the popular notion of an 'ethical compass'. A similar idea has been advanced by adherents of Aristotelian-inspired virtue ethics (e.g. Lovibond 2002). But Kierkegaard emphasizes the importance of a thoroughgoing *adoption* achieved not just through cultivation and habituation, but through choice and self-identification. This also means that his view of ethical formation is in a way more principled than the neo-Aristotelian. For although he denies explicitly formulated principles a central role in ethical conduct, to even a larger degree than Aristotelians typically do, he nevertheless sees it as flowing from a principled personality, and so as more stable and unified, and less variable or context-dependent.

It may still be thought that an emphasis on authenticity will inevitably play down moral responsibility, sense of community, solidarity etc. By giving priority to self-choice and personal development, Kierkegaard has presented a view that resonates well with contemporary individualism; but teachers and educational institutions have an obligation to counteract or mitigate this tendency, rather than cater to it. This critical line of thought seems to have something for it. Several influential thinkers have voiced similar concerns, if not directly related to education, then to societal tendencies in general. Alasdair MacIntyre has described Kierkegaard's theory of morality based on the choice as a fatal step towards radical subjectivism and nihilism. Ethical principles that are merely chosen can have no real authority, MacIntyre argues (MacIntyre 1981, Chap. 4). In a similar, albeit more nuanced vein, Charles Taylor has diagnosed what he calls a 'slide to subjectivism' in the existentialist interpretations of the ideal of authenticity (Taylor 1991, 55ff.). He argues that if authenticity is reduced to 'self-determining freedom' (ibid. 68), then it undercuts itself. It must also incorporate a responsiveness to defensible values, a recognition of the 'demands that come from beyond our own desires or aspirations' (ibid. 58).

In how far does this criticism apply to Kierkegaard? On the face of it, Kierkegaard does indeed slide into subjectivism. He makes the intensity and freedom—indeed, the very subjectivity—of one's choices into the sole important factor, and considers the *content* of one's choices inessential (E/O 485f.; SKS 3, 164). And he does, of course, generally emphasize individuality, freedom etc. Yet it is possible to defend his view, or at least make it appear less obviously problematic, both by challenging the critics' interpretation and by pointing out shortcomings of their own anti-subjectivist view.

Taylor may be right that a certain tension between subjective and objectively normative aspects of self-development should be accepted as part of a viable notion of authenticity (1991, 66). But it is hard to see how such a tension could be dealt with satisfactorily without any further guiding principle. Merely observing it gets us nowhere. Kierkegaard does precisely suggest a way in which the tension—which he duly recognizes—can be accommodated. The individual must indeed be responsive to intersubjectively acceptable (or otherwise trans-subjective) values. This emphasized very explicitly by the ethical character, but also, in a different, but parallel way, in connection with the religious stance. But the values need to be duly *appropriated*. The individual cannot just passively subject herself to them; they

may need independent authority, but this authority must also be recognized by the individual, according to Kierkegaard to such an extent that they can be said to be freely chosen. This is very different from a subjectivist ethics according to which values are mere projections of subjective preferences. On Kierkegaard's view, value-constitutive choices are far from arbitrary whims. Kierkegaard may have stressed the element of personal choice; but he equally stressed the need for personal choice to have a transpersonal set of norms to work with.

This is not intended as an apology for Kierkegaard. As we have seen, there are reasons to question the fundamental coherence and justification of his view. And he does admittedly place the final authority in the subject's own choice. But his view is considerably more nuanced than it appears from MacIntyre's criticism. It also constitutes a more wholehearted attempt to get to the root of the problem than merely juxtaposing the subjective and objective aspects of self-development, as Taylor does.

Moreover, while it may seem overly radical in some respects, Kierkegaard's conception of authenticity may, in fact, be more realistic and educationally relevant. Modern culture has become irrevocably individualist. This is conceded by Taylor, who aptly recounts the story of how authenticity became a powerful and ubiquitous ideal and also thinks that it deserves to be maintained, albeit with certain limitations (1991, 23). It is eminently sensible to assume that students in contemporary societies need to be able to personally identify with the norms they are expected to adopt. Mere habituation, even of the softer and more nuanced kind, will not do. Kierkegaard presents a model for addressing this situation rather than evading it. He suggests of a way of reconciling a basic and legitimate demand for authenticity with the existence of common and objectively binding norms. He gives little attention to the independent justification of these norms, however. He assumes that conventional morality is more or less correct, and that it is obviously so. The problem for Kierkegaard is not to provide theoretical foundations for morality—something for which he sees no need—but to explain how morality can become effective, how it can come to move a human being and not just present itself as a 'cold and naked truth'.

It should also be borne in mind that Kierkegaard himself points out the very same tendency to worship a degraded ideal of authenticity as Taylor does. His diagnoses of various forms of incomplete or misguided authenticity are among the most educationally relevant aspects of his thinking. They are relevant not least because the ideal of authenticity is an immensely powerful factor in modern culture and so an important factor in shaping the conditions under which education must take place. The ideal of authenticity has been popularized to such a degree that it has become not just an integral part of popular culture, but also of contemporary etiquette and a huge commercial factor. Commitment, passion, resoluteness, conscientiousness, dedication and individual responsibility are hailed as contemporary cardinal virtues. Products are sold by associating them with uniqueness, originality, boldness and self-expression. Clothes are presented as ways of making a 'fashion statement', of showing other people one's true, original personality.

The challenge is therefore not so much to make students think for themselves instead of clinging on to traditional values and assumptions. It is much closer to how Kierkegaard describes as the need to address the aesthetic character who believes herself to have risen above conventional norms, but has in fact only substituted one more trendy set of such norms for an old-fashioned one.

Authenticity as Kierkegaard understands it entails a considerable element of self-restraint and moderation. He does basically take it to require unrestricted commitment and passion, and so far his views do seem to tally with the contemporary ideology of self-realization. But he is more strongly wedded to the classical ideal of proportion and self-assertion through self-restraint. Self-realization is not a matter of aiming as highly or strongly as possible.

A maximum of passion and commitment can only be achieved if one manages to avoid *diversion* and maintains an undivided focus on the object, viz. on oneself. It is not necessarily wrong to be focused on the very *task* of becoming oneself, as long as this is understood correctly—that is, in the fundamental sense in which the self is *itself* a task. Nor is it wrong to identify with the fundamental pathos and energy one invests in the attempt to become oneself. But focusing on various *projects* of refashioning oneself is a diversion; and so is the fascination with one's own power of self-assertion or existential remoulding. Kierkegaard describes these excessive attitudes as forms of inauthentic existence in his analysis of the person who 'in despair wills to be herself'. He also diagnoses a very subtle form of such inauthenticity by letting Judge Vilhelm—himself a professed champion of modesty and self-restraint—be carried away by his enthusiasm for the ethical mode of existence, to the point where he seems almost to brag about his mastery of life.

Educating for authenticity must, therefore, consist in something else than simply advertising the ideal of authenticity. For one thing, the ideal is very likely to be misunderstood if it is presented straightforwardly (this is part of the rationale behind Kierkegaard's advocacy of indirect means of communication; see Chap. 4). When described in general terms, it almost inevitably comes to sound like a piece of coaching or self-help jargon—'believe in yourself', 'be yourself', 'just do it' etc. As such it is very seductive. Existential *topics* can easily spark students' interest, to such a degree that teachers can also be lured into catering to this interest by focusing on what Kierkegaard would see as the project of meditating on oneself as an *abstract* self, and thus as an existential diversion.

Students are also likely to have already internalized some version of the ideal of authenticity. It is open to debate—and a matter for sociological study—how widespread or culturally specific this tendency is. But it is ubiquitous in Western societies, and there are many indications that other cultures, included so-called traditional ones, have also adopted at least part of the ideal. At any rate, in many educational contexts teachers will have to deal with students for whom self-realization has become a predominant concern, albeit not necessarily as the task of becoming a Kierkegaard's sense. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that the main source of inauthenticity with which contemporary educators are confronted is the very ideal of authenticity, which has become something like the master idol of our age.

Kierkegaard gives scant advice on how to tackle this situation in practice. His main suggestions involve a kind of subtly orchestrated and careful self-cultivation (or *Bildung*; see Sect. 2.5) and the use of a dialogical and ‘maieutic’ approach that might prompt the individual to take up a more genuinely authentic attitude without relying on instruction or commands (see Chap. 4). Apart from this, his notion that becoming oneself entails the taking over of one’s historically formed self does provide some clues as to relevant educational approaches. The aim must be to correct the illusion that one is boundlessly free and can make oneself into whatever one likes (which, almost invariably, means emulating some role model)—while at the same time retaining a sense of the value and possibility of genuinely personal freedom.

More positively, the aim must be to make students connect with their historical and psychological conditions and let these inform their efforts at self-realization. This might provide a rather straightforward rationale for maintaining a historical perspective in education. It is not because students should come to see themselves as being historically determined, but rather because history is a medium through which they can come to know themselves. This leaves open, however, which aspects of history should be selected and emphasized, though it does provide a partial selection criterion. Though Kierkegaard has sometimes been interpreted thusly, there is nothing in his notion of history or its relation to human existence that supports a particularly nationalist narrative. It does rule out a very strongly cosmopolitan approach, inasmuch as Kierkegaard stresses the importance of some kind of rootedness and belonging. On the other hand, it provides a relatively unpolitical and normatively innocuous rationale for focusing on local habits and traditions, since there is no assumption that these are in any sense ‘better’ than others. It is just that they may be more relevant to the self-discovery and self-formation of students. One should be wary of assuming uncritically that some popular story from e.g. national or regional history is particularly adequate and existentially relevant. Kierkegaard rightly stresses that each individual has *her* particular history and also co-constitutes it through her understanding and choices. Hence, the teaching of history and culture should facilitate a process of appropriation and application in students by presenting a certain historical material, but not by presenting any rigid interpretation of it.

This is very different from the typical instrumental ‘canon-oriented’ argument for the importance of historical and cultural knowledge, which is based on the assumption that a certain amount of such knowledge is needed to crack the cultural code and gain access to other valuable knowledge from which she would otherwise be cut off (Hirsch 1988). Kierkegaard nowhere denies that something like this could be needed. He was, typically for his time, little concerned with issues of mass education, and does not seem to have worried about any lack of background knowledge. But as we shall see in the next chapter, his idea of education as self-cultivation or -formation differed strongly from content- or curriculum-oriented notions.

Chapter 3

Self-Cultivation and Its Discontents

3.1 Introduction: The Classical Notion of *Bildung*

Kierkegaard's stance towards self-cultivation is ambivalent. Like authenticity, he adopts it as a general ideal, but distinguishes between its more or less appropriate forms, and warns against its popular and superficial incarnations.

Let us first look at the classical notion of *Bildung*, which was developed predominantly by German thinkers from Herder to Goethe, Schiller and Humboldt, and which provides the background for Kierkegaard's thinking about self-cultivation. While it came in different versions, a number of fundamental tenets can be discerned. *Bildung* is characterized by the following features:

- (a) It pertains to a *person* as a *whole*. Though it is now common to speak also about the cultivation of specific traits or abilities as *Bildung* (e.g. 'scientific *Bildung*', 'democratic *Bildung*', or even 'digital *Bildung*'), in its original or paradigmatic sense, the notion applies to the general formation of a person as complete and mature human being. Hence it is not domain-specific, nor is it aimed at developing some specific generic skill, or set of such skills (von Humboldt 2000, 58).
- (b) It is *holistic* and *organic*. Not only does *Bildung* pertain to the person as a whole; its components, the many different qualities and abilities of which it consists, and the processes in which they are developed, must also form a coherent whole. The powers and abilities of the person must be brought to bear on each other, to such an extent that they can be said to be not just interdependent, but mutually interpenetrating. They must, moreover, be animated by the general attitude and self-understanding of the person—which is itself conditioned by them. Humboldt spoke of a 'linking of the self to world to achieve the most general, most animated, and most restrained interplay' (loc cit.) and of 'the convergence point that everything must reach if it is to affect us' (ibid. 60).

