

Kierkegaard and Liberal Education as a Way of Life

Kevin Gary
Goshen College

INTRODUCTION

The ideal of liberal education proposes rich possibilities for what an education ought to be. The many colleges and universities that currently offer a liberal education attest to its enduring value. Part of its appeal is that it aspires to offer an education for freedom, typically through the acquisition of critical thinking skills necessary for the attainment of individual autonomy.

Yet liberal education, classically understood, also includes a formative dimension. Programs of liberal studies put forward a canon of great books that not only promote critical thinking but also offer moral exemplars intended to encourage character formation. Accordingly, students are initiated not only into a way of thinking but also a way of living.

At the present moment this formative side tends to be ignored, with an exclusive emphasis on liberal education as the development of critical thinking skills for individual autonomy.¹ While this focus on critical thinking avoids the entanglements that accompany education for moral commitment, it offers a limited perspective on the tradition of liberal education. More problematically, as I will argue, it promotes a misguided understanding of freedom.

Søren Kierkegaard has clearly exposed this problem. Liberal education focused exclusively on critical thinking erroneously assumes that if one simply knows or can critically appraise an ethical ideal or rational course of action then he or she can freely accept, embrace, and live it. Accordingly, educators see their role as simply cultivating cognitive thinking skills in students so that they develop the capacity to envision and critically entertain ethical possibilities. Yet this step from *knowing* to *willing* is not a given.

This conflation of knowing and willing stems from a misunderstanding of the nature of ethical truth as knowledge, that is, from seeing ethical truth as something that can be cognitively grasped through speculative thinking.² Instead, Kierkegaard explains, ethical truth is only true when it is appropriated or lived. Liberal education viewed simply as acquiring critical thinking skills for individual autonomy ignores the qualitative leap between knowing and willing, and offers a skewed portrait of what liberal learning has traditionally demanded.

The ultimate aim of this essay is to retrieve a more comprehensive understanding of liberal education that includes the cultivation of critical thinking (or knowing) as well as the demanding task of living into what one knows (or willing). To clarify the notion of “liberal education,” I turn to the writings of Bruce Kimball and Pierre Hadot. Each surveys the tradition of liberal education and provides a distinct yet complementary framework for comprehending the vast history of liberal education. I then turn to Kierkegaard, whose writings animate a fuller understanding of liberal education that intensifies the task of would-be liberal educators.

TRADITIONS OF LIBERAL EDUCATION

In his study *Philosophers and Orators: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education*, Kimball traces two distinct traditions of liberal education: the tradition of philosophers and the tradition of orators. Philosophers hold up Socrates as their ideal. They prize critical thinking and the tireless quest for truth as the core of liberal education. This understanding of liberal education threads a line from Boethius to scholasticism to the Enlightenment to the modern research university.

From its beginning, the philosophical tradition has been in conflict with the tradition of orators. Wary of Socrates' endless questioning, orators value instead the appropriation of established virtues. For orators, liberal education is fundamentally about cultivating practical wisdom and fashioning active citizens who demonstrate virtue. This civic-mindedness in turn involves transmitting agreed-upon virtues, canonized in classic texts.³

Orators believe that liberal learning is worthless unless it translates into practical virtue. The orator's strength is in arguing that philosophy is only "confirmed to be true...when it is expressed or has an effect."⁴ Its weakness, however, is its reliance on traditions of virtue that may in fact be questionable and require critical examination.

Presently the tradition of philosophers is dominant. The modern research university's relentless quest for new knowledge is heir to this tradition. The ascendancy of the philosophical understanding, however, has "skewed understanding of the history of liberal education" such that the philosophical tradition is regarded simply as *the* tradition of liberal education.⁵

Kimball's typology helps set the stage for comprehending the vast tradition of liberal education. Hadot also surveys the history of liberal education, yet offers a distinct and novel perspective. Similar to Kimball, he identifies two traditions. One tradition conceives of philosophy or liberal learning as primarily an abstract, theoretical enterprise — essentially the view taken by Kimball's philosophers. This view, argues Hadot, misunderstands and obscures the original nature of liberal learning that was not a theoretical enterprise but fundamentally a way of life. More than oratorical expression for political purposes, liberal education as a way of life involved a deep, personal, and internal transformation. The lived virtues that gave expression to it were cultivated by a vigilant and demanding spiritual practice.

