

Infinitely Interesting: Bloom, Kierkegaard, and the Educational Quest

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In *The Closing of the American Mind*, Allan Bloom laments the current emphasis on the tolerance for diversity, or “openness” as he calls it, in the education of American youth. This democratic accommodation of all points of view has led to a cultural relativism that has “extinguished the real motive of education, the search for a good life,”¹ thus stifling the longing for knowledge. Intended to protect individual views, the educational commitment to neutrality does not contribute to the meaningfulness of individual lives. Rather, it gives rise to the educational malaise of indifference. Bloom’s call for a return to a traditional education centered on the values of Western civilization is aimed at rekindling the passion at the heart of the pursuit of knowledge and self-discovery, to renew the philosophical quest for the answer to the Socratic question of how one should live. If we are to reclaim a place for philosophy — and the “moral unity of learning” — in contemporary American life, education must be reconceived as a quest for truth.

Though I disagree with Bloom’s conservative antidote, I share his concern about indifference and its ill effect on the nature of the educational quest, and recognize the desirability of an intimate bond between education and the quest for truth. Bloom even seems to be at least partly right about relativism: as it plays out in education, “openness” and neutrality are emphasized at the expense of commitment and passion. But must we sacrifice democratic diversity in order to combat indifference? Is universal truth the only source for a “moral unity of learning?” A different light can be shed on these questions and on the role of the quest for truth in moral education by drawing on Kierkegaard’s ideas of subjective truth and indirect communication. These notions contribute to an educational philosophy that aims to nurture the individual’s passionate quest for how to live without violating the spirit of democratic openness to all views. Further, such a philosophy as a guide to classroom life and curriculum would encourage not only the awakening of individual longing but an affirmation of the intimate tie between one’s longing and intersubjective existence.

Bloom argues, and I agree, that in order to reconnect education with the passionate search for a good life, we must reintroduce to the curriculum “[t]he kinds of questions children ask: Is there a God? Is there freedom? Is there punishment for evil deeds? Is there certain knowledge? What is a good society?”² The prevailing sentiment seems to be, however, that encouraging a passionate belief in how one should live is just too hot for education to handle. The “big questions” have been sidestepped in the education of children and adolescents, presumably because educators are (rightfully) concerned about imposing any particular set of beliefs on their students. Omitted from education are some of the most important concerns a student might have, those that might help her to reach an understanding of herself

and her relationship to her world. The unfortunate result of leaving these questions to chance is that the educational quest has become one directed toward personal success rather than “the good life.” The expectation of reward for effort applied has displaced the longing for knowledge. It seems to me, however, that an openness to such questions — nothing less than an acknowledgment of the ambiguity of the human condition — is a prerequisite for a truly moral education. But can we bring those big questions back to liberal education without the promise of universal truth at the end of the philosophical rainbow?

Søren Kierkegaard, the 19th century Danish philosopher, concerned himself with the ambiguity of individual existence rather than the certainty of philosophical systems and the quest for objective truth. Because “all essential knowing pertains to existence,”³ the Kierkegaardian seeker of wisdom strives to live fully in the understanding of the particulars of her existence, not only of her daily life, but of existence in its largest sense, encompassing how she relates herself to the unknown. She can only confront this unknown by trying to understand the questions that most passionately concern her. In Kierkegaard’s terms, this is a matter of looking inward, that is, becoming subjective.

In Bloom’s view of “the big questions” the source of the answers is the universal truth of the Western tradition. As Kierkegaard does not appeal to the universal, Bloom might brand his thought relativist. But the passion of subjectivity bears little resemblance to the neutral relativism of objectivity Bloom deplores, in which no idea has any stronger claim on one than any other idea. One does not choose one’s subjective truth, but chooses only whether to embrace it and how to exist in light of it. A concrete analogy to the idea of subjective truth might be found in the general sense of a “calling.” Should an individual respond to the strong calling she feels to be a teacher? Or should she be disinterested, in a sense, “open-minded,” and choose from among many careers with reference to such objective criteria as prestige, salary and the job market? If she holds to her interest in teaching, despite the many sensible, profitable alternatives and despite the difficulties she may face, she is in some sense acknowledging a claim that has been made on her. For Kierkegaard, the individual’s subjective truth makes an absolute claim, for it is that which most deeply concerns her, and thus it is “infinitely interesting.”