- (c) It is predominantly a *process*. Though the word *Bildung* is also commonly used to describe the outcome of a process of learning—in German a ‘learned’ person is called *gebildet*, that is, she possesses *Bildung*—the classic philosophical notion is first and foremost that of a continuous and in practice never-ending process. *Bildung* is thus similar to authenticity as being not so much an end-state as a continuous attempt to *become* oneself. This also explains why it cannot be achieved through a high degree of division of cognitive labour. The different activities in which the person is formed must also be integrated; the process is not just a means to achieving *Bildung*, but its very substance.
- (d) *Bildung* is a *free* and not a forced activity. In his liberalist manifesto *The Limits of State Action*, Humboldt wrote that

Whatever does not spring from a man’s free choice, or is only the result of instruction and guidance, does not enter into his very being, but still remains alien to his true nature; he does not perform it with truly human energies, but merely with mechanical exactness (von Humboldt 1969, 28).

Only inasmuch as the subject willingly engages in cultivating and forming herself can one speak of genuine *Bildung*. This is partly because its elements are supposed to become constituents of oneself, that is, to become thoroughly adopted and appropriated. Something I might learn, but do not really take to heart, or with which I am not able to identify, will not become part of me or form me as a *person*. Freedom is required for *Bildung* not just to the extent that it must be a voluntary activity. It must be driven by a real commitment and a genuine passion for learning. Thus, what is now referred to as *internal motivation* (Amabile 1996) is crucial to the idea of *Bildung*. Internal motivation is often valued today because of its indirect instrumental benefits—it will be easier for you to achieve some kind of externally valuable knowledge if you manage to abstract from its possible usefulness and external rewards, and to seek it merely for its own sake. But as an element in the notion of *Bildung* it is given a more fundamentally noninstrumental value. It does serve a purpose—to ensure the unreserved appropriation of the knowledge and its full integration into one’s personality. But since *Bildung* is a process, and appropriation and integration are not just external goals, but themselves part of *Bildung*, internal motivation also becomes a part of *Bildung* and a goal in itself just as much as a means.

The freedom requirement gives rise to a version of the pedagogical paradox: the subject cannot be expected to be internally motivated from the outset. A sufficiently comprehensive process of *Bildung* is likely to include much that the subject will initially perceive as irrelevant or at best as an uncomfortable necessity. The very idea of moulding oneself is likely to be met with resistance, as it effectively consists in giving up one’s present self for a future incarnation the character of which cannot be known in advance—or which, to the extent that it *can* be known in broad outline, will seem strange and foreign. Therefore, the process must be triggered by external forces and possibly also directed and orchestrated by others, at least to a certain extent. Though proponents of *Bildung* have generally criticized Kant for putting too much emphasis on principles,

purely rational justification and overt instruction, they have tended to accept, perhaps for want of an alternative, the general outline of his answer to the pedagogical paradox: the secret lies in a process of cultivation which gradually shifts the initiative from the teacher to the student. The teacher is ‘to accustom’ her pupil ‘to endure a restraint of his freedom’. Yet whereas Kant imagined this to take the form of a conventional learning process, proponents of *Bildung* placed their hopes rather in a process of highly informal learning, which might be centred on scholastic activities but would have to include much more.

- (e) *Bildung* is thus an *experiential* process. By exposing the individual to certain influences, it is made likely that she will eventually become internally motivated to adopt certain beliefs and attitudes, and do this freely. She is to be placed in a certain environment, which it will be up to her to explore and interact with, rather than she is to be guided or instructed. Moreover, *Bildung* involves an element of strife and overcoming of oppositions. It is triggered not least by perceived inadequacies: Inadequacies in one’s surroundings, but not least inadequacies in one’s initial habits and concepts. The frustration of the subject’s immediate desires, and her experience of the inadequacy of her self-conception, will move her to freely adjust herself so as to interact more productively with the environment, and to represent it more adequately. Conflicts and tensions are thus not to be avoided, but should be tolerated or even actively brought about. The idea of the ‘educational journey’ is a particularly vivid expression of this idea. By being prompted to leave her familiar surroundings, the subject is likely to encounter much that will seem strange and different, but appear interesting enough to motivate a practical and intellectual adaptation, and thus an expansion and refinement of her practical and conceptual repertoire.

Bildung does depend on the acquisition of knowledge and understanding of culture and social world. But this process is itself facilitated by a person’s being part of a more fundamental and existentially important process of self-formation. One’s life, and the task of giving it an appropriate direction and satisfying content, as well as coming to terms with society, matters more than anything else to a human being. Hence by integrating learning and learning contents in the very process of living and mastering one’s life, the maximal degree of motivation might hopefully be achieved. We have here a clear expression of the idea of mutual dependency and interpenetration of the different elements of learning and, in the last instance, of the different aspects of the human being herself.

- (f) The different qualities and abilities of a cultivated human being should not just be coherent but also *balanced*. The classical Greek ideal of a *proportionate* development and exercise of different virtues is retained in the notion of *Bildung*. Hence the implicit—and sometimes explicit—criticism of extreme specialization. Proponents of *Bildung* contrast it with the acquisition of superior intelligence or knowledge, inasmuch as the latter is unrelated, and perhaps even counterproductive, to the development of a well-rounded personality. Again,

balance and proportion are treated both as instrumental to more general and moral goals and as having value in itself. They are seen as essential to a human being and of instrumental utility in that they for example further a genuine *understanding* of what is known or done skilfully, or support a discriminate and appropriate *use* of knowledge and abilities. In the above quotation from *The Limits of the State*, Humboldt contrasts carrying out a task ‘merely with mechanical exactness’ while performing it with ‘truly human energies’. This does not just mean that performance should be animated by one’s whole personality. The contrast to mechanical exactness lies also in the ideal of proportionality. *Bildung* is supposed to engender a sense of judgment that allows one to virtually feel what is fitting and considerate in dealing with a specific matter or situation. It has thus obvious affinities to contemporary notions of *expertise*, with the important qualification that in contrast to the latter it is not domain-specific (cf. a). If it can be conceived as a skill at all, it is the ‘skill’ of mastering life in its totality.

The philosophy of *Bildung* has been contrasted with the Anglo-Saxon tradition of *curriculum*. This is hardly a fair or adequate as a description of the actual educational practices in different parts of the world. Arguably Anglo-Saxon liberal arts education comes closer to the ideal of *Bildung* than what is taught in many continental European institutions. Yet it does serve to highlight two different ways of conceptualizing education: A curriculum is a sum or an *aggregate* of experiences and abilities. It is usually expressed in a description of a body of subjects that must be learned. While it may be more than just a syllabus—it is now widely understood as comprising of a whole course of study, and thus taken to include a description of a certain progression and an ordering of educational means and goals (see Wiles 2008, 2), it still differs from the idea of *Bildung* in its attempt to ‘compartmentalize’ different aspects of the learning process. Moreover, while contemporary curriculum-based thinking does emphasize the procedural aspects and interactional nature of learning, it still conceives of learning as something that is *provided* by the school or teacher according to a certain preconceived plan, and which the student is assumed to take up in a certain preconceived manner.

By contrast, the notion of *Bildung* emphasizes the independent activity of the student. It also emphasizes the importance of informal—i.e. ‘extramural’—learning. Since it aims at developing the human personality in general, what is learned—the content—must clearly contribute to, and be selected with an eye to, this development. And it must be learned in such a way that its potential for developing the human personality is duly realized; that is, it must be framed and perceived so as to make its overall significance salient. Accordingly, later work in the *Bildung*-pedagogical tradition has emphasized that learning content should be *exemplary* and serve to make a wider field of human affairs accessible to the student (see for example Klafki 2000).

Bildung is thus opposed to the mere amassment of facts, not just for its own sake, but also for the sake of providing the learner with a store of knowledge of which she can draw if need be. The latter is sometimes referred to ‘general *Bildung*’, and the

idea of acquiring a broad repertoire of knowledge is often associated with, or seen as the essence of *Bildung*. Humboldt himself was not averse to this aspect of *Bildung*, which has affinities to the contemporary ideas of a foundation of skills and knowledge necessary for one to function as a citizen:

There are simply certain items of knowledge (*Kenntniss*) ... that must be general (*allgemein*), and even more so a certain formation of attitudes and character, which no one should lack. Someone is obviously only then a good craftsman, merchant, soldier or businessman, if he in himself and independently of his profession is a good, decent and according to his social class (*Stand*) enlightened human being and citizen (von Humboldt 1964, 218).

This is, however, different from the core notion of *Bildung*, which centres on personal development and thus requires that the learning process not just equips the learner with new items of knowledge, but also contributes to forming her personality. Humboldt was also concerned with the latter, as he took the formation of one's character to be even more important than the possession of knowledge. But he obviously describes this formation as a matter of learning to behave appropriately. We may see in this an early sign of the tendency to play down, at least in practice and when applied to people in general, the creative and emancipatory aspect of *Bildung*, and viewing it merely as consisting in the acquisition of a certain set of cultural norms.

3.2 Kierkegaard and *Bildung*

It is obvious that Kierkegaard shared many of the general views on education typical of the *Bildung*-movement. Most of these follow more or less directly from his ideal of becoming oneself. Seeing self-choice, historically conditioned self-determination and the formation of coherent personality as the essence of being human, he naturally favoured a view of education according to which its ultimate aim was to further precisely these qualities.

A particularly straightforward description of Kierkegaard's pedagogical ideals can be found in an early journal entry from the year 1838. It is notably not least because Kierkegaard here explicitly says that his view applies to general educational concerns (and not just to the teaching of existential and religious matters) and even to ordinary school lessons:

All ordinary concern for children outside the proper lesson hours, but also within these as far as possible, should be Socratic. One must awaken an appetite in them to *ask questions* instead of waving aside a sensible question. ... What matters is to *bring the poetic to bear on their lives in every way*, to exert a magical influence; when least expected suddenly to let in a glimpse and then have it vanish again; the poetic is not something to allocate certain hours and days to (JP 74; SKS 17, 124).

Kierkegaard here advocates a narrative approach typical of the *Bildung*-movement; storytelling is seen as integral to the formation of the children's personality. He also puts a typical emphasis on the experiential aspect of learning, describing what

seems to be embryonic ‘transformative’ experiences; children should be exposed to images and ideas they may not yet be able to grasp as such, but which might nevertheless make a mark on their personality in the long run.

The youthful, somewhat immature character of Kierkegaard’s thinking at this stage can be seen from the fact that much of this sounds like rather mainstream liberal or reform pedagogy. It certainly was not mainstream in the 1830s; it is remarkable to what extent Kierkegaard anticipated pedagogical ideas that first became influential during the first part of the twentieth century, due not least to the influence of John Dewey, and that he did so in a spontaneous journal entry. But his ideas are not exactly original, as similar notions of education based on conversation and learning through internal motivation had been developed earlier by e.g. Basedow and Pestalozzi. Kierkegaard also tends to romanticize. The idea of an understanding, respectful attitude on part of the teacher that will guarantee ‘he is never inconvenienced by the children, never pestered by them’ is an idealized notion that seems typical of intellectuals who have not themselves been put to the task of dealing with unruly children.

Still, the passage is highly instructive. Kierkegaard goes on to describe the ‘storyteller’, or what seems to be his then ideal notion of a teacher (or rather a kind of complementary mentor who takes care of the more poetic aspects of education):

... He knows what they have to do at school, he doesn’t go over their lessons with them but quietly asks what they are reading, acquainting himself with it not to test them ... not to give them the opportunity to be brilliant in company, but ... to relate in an individual way precisely with what they are otherwise engaged in, though always *en passant*, so that the child’s soul is electrified by it and he feels the omnipresence of something poetic ... In this way a constant mental mobility is nurtured in the child, a permanent attentiveness to what the child hears and sees, an attentiveness one must otherwise elicit by *external* means ... (JP 75; SKS 17, 125).

