

KIERKEGAARD'S EXISTENTIAL EDUCATION: THE ROLE OF SEDUCTION AMID EDUCATIONAL THEORIES

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Abstract

Education in its technical sense, with all its tools and techniques is the means to achieve some objectives. It is the process of facilitating learning, or the acquisition of knowledge, skills, values, beliefs, and habits. With regard to existential issues about attitudes to life, freedom, responsibility, meaning, choice, and values, this paper raises some existential issues of education like how can the teacher meet the pupils? How should the teacher meet the pupils who, for example, have created a connection and understanding for their own way of living through engaging meeting with certain ideas? In such a situation, it would be clearly thoughtless for the teacher to suggest that the pupils base their life upon an illusion and that they ought to choose another direction in life. Inevitably this would perhaps be understood as a provocation and the pupils would most likely put up a strong defence. This consequently would result in two opposing attitudes creating a distance between the pupils and the teacher. The teacher's direct thrust may even have strengthened the pupils' present attitude. Adopting a philosophical approach therefore, this paper aims at making a case for the role of seduction in existential education, that is, education that focuses on the pupil's life choices. First, the paper shows that the relationship between the teacher and the pupil can be understood as a form of seduction. Secondly it examines how such a relationship functions in practice and warns against dangerous aspects related to seduction, and lastly, the article offers ways and modes in which seduction can be used in a justifiable manner in existential education.

Keywords: Education, Kierkegaard, Existentialism, Seduction, Teachers

Introduction

Education is the means by which an individual realizes the best that he is capable of. The most important aim in education is to become a human being who lives and makes decisions about what he will do and be. The aim of education is to help students comprehend and acknowledge themselves as unique individuals who accept complete responsibility of their thoughts, feelings and actions. The institution should provide an atmosphere where the individuals develop in a healthy way. In such an atmosphere, the young people become active, trustworthy and responsible. Encouragement and acceptance by teachers' foster sense of security and faith. Any subject in the curriculum can present existential situations for the growth and teaching of human beings. Students are afforded with great latitude in their choice of subject matter.

A central proposition of existentialism is that existence precedes essence, which means that the actual life of the individual is what constitutes, what could be called his or her "essence" instead of there being a predetermined essence that defines what it is to be a human. The individual has liberty of choice, which makes him dynamic in nature. This freedom helps with

the self-emerging process. The individual relates to others and to the processes of being and becoming by the unique subjective style of development. The individuality of man is of supreme value. It is very close to the individual life of man.

Thus, the human being through their own consciousness creates their own values and determines a meaning to their life. Although it was Sartre who explicitly coined the phrase, similar notions can be found in the thought of many existentialist philosophers, from Kierkegaard, to Heidegger. As Sartre puts it; Man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world and defines himself afterwards.¹ Of course, the more positive, remedial aspect of this is also implied: A person can choose to act in a different way, and to be a good person instead of a cruel person. Here it is also clear that since man can choose to be either cruel or good, he is, in fact, neither of these things essentially.

Existential Education

Existentialism holds that education helps an individual to realize the best that he is capable of. In doing, so education must help the individual to realize the 'facticity' (contingency) of his existence to face the categories of this facticity - dread, anguish, anxiety and fear - resolutely and courageously and finally prepare him to meet death with pleasure.² To inculcate choice making power in students, education should train men to make better choices and also give the idea that since his choices are never perfect, consequences cannot be predicted. Life is a continuous process of making choices and all choices are personal and individual. A man's life is a project and each of us is architect of our own life.

Kierkegaard explains existential education as the course the individual goes through in order *to catch up with himself* and the person who will not go through this course is not much helped by being born in the most enlightened age.³ This indicates that one will not be oneself by incorporating cultural values and norms. Rather, one must be involved with what Kierkegaard calls "catching up with oneself." This means searching back to how one was *before* culture began to influence one's life. Kierkegaard wants the individual to take a critical distance to the culture, so that the process of individualization can take place, more or less, without cultivation or socialization. As the individual goes into this process, he may be himself anew. The core of this form of existential education, seen from the teacher's perspective, is to cultivate the individual's specificities, its singularity and uniqueness, which Kierkegaard described as 'distinctiveness'.

For existentialists, every man has a unique variety of methods and organizations which should be developed accordingly. To develop sense of responsibility in child: Existential education emphasizes the importance of individual responsibility. As for them, there is no escape from wholly individual responsibility. It is the duty of existentialist teacher to assist the student to assume responsible selfhood, to grow up and face the world responsibly. Existentialism holds that for all the choices people make they cannot blame others, whether that be their parents or society and they cannot even blame the conditions in which they find themselves. Against this background, it is possible to interpret Kierkegaard as believing that each person is already

unique because God is the one who gives everyone his or her unique characteristics. Such an interpretation implies a form of existential education which is about cultivating unique characteristics that are already in the individual.