This ancient understanding of liberal education, observes Hadot, stands in sharp contrast to how liberal learning is understood today.⁶ To illustrate this point Hadot takes the perspective of a modern university student. Such a student, argues Hadot, would most probably leave the university with the impression that liberal learning is primarily concerned with discovering new systematic ways for understanding the universe, from which flow doctrines and moral consequences for individuals. These doctrines in turn encourage a certain way of life or mode of behavior as an accessory or end product of critical, speculative processes. Liberal learning, in this light, is fundamentally speculation about life. Considerations of whether or not this way of life is efficacious or livable, Hadot notes, are utterly secondary.

While it is true that ancient philosophers offered superior theoretical reflection, this activity, Hadot says, must be situated in the proper context from which it emerged. The intentional way of life of ancient philosophers was not “located at the end of the process of philosophical activity,” but rather stood at the beginning, as an existential choice that was in reaction to other existential possibilities.⁷ Liberal learning as a way of life involved “a mode of existing-in-the-world, that had to be practiced at each instant, and the goal of which was to transform the whole of the individual’s life.”⁸ This existential option embraced a certain vision of the world; the task of philosophical and critical discourse, says Hadot, was to disclose and rationally justify this existential option.

It was from this existential option that doctrines emerged and were refined and clarified. This primary life choice informed the doctrine that was taught. Furthermore, ancient philosophers never made this choice in isolation but within a school community. To be a part of a school was to embark upon a total change of lifestyle, “a conversion of one’s entire being, and ultimately a certain desire to be and to live in a certain way.”⁹

Moreover, liberal education as a way of life was not a uniform endeavor. Various schools — Stoics, Cynics, Epicureans, and so forth — were dedicated to this approach yet were inspired by distinctly different ideals. What was consistent among these various approaches was the rigorous, all-encompassing practice or way of life that each promoted. Each way was grounded in a deliberate existential choice. Though the nature and substance of the existential commitment may have differed, depending upon the ideal embraced, the striving to actualize the ideal in the concrete circumstances of one’s life was the essence of liberal education.

Like Kimball, Hadot sees liberal education (especially since scholasticism) as primarily reduced to theoretical speculation. Liberal learning is indissolubly linked to the university and considered primarily as a theoretical enterprise. In modern universities liberal learning is no longer a way of life but a way of thinking.¹⁰ Kierkegaard’s authorship offers a powerful and unique perspective on the practice of liberal education that exposes the limits of liberal education as critical thinking and furthers the tradition of liberal education as a way of life.

KIERKEGAARD AND LIBERAL EDUCATION AS A WAY OF LIFE

Compel a person to an opinion, a conviction, a belief — in all eternity, that I cannot do. But one thing I can do, in one sense the first thing (since it is the condition for the next thing: to accept this view, conviction, belief), in another sense the last thing if he refuses the next: I can compel him to become aware.¹¹

[W]ith regard to something in which the individual person has only himself to deal with, the most one person can do for another is to unsettle him.¹²

Kierkegaard’s authorship does not lend itself to easy interpretation. He can be viewed, as one commentator observed, as either the successor of Aristotle and Aquinas or the predecessor of Jean-Paul Sartre and Michel Foucault.¹³ In *Point of View*, Kierkegaard explicitly states that his writings from the beginning, both veronymous and pseudonymous, are inspired by his religious teleology, which seeks to awaken moral and religious edification.¹⁴ Toward this end, he faces two tasks:

first, presenting the ideal requirements of ethical and religious truth, and second, placing upon the reader the difficult task of appropriating this ideal. Kierkegaard seeks both to articulate what it means to be an ethical, religious person — its ideality without compromise — and provoke his individual readers to take up the difficult task of appropriating this ideal. His writings are a provocation and an invocation to the reader to live or appropriate moral and religious categories. They facilitate a process of edification or the interiorization of ethical and religious truth. Avoiding extensive arguments over the substance of religious and ethical truth — which Kierkegaard sees as an evasion of living ethically, his writings seek to prompt awareness and the immediate decision to live into ethical-religious categories of existence, rather than simply argue over such categories, and thereby forgo becoming an existing self. Kierkegaard seeks to “reduplicate” in his readers the very ethical and religious dispositions his writings speak about.¹⁵