Several elements of a refined notion of *Bildung* can be discerned here. The aim is to nurture a ‘constant mental mobility’ and to sharpen the child’s sensibility, ensuring that what the child senses is turned into real *experience* (there are signs here that Kierkegaard was, at this time, attracted to an idea of self-cultivation closer to that which he would later associate with the aesthetic character, for whom mental mobility or ‘gymnastics’ are of particular importance). There is also the idea of ‘nudging’ or the invisible hand of the teacher, who is expected to draw implicit connections to other familiar topics, leaving children to discover these connections for themselves. Later in the same entry, Kierkegaard makes an attack on what he considers a misguided attempt at supplying children with so-called useful knowledge. He surmises that it will breed complacency and is likely to have no deeper or lasting effect:

Out of this [approach] a purely atomistic knowledge developed which gave no credence to any deeper relation to the children and their existence, which was not appropriated in any way in their *souls*, thus depriving them of any possible standard and allowing them to assume that they were great naturalists and linguists [...] It is not of such atomistic knowledge that it is true that what one learns in youth one does not forget in age (JP 79; SKS 17, 131).

What distinguishes the alternative approach favoured by Kierkegaard—the path of self-cultivation, or what Kierkegaard here calls ‘moral education’—is that it provides the children with a standard from which they can assess the level and actual usefulness of their knowledge. It imposes a direction and coherence on what is learned and secures that it is not easily forgotten.

The closest one finds to a classical or ‘mainstream’ notion of *Bildung* in Kierkegaard’s work is the description of ethical character—Judge Vilhelm—in the second part of *Either-Or*. The judge explicitly advocates a process of *Bildung* as the fundamental means for overcoming despair and achieving authenticity. While the direct Danish equivalent of *Bildung*, ‘dannelse’, is rarely used by the judge, he speaks, in the very title of his letter to his younger friend, the aesthete, of ‘personlighedens *udarbejdelse*’, that is, the ‘working out’, ‘construction’ or ‘formation’ of one’s personality. But the aesthetic character is in fact also committed to a version of the ideal of self-cultivation. It is typical for Kierkegaard’s thinking that the same general ideas are exemplified by different existential stages, only with differing accentuations and justifications. This goes for the ideal of self-cultivation as well as for the ideal of authenticity.

For an aesthetic individual, self-cultivation is very much a question of achieving complete control of one’s emotional responses. It is also, of course, a question of developing one’s personality and capacity for sensation so as to maximize enjoyment. Kierkegaard may in the end have sided with the ethical character in condemning this as an insufficient notion of the ultimate aim of life. He did, however—very much in line with the *Bildung*-movement—think that developing one’s capacity for enjoyment is a necessary component of becoming a cultivated self. Even Judge Vilhelm admits that a life worth living has to be aesthetically satisfying. Besides, inasmuch as the aesthetic character is concerned with self-cultivation, she recommends abandoning immediate enjoyment for a more tempered a refined one; acknowledging, much like the Ancient hedonists, that maximum pleasure requires restraint and self-control. In order to really enjoy life, and to get something from it *oneself*, rather than just becoming immersed in it and so losing oneself, one’s pleasure has to be cultivated and domesticated. The aesthetic character even comes close to advocating something like the Stoics’ ideal of invulnerability through detachment. Mental flexibility and emotional control are required for one to be able to engage closely enough with life to enjoy it, but not so closely that one risks getting hurt:

Every life-situation must possess no more importance than that one can forget it whenever one wants to; each single life-situation should have enough importance, however, for one to be able at any time to remember it ... One must keep reins on the enjoyment from the beginning ... (E/O 234; SKS 2, 282f.).

The art of remembering and forgetting will then also prevent one’s sticking fast in some particular circumstance in life and ensure perfect suspension ... (E/O 236; SKS 2, 284).

Surely this passage from *Crop Rotation* is—like the whole text—ironic and implicitly critical of the rules of life proposed by the aesthetic character. It highlights some of what Kierkegaard sees the discontents of the ideal of self-cultivation, a typical way in which it becomes degraded and turn into a source of inauthenticity:

Self-cultivation equips a person with skills that enable her—and so tempt her—to *play* with her existence, as well as with the rest of the world. It celebrates *mastery* of life for its own sake, as if it were a kind of sports competition (the aesthete talks about the goal as ‘being in a position to play battledore and shuttlecock with the whole of existence’ (E/O 234; SKS 2, 283). It is egocentric in that it treats other people as mere means for self-development.

Yet the text is not purely critical. It does present what Kierkegaard considers a *relatively* superior way of securing enjoyment and enhancing its existential significance; and it does describe some general attitudes and priorities that will be part of any kind of self-cultivation, in one way or another. For example, the aesthete stresses the of refining one’s appetite and developing a flexible mindset. And he urges one to cultivate a variety of interests and thus attain richness in life, while preserving a kind of unity, focus and integrating that is needed for the richness to be appreciated as such. The aesthetic character is in basic agreement with Judge Vilhelm, and probably expresses Kierkegaard own view as well, when he argues against seeking diversity and richness in life through a constant change of outward circumstances. It is not about change and diversity in its ‘extensive’, but rather in its ‘intensive’ dimension; it is a matter of cultivating select talents and enjoyments to the highest perfection:

The method I propose consists not in changing the soil but, as in the real rotation of crops, in changing the method of cultivation and type of grain. Here, straightaway, we have the principle of limitation, which is the only saving one in the world. The more you limit yourself, the more resourceful you become (E/O 233; SKS 2, 281).

By letting the aesthete advocate a perfection of the art of forgetting and remembering, Kierkegaard could be said to highlight the importance of *metacognitive* and *self-regulatory* skills: cultivation entails an awareness of the significance of actions and events in one’s life, but also an ability to deliberately detach oneself from them or, in other words, set them in perspective. More generally, cultivation requires one to develop a capacity for emotional regulation.

It may be that the aesthete misuses his metacognitive skills to avoid confronting himself or making a genuine choice. He may also develop them in a way that renders him insensitive to e.g. the moral significance of his actions and experiences. Yet the very ability to respond flexibly and sensitively to meanings and values encountered along life’s way, and to mutually adjust one’s self-understanding, the significance attached to particular experiences and one’s needs and values, is a precondition for coping with life, regardless of one’s existential orientation. Most obviously, the emphasis on the art of limitation, and the suggestion that one should cultivate one’s talents in an intensive rather than extensive manner, seem to have general validity. Cultivation is a qualitative and concentrated affair; amassment of knowledge or cultural diversion has no place in it, but are rather factors standing in the way of genuine self-development. The aesthete does seem to advocate something like the latter (i.e. seeking diversion in a multitude of activities), but he is markedly less convincing in doing so, as it contradicts his more central observation that it is futile to seek fulfilment through a mere change of outward circumstances.

Kierkegaard recognizes the psychological limitations to the project of controlling one's emotions. Emotions arise in us and are not directly subject to our voluntary control. Both the aesthetic and the ethical character report strong negative emotions that one would have expected them to be able to suppress, judging from their self-appraisal of their metacognitive skills. Kierkegaard describes how one might learn to use the emotions and domesticate them through the power of interpretation and relativizing. But he also acknowledges the power of first-order experiences (including emotions) to impact on one's self-understanding; there are limits to how much their significance can be altered. As noted earlier, there are close parallels between Kierkegaard's understanding of existential spheres and the notion of a paradigm as it is used in contemporary philosophy of science. In science, theoretical assumptions and reconceptualizations may serve to neutralize apparently recalcitrant experiences or 'anomalies'—but only up to a certain point. Some novel experiences may be sufficiently vivid and spectacular to resist integration into the existing theoretical framework and instead force a change in conceptual scheme. Kierkegaard describes how structurally similar mechanisms are at work in the process of existential development.

So although the presentation of the art of living practiced by the aesthetic character in *Crop Rotation* is heavily ironic and serves to bring out its limitations, it does contain ideas and observations that are shared by Kierkegaard and might be adopted for more constructive purposes.

Turning to the idea of cultivation connected with the ethical stage, one notable feature is that it is not just dynamic—as the aesthetic character has already pointed out—but dynamic in a structured and oriented way, as Judge Vilhelm describes it as the process of genuine *development*. He charges the aesthete with having no genuine notion of this. The aesthete does *change progressively*, and she may even be keen on improving herself. But her development is like that of a plant: it happens by necessity, even if it takes cultivation; the cultivation is merely aimed at bringing forth and exploiting that which is already there as a natural or cultural potential (E/O 525f.; SKS 3, 215f.). Kierkegaard explicitly describes this as the 'mainly aesthetic cultivation typically of the present day' (SKS 3, 216f.; left out in E/O). The activities undertaken by the aesthete, varied and energetic though they may seem, serve only to maintain a basically passive state of observing and enjoying what shows up in life (and so to be, but not to become, oneself). By contrast, genuine (ethical) self-cultivation is driven—and not just assisted—by freedom. The popular notion of self-cultivation is about using one's freedom to exploit the available options, and so makes it dependent on them. The alternative view championed by the Judge, and no doubt by Kierkegaard himself, requires one to subdue the use of talents and options under the independent project of becoming oneself.

The process of cultivation is moreover depicted by the Judge as more fundamentally *holistic*. The formation of one's personality is described as a never-ending process, 'as much a matter of constant development as an all-at-once affair', in which 'each lived moment' acquires a proper meaning through referring to a 'total view' (E/O 449; SKS 3, 118). The holism consists not merely in the different elements in one's life being interrelated, but in their being all related to common

view or cause—hence Kierkegaard’s existential holism is also about one’s life being *centred* and *directed*.

According to the ethical character, self-cultivation and becoming oneself is at bottom one and the same. The fundamental dynamic aspect of ethical existence, which makes it a process of development, is the way in which the person always progresses, or at least strives, towards a more authentic relationship to herself. Hence it is not essentially about acquiring new knowledge or skills. However, as we have seen, becoming oneself consists in choosing and taking over oneself. This in turn implies a reorganization and putting to use of one’s inborn or culturally acquired dispositions and skills—and so it entails, in practice, a process of cultivation in the more mundane sense of expanding and improving one’s range of personal and social qualities. Judge Vilhelm describes his existential task as consisting in imposing on his different dispositions and affects a clear meaning and unity:

He [the ethical, cultivated person] has himself, then, as a task in a way in which the task in essentials is that of ordering, tempering, kindling, repressing – in short bringing about a proportionality in the soul, a harmony that is the fruit of the personal virtues (E/O 552f; SKS 250).

We here have an example of how the Judge’s view of self-cultivation is at least partly concordant with that of the aesthete. Both hold that cultivation consists in a tempering or repression of affective dispositions which brings them under the control of one’s personality. It differs in also emphasizing a certain *ordering*, and requiring the harmony between the different mental states to be conditioned by the personal *virtues*—that is, the Judge urges that the structuring principle of one’s activities and experiences should be ethical norms, and not just an interest in maximizing pleasure.

Later in the same passage, Judge Vilhelm says that the task is not to mould (Danish ‘*danne*’, *bilden* or ‘cultivating’) oneself, but to exert an influence, and yet one does at the same time mould oneself (loc. cit.). This clearly brings out Kierkegaard’s ambiguity towards the ideal of *Bildung*. It is not about cultivation for the sake, or specific content, of cultivation; it is about cultivation as a way to concretize and actually live out the task of becoming oneself, which otherwise risks becoming a purely inward and abstract one. And it is not that one should have self-cultivation in mind as such. One should carry out one’s specific tasks wholeheartedly and immerse oneself in one’s social life. Only then can self-cultivation take place. This is a point of contemporary relevance, as there is a risk that self-cultivation becomes hypostatized and treated as an independent educational goal, or independent concern for the individual. Since self-cultivation is complex, organic process that has to be realized by a large number specific activities, each of which demand full attention and commitment, this is a serious mistake.

The judge stresses an important aspect of self-cultivation that was implied by both Schiller (2005) and von Humboldt (1969): its essential connection to personal *wellbeing*. The judge enjoys forming himself continuously. He enjoys taking up the tasks and challenges of life; he enjoys his own—admittedly imperfect—mastery of

life. This—and only this—makes it possible for him to identify wholeheartedly with his duties and vocation, and to freely accept his life and the obligation to continuously perfect it. He is able to enjoy it thusly—and enjoy it more than anything else—because the process of *Bildung* exhibits all the essential characteristics of an *aesthetic* object, as this was standardly conceived by thinkers of classicism and romanticism: *Bildung* has movement, but also constancy and stability; it is a manifestation of freedom—it does not appear forced—but also of necessity, as it seems to be just the way it has to be. It does not follow any preconceived plan, but develops according to its own inner necessity; it has its ‘teleology in itself’ (SKS 259f.; EE 560f.). It moreover unites the universal and the individual. In this way the process of self-cultivation helps to overcome the alienation that was widely experienced by intellectuals at the dawn of the modern age.