For Bloom, the study of the humanities is the pursuit of “the important truth,” and recognizing the claim of the classics to hold this truth enables each seeker of wisdom to connect his personal longing with the “intuition of the comprehensive order of things.”⁴ Kierkegaard’s notion of truth is very different from the metaphysical umbrella Bloom would resurrect to reignite passion in the hearts of learners. The idea of subjective truth, though not unifying in Bloom’s sense, may offer a better response to what Bloom calls “the prevailing passions” of today’s diverse students, one that can still open the way to the pursuit of a good life as a central educational concern. This moral quest does not find its unity in the “answers” provided by the Western tradition, thus does not preclude tolerance for diversity or “openness” to the beliefs of all learners.

The idea of subjective truth is central to *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to “Philosophical Fragments,”* in which Kierkegaard is concerned with the individual’s

god-relationship and the sort of religiousness that transforms one's existence. To be a Christian, Kierkegaard argues, it is not enough to go to church on Sundays and forget about God the rest of the week. Rather, the religious individual must always exist in the awareness of her relationship with God, her "absolute telos." It is this telos, the absolute demand her relationship with God places on her, that gives meaning to her existence.⁵

Rather than promoting Kierkegaard's or any idea of God, this discussion is intended to explore how Kierkegaard's account of the god-relationship might illuminate a common human experience — the longing to be connected to what Charles Taylor calls "the ultimately important."⁶ It is the individual and the relationship rather than this larger something that I wish to focus on here, in the hope that Kierkegaard's description can move us closer to being able to talk about this experience in educational terms.

Kierkegaard's god-relationship neither instructs the individual how to live, nor can it be set aside from her daily life to provide a comfortable refuge in times of spiritual need. There is a certain sort of helplessness involved in the relationship because the individual receives no direct response — there is no acknowledgment of the relationship, no visible results. Beyond the reach of words, the individual's god-relationship can only be understood through actually living her life, embracing her uncertainty in a constant process of striving. Her existential striving is not aimed at the attainment of a crystallized goal, nor an object of knowledge. Rather, the individual in her relationship with God is always becoming, thus her task is never finished. This task of existing in uncertainty cannot be addressed by looking to quantifiable, describable results, that is, by becoming objective, which has as its goal finality and certainty. She can only approach the relationship to God by becoming subjective, attempting to understand the unique demand existence places on her.

The question of the god-relationship is the question of eternal happiness — for Kierkegaard the passionate interest in immortality is a condition of human existence. What is the desire for immortality but a response to our human understanding that there is an end to our temporal existence? This desire for meaning is at once a psychologically heavy burden to bear, one we often wish to be distracted from, and something that almost irresistibly compels us to respond. Our interest in immortality is manifested in many ways: late-in-life religious conversions, the obsession to establish one's place in history, the artist's desire to create something that will live beyond her time, even the desire to have children.

One way to describe the manifestation of the human confrontation with mortality, then, is as a longing for immortality. A way to describe this longing that is more germane to a discussion of education might be to think of it as a desire to approach one's life so as to give meaning to one's existence, or as Kierkegaard might put it, to fulfill the demand being human places on us. This is the pursuit of subjective truth — "the subjective individual's most passionate interest."⁷

I should note here that this discussion is not intended to be conclusive on the philosophical nature of truth. Rather I am attempting to sketch out an approach to a moral education in a socially and culturally diverse society that cannot or will not

agree on a foundational metaphysics. It is an educational approach that would aim *not* to discourage absolute beliefs — in God or Allah, truth or justice. It would in fact encourage each individual's recognition and exploration of the questions surrounding her beliefs, in all aspects of her education.⁸ But whether the individual holds her beliefs to be subjectively or objectively absolute is almost irrelevant to the educational approach I am trying to suggest. This type of education must be guided by the notion that what is "universally human" is not necessarily adherence to any particular truth, but the individual's passionate engagement with that which offers her life meaning — her "absolute telos."

The individual must become an "existing subjective thinker" — "to exist" being for Kierkegaard to grasp the relationship between the "here," finite earthly reality, and the "hereafter," the infinite (immortality). Kierkegaard likens this relationship to the Greek concept of Eros as it is presented in the Symposium. Like Eros, who is born of poverty and plenty, existence for Kierkegaard

is that child who is begotten by the infinite and the finite, the eternal and the temporal, and is therefore continually striving. This was Socrates' view — therefore love is continually striving, that is, the thinking subject is existing.⁹

One might be tempted to think that the Kierkegaardian individual is merely spinning her wheels by perpetually striving toward a goal without reaching it, but that is only a reasonable view if this process is understood finitely, or objectively. The point is that it cannot be understood this way, in terms of a goal, unattainable or not. What is important is that the individual subject "has the infinite within herself, by existing she is in the process of becoming."¹⁰ Rather than turning away from the demand placed on her by her relationship to the larger uncertainty of human existence, her life is transformed by her embrace of the infinite.