One of the functions of education has to do with qualification; a situation in which the individual shall be qualified for something specific. It can, for example, be about qualifying the individual for a profession. Another function has to do with socialization, where the purpose is to insert each individual into existing social, cultural, political and other orders. Neither of these two functions can be related to Kierkegaard's notion of education. He is neither interested in qualifying or socialization. In fact, he argues that individualization must take place outside any form of socialization or cultivation. This means that we can place Kierkegaard's existential education in the function described as the subjectification function/domain, in which this function can best be understood as the opposite of the socialization function of education.⁴

The reason is that the individual should not be part of an already existing order, but should rather become independent from such orders. It would be wrong to talk about an objective truth when it comes to the individuation or subjectification of people. Rather, it is a matter of subjective truth. The difference between these two forms of truth is as follows. On the one hand, we can imagine the person to qualify as a doctor. It is essential that a doctor knows the objective truth about the human anatomy for instance. Therefore, a medical study, similar to other studies, must contain a great deal of qualification, where medical students must strive to get the objective content right. When it comes to existence and how to live life, however, one must think differently. One cannot tell the person that he or she must live in a certain way. Of course, one can point out some ways for the person. This is the salient point for Kierkegaard, the individual must choose on his or her own. As soon as the existential choice is made, the individual must appropriate the truth; inscribe it in his or her life. This is no universally valid truth, but rather an existential truth, or, as Caputo refers to as “the truth that is true for me.”⁵

Seduction as an Important Tool in Education

For Kierkegaard, seduction can no longer be described or concerned as an exclusively aesthetic understanding as the fulfilment of pleasure and desire as the factual consolidation and reconceived within the realm of ethics or to be more precise within the *fonfinium* or border area between ethics and aesthetics. However, Kierkegaard recognizes the fact that at the aesthetic stage of life, the seducer (the teacher lacks pedagogical powers to influence his or her pupil). This is seen in *the immediate erotic stages*, included in *Either/Or*, where Don Giovanni is characterized as an immediate seducer who seduces through the erotic. He is like music that disappears just as fast as it is played. The power of the word is totally foreign to him. The only thing he cares about is to seduce in a spontaneous manner. The seducer enjoys the satisfaction of desire; as soon as he has enjoyed it, he seeks a new object, and so it goes on indefinitely. Thus, he does indeed deceive, but still not in such a way that he plans his deception in advance; it is the power of the sensuous itself that deceives the seduced, and it is rather a kind of nemesis.⁶

Kierkegaard introduces another seducer (teacher) who lives in the ethical sphere. He is well informed than Don Giovanni who lives within the sphere of aesthetics because he

understands the dynamic of aesthetics and ethical stage. Here, Kierkegaard introduces Faust as a different seducer than Don Giovanni. According to him, Faust is to be an intellectual seducer. In contrast to Don Giovanni, Faust is unmusical. His weapon is first and foremost the word, which is also the chief weapon of Johannes, the main character in *The seducer's diary* (which is incorporated in *Either/Or*). More correctly, Johannes combines both forms of seduction—even though he characterizes himself as an “aesthete, an eroticist”. It is this combination which makes him particularly powerful and dangerous. This is evident in the last phase of his seduction of Cordelia. In the heat of the duel, the young woman attempts to seduce Johannes with erotic means only. She has only one weapon at her disposal. Johannes, on the other hand, has two weapons, the erotic and the spiritual. “Sometimes one must place oneself very high, yet in such a way that there remains a place still higher; sometimes one must place oneself very low.” Johannes knows when he shall place himself on a higher and spiritual plane and when he shall put himself on an erotic and lower plane. But first and foremost he bides his time. He doesn't sprint like Don Giovanni. On the contrary, he plans his actions so that he can be one step ahead of his victim and, also to be able to “gaze into her future”. The seducer *par excellence* combines the erotic with the spiritual. That is to say that the seduction is immediate and first and foremost prolonged as both planning and the use of tricks are an important part of the seduction.⁷ On the part of pupils, Kierkegaard suggests that students must develop a consistent scale of values, authenticate their existence by being committed to these values and so act as to be prepared to die for these values than to live without them.

In another sphere of existence, Kierkegaard explained the importance of deception where he says that as seducer, Johannes meets the audience face to face, which is necessary when the aim is to capture the attention and empathy of others.⁸ Existentialism disagrees with the standards made by universal education as it is made up for all, and deals generally with the average and compels the student to conform to the law of average instead of practicing his unique qualities. It does not pay attention to exceptional. Moreover, there is nothing to guide them in their choices; no principles or rules can guarantee that any choice is right. People must simply make their choice and accept the consequences though the consequences may be unpredictable. Every choice carries our complete personal responsibility. Existentialists hold that people decide their own fates and are responsible for what they make of their lives. Because we are self-creating or self-fashioning beings in this sense, we have full responsibility for what we make of our live.