Judge Vilhelm is aware that he could be criticized for instrumentalizing even something as apparently fundamental and intrinsically valuable as the love of his wife, by viewing it as part of the process of self-cultivation. But he considers it a grave mistake to see marriage primarily as a ‘school for character’. Though it is indeed also such a school, marriage it is to be sought not for that reason, but out of love, and with an expectation that it will contribute to one’s happiness (SKS 3, 69ff.; EE 415ff.). By becoming involved in the process of self-cultivation, moreover, marriage, like other fundamentally valuable phenomena, is not reduced to a mere instrument. Quite to the contrary, it is endowed with real significance, as it becomes an integral part of one’s existence and animated by one’s desire to become oneself. In the process of self-cultivation, means and goals cannot be clearly distinguished, and the parts both derive their significance from the whole and contribute essentially to it.

Forming one’s character is thus not like sharpening a knife or tuning a car. In such cases, there is a distinct goal that can be realized in different ways, all of which are fundamentally independent of and only valuable in so far as they contribute to it. One’s personal character, by contrast, is ‘built up’ by appropriating and absolutely valuing phenomena like marriage, friendship, work, history or art.

The judge insists that everyone has a *vocation*, and contrasts this with the aesthetic theory of *talent*. Having a vocation means having, or being part of something, that is *universal* as opposed to merely accidental. As such, it is also more *beautiful* and so actually more aesthetically pleasing. Accomplishing one’s vocation, the judge says, ‘is bound up with a satisfaction of [one’s] whole personal being’ (E/O 567; SKS 3, 277).

By living ethically, one is able to actually *accomplish* something (E/O 568; SKS 3, 279). This should be understood not as bringing about some external end; whether this will actually happen or not is accidental, and the importance of what is attained will be merely relative, anyhow. So as long as the focus is on the outcome, the aesthetic character is justified in her indifference towards different kinds of tasks and jobs. However, the judge urges us to view accomplishment as a mode of *agency*, in which the agent commits herself to, and identifies with, a certain generally acknowledged task. Since the task is generally acknowledged as such, this

kind of agency unites the individual not just with society, but with all of mankind, since by making her work into her vocation the agent places herself ‘on the same footing with all other men’ (E/O 567; SKS 3, 277). Responding to one’s vocation is a means for overcoming the opposition between individual and society, bringing one’s personal needs and aspirations in line with what is generally held to be good:

So the ethical proposition that everyone has a vocation implies a rational order of things in which every person, if he wants, fill his place in such a way that he expresses the universally human and the individual simultaneously (loc. cit).

This is a highly typical example of the idea of self-cultivation as it can also be found in the works of Goethe or Hegel: It is about finding one’s place in the larger order of things and *thereby* becoming oneself as an individual. Yet it is also one of the passages in which Kierkegaard may not just advertise the idea of self-cultivation, but implicitly criticizes it, or at least points to its possible distortions or misapplications. Though the universally human and the individual is presented as interdependent and thus on equal footing, the description does give an impression of an act of subordination, which effectively suppresses one’s individuality. The Judge’s letter can be seen, on the whole, as depicting him as engaged in the fundamentally sound task of realizing himself by acting out a certain social role authentically, but repeatedly losing himself *in* the attempt. He does so either by over-identifying with the social role (i.e. giving too much weight to the social and universal aspect) or by indulging in the joy of cultivating himself (a process which Kierkegaard does hold to be pleasant, but thinks should not be engaged in mainly for the sake of the pleasure it brings).

Kierkegaard’s implicit criticism of self-cultivation as effacing one’s unique individuality under an abstract notion of humanity has recently been echoed by Gert Biesta. He has argued that the still powerful ideal of *Bildung* (at least in its classical version, but also in contemporary forms like Nussbaum’s (1997) idea of ‘cultivating humanity’) puts too much emphasis on cultivation and socialization and too little emphasis on the formation of individual subjectivity. According to Biesta, it ignores the ‘existential dimension’ in education (Biesta 2014), and can be difficult to square with the many different life projects and life forms characteristic of the contemporary age (Biesta 2002). Very much in line with the view expressed in the Judge’s letter, the thinking Biesta criticizes is characterized by positing a universal ‘norm of what it means to be human’ (2014, 16). Kierkegaard was obviously less concerned with the risk of excluding or marginalizing certain groups that are not able to fulfill the norm. His existential thinking, including his positive notion of self-cultivation, retains a universalist tendency, and even a rudimentary essentialism. He does present a kind of universal philosophical anthropology, albeit one that does not describe the ‘essence of man’ in any specific natural or cultural terms. Yet like Biesta, Kierkegaard was also very much concerned with the uniqueness of human beings and did see a risk of humanism generating a conformist pressure.

However, whereas Biesta mainly takes the influence of humanism as a social fact, Kierkegaard also describes its peculiar lure and the subtle ways in which even individuals apparently in charge of their own life can still succumb to it: In order to become oneself, one must also *enjoy* (becoming) oneself; it cannot be driven by external motivation alone. But enjoying the process of becoming oneself easily leads to enjoying its *means* and outward *expressions*. It is also easily confused with the pleasure that comes from fulfilling a social norm of successful human activity. In this way it can distract from, rather than support, the central task of becoming oneself (cf. also Kierkegaard's criticism of misguided self-realization (Sect. 2.4 above)). In the course of the second part of *Either-Or*, the Judge gets more and more carried away by his own edifying and self-justificatory rhetoric. His originally sincere modesty comes to appear false. It is consistent with his general view that life must be aesthetically pleasing as well as informed by a sense of responsibility. Yet he no longer observes his principle of reining in the aesthetic tendency:

I perform my services as a judge, I am glad to have such a vocation, I believe it is in keeping with my abilities and my whole personal being. I know it makes demands of my powers. I try to mould myself more and more to it, and in doing so, I feel that I am developing myself more and more. I love my wife, am happy in my home [...] My work has importance to me, and I think it also has some for others, even though that is something I cannot determine and exactly measure. I feel joy in the fact that the personal life of others has importance for me ... I love my native country, I cannot imagine thriving properly in any other. I love my mother tongue which liberates my thought ... Thus I love existence because it is beautiful (E/O 583f.; SKS 3, 305f.).

This is a vivid example of Kierkegaard's use of literary means for creating internal discussion and testing his views *in* the very text. At least two tendencies can be discerned: A sincere ethical attitude, as the judge stands openly to his apparently humdrum existence and discloses its hidden beauty, *and* an implicitly aesthetic stance and a lapse into bourgeois conformity. It is possible, if not necessary for an individual to cultivate herself by appropriating some particular culture; and so there is nothing wrong as such with declaring a love for one's native country and mother tongue. But there are conservative, and possibly even chauvinist, undertones as well, and a kind of complacency, smugness and even narrow-mindedness. The passage allows for a semantic gestalt shift, as the reader is prompted to alternate between more and less charitable interpretations. This shows both the potential and danger of self-cultivation. One might turn one's social life into a work of art, as an authentic expression of oneself; and one might take more than sufficient pleasure from fulfilling one's social obligations. But it is a risky enterprise, since one can just as well lose oneself to social life, or enjoy it so much that one ends up living *for* the pleasure alone.

It is a pervasive theme in Kierkegaard's work that cultivation ought to differ from, but easily gets confused with, mere cultivatedness. Kierkegaard already criticized the popular notion of *almen dannelse* ('universal culture' or 'universal cultivation'; German *Allgemeinbildung*) in his doctoral dissertation *The Concept of Irony*. He traced it back the ancient Greek Sophists, notably Protagoras, but clearly

also meant his critical treatment to apply to the self-cultivation ideal of his contemporaries:

... they [the Sophists] represented the separated culture for which a need was felt by everyone for whom the fascination of immediacy had faded away. Their wisdom was “ein Fliegendes Blatt [a fly sheet], which was not kept from flapping about either by a prominent public figure or by integration into a coherent system of knowledge. ... On the whole, what they wanted to impart to people was not so much an insight into the particular sciences but a universal culture ... This universal culture reminds us of what is offered for sale in our time by scholarly vendors of indulgences under the name of enlightenment. ... Reflection ... gives people an adroitness, a competence of classifying every particular instance under certain universal instances; it places at the disposal of each individual a rosary of *loci communes* [general or common propositions] ... The more such categories one has, the more expert one is in using them the more educated one is. [...] In one sense this universal culture is very rich and in another very meager. It deceives itself and others and does not detect at all that it always uses the same magnitudes ... this culture is negative, and too shrewd to be innocent ... (CI 201ff.; SKS 1, 248).

Several strands of criticism are interwoven in this passage. There is, first, the now familiar criticism of the mere amassment of fragmented knowledge, as well as of knowledge detached from life. Yet Kierkegaard acknowledges that the Sophist were, like his contemporary advocates of *Bildung*, actually concerned with integrating different items of knowledge and bringing them into service of human life. Still, the kind of life envisaged is defined by universal culture, and so by a certain norm of social success and a general idea of humanity. There is, moreover an anticipation of the criticism levelled against objective knowledge in the *Postscript*: ‘Universal culture’ is unable to provide any secure foundation for existential decisions. Learning to master concepts and theories provides a certain assurance; and engaging in critical reflection may help to keep more fundamental doubt at a distance. The very adroitness of thinking, the cunning use of one’s intellect, may also be a source of enjoyment of and coming to terms with oneself. But deep down it is mainly negative, unable to resolve the contradictions it exposes in any satisfying manner—and so it is really ‘deceptive’.

In the Conclusion of the *Postscript*, this point is expressed even more strongly, now directly related to the question of religious faith:

[I]t is forgotten that as understanding and culture and refinement [*dannelse*, “*Bildung*”] increase, sustaining the passion of faith becomes more difficult. [...] The refined have [...] only a somewhat ironic advantage over the simple-minded ... The preponderance of understanding in the refined, the objective orientation, will all the time cause resistance to becoming a Christian, and the resistance is the sin of the understanding, namely half measures [*halvhed*; “halfness”]. [...] After all, the most simple-minded human being is able to become a Christian and continue being such; but partly because he lacks understanding on any great scale, and partly because the simple-minded person’s condition in life turns his attention outwards, he is exempted from the laboriousness with which the refined person preserves his faith ... (CUP 510f.; SKS 7, 550f.).

It would be a mistake to understand this as merely the expression of a concern for the future of religion in an age of enlightenment. Kierkegaard’s point has more general significance. He notes that reflection and refinement complicate the

existential task of finding meaning and direction in life. It makes it more difficult to form the kind of wholehearted commitment required for authenticity. Simple-mindedness, by contrast, protects one from being caught up in reflection. Kierkegaard here raises a worry that would become a central concern of much nineteenth-century philosophy and literature (prevalent, for example, in the work of Dostoyevsky and Nietzsche): that the growing cultural sophistication characteristic of modern society could lead to a loss of sound instinct, and, especially, a lack of resoluteness.