For the purposes of our educational discussion, we might begin by thinking of the Kierkegaardian dialectic as the interpenetration of what offers one's life meaning, and one's daily mode of existence. The difficulty of being genuinely human, of always becoming, is in holding these two things together, "infinitely interested in existing."¹¹ The challenge of a Kierkegaardian education, then, is to strive for the interpenetration of school life and curriculum with the questions that most passionately concern each learner. This approach suggests a way that educators and public education might go beyond merely tolerating different truths, to inspiring the individual's pursuit of truth.

The infinite interest of the Kierkegaardian individual is manifested through her existential striving. This striving expresses her awareness of her existential position, a position that admits of both vulnerability and a certain aloneness with regard to confronting the most important questions facing her. To realize her life, her possibility, she strives to develop herself to "the utmost of her capability,"¹² but in the realization that what she does may not produce effects of "world-historical" significance. And if she should accomplish something, she must be aware that it may be undermined by "divine jest," the quirks of fate or divine will that seem to stymie our attempts to attain various temporal ends. In other words, the Kierkegaardian individual must confront the uncertainty of existence. Further, she must act always

in the light of her subjective truth, expressing that truth through her life as “existence-communication.” In the concrete and particular way the individual lives her life, she communicates her constant striving to understand how she ought to live it. Existence-communication expresses not only a sort of acknowledgment of the singular demand that being human places on each of us, but also a concern for and relationship to each individual other’s process of becoming. Thus communicating, the Kierkegaardian individual embraces both the tragic and the intersubjective dimensions of the human condition.

To think of learning as existential striving is one way educators might inspire students to link their individual passions to a search for truth — the ultimate “relevant” curriculum. To paraphrase Heidegger, learning as existential striving is to make everything we do answer to the demands existence places on us.¹³ We might think of the educational process of becoming as living and learning in relationship to the questions that are central to our existence. Similar to Kierkegaard’s god-relationship, these all-important questions represent objective uncertainty; they offer no definitive answers, no prescriptive solutions. But these are the questions around which each of us makes meaning, and keeping them alive is the pursuit of subjective truth.

In the sense that we can encourage the pursuit of truth as an educational quest without assuming that all must subscribe to a set of beliefs attributable to a particular group or culture, a Kierkegaardian education allows for the “openness” that is liberal tolerance. But there is an even more important sense in which a kind of openness is central to learning as existential striving, an aspect of the education that not only does not dull passions in its equanimity, but itself engenders passion.

Of his much-admired teacher, Kierkegaard said, “If I wanted to be Lessing’s follower by hook or by crook, I could not; he has prevented it. Just as he himself is free, so...he wants to make everyone free in relation to him.” Existential communication, according to Kierkegaard, allows the teacher (as existing subjective thinker) to emancipate her student.

[T]he genuine subjective existing thinker is always just as negative as she is positive and vice versa: she is always that as long as she exists, not once and for all in a chimerical mediation. And her communication corresponds to this, lest by being overly communicative she meaninglessly transforms a learner’s existence into something other than what human existence is on the whole. She is cognizant of the negativity of the infinite in existence; she always keeps open the wound of negativity, which at times is a saving factor (the others let the wound close and become positive — deceived); in her communication, she expresses the same thing. She is, therefore, never a teacher, but a learner, and if she is continually just as negative as positive, she is continually striving.¹⁴

The negative of the infinite is the uncertainty of existence that objectivity (the positive) would try to gloss over. To “over-communicate” is to communicate as if existence were not uncertain, as if one possessed a final positive truth that could be applied indiscriminately to all individuals. Subjective truth, however, is expressed not in terms of finality, but in light of the individual’s own never-ending process of becoming.

Kierkegaard calls the positive mode “direct communication,” which is appropriate wherever objective thought is within its rights, but not in the realm of

subjectivity. To communicate in terms of results and certainty does not allow the recipient the possibility of belief. A significant part of public education does not fall into this realm, of course, and where facts and objectivity are involved, direct communication is in order. In the liberal democratic tradition, however, direct communication in the realm of belief, religious and otherwise, is a threat to the “openness” Bloom describes, a threat to the student’s freedom to live by her own understanding of truth. If education is to embrace the realm of commitment and belief, another mode of communication is called for, the mode Kierkegaard calls “indirect communication.”