On the Need for Theoretical Pedagogies

Since it is imperative according to Kierkegaard that a good education is one that assists each of us in seeing ourselves with our fears, frustrations and hopes, as well as the ways in which we use reason for good and ill, the first step in any education, therefore, is to understand the theories and what they entail. What is essential in this discussion, especially in terms of the claim that existentialist teaching undermines constructivist pedagogies, is an insight; one that we would argue is upheld by all canonical existentialist thinkers, that there is no ultimate realm of knowledge or truth that is accessible to us as truth-seekers. For effective understanding of existential education and the role of seduction, Kierkegaard points out some important theories of education needed for the seduced and the seducer as follows:

a). Theory of Value

What knowledge and skill are worthwhile learning? What are the goals of education? Kierkegaard insists that the only knowledge worth knowing is the one that advocates the development of one's cognitive processes rather than the end products of such processes. For Kierkegaard becoming educated "a way of life involves a deep, personal, and internal transformation. The lived virtues that gave way to it are cultivated by a vigilant and demanding spiritual practice. Thus, little is worth knowing except for the processes by which one arrives to a subjective truth through a particular way of life. Educators, therefore, must concern themselves with the efficaciousness of this "truth" and the discovery of a mode of existing in the world, that has to be practiced at each instant, and the goal of which is to transform the whole of the individual's life."⁹

b). Theory of Knowledge:

The concept of subjectivity as well as objectivity preoccupies Kierkegaard's theory of knowledge. While he frequently refers to objective knowledge, Kierkegaard does not seem to have much faith in it. In fact, much of his work seems to suggest that he does not believe in objective certainty at all. Kierkegaard believes, instead, that there is always some form of doubt involved in the acceptance of knowledge outside the self, and therefore, no information from the outside world can be accepted as an absolute given. His focus is on subjectivity being the only true knowledge. To him, belief and knowledge are heavily intertwined, as no true knowledge can come without a leap of faith. His view is that a person cannot gather information from the outside world without faith or belief. Therefore, it is introspection and the willingness to believe in things you cannot objectively prove to be truths which form Kierkegaard's definition of knowledge.¹⁰

c). Theory of Human Nature

In his effort to situate mankind in existential education, Kierkegaard raises the following questions, what is a human being? How does it differ from other species? What are the limits of human potential? For him, a human being begins life as an "aesthetic". That is, one starts out as being able to entertain in imagination different possible ways of looking at life, but essentially irresponsible. Irresponsibility, in this sense, is to say that one neither has nor desires control over one's environment or what happens to him. A child, for example, is born into this life without enough conscious awareness of his surroundings to make choices regarding what happens to him. What makes an individual a "person" or human being is "choice of oneself". Choosing oneself is a process that, according to begins out of the despair of the realization that one is responsible for oneself, of "one's existence over against the crowd." This is what Kierkegaard identified as "dread". For Kierkegaard, therefore the question is not primarily whether or not one is a "person", but whether or not one is capable of consciously choosing, of following one's own subjective ethical compass, of following the path of "right". When one is choosing between alternatives, making difficult decisions, that is when one's "personness" is most complete.¹¹

d). Theory of Opportunity

On who is to be educated or who has the right to education, Kierkegaard in his theory of opportunity made it clear that Man creates his own opportunity. In his many works, Kierkegaard writes frequently on choice and freedom, focusing on the ability of the individual to use self-reflection to grow as a person. With this concept in mind, Kierkegaard would seemingly view education as an opportunity that man makes for himself. To Kierkegaard, man makes his own possibilities and is, therefore, responsible for creating his own opportunities with regards to education and life. Kierkegaard defines this concept as possibility, and it is a major key in understand how he views opportunity. All men, he believes, are capable of noting possibilities in themselves and in the world, seeing chances to affect change.¹² The problem lies in the action taken after a possibility is noted. Until an action is taken, Kierkegaard believes that man lives as yet only in possibilities. It is 'I can'. If a possibility is noted and then acted upon to create change, then man has formed his own opportunity. This is what Kierkegaard defines as "actuality". Opportunity, then, only comes about when an individual notes the possibility for change and then acts to see that change played out. This distinction limits the number of people who have opportunities, as there are many individuals who, even when noticing the potential for change, will not act upon it.

e). Theory of Transmission

This theory raises some problems on who is to teach and by what methods and what will the curriculum be? Kierkegaard contends that while factual information is important, a lifestyle guided by the conscious choosing of oneself is essential to the transfer of knowledge. Consequently, the acquisition of objectified knowledge, which is commonly the goal of many educational practices, is relatively meaningless. Worse still, the process of obtaining this knowledge by making a series of "objective" choices is the apotheosis of Kierkegaard's theories. The search for purely objective knowledge is absurd according to Kierkegaard because there is a neutralization of the agent involved meaning that one would not use their own experiences, either personal or vicarious, to make a decision regarding lifestyle. Conversely, the process of obtaining this lifestyle through choice is essentially the knowledge to be gained because the agent gains insight, either personal or vicarious, that aids in the ability to make decisions.¹³ Here, Kierkegaard also maintains that schools should act to encourage the maximum development of individual autonomy or free choice.