This does not mean that Kierkegaard defends a kind of anti-intellectualism. Nor does it render irrelevant the mastery of specific practices and contents of cultivation. Kierkegaard does think that one has an obligation to develop and put to use one's talents and understanding. When he lets Judge Vilhelm note that by trying to 'mould himself more and more' to his vocation, he feels that he is developing himself more and more', this is not meant ironically; it is an ideal of cultivation to which Kierkegaard himself subscribes. His ideal is the 'simple-minded *wise* man' (CUP 296; SKS 7, 323) (*italics mine*). Yet by emphasizing that it is more about trying than actually succeeding, and by stressing that simple-mindedness is not a vice, he does temper the perfectionism inherent in the notion of *Bildung* considerably. The central, unqualifiedly positive kind of self-cultivation is *self-cultivation*. It does need socially acknowledged tasks, a vocation, responsibilities, and a certain cultural context and content, as a material to work on, and a medium in which it can realize itself. But since this is more a means to than the goal of cultivation, and since it does not require any *particular* cultural context or content, Kierkegaard's ideal remains quite flexible. It should thus be able to meet many of the worries pertaining to the ideal of self-cultivation in today's highly diversified and multi-cultural societies. And it is considerably less elitist than most other conceptions of *Bildung*. That it provides few guidelines for the selection of content and specific activities may seem disappointing to educationalists. It does, however, lay down some practically relevant, albeit very general principles; and it is quite compatible with, indeed requires a search for content and activities that can foster an emotionally and cognitively flexible, but also unified and active personality.

Chapter 4

Dialogue and Indirect Communication

4.1 Introduction

We now turn to some of the most directly educationally relevant ideas in Kierkegaard's work. Kierkegaard's recognition of the task and challenge of conveying an existential message led him to search extensively for an appropriate form of communication. How could it be possible to seriously motivate another human being to confront the existential question and strive for authenticity, without undermining the whole enterprise, by thinking and deciding *for* the person in question? The task seemed immensely difficult not least because Kierkegaard considered theoretical knowledge—that which is usually communicated in learning processes—practically impotent. This gave him a strong interest in all kinds of circumspect, subtle or indirect communication.

There was nothing very new to this. The whole romantic era had been marked by a deep concern for communicating that which for various reasons could not be said straightforwardly, and a fervent experimentation with styles and genres. Hegel employed a number of clever communicative and pedagogical devices in his philosophy, for example, the use of narrative forms and his dialectical style of reasoning, which gradually led the reader to see how apparently contradictory notions complement each other. Goethe theorized about symbolism as a process in which a phenomenon is transformed into an idea, which is again transformed into an image or symbol that both binds and expresses the otherwise inexpressible idea (von Goethe 1999a, 202). Romantic poets and essayists like Friedrich Schlegel wrote fragments and aphorisms, and the so-called romantic irony became a popular idiom. It was used extensively by Kierkegaard's somewhat older contemporary, Heinrich Heine.

Kierkegaard was deeply familiar with all these communicative strategies and devices, and also with older ones, like the theological use of the *via negativa*, the attempt to express the allegedly unfathomable and incomparable greatness of God by saying only what cannot be said of him, i.e. to deny that any ordinary predicate

could be truthfully applied to divine reality. Just as with the ideals of authenticity and self-cultivation, Kierkegaard adopted the general idea that one can only speak indirectly about the most important issues, but modified it to serve his own purposes, and critically pointed out how it could easily be misused.

4.2 Challenges for Existential Education

We have already encountered most of the challenges that led Kierkegaard to search for a more appropriate form of communication than the conventional, more or less straightforward ones. Part of his motivation flowed directly from the pedagogical paradox as formulated by Kant: How is it possible to develop in the student a sense of freedom when teaching always involves restraint? Kierkegaard considered the less radical solution suggested by Kant, a process of cultivation, in which the student's impulses are moulded together with the general norms inadequate. He appears to have had moral scruples about using a pedagogical strategy which in contemporary language may be described as 'nudging' (Thaler and Sunstein 2008): influencing people's behaviour in a way that is assumedly beneficial to them, without limiting their freedom of choice, by controlling the 'choice architecture' of their environment (in this case their *cultural* environment).

Yet Kierkegaard's moral scruples were not the decisive factor. Like Kant, Kierkegaard did see that some kind of asymmetrical dependence between teacher and student, and some kind of external conditioning, was inevitable. His complex view of the responsibilities and obligations of the teacher is implied by his description of the challenge facing a *lover* in his later *Works of Love*:

What, then, is the greatest benefaction? ... the lover knows to make himself unnoticed, so that the recipient does not become dependent on him – by crediting him with the greatest benefaction. This means that the greatest benefaction is precisely the *mode* in which the only true benefaction is accomplished ...

Let us get this clear. When I say "This man, by my help, stands on his own" and what I say is true, have I done the best [for] him? ... What do I mean by this? I say "He stands by himself, independent, by my help". But then, of course, he does not stand by himself: then he has in fact not become his own, then he is indebted to my help for all this – and he is aware of this. To help a person in this way is really to deceive him ...

Consequently the greatest benefaction cannot be accomplished in any way whereby the recipient gets to know that he is indebted. ... On the other hand, if one says "This man stands alone – by my help," and what he says is true – then he has done for the other person the highest that one man can do for another: he has made him free, independent, unto himself, unto his own, and simply by hiding his help helped him to stand alone (WL 255f., SKS 9, 272f.).

What makes the action justified is not that it is done for the *good* of the recipient (e.g. the student), at least not in any substantial, straightforward sense—Kierkegaard is not a consequentialist—but the *way* it is done, the *mode* in which it is accomplished. There does seem to be some kind of semi-consequentialist

justification, though, in that the action should aim at enabling the recipient to ‘stand alone’. The goal is to foster authenticity. But even when an action is done *for the sake* of the other’s freedom, there are still reasons for moral scruples, as the fostering of freedom establishes a dependency and so also limits the freedom in question. Kierkegaard even speaks of this as ‘deception’. Interestingly, for Kierkegaard the problematically deceptive course of action is that which makes the recipient *aware* of the circumstances because it makes her consciously indebted, whereas what seems to be a more serious and ordinary form of deception, when the benefactor makes herself unnoticed and so gets the recipient to believe that she has achieved authenticity without any assistance, is considered by Kierkegaard to be the preferable approach. This indicates that Kierkegaard was not primarily motivated by moral scruples of an ordinary sort. Existential education has a certain moral cost, no matter what.

A more decisive factor behind Kierkegaard’s turn to indirect communication may have been his awareness that the ideal of cultivation could easily turn into a mere template for conventional, bourgeois existence or otherwise promote conformity rather than autonomy. Kant’s intentions may have been right; his notion of cultivation may have been one that gave ample room for self-development and self-assertion on part of the student. In practice, however, both the teacher and the student would be permanently tempted to reproduce conventional norms; especially so when these norms had developed to a point where their refinements and subtleties made them easy to mistake for genuine expressions of personal choice.

But Kierkegaard’s main motivation for seeking indirect means of communication went deeper. He worried that immersing a student into a process of cultivation would not merely fail to respect and further her autonomy, but that it would not work at all, at least not with regard to the central educational objective, the attainment of authenticity. Obviously, authenticity cannot be learned by instruction. This follows from Kierkegaard’s notion of authenticity as something that has to be enacted and performed, and which is essentially subjective and individual. Authenticity lies beyond the limits of theoretical knowledge. Kant and the romantic thinkers agreed on this to a certain extent. At least they did not depict the process of cultivation as one of instruction or training. They emphasized how it should be driven by the student’s own interests and curiosity, and described it as consisting in a continuous interplay between the student and her environment. But they still saw the attainment of authenticity as a gradual integration of subjectivity into a larger scheme of things, as a kind of fusion of the subjective and the objective point of view. The cultivation strategy thus did not pertain to the essentially subjective element in human existence, which Kierkegaard did not think could be synthesized with anything objective without losing its defining character (CUP 107; SKS 7, 121). It was the recognition that this element of essential subjectivity could not be captured by theoretical or propositional knowledge that led Kierkegaard to conclude that direct communication, however personally and culturally sensitive, could not help an individual to become authentic:

... existence-actuality [Existents-Virkelighed] cannot be communicated ... When the actuality is understood by a third party, it must be understood as possibility, and a communicator aware of this will bear in mind accordingly that his existence-communication, precisely so that it must may be directed towards existence, must have the form of possibility. A communication in the form of a possibility brings the recipient, as close as is possible between one person and another, to existing in it (CUP 300; SKS 7, 327).

That existence-actuality cannot be communicated, follows more or less directly from Kierkegaard's epistemological considerations. But in another respect, the view expressed here seems puzzling. Was Kierkegaard not first and foremost concerned with *actuality*? Did he not criticize Hegel, and more generally proponents of a scientific approach to existential questions, for remaining on the level of abstract possibility and so not really engaging with existence as such? He did, but the concept of possibility used in this passage from the *Postscript* is a different one, and characteristic of Kierkegaard's own thinking. It is not the concept of an option-space or logical space of different un-actualized states of affairs. It is the existential notion of something that is not yet completely realized but confronts the individual as a determinate *task* or *requirement*. In *Either-Or*, Judge Vilhelm explicitly identifies the notion of existential possibility with that of a personal task (E/O 543; SKS 3, 240).

The special form of communication sought by Kierkegaard should not just *envisage* the possibility in question—that would misrepresent it—but make the recipient *acquainted* with it as a peculiar *mode* or *way* of existing, which has a basic normative force—it is *imperative* or *urgent*—but of a sort so intimately connected with the recipient's own existence that it cannot be communicated in the form of a command. The imperative must come from the recipient herself, and cannot be a *general* requirement.

4.3 Irony, Dialectics and Maieutics

Kierkegaard saw the need for using indirect means for communication, but also the dangers of doing so, as well as the shortcomings of most extant notions of such communication. His ambivalence is reflected by his attitude towards irony and dialectics. He obviously uses both of them quite extensively. But he repeatedly points out that both are instruments for *detachment* and relativizing, and as such opposed to his own ideal of absolute existential commitment.

For Kierkegaard, irony does not merely signify a form of communication or "figure of speech". In the *Postscript*, he elevates it to the status of an intermediate existential stage (CUP 421ff.; SKS 7, 455). Ironic existence is characterized by a clear consciousness of the limitations of the aesthetic mode of existence, as well as of the 'infinite requirement' characteristic of ethical stage—but also of a lack of courage or ability (or sheer will) to meet this requirement and actually choose oneself. Kierkegaard's description of it is a good example of the point that the stages do not represent a simple hierarchy of still more superior existential attitudes.

In a way, the ironic character seems superior to the ethical one, having already ‘made the movement of infinity’ (loc. cit.), but also grasped the contraction involved in ethical existence. The ironic character sees that the ethicist attempts to exhaust herself in her actual, social life, even though what makes her an ethicist is an essentially inward movement (CUP 422f.). She remains inferior to the ethicist by not actually choosing and trying, perhaps not even daring; but she maintains a philosophical superiority by seeing the difficulties involved in the ethical project and resisting the temptation to indulge in the cosy aesthetics that accompanies it.

Irony was employed by the romantics as a means for communicating about important matters without mentioning them directly. For direct mention would almost inevitably trivialize them and thus miss the point. Romantic irony consists in puncturing the fictional character of a text, making its conventional and artificial nature explicit, for example by adding a more cynical meta-text to an otherwise conventionally beautiful or gripping story. It may thus function as means for expressing artistic and philosophical superiority. Schlegel saw it as an expression of the freedom of the author; in one place he defined it as ‘the thinking spirit’s amazement over itself, which so often dissolves into a quiet laugh’ (1830, 61). This is very similar to the attitude which Kierkegaard finds and criticizes in the aesthetic—and sometimes even in the ethical—character: a sort of self-contented, self-protective satisfaction with one’s own wit and self-critical skills.

Yet romantic irony was also used for less egocentric purposes. By playing with and apparently making fun of conventions and clichés, the romantic writers hoped to salvage a kernel of real beauty and poetic truth. They hoped that their message would come across implicitly. For example, Heine could actually rhyme *Herz* (heart) with *Schmerz* (pain) (‘Und wüssten’s die Blumen die Kleinen’, *Buch der Lieder*; Heine 1827, 128), as Goethe had done earlier with less irony (in ‘Reunion’, *West-Östlicher Divan* (Goethe 1999b)). Heine thereby indicated both the triviality of unrequited love that it is almost as common as muck, rather irrational too, and so nothing to write home about—and the fact that it remains really tragic and all-important to those who find themselves in the grip of it, and that it is at heart a unique experience which is not straightforwardly communicable.