Developing as an existing subjective thinker is to develop the art of indirect communication, an art whose secret is to set the recipient free to explore her own inwardness. For an existing individual, “the truth is only in the becoming.”¹⁵ She is not finished with her life so she cannot communicate existential truth as results or finality. Because existential communication is conducted in terms of possibility, not fact, the recipient must appropriate it rather than passively accept it. In Kierkegaard’s words, “all receiving is a producing.”¹⁶ In appropriating the communication the learner awakens to her need to explore her own questions, her own possibilities of how to live in the light of the demand placed on her as a human being. When passion is evoked, effort is required — the learner cannot fall back on platitudes or “group-think.” Instead she may recognize her potential to break free from the pull of mindless conformism.

Existential learners have possibility in common, a possibility that can be communicated, for instance, in a discussion of the actual life and deeds of some praiseworthy individual, perhaps a historical hero. Kierkegaard notes that an existential communicator understands that being informed that someone did this or that great thing is likely to squelch a particular individual’s motivation by turning the person discussed into a mere object of admiration, an exceptional being: “she admires him and says: But I am too insignificant to do anything like that.” According to Kierkegaard,

What is great with regard to the universal must therefore not be presented as an object for admiration, but as a *requirement*. In the form of possibility, the presentation becomes a requirement. Instead of presenting the good in the form of actuality, as is ordinarily done, that this person and that person have actually lived and have actually done this, and thus transforming the reader into an observer, an admirer, an appraiser, it should be presented in the form of possibility. Then whether or not the reader wants to exist in it is placed as close as possible to him. Possibility operates with the ideal human being... who is related to every human being as requirement.¹⁷

Subjectivity for Kierkegaard is the possibility of appropriation, and this possibility opens us to the good. This aspect of possibility suggests a type of open-ended perfectionism that might inform both classroom dynamics and curricular approach.

The Kierkegaardian notions of subjective truth and indirect communication may contribute to educational thinking in at least two ways. First, they suggest a way to think about what has been called the “shared morality” of a classroom, an approach that nurtures an awareness of the self in a moral relationship to other persons.¹⁸ Second, these ideas offer teachers and learners an approach to what they

encounter in the curriculum. Both of these approaches draw on the idea that what is universally human is our finitude and the demand existence places on each individual. Both are linked to the somewhat paradoxical notion that the quest for meaning that seems to isolate us in our subjectivity is exactly what we share with all other human beings.

First, participating in the shared morality of the classroom, teacher and students are all “seekers of wisdom,” each struggling with the question of eternity, the demands of existence, with all the vulnerability and aloneness that the uncertainty of life entails. At the same time, as each struggles with a subjective truth that she alone can respond to, she strives to communicate with her fellows on the basis of the possibility that they all share. An understanding of this shared striving, a sort of existential empathy, underlies a respect and compassion for all other learners in their educational quests.

Second, in terms of curriculum, a Kierkegaardian approach might nurture an alternative (but not necessarily exclusive) relationship to certain types of knowledge that emphasizes both possibility and the passion of individuals. Bloom talks about bringing the big questions back to elite undergraduate education, but my interest in these questions extends particularly to the education of adolescents. It has been a common cry that curriculum for adolescents is not “relevant,” that the content of texts has nothing to do with “real life.” Rather than simply addressing this concern with contemporary adolescent fiction and a focus on personal experiences (though there may be a place for these), we should consider the larger sense of relevance that Bloom is concerned with, that is, a way to speak to passions and possibilities that go beyond the immediate concerns of students’ daily lives.

Adolescence is a time of questioning that goes far deeper than the questioning of authority. Perhaps the central concern of students at this age is “the discovery of the self as something unique, uncertain, and questioning in its position in life.” According to Kohlberg and Gilligan, developmental theories of adolescence point to identity conflicts and “philosophic doubting about truth, goodness, and reality,” a doubt that is more akin to Dostoyevsky’s adolescents than to Mark Twain’s.¹⁹ The introduction of existential-philosophical questions to the curriculum might be one way to connect those burning questions to adolescents’ learning. Addressing open-ended questions related to the idealistic pursuit of the good life, as it relates to, among other things, the nature of freedom and truth, altruism and revolution, has potential for, at the very least, enriching the study of history and literature, and at most, inspiring individual passions.