Kierkegaard thought that the societal nature of life allows for interactions with other individuals at little risk to the "self" as long as one maintains the ability to not get lost in the crowd, as it were. In fact, Kierkegaard saw the danger in becoming too much the individual and lamented the fear that he may become too far detached from society. As much as man is a product of the environment in which he exists, it is his individual choices that determine his "self". The subjectivity of each individual's experiences makes it difficult at best to determine a Universal Ethic or a Universal Morality. Kierkegaard believes that when faced with a moral or ethical dilemma, one should choose but where the socially accepted ethical choice conflicted with one's own subjective belief of "right and wrong", one should defer to the

accepted norm. The ability to do so is a determining factor in the establishment of one's character and the determination and identity of the "self", which was Kierkegaard's main concern.¹⁴

Seduction: Its Consequences and Problem

From the fore analysis of the role of seducer and the seduced, one will not doubt the fact that a seducer always is in danger of ruining the life of the seduced, even though the seducer may believe that he is living a lie. The seducer must therefore address different questions, such as whether it is appropriate to try to seduce a person away from their illusions, or not. Confronted with such situations, Kierkegaard chose not to intervene for fear that he would take from the seduced Christians something that was, despite everything, an important anchor in their lives. Furthermore, a seduction can, in the worst scenario, lead to a complete delusion and perhaps even to brainwashing. Therefore, one can say that seduction at its most destructive is when the teacher manipulates the pupils into his own world. As soon as there isn't space for other points of view than the teacher's, he is about to indoctrinate the pupils while at the same time hindering the pupils from being free to choose for themselves.

On the other hand, the seducer must give the pupils a free choice, because the existential education focuses on what Kierkegaard says in *Works of love* "to become himself, free, independent". The individual can only become himself, free, or, independent by taking the existential choice on his own, and then inscribe the existential or subjective truth in his own life.¹⁵ The point is that the individual cannot live someone else's truth about existence. From an educational perspective, the individual can only become himself provided the teacher's intervention is unnoticed.

It is important to note that this does not concern some kind of objective truth. The truth Kierkegaard talks about is not universal for all time and everyone. Rather, it is a notion of subjective. This means that the teacher's pedagogic assignment is not about bringing the pupil to his truth because that would only be his own subjective and personal truth. All the same, the teacher must, in a seductive and tactful manner, get the pupil to see his side of the situation. But the teacher's view, as stated, is neither general nor universal. The pupil shall not be deceived into the teacher's truth, but into his own, subjective truth that must never be total. According to Kierkegaard, this teacher is doing everything for the pupil, but pretends he is doing nothing. He takes no credit for what has happened; rather, it is a total self-sacrifice, about the same as working without. Briefly, it is about giving "in such a way that the gift looks as if it was the recipient's property". In this way the teacher has managed to create an opening where the pupil is given the opportunity to make the existential choice on his own. This can first happen provided the teacher's intervention is unnoticed.

Evaluation and Conclusion

The rationale of existential education is to provide an extensive and comprehensive experience with life in all its forms. The existentialistic aim of education is humanitarian and humanist. The basic purpose of education is to enable each individual to develop his or her

fullest potential for self-fulfilment. Aims of education according to existentialism include developing the authentic self of the child. Consequently, students must learn to feel, to become an 'authenticated individual'. 'Becoming' requires conflict and frustration by which persons grow in their personality and understanding. Existentialism's main concern is with the existence of 'self. Education should help in the development of 'self-for-itself of student. To assist in the development of self-realization in the child; Education should help the child to achieve self-realization. The student should become personally concerned with the realization of his own nature. Kierkegaard believes that a good education is one that assists each of us in seeing ourselves with our fears, frustrations and hopes, as well as the ways in which we use reason for good and ill. The first step in any education, therefore, is to understand ourselves. To this effect, Kierkegaard maintains that existential education is to prepare the child for social adjustment. Education should be such that it makes the student able to see beyond personal interest and goal.¹⁶

In conclusion, existentialists argue that social education should teach to respect the freedom of all. Respect for the freedom of others is essential, for freedom is almost certain to conflict. Good education prepares man to will his freedom and at the same time, to will the freedom of all others. When he asserts the value of any action he is asserting a value with this universal appeal "I am responsible for myself and for all".¹⁷

Endnotes

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