According to Kierkegaard, existence is not a given but a task. To exist is to become a self, and this requires appropriation of ethical and religious truth. Kierkegaard’s pseudonym Johannes Climacus in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* takes up this topic at length. Climacus asserts that “truth is subjectivity.”¹⁶ By this, Climacus, an existential thinker, seeks to underscore that truth for the individual is not simply a *what* (a system of ideas or beliefs) but a *how* (a mode of living). A person cannot comprehend the truth or falsity of an ideal if he or she has not appropriated it inwardly and thereby lived in accordance with it, live it in actuality. Speculative thinking, Climacus laments, tends to miss this task of appropriation and its ensuing demand for self-examination and thereby mistakenly equates thinking with existing.

There is in philosophy, observes Climacus, a persistent forgetfulness about what it means to exist and a tendency to equate existence with thinking. One cannot counter this propensity with more thinking. Replying to the limitations of thinking with more thinking is no reply at all, argues Climacus. The cycle must be broken.

Concerned with breaking this cycle, Kierkegaard seeks to promote edification. His preoccupation with edification clearly situates him within an understanding of liberal education as a way of life. Kierkegaard affirms that the “how” of learning is as important as the “what,” lest liberal learning be viewed simply as a list of theories or argued positions rather than as a way of life involving great personal discipline. Yet he understands the challenge this involves.

The opening quotes of this section underscore the difficulties involved with communication that seeks edification, for edification, strictly speaking, is the task of the individual. Edification or existentially reduplicating ethical-religious categories is a free act accomplished by the individual. Logic or authority cannot coerce it.¹⁷ A person cannot edify another person for “they cannot implant the ground that then builds itself up.”¹⁸ The ground is not implanted but presupposed. Edifying discourse assumes qualifying concepts, whether religious or ethical, as given and understood.¹⁹ An edifying discourse about love takes for granted that the hearer knows “essentially what love is and seeks to win them to it, to move them.”²⁰

Aware of the limits placed on edification, yet intending to accomplish it, Kierkegaard carefully considers the receiver's ethical-religious level so that ethical-religious truth can be communicated truthfully. Kierkegaard notes that communication is generally characterized by four elements: (1) the content of what is communicated, (2) the mode of the communication, (3) the receiver, and (4) the communicator. With respect to ethical communication, Kierkegaard finds confusion in the modern age that communicates the ethical not as art but as scholarship and science. However, unlike scientific knowledge, ethical communication presupposes knowledge of what is ethical. Thus, strictly speaking, in ethical communication there is no object of knowledge communicated. Rather, ethical communication involves — or should involve, if it is to be ethical — “luring the ethical out of the individual, because it is *in* the individual.”²¹ Since we all know the ethical, to communicate the ethical as an object is unethical.

It is this understanding of ethical-religious truth as a way and the self as *on* the way that inspires Kierkegaard's novel form of communication that seeks edification. Its purpose is not to inform (provide knowledge) about ethical matters but rather to unsettle and make one aware of the gap that exists between knowing and willing, thereby prompting the difficult task of appropriating ethical/religious truths and embracing truth as a way of living, rather than as a cognitive insight.

With indirect communication Kierkegaard seeks to invoke earnestness, to enable the reader to “stand alone — by another's help.”²² Lest the communicator become a hindrance, she must proceed indirectly or ironically, hiding her earnestness, for the desire to imitate always persists. In order to resist this inclination the earnest one becomes, as Kierkegaard notes, a Proteus who incessantly changes. Ethical earnestness, contends Kierkegaard, involves irony; in fact, to most people it appears as jesting. The earnest communicator's help must remain hidden, for if the learner sees the other's help as advantageous, that usually becomes an obstacle to her standing alone. Kierkegaard elaborates on the earnest communicator:

[One] must not have the appearance of earnestness. To appear to be earnest is direct earnestness but is not earnestness in the deepest sense. Earnestness is that the *other becomes earnest (and here the accent lies)*, but it is well to note that this is not by way of immediate impression and by mimicking, but by oneself — and that is precisely why the communicator must not appear to be earnest.²³

The intention is to prompt a realization or capability for the learner to live into an ideal immediately. If the learner says, “I cannot,” the teacher must reply, “this is nonsense, begin now as well as you can.”