Kierkegaard may be said to have used even subtler forms of irony, for example, in the passages from the Judge’s letter in *Either/Or* quoted earlier. Here, the beauty and pleasures of marital life are described in an apparently straightforward manner, but also in ways bordering on cliché—and in a way that makes it seem to say between the lines: ‘I do know that this sounds too simple and good to be true, but believe me, in reality, it *is* true, and actually not that simple’, but also (thereby, adding a further ironic layer as compared to Heine’s poetry): ‘Coming to terms with oneself in this way may, however, still be too easy’.

Irony was thus seen by Kierkegaard to have its limitations. He saw romantic irony as representing a spiritual freedom that threatened to become both irresponsible and a source of self-indulgence. In effect, the romantics distanced themselves from the matters of serious concern they communicated about, and so, in the end, they failed to achieve authenticity.

Kierkegaard was especially interested in the ancient *Socratic* irony. The character of Socrates plays a central role throughout Kierkegaard's work. We have already seen how his youthful speculations about authentic teaching gave central importance to the use of Socratic questions. The *maieutic* ('midwifery') or genuinely Socratic method aims at getting others to produce ideas themselves. It does so by starting a conversation about the true meaning of a word of fundamental importance. An underlying assumption, which would become typical of most philosophy up until the present day, is that if someone uses a word competently, she must also implicitly know what it means. By challenging the more or less spontaneous definitions produced by the conversation partners—while professing his own ignorance—Socrates would narrow down the range of possible meanings and lead the way towards a more appropriate and explicit understanding of the concept in question.

In some respects, this Socratic method fits extremely well with the basic tenets of Kierkegaard's overall approach. Kierkegaard, as we have seen, stressed the *way* something is done rather than what is done (the content), and he gave prime importance to doing something *oneself*. The Socratic approach apparently meets Kierkegaard's main concerns—most obviously, the concern for not trying to do for the student that which the student can only do for herself. It also meets his ethical concern, at least to a certain extent, as Socrates apparently respects his conversation partners and does not wish to dominate them. Certain reservations about this aspect remain, however, as Socrates' self-professed ignorance can seem artificial at times—he does know where the discussion is going—and the conversation technique may resemble a kind of subtle manipulation. Later, Nietzsche would depict Socrates as a seducer. Kierkegaard remained more sympathetic but was aware of the dangers and limitations of the Socratic method.

It has been argued that Socrates' own conception of maieutics was overly intellectualist; that although he did not consider it possible to teach by straightforward instruction, he did see teaching as a means for making the student acquire knowledge of the essence of ethical concepts (Coplestone 1993, 112). Whether or not this is something for which he should be criticized, there is an obvious difference to Kierkegaard inasmuch as the latter did not see knowledge of the content of concepts as guaranteeing right action. Socrates did care for the manner of teaching; but in contrast to Kierkegaard, he still assumed that some kind of content knowledge, if not of the propositional type then in the form of direct insight into an essential relationship, was the key to the solution of practical problems, including the problem of living well.

In any case, Socratic irony was seen by Kierkegaard as superior to Hegelian *dialectics*. As has already been amply exemplified, Kierkegaard did himself use something like Hegelian dialectics quite often. Yet, in his final view, he dismissed it as being merely a tool for conceptual mediation, that is, for making moves within the field of objective knowledge, which did not relate to existential question and prevented rather than supported the categorical and wholehearted decisions he thought

were needed for authentic existence. By contrast, irony, and especially Socratic irony, for all its potential limitations, maintained a deeply *personal* character:

Dialectics as such is a determination all too impersonal for a character like Socrates to occupy himself with it, for on the contrary, while dialectics extends and diffuses infinitely into the extremes, irony leads it back into one's personality and rounds it off in the personality (CI 122; SKS 1, 174).

A guarded commitment to dialectics is visible in this passage. The point is not that dialectics should be abandoned altogether, but that it should be practiced in the Socratic rather than the Hegelian manner; that is should be incorporated into the existential project and given a personal expression.

In his early writings, Kierkegaard was still strongly critical of irony as a mode of existence and fundamental attitude, and so also of the Socratic irony. He saw in it much of the same irresponsibility and egoism which he had criticized in the romantics and accused Socrates of in effect turning his back to his community (SKS 1, 307f.). Although he came to judge Socrates much more favourable in his later works, this does not mean that he changed his view of the ironic attitude as such. Rather it reflects the fact that he had come to identify personally with Socrates, seeing his own vocation of as that of a 'midwife'—but not treating it as a paradigm of human existence in general. For Kierkegaard, a life given to helping others acquiring existential insight could not really be a happy one, but would remain a case of 'human sacrifice'.

Overall, it might be said that Kierkegaard appreciated—and considered as more or less indispensable—the *use* of dialectics and, especially, of irony; but that he warned that immoderate use of these modes of thinking or figures of speech could end up affecting one's personality, moulding rather than merely serving it. In parallel to his reservations about self-cultivation, he saw how these potent instruments could be misused or misguided. Irony cleanses one's mind of misconceptions. Dialectics reveals the hidden dependencies between concepts and the mutually limiting nature of the basic elements of life and reality. But they also give one a false impression of standing aloof from everyday concerns, of being a master of everything, and not part of the reality the structure of which has been laid bare. They do express one's freedom and subjectivity, but in ways that may not make it easier for oneself to grasp.

What is the significance of Kierkegaard's critical treatment of irony and dialectics for education? For one thing, it further underscores the necessity or personal appropriation and engagement. As long as the goal is to foster mental flexibility or knowledge of limitations, they are very potent pedagogical tools indeed.

Kierkegaard demonstrates this more by *using* irony and dialectics than by describing their potential benefits. For example, Judge Vilhelm's letter is written in a way that is both nuanced and dynamic—the reader is prompted to alternate between various, more or less sympathetic attitudes—and so personally gripping that the reader cannot concentrate merely on theoretically assessing the Judge's standpoint, but must inevitably consider her own life as well. It is dialectical and

ironic, but also goes beyond intellectual wavering and requires the reader to really invest herself. This makes it a pedagogical paradigm, regardless of its further philosophical significance or limitations.

Kierkegaard moreover points to some typical ways in which otherwise excellent pedagogical performances can fail. The student can be brought to grasp a subject to such an extent that she apparently sovereignly masters it. She may be able to play with it, turning and twisting it, or to correctly enumerate pros and cons—all usually reliable indications that she has indeed mastered it and that the teaching has been successful. But something may be missing; the success may be pyrrhic or spurious. A keen understanding of dialectical subtleties, or an agile handling of theoretical perspectives, can mask an underlying lack of orientation or interest, or a disability to engage properly with the issue under discussion.

This does not mean that Kierkegaard is arguing against open-minded teaching, still less that he thinks students should adopt an unquestioning attitude. He does not advocate keeping teaching simple in the sense that it should not stimulate reflection or otherwise challenge the students. For this will also rarely lead to real appropriation or engagement. Deliberation and even doubt do play a central role in his view of learning. The commitment he requires can very well be to a view that is highly nuanced and open to interpretation and discussion. His central point is that commitment *is* required, and that it may be hampered by the use of an overly dialectical approach, the teaching of mere mental gymnastics or relations between views or concepts. Teaching should not provide students with an easy means for evading difficult decisions, but rather hold them to their task.

4.4 Concepts and Practices of Indirect Communication

Let us now look, finally, at Kierkegaard's own notion of indirect communication. In which way did he require it to be indirect, and for what reason? This is addressed in an absolutely central passage in the *Postscript*, in the section entitled 'The subjective truth, inwardness':

... it also became clear to me that, if I wanted to communicate anything on this point [i.e. what it is to exist], the main thing was that my exposition be in the *indirect* form. For if inwardness is the truth, result is only junk that we should not trouble one another with, and wanting to impart the result an unnatural form of interpersonal association, in so far as every human being is spirit and truth is precisely the self-activity of appropriation, which a result hinders. Suppose a teacher in relation to the essential truth (for otherwise a direct relationship between teacher and pupil is quite in order) has, as one says, much inwardness and would preach his teaching day in and day out. If he assumes a direct relation between the learner and himself, his inwardness is not inwardness but a direct outpouring, for it is a respect for the learner precisely as one having inwardness in himself that is the teacher's inwardness. Suppose a learner is enthusiastic and in the strongest terms preaches his teacher's praises abroad, thus, as one says, laying bare his inwardness. His inwardness is not inwardness but immediate devotedness, for it is precisely the pious and silent accord by which the learner himself assimilates what is taught, distancing himself from the teacher because he turns inwards to himself, that is the inwardness (CUP 203: SKS 7, 220).

On the face of it, Kierkegaard here seems to limit the educational relevance of indirect communication quite considerably. A direct relationship between teacher and pupil is appropriate, he says, in ‘ordinary’ cases of learning, when the issue in question is not of existential import. We shall later consider the question of the general educational relevance of Kierkegaard’s thinking in more detail (see Chap. 5). It should suffice to note that inasmuch as Kierkegaard does make authenticity a basic requirement for successful self-cultivation and significant learning (and self-cultivation is an ongoing, never-ending affair), indirect communication maintains a certain relevance to education more generally.

It now becomes clear that the primary justification for choosing the indirect mode of communication is a concern for its intended result. It is supposed to foster a state of ‘inwardness’ (again, the Danish word is *inderlighed*, which carries connotations of passion and commitment, and less of seclusion or reflection). If any trace of the external source of learning is left in the learner, she will not experience a complete *self*-appropriation of the truth. And it is this *mode* of appropriation (and the subjective, albeit mostly implicit, realization of it as such by the individual) which teaching and communication are supposed to bring about.

Most Kierkegaard-scholars have assumed that indirect communication is required because the *object* of existential communication is so special that it eludes ordinary language. In line with the view that drove the romantics to use symbolism or irony, they assume that existential matters are virtually inexpressible, or at least cannot be described adequately in words and sentences. It should, however, be borne in mind that Kierkegaard is generally not concerned with the *content* of knowledge and learning, but almost exclusively with the attitude with which a content is appropriated, or the mode in which it is realized. This calls the standard interpretation into question. It has been challenged most notably by Poul Lübcke, who argues that indirect communication has nothing to do with *semantics*, with the meaning and reference of that which is communicated. According to Lübcke, it is all about *pragmatics*, more precisely about *doing* things with words (Lübcke 1990). Indirect communication aims at prompting a certain reaction in the listener, not of conveying any specific message. Kierkegaard does not, on Lübcke’s interpretation, regard existential matters as special or elusive in the sense that they cannot be captured in ordinary language or easily understood. The problem is all about *motivation*. Only by communicating indirectly can otherwise rather trivial, unproblematic matters be grasped by the listener as carrying real significance and thus acquire a motivating power.

There is much to be said for Lübcke’s interpretation. It highlights two fundamental aspects of Kierkegaard’s thinking, which I have also stressed repeatedly: His insistence that *mode* and *attitude* are more important than *content*; and his firm belief that existential and moral matters are really quite uncomplicated, and that grasping them appropriately does not require any kind of subtle reflection, smartness or mystic faculty of intuition.

Nevertheless, there may still be something to the standard interpretation. Lübcke overemphasizes the triviality of the existential and moral truths and focuses one-sidedly on the persuasive aspect of indirect communication. It is not *all* about

motivation and attitude. Existential insight *is* a form of knowledge according to Kierkegaard, and its ‘object’ is not unproblematic or completely straightforward. In another passage in the *Postscript*, which I have already quoted, the challenges that call for indirect communication are described explicitly as stemming from the peculiar nature of its object:

... existence-actuality [*Exists-Virkelighed*] cannot be communicated, and in his own ethical existence the subjective thinker has his own actuality (CUP 300; SKS 7, 327).

It is because genuine self-realization requires one to grasp oneself in as essential *subjectivity* (see Sect. 1.4) that indirect communication is needed. Direct communication, even of the most sophisticated kind, cannot but present the individual as a *type* and something *objective* (be it as the peculiar type ‘this individual person’, which still does not suffice to capture the individuality as such). Surely, such a grasp requires no particular smartness. A refinement of objective categories or deeper knowledge of objective relationships will be of no help but is likely to be more of an obstacle. But neither is it just a matter of recognizing a platitude. Subjectivity *is* in a way a special, highly elusive ‘object’. Coming to know it may not require any mystical insight or extraordinary intellectual powers, but it is a difficult epistemic task nonetheless, and the result is a distinctive kind of knowledge.