Along these lines, one aspect of the “moral unity” of learning may derive from an attempt to understand the strivings of individuals in relation to their particular societies and circumstances over the ages. Sensitive to oppressed groups, past and present, educators have already begun to question the teaching of traditional metanarratives of historical progress. The extreme response is to demystify tradition with an account of the “facts,” for instance, depicting America’s founders as self-serving and greedy. Alternatively, an approach that embraces the strivings of

individuals and the tragic aspect of the human condition might place more emphasis on the many and various ways humans purport to pursue the good, with all the ambiguity about motives, all the inspired and misguided efforts richly intact.

The educational program suggested here is not intended to dictate specific practices but to provide a different perspective on what we are trying to accomplish in educating children. I hope it is enough to suggest how Kierkegaard's ideas of truth as subjectivity and indirect communication might shape an approach to moral education — or a moral approach to education — that acknowledges pluralism and confronts the problem of indifference to learning. Unlike Bloom, Kierkegaard suggests that we can encourage belief and commitment as well as “openness” and tolerance. A commitment to objective truth and a conservative (exclusive) approach to the humanities need not be prerequisites to inspiring passion in learners and to renewing the pursuit of a good life as an aim of education.

Bloom and others have attempted to show that democratic pluralism and educational multiculturalism inevitably lead to a “cultural relativism” that would undermine not only “traditional values,” but any attempt at “moral unity” in education that does not rely on a universal truth. With an approach that incorporates existential possibility, however, learners can explore their own culture and other cultures in all their diversity without either the presumed advantage of an enlightened superiority or an undue emphasis on “neutrality.” This view supports the study of the traditional values of Western civilization in American schools, those values that, for better or worse, influenced the development of this country, its current government and prevailing attitudes. But study of these values (and those of other cultures) would be guided by questions centered on the pursuit of the good — What were the explicit values of the actors? Were the values lived up to? What went wrong?

Bloom finds moral unity in objective truth, an approach that Kierkegaard might describe as one in which human beings, in their particularity, are sacrificed to the contemplation of an abstraction, an escape from existence. A Kierkegaardian education would draw moral commonality from the understanding of what all individuals share but cannot directly articulate — a passionate interest in their existence, in the meaning of their lives. A conscious existence in the light of the universally human experience of finitude links individuals to each other by means of indirect communication, a sort of existential empathy.

In general terms, then, a Kierkegaardian education would not dwell solely on the fulfillment of goals and final results (though there is a place for such “relative ends”) but makes room for what might be thought of as the erotic component of existence. Ideally, such an approach provides the opportunity for an educational quest that connects the student's passions to her learning, her longing to the longings of humankind.

1. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 34.

2. Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, 372.

3. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to "Philosophical Fragments,"* ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 197. Though Kierkegaard consistently referred to individuals as masculine, it is important to my project to consider his thought in relation to women as well as men. Therefore, I have substituted the feminine pronoun in all references to Kierkegaard's text. In quoting directly, I have not bracketed the substitutions.
4. Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, 367.
5. Another, less sectarian way to think about the "absolute telos" is suggested by Charles Taylor's idea of "strong evaluation" which involves value discriminations in light of an end or good that "commands our awe." See *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1989), 14-24.
6. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 42.
7. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 174.
8. After writing this paper, I read Nel Noddings's *Educating for Intelligent Belief and Unbelief* in which she makes an excellent case for the importance of the critical exploration of various traditions and belief systems in schools. My own emphasis is not on the study of beliefs themselves, but on an education that acknowledges and develops the student's unique relationship to the uncertainty of existence.
9. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 92.
10. *Ibid.*, 93.
11. *Ibid.*, 302.
12. *Ibid.*, 135.
13. Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?* trans. J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 14. The original: "To learn means to make everything we do answer to whatever essentials address themselves to us at a given moment."
14. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 85.
15. *Ibid.*, 78.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*, 358-59.
18. David Hansen, "The Emergence of a Shared Morality in a Classroom," *Curriculum Inquiry* 22, no. 4 (1992).
19. Lawrence Kohlberg, and Carol Gilligan, "The Adolescent as Philosopher," in *12 to 16: Early Adolescence*, ed. Jerome Kagan and Robert Coles (New York: Norton, 1972), 148.