Thus what needs to be communicated is not knowledge but the awakening of ethical capabilities — an edifying joust to ethical action. This, though, requires art rather than science, for the “object of the communication is...not a knowledge but a realization.”²⁴ Direct communication about ethical matters, communicated scientifically, is a misunderstanding that gives the reader one more thing to *know*, but fails to communicate the earnest task of existing into ethical categories such that the hearer rests in the status quo. More knowledge, Kierkegaard says, is only a diversion from ethical earnestness.

Kierkegaard, a master Proteus, forwards literary creations that act as invaluable mirrors or foils for the reader's own quest for self-understanding and actualization. He canvasses "poetized personalities who say I...into the center of life's actuality."²⁵ These different literary forms and pseudonyms, explains David Burrell, enable Kierkegaard "to distinguish what was able to be said from what could only be shown."²⁶ Rather than build a clear, logical system, he does philosophy by way of examples, canvassing pseudonyms that idealize and typify, according to Paul Holmer, "the range of real [men and women] and their options, choices, attitudes, passions, and reasoning."²⁷ To have their full effect these existential possibilities "must be imaginatively re-lived by the reader...must be met with a personal response, an existential 'reduplication' or an equally existential refusal."²⁸ Only in this personal response are there stirrings of edification.

By illuminating example after example, Kierkegaard does justice to the complexity of human existence and in turn invites the reader to do justice to the complexity of his or her own existence, to take it seriously and pay careful attention to it.²⁹ This seriousness or practice of edification is the ultimate aim of Kierkegaard's pedagogy. It involves existentially encountering these poeticized personalities and becoming aware of the gap in oneself between knowing and willing and doing something about it immediately.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This encounter for edification is hard-won. It is, as Kierkegaard shows elsewhere, easily and cleverly avoided. In *Either/Or* and *Sickness unto Death* Kierkegaard illuminates the many forms such evasion takes. One such form is to retreat into critical thinking, the penchant of modern liberal education. Liberal education as critical thinking seeks to detach from the concrete demands of particular ethical agency in the hopes of attaining a clearer, more objective perspective. It aims for description rather than prescription. Accordingly, it understands its role as primarily fostering critical thinking that enables neutrality — a safe place in this polemical world. This approach resembles Lawrence Kohlberg's process for facilitating the development of ethical thinking while avoiding the tangle of having to teach for moral commitment, thus avoiding concerns about indoctrination. This critical detachment implicitly and optimistically assumes that right knowledge will lead to right action. Its advent coincides with Elmer Theissan's account of the secularization of the ideal of liberal education.³⁰

This approach, however, misses something vitally important. While critical thinking is important so that students are equipped with intellectual skills that enable them to detach from the immediacy of the present and critically appraise a range of alternatives, it overlooks the difficult work of interiorizing or appropriating an ethical alternative, which in turn enables one to further appraise the viability of that alternative.

Certainly the substance of ethical and religious truth will and should always be questioned and examined. However, what constitutes ethical and religious truth can indefinitely be held in critical abeyance, thus evading the arduous steps at interiorizing such truth. What is regarded as freedom or autonomy is really a critical detachment

that keeps its options open but has yet to embody or live into an ethical alternative. This, Kierkegaard shows, is a spurious freedom and a narrow understanding of liberal learning.

In pondering the value of this understanding of liberal education as a way of life and Kierkegaard's contribution to it, I conclude with reference to Kierkegaard's work *Johannes Climacus, or De Omnibus Dubitandum Est (One Must Doubt Everything)*. This pseudonymous work, in which Kierkegaard directs his sights at Descartes is particularly appropriate. Descartes's methodology of doubt is arguably the ideal culmination of modern liberal learning.

In the spirit of liberal education as a way of life, Kierkegaard, through his pseudonym Johannes Climacus, takes seriously Descartes's project that begins with radical doubt. He creates a poet-existence, Climacus, who attempts to take Descartes at his word. Instead of authoritatively and didactically discoursing on *de omnibus dubitandum* (doubting everything) and thereby attracting followers, Climacus endeavors to exist into such doubting as existence-inwardness. In so doing he realizes what an infinitely difficult and impossible task this is and ultimately what an absurd task it is. This way of existing, doubting everything, is utterly fantastical, removed from truth as existence.