Admittedly, the motivational aspects are important, too. But Kierkegaard does think—deviating, in this one respect, from the standard view associated with David Hume—that an item of knowledge can be motivating as such. The motivating power of the ethical does not come from the intellectual justification of the ethical principles, neither does it come merely from the attitude of the individual. It comes from her self-realization, from experiencing herself as herself, and the act of *becoming* herself, which Kierkegaard sees as more or less the same (knowing oneself subjectively means *being* oneself, and being oneself *authentically* means becoming oneself). Hence self-knowledge is, for Kierkegaard, intrinsically motivating. And so indirect communication is not just a kind of persuasive ‘pragmatics’, a means for getting the listener to act on what she already knows. It does have a distinctive ‘content’, inasmuch as it aims at getting the listener to know something she did not know before.

Indirect communication is not just a matter of the teacher making herself unnoticed, working behind the scenes as it were. Kierkegaard also recognizes a more confrontational (or ‘oppositional’) approach, epitomized by Jesus’ provocative, indeed absurd claim to be God, made by someone who is also obviously a human being like any other (CUP 203; SKS 7, 220; cf. also *Practice in Christianity* (Kierkegaard 1991)). This is a suggestion with broad educational relevance: A teacher may prompt subjective appropriation and independent thought not merely by leaving the student to her own devices, but by putting her own authority on the line, maybe even exposing her own contradictory beliefs or attitudes. Kierkegaard suggests that the ‘[t]he more complete the oppositional form, the greater the inwardness’ (loc cit.). By frustrating the student’s expectations and challenging conventional notions—by doing or being, rather than explicitly saying something—

the teacher cannot only stimulate ‘out of the box’ thinking, as popular pedagogical wisdom will have it. Dialectics and critical thinking of the more standard sort might be more than sufficient for that. What Kierkegaard emphasizes is rather that the oppositional form will force the student back into a reflective mode, becoming aware of her own approach or attitude as such.

Considering the educational relevance of the idea of indirect communication, much is not essentially different from what can be said of the use of the Socratic method in general. Indirect communication helps to make the student think for herself, and it prevents her from shunning important questions both by avoiding clichés and conventions and by leaving her no opportunity to flee into superficial learning activities.

So what is distinctive about it? Indirect communication in Kierkegaard’s sense is not just about making the student think for herself. It is more about ensuring that she also *appropriates* what is learned; that she approaches and adopts it in the right way. This is by no means guaranteed by the use of the Socratic method, or of irony and dialectics. For these forms of communication do not necessarily make the student invest herself in the process of learning or connect personally to what is to be learned. They function rather like intellectual showcases, urging students to consider the relative merits of different options, maybe challenging their existing beliefs, but also creating an impression of knowledge as a fundamentally impersonal affair. Irony may express the teacher’s personality, but it does not present it as completely authentic, nor does it address the student as an individual.

Indirect communication in Kierkegaard’s sense is directed more strongly at eliciting a personal commitment from the student, and at securing that she learns in the right way. Somewhat paradoxically, it also emphasizes the element of *teaching*, and so the role of the teacher, to a still greater extent. For the Socratic or romantic ironists hide themselves behind their communicative devices; irony is used as an *incognito* (CUP 422; SKS 7, 457). The indirect communicator in Kierkegaard’s sense may also have to hide herself, in order to make her contribution unnoticed as such. But this is a matter of discretion or self-effacing, and hence a completely different kind of concealment. The ironists and dialecticians are acknowledged as such; they display their ingenuity and intellectual cunning in the very act of communication. In doing so, they do not put their own personality at risk. It is just the opposite with indirect communication of the sort Kierkegaard envisages: Here, the teacher gets no credit, as she is either not noticed at all, or her own limitations and doubts are revealed. But she is very much *present* in the process of teaching and very much present to *herself*. Authenticity on part of the teacher is thus a necessary condition for educating for authenticity.

Chapter 5

Needs and Dangers of Ambitious Educational Ideals

5.1 Introduction

Many, if not most debates in contemporary educational thinking and policy pit two fundamentally opposed views against each other. On the one side, there are researchers and policymakers chiefly concerned with finding ways of reliably fostering skills that will assumedly be important for future success at work and in practical life in general. On the other side, there are those—often more philosophically minded educationalists—who insist that education should aim both higher and broader. They do not wish teaching to become guided by narrow concerns for employability or measurable skills. Instead, they want to maintain a focus on the learner as a complete human being, including her personal well-being, her role as a citizen in democratic society and in the world as a whole, her capacity for aesthetic and cultural expression and her moral character.

It is easy to sympathize with the latter view, especially if one takes philosophical approaches to education seriously. Yet the more practically, short-term result oriented educationalists do seem to have some strong arguments. There is no denial, they might say, that the broader goals are highly desirable in principle. The problem is their lack of feasibility. They may be difficult to achieve at any rate, and their possible realization will be costly and so leave too few resources for other, philosophically less exciting, but no less important educational aims. Students will be better served by acquiring a set of useful skills than by picking up bits of humanist jargon or embarking on a journey towards self-cultivation which will bring them nowhere near the actual goal. Proficiency in reading and math is valuable even in the absence of a cultivated personality; by contrast, superficial or partial cultivation is of little use to someone who lacks such basic skills.

Kierkegaard was all too far removed, both in time and in terms of interests, from the current educational debate to have held any definite view on these issues. Still, his thinking may help to illuminate them in certain respects—and, conversely, the issue of ideal versus more practical aims may shed light on the relevance of

Kierkegaard's thinking to contemporary educational concerns. Though we have already explored several ways in which it might be able to guide, or at least inspire, educational practice, there is still reason to doubt that it has any practical significance beyond the exclusive domain of philosophical inquiry.

5.2 Existential Education as Impractical or Elitist?

I have repeatedly voiced a concern that Kierkegaard's thinking may, for all its intellectual brilliance and suggestive power, be too far removed from the actual concerns of teachers and educational policymakers. There is a legitimate worry that the more Kierkegaard succeeds in exposing superficial ideals and half-hearted commitments, the more he renders his own thinking practically irrelevant. Ordinary students, it might be thought, are simply not up to the formidable existential task set by his philosophy. If we take it to embody an educational ideal—and even this may be to read too much into it—then this ideal appears extremely ambitious. Kierkegaard puts authenticity and fundamental character development above all; he requires a total integration of the knowledge and skills of an individual into her personality, and the unreserved, indeed passionate commitment of the individual to her own process of self-cultivation and self-realization.

It is not, however, obvious that Kierkegaard's ideal is extremely ambitious in all respects. The very distinction between ambitious—or ideal—and realistic views on education may be too simple, as there are several ways or dimensions in which one can be ambitious, with very different practical consequences. Kierkegaard's thinking is a case in point.

Kierkegaard always insisted that his thinking was in no way esoteric or exclusive. He placed himself in a long tradition of philosophers who have portrayed themselves as being on the side of the man or woman on the street, using their sophisticated intellectual tools mainly to ward off attacks to the integrity and possibility of ordinary, honest life. His notion of an authentic life did not require any particular sophistication. Judge Vilhelm of *Either-Or* II presents himself as much simpler-minded than his young adversary. There is undoubtedly an element of pretense to that, as the judge does reflect quite deeply on his life and obviously knows the philosophical movements of his time very well. Yet it is correct that the ideal championed by the judge is not that of a brooding intellectual or a perfectionist Renaissance man. He cherishes a straightforward, if not exactly simple, life, which is in many ways quite conventional, and only differs from that of the existentially unenlightened in being based on a commitment to become oneself and do the good (which, as we have seen, Kierkegaard considers to be one and the same, thereby further relieving the individual of the burden of having to learn a complex system of moral rules and principles).

It may still be thought, however, that the very emphasis on the existential dimension of learning is implicitly elitist. Existential questions are widely seen as luxury problems, which only seem important to those who have already met their

basic material and psychological needs. According to this view, mass education should focus first on fostering basic skills, second on fostering more special competences required for functioning in society and mastering one's life—and only then can one spur existential reflection, as the pedagogical icing on the cake.

However, Kierkegaard strongly disputed the view that existential questions are exclusive and difficult to grasp. He took them to be absolutely ubiquitous, ingrained in the very nature of a human being:

Every man, however modest his talent, however subordinate his position, feels a natural need to form a view of life, a conception of life's meaning and aim (E/O 493; SKS 3, 175).

This might seem like an implausible, or at any rate quite unsubstantiated, psychological hypothesis. It is made more plausible by Kierkegaard's belief that both the conception and the need for it may remain highly implicit. He acknowledges that the philistine has no awareness of existential questions, but assumes that she will nevertheless experience a lack of meaning, which is a symptom of unsatisfied existential needs. Even the ethical character—of which Judge Vilhelm may, after all, not be the best example, because he, as a spokesperson for his mode of existence, is extraordinarily explicit and reflective—need not form any set of existential beliefs. The ethical need only to be acted out; the answer to the existential question, as well as the recognition of it as such, is given in the existential *response*, which consists in an action based on an affective state.

Existential education, according to this view, is not necessarily concerned with philosophical questions, abstract reflection or skills for arguing and debating. It is even questionable whether philosophy is conducive to it at all. It is possible, if not likely, that philosophical activities, which almost inevitably consist in setting different views up against each other and assessing their relative strengths and weaknesses, will lead the student to adopt a more detached stance. They could make her into a spectator of, rather than a participant in, her own life.

It is surely debatable how positively Kierkegaard's preference for resoluteness and action over detachment and observation should be assessed. It may be argued that from a more general, moral or political point of view, the world needs more balanced and considered judgment and less passion-driven immediate action. But in any case, the non-theoretical character of existential knowledge makes Kierkegaard's notion that existential questions are of significance to everyone more plausible. This, in turn, means that such questions are not too 'lofty' to be part everyday educational efforts. I have characterized Kierkegaard's notion of self-cultivation as extremely demanding. However, it is only more demanding than other comparable notions in requiring a high degree of personal commitment and existential integration. It is not especially demanding when it comes to the *content* that has to be learned. And so it seems fair to say that the charge of overkill is more apt in the case of views inspired by the Aristotelian perfectionism, which is very popular among educational thinkers today (see for example, Nussbaum 1997). In contrast to such views, Kierkegaard does not require that education should foster any sophisticated virtues or greatly expand the learner's cultural horizon. To a

certain extent, his view is compatible with the idea of cosmopolitan or multicultural education. But he warns against the kind of cultivation that may lead to cultural uprooting or a disoriented personality. In short, he is ambitious about the *depth*, but not the *breath* or *complexity* of education.

This is not to deny that Kierkegaard's view is contentious and that its feasibility—and even its correctness—remains debatable. For example, does it follow from the fact that every human being is disposed to form a conception of life's meaning that it *ought* to do so, and that every conception formed in response to the question of life's meaning that evades it rather than tackles it head-on is therefore defective? This is what Kierkegaard suggests. Apart from ascribing an intrinsic value to authenticity, his argument appears to be that failing to face up to the existential question places one in an essentially unstable position. This is an empirical claim, but by no means an implausible one. It could also be maintained, however, that it is possible to build sufficient personal resilience without engaging very closely or intensely with existential questions. More mundane reflections on one's personality, situation, goals and aims may suffice. On the other hand, Kierkegaard may still have a point in assuming that this can only be successful if the reflections are supported by an implicit awareness of, and commitment to, oneself.

Educators should take seriously both the risks and the potentials associated with Kierkegaard's educational ideal. Kierkegaard himself, it should be remembered, warned against the likely misuses of the ideals of authenticity and self-cultivation. This warning pertains even to his own versions of them. His understanding of authenticity may not by itself be overly demanding, but the task of implementing it in educational efforts may still be very difficult and risky. On the other hand, their importance is great enough for it to be worth the risk trying. To always care, at least implicitly, for the personal appropriation of what is taught and its possible contribution to personal development seems to be a sensible maxim.

To sum up: The risks associated with existential education are (i) that it may foster an exaggerated seriousness and a desperate and ultimately self-alienating attempt to become oneself; (ii) that it may foster an overly smooth or smart cognitive and emotional flexibility that makes the student unable to make clear choices or confront serious matters; (iii) that cultivating the student's enjoyment of her own intellectual and cultural—or even existential—accomplishments may lead her to irresponsibly indulge in them and (iv) that it may lead to a kind of subtle 'snobism', celebrating existential sophistication at the expense of more mundane qualities.

The potentials of existential education are (i) that it may help to strike a proper balance between seriousness and depth on the one hand and a more humble, humorous and practical attitude on the other; (ii) that by aligning learning and cultivation in general with fundamental self-development, otherwise unattractive learning tasks may be tackled more easily and (iii) that by focusing on *self*-realization, the ideal of cultivation is dissociated from its specific cultural and political connotations, making possible an inclusive education that is compatible with a diversity of student backgrounds and aspirations.

There is the further question of whether it is possible to adopt aspects of Kierkegaard's thinking in a more selective and limited form, or using them in a more instrumental fashion. In spite of Kierkegaard's uncompromising stance on many issues, it is hard to see why this should not be the case. No doubt Kierkegaard was critical of the tendency to reduce education to schooling or vocational training, and he wrote disdainfully about imparting 'atomistic knowledge to students'. But this did not prevent him from acknowledging the importance of acquiring metacognitive skills (even speaking of nurturing 'a constant mental mobility' as one of the benefits of the Socratic method). He described teaching methods, like prompting students to think for themselves by exposing one's limitations as a teacher, which may be put to use for more limited purposes. He also saw a close connection between self-cultivation and *vocation*. By exposing the aesthete's tendency to 'engage in all sorts of breadless skills' (E/O 239; SKS 2, 287), he implicitly emphasized the importance of having specific practical tasks and also indicated that the contrast between liberal education and vocational training may be exaggerated. By showing how mundanely useful pursuits may at the same time help realizing higher goals, he set himself apart from the German *Bildung*-movement, which put more emphasis on freedom from external goals and advocated a more leisurely, gentleman-like approach to education.

It is not even clear that authenticity—the final and fundamental aim of education for Kierkegaard—cannot also be exploited for more mundane purposes. Things can have both intrinsic *and* instrumental value, and their worth need not be compromised by taking advantage of the latter. Kierkegaard does seem to assume that coming to terms with oneself will also manifest itself in some kind of practical success. The authentic person is able to concentrate on really important matters and making more of her life; she has a higher degree of resilience and perseverance. A vivid example of this kind of practical side-effect of becoming oneself is given by Tolstoy in *War and Peace*: the main character, Pierre Bezukhov, is intelligent and well meaning, but lacks a direction in life and indulges in idealistic and emotional fancies. Narrowly escaping execution by the French, and experiencing the wise simple-mindedness of a peasant co-prisoner, Pierre is finally able to come to terms with himself and the human condition. From then on his life changes completely, though many things apparently stay the same. He marries and settles down, and while he is still awkward and makes almost as many mistakes as before, his life has now become more 'coherent', and he is even able to '[get] on with less money' (Tolstoy 2006, Epilogue, Part I, Chap. 12).

Such practical side-effects of authenticity are, of course, very different from employability or the skills needed to progress to higher education. The practical benefits are on a more fundamental level, having to do with basic mastery of life. On the other hand, this is not irrelevant to the more mundane educational goals. Kierkegaard does describe authenticity as being instrumental to motivation, attentiveness and perseverance. He not only advocates educating for authenticity, but also education *by*, or *based on*, authenticity.

5.3 Against Education?

Some might consider the very title of this book grossly inappropriate. The term ‘education’ carries connotations that would seem to make it incompatible with the ideal of authenticity, and with Kierkegaard’s thinking in particular. I have used it in its original, broader sense, as encompassing all sorts of learning and teaching, including informal and non-scholastic learning and even personal processes of cognitive and emotional development. The title of Flaubert’s novel *Education sentimentale* does not, for example, refer to any institutionalized or didactically structured process of learning.

Still, it makes sense to relate Kierkegaard’s thinking to contemporary trends and discussions which have juxtaposed education and learning and cultivation in a broader sense. According to a popular diagnosis, in the last half-century, the notion of education has been at once narrowed down—making it almost synonymous with formal education and curriculum-driven instruction—and expanded in that it has been applied to still more domains, from early childhood care to university studies (Kristensen 2017).

It can be argued that this diagnosis is too crude and ignores the fact that there is still a considerable diversity of aims and types of pedagogical activity. Yet it is hard to deny that there is something to it (even though Kierkegaard’s criticism of the focus on ‘useful’ knowledge in the teaching of his day shows that the tendency is far from new; it can be traced back so far as to the ancient Greek Sophists, who were criticized for it by Plato).

Again, it should be borne in mind that Kierkegaard was little concerned with the bulk of the educational process. He knew nothing of mass education, and he took it for granted that students can somehow acquire the basic skills needed for everyday tasks and future learning. What seems to follow from his views is that there need not be anything wrong with the expansion of schooling and instruction, but that it is important that certain qualities that go beyond education in this sense are preserved; that teaching does not become reduced to mere instruction or completely curriculum-driven. In one respect, however, he does seem to go clearly against the trend by highlighting the role of the teacher and what may be called the art or practice of teaching. This has arguably been given less emphasis in the wake of the educational expansion, as the focus has shifted to the student considered as a *learner* (Biesta 2010; Jarsma et al. 2016).

This may sound paradoxical since Kierkegaard’s approach also seems distinctively ‘student-centred’. Is it not all about bringing the student to grasp her own subjectivity and think for and become herself? It is—but this does not mean that the teacher should tailor her teaching exclusively to the interests and abilities of the student. Existential education aims at making the student *become*, and not merely *be*, herself.

Kierkegaard describes the movement towards authenticity as a transformative and disruptive process. This requires the teacher to take a more active role and not just ‘deliver the curriculum’ or gauge and adapt to the student’s situation. Teaching

has to be more confrontational, even if the teacher should not put herself in the centre.

This again raises the question of feasibility. The teacher is required to invest herself personally, even exposing herself, while doing it in such an inconspicuous fashion she will not be credited, at least not immediately, for the success. Since she may also have less time to deliver the curriculum, she can also come under further pressure because of—legitimate—expectations as to what should be taught and learned, content-wise. In short, teaching seems to become a quite demanding and unrewarding job. Such concerns should be taken seriously. Business, as usual, can be justified by the general human need, to be found in both teachers and students, to work in an undisrupted, habitual fashion at least some of the time.

Nevertheless, it remains a sensible ideal that a teacher should challenge students and bring her own personality into play, if only very implicitly, and in the course of standard curriculum delivery. When it is made clear that it is more about teaching in a certain way than about complementing one's usual teaching with some separate and more or less spectacular 'existential' teaching, the ideal comes to appear neither unrealistic nor unacceptably burdensome. Kierkegaard may seem to demand of the teacher that she should go beyond the general 'teacher ethos'; but it could also be argued that it is part of this ethos that a teacher should always to some extent be—or at least strive for becoming—personally and passionately engaged and for achieving some of her educational goals in virtue of this engagement.

A related implication of Kierkegaard's thinking is that there is no simple continuum of skills and competences. He did not believe self-cultivation of the genuine kind to simply flow from acquisition of knowledge and competences. He did require a specific cultural material to work on and gave importance to mastery of socially acknowledged tasks. But he maintained that self-cultivation represents a qualitatively new level of development, as it requires a personal commitment which is not inherent in task mastery or knowledge possession as such. In this respect, his conception is clearly one of transformative learning (see Sect. 1.3), in a more radical way than what is currently so-called. Education for authenticity is thus not 'education' in the contemporary narrow sense, though it may be quite compatible with, and even a necessary and intimate companion to, schooling, instruction and curriculum-driven activities.

As for teacher ethos, there has been some discussion in recent educational research of its relationship to teacher competence in general on the one hand and morality on the other. The majority of researchers suggest a tight, albeit often unspecified connection (e.g. Campbell 2003), whereas, smaller, but growing group of researchers calling this connection into question, suggesting that ethos is broader than morality and that competence and morality does not go hand in hand (Oser and Voegler 2003; Latzko 2012). On this issue, Kierkegaard takes a very clear and ambitious stand. Though it seems plausible to assume that one can act highly competently as a teacher without having a strong moral character, Kierkegaard assumes that the teacher's ethos must be determined by a fundamental attitude that can only be described as moral. But again, it should be emphasized that morality is, for Kierkegaard, not a question of knowing or having justification for moral

principles [in this he differs clearly from the view of Campbell (2003)]. For him, morality is precisely an attitude. It is more than just a character trait, though, like such a trait, it also manifests itself in a disposition to do the right thing. It may be characterized as a knowing *how* to do good.

This means that not only teaching but also teacher education should ideally include a moral dimension. As long as this is not understood as an obligation to teach moral philosophy, but only as requiring that students should be prompted to develop an appropriately committed attitude, it need not lead to any exaggerated academization. But it implies that future teachers should also be taught and not just treated as learners, a self-sufficient individual whose potential has to be brought out. This is indeed ambitious, but not necessarily overly so in the sense of demanding too much in terms of resources or intellectual abilities of students and teachers.

5.4 Conclusion

It should have become abundantly clear—and come as no surprise, anyhow—that Kierkegaard's contribution to educational thinking consists more in raising important questions than in providing clear answers. He did make a number of positive contributions, however, that deserves to be emphasized. The most important of these may be his insistence that the *mode* and *attitude* matter more than the *content* of knowledge, learning and teaching. He may have played down the importance of content excessively, but he was probably right in pointing out that the content does not by itself determine how—or whether at all—it is picked up, applied or realized, and that there are different ways of knowing, learning and living that deserve to be recognized as such. Another positive and pervasive point is that learning is a strongly holistic, but also centred and focused affair. Its various elements have to be connected and animated by a common and fundamental attitude. Kierkegaard develops this point beyond the platitudinous principles of the earlier conceptions of *Bildung*, which implied that an integrated personal character would gradually emerge from the interaction between the individual, cultural content and the wider world. He can be said to have corrected the romantic fancies typical of such thinking—including much contemporary philosophy of education—by acknowledging the mundane and practical aspects of learning and insisting that successful cultivation should produce a firm, rather than a polished personality, and so needs a sense of direction.

Last but not least, Kierkegaard conceived of educational means and in ends in a way that may mitigate between approaches that seem mutually exclusive. He champions an ambitious notion of self-cultivation, but he allows for such cultivation to take place through rather mundane and immediately useful learning activities. Though one would expect his thinking to fall on the idealist side, and support an exclusive approach, it turns out on inspection to be rather flexible and inclusive.

As for the many open questions that Kierkegaard has left for further discussion, the most central may be just *how* important is the attitude of the teacher and the

learner—and, conversely, to what extent the content should be regarded as insignificant? It seems plausible that certain contents are better suited to act as a catalyst for self-realization, as Kierkegaard himself seems to have implied with his notion of ‘oppositional’ indirect communication—though arguably this is more about the actions of the teacher than about what it is taught. These questions, in turn, raise the issue of the proper scope of existential teaching; whether it is restricted to, or ought to be restricted to, a special class of educational goals. I have argued that although Kierkegaard’s conception is, on the face of, quite restricted, setting to one side ordinary, ‘inessential’ truths, it turns out to have implicit ramifications way beyond the teaching of existential and religious questions. Yet, the degree to which this is the case, and what precisely the ramifications are, is still very much up for discussion.

I have argued that Kierkegaard delineated a view that is fundamentally compatible with many acknowledged practices and need not put any undue strain on students or teachers. But as he himself pointed out, even the best of ideals may become abused (he even indicated that the better the ideal, the greater the risk). Though his positive contributions should be kept in mind, perhaps this is, in the end, the most important part of his educational legacy: that he pointed out the many and often subtle ways in which well meaning activities, including the project of becoming oneself or educating for authenticity, can turn into their opposite. Since the full significance of this point can hardly be grasped without actually trying for oneself, it is also an exemplary piece of indirect communication.

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