On a final note, consider how liberal education as a way of life versus liberal education as critical thinking would approach the directive to live a life based on love of one's neighbor. Liberal education as critical thinking would respond with a flurry of questions: Who is my neighbor? What is love? And so forth. These are seemingly important questions that merit our attention and demand further speculation. Yet herein Kierkegaard sees an evasion, a holding back from a crucial existential choice. This speculative or spectator posture "modestly" says it is a matter of thinking things through first. Kierkegaard, however, charges that this restraint is a matter of willfulness or a lack of willing, an avoidance of existing into what one knows — a form of despair. The speculator takes lightly the transition from knowing to existing, considering it to be a given that will happen in due time. This transition, however, as Kierkegaard's other pseudonym Anti-Climacus observes, is a long story; it is the rub, the heart of the matter, and the heart of a liberal education, fully understood.³¹

1. James O. Freedman, *Liberal Education and the Public Interest* (Iowa City: University of Iowa, 2003), 56. Also, see Mark Schwehn, *Exiles from Eden* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 9–10. Modern research universities, preoccupied with Max Weber's ideal of *Wissenschaft*, are the fruits of this exclusive focus on critical thinking and its quest for new knowledge.

2. For elaboration on this point see Paul Holmer, "Kierkegaard and Philosophy," in *New Themes in Christian Philosophy*, ed. Ralph McInerney (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 17.

3. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2d ed. (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1984), 125–30. Within oratorical societies the roles and accompanying virtues that people aspire to were given and predetermined. Critical thinking or taking the point of view from the outside would have been utterly foreign to a culture inspired by an oratorical state of mind. As MacIntyre explains, "there is no 'outside,' except that of the stranger."

4. Bruce Kimball, *Philosophers and Orators: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1986), 35.

5. *Ibid.*, 11.

6. Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 265. Hadot's notion of "philosophy as a way of life" I use interchangeably with the phrase, "liberal education as a way life." While the roots of philosophy as a way of life precede the mature development of liberal education, they definitely inspire and inform the core of liberal learning.
7. Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 3.
8. Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 265.
9. Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy*, 3.
10. There is not space to explain how philosophy as a way of life was displaced. Hadot traces the major cause to scholasticism wherein philosophy, demoted as the supreme science, was relegated to simply supplying conceptual tools for theology.
11. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 50 (gender use in original).
12. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, vol. 1, trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 387 (gender use in original).
13. Robert Roberts, "Existence, Emotion, and Virtue: Classical Themes in Kierkegaard," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 178.
14. Kierkegaard, *Point of View*, 23. Given Kierkegaard's penchant for irony, one can doubt this assertion. However, I take him here at his word, for it illuminates the stark difference between his veronymous and pseudonymous writings, and is echoed in his private journals.
15. Louis Mackey, *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), xii.
16. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*.
17. Mark Strawser, *Both/And: Reading Kierkegaard from Irony to Edification* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 204.
18. Ibid.
19. Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, vol. 4, ed. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (London: Indiana University Press, 1975), 263.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid., 269.
22. Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. Hong and Hong (London: Indiana University Press, 1967), 280.
23. Ibid., 288 (emphasis added).
24. Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, vol. 4, 272.
25. Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, vol. 1, 302.
26. David Burrell, *Exercises in Religious Understanding* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1974), 148.
27. Paul Holmer, "Kierkegaard and Philosophy" in *New Themes in Christian Philosophy*, ed. Ralph McInerny (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 18.
28. Mackey, *Kierkegaard*, xii.
29. Holmer, "Kierkegaard and Philosophy," 18.
30. On the secularization of liberal education see Elmer Thiessen, *Teaching for Commitment: Liberal Education, Indoctrination, and Christian Nurture* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), 48–50.
31. This discussion parallels Aristotle's account of continence and incontinence, wherein he makes the distinction between knowing and willing the good. Kierkegaard, as noted, reinforces and expands upon this insight. The gap though between knowing and willing is, according to Kierkegaard, a much longer story, fraught with despair. In an upcoming paper I intend to explore the many evasions or forms of despair that impede the transition from knowing to willing.