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*Brigham Young University - Provo*

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Kierkegaard and a Pedagogy of Liminality

Sylvia McMillan

A dissertation submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

A. LeGrand Richards, Chair  
E. Vance Randall  
Scott E. Ferrin  
Steve Hite  
Edwin Gantt

Department of Educational Leadership and Foundations

Brigham Young University

June 2013

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## ABSTRACT

### Kierkegaard and a Pedagogy of Liminality

Sylvia McMillan

Department of Educational Leadership and Foundations, BYU

Doctor of Philosophy

There is a strain of curriculum theory especially since the reconceptualist movement that applies existential philosophy to educational issues and questions. There is also a related branch of curriculum theory that looks especially at existentialist theology to cast light on curriculum issues from a more religious slant. Both of these strains of analysis are rooted in Kierkegaard, the father of existentialism and existential theology (Huebner, 1999; Tillich, 1948). The educational implications of the works of Kierkegaard are a subject that has been virtually unexamined in either educational or Kierkegaardian scholarship except by two scholars whose works are already 40 years old.

A pedagogy of liminality aims at empowering the teacher and student to make what is being studied in the classroom something that each student will appropriate in her own way. The teacher facilitates this process by never letting the student rest for very long in any particular solution to a problem. Rather the teacher positions the student on a landscape which is filled with paradoxes. Each solution breeds a new set of questions and often equally viable though opposite solutions. The teacher thus constantly places herself and her student between dialectical poles, always reaching higher and higher syntheses in recursive process.

The purpose of a pedagogy of liminality is twofold. First, it prevents the curriculum from becoming an inert object. It becomes a dynamic growing thing. Second, it requires the student to never rest in any so-called objective answer but to always be striving towards a higher answer and an even better set of questions. In this way the teacher and student in collective discourse are each appropriating the discourse uniquely in enriching their life narratives. This is consistent with Kierkegaard's primary emphasis on subjectivity and his view of objectivity as secondary and always ideally in the context and service of subjectivity.

This dissertation is done in the hybrid style. The main part of the work is designed as a journal article.

Keywords: Kierkegaard, Education, Pedagogy, Curriculum, Liminality

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## DESCRIPTION OF STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

This dissertation is a hybrid dissertation format. The focus of this study is a journal ready article addressing the philosopher Soren Kierkegaard and his views as they relate to education. Many of his thoughts and ideas, though not specifically addressing education have great importance in the field of education. This research specifically makes the link between Kierkegaard and the pedagogy of liminality.

### **History**

Education over the last 140 years has become increasingly a technist “one best system” (Tyack, 1975 Cremin, 1964). Indeed, as Cremin noted in 1988, echoing President Eisenhower, the major threat to not only American education but American democracy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century would be the growth of the “military-industrial educational complex”. This entails an increasing objectification of students, teachers, and knowledge to do what a one best system needs it to be in order to fulfill its role as an instrument of social maintenance/control/engineering. Individuals must become anonymous, merely “human capital” units, and categorized in order to be scientifically managed. Management would include being statistically measured primarily so that they can be controlled according to some external socioeconomic agenda. That system means a movement away from education as an I/Thou encounter to an I/It alienation for principals, teachers, and students.

As far back as the civil war, education began to be viewed as a means to prepare students for military service and civil and economic society. It was known as the *northeast scientific movement* (Rudolph, 2005). This scientific movement was partially in response to the question of what we do to address an urban economy. How do you educate for wage labor? As Tyack

demonstrated, the educational consequence of the victory of the North over the South in the Civil war meant an increasing commitment in the newly arising public school to the ethos of the industrial and increasingly centralized political economy. As urban society grew and became a significant factor in the country the effects included increasing bureaucratization, models of organizational behavior, and the use of psychometric tools to define and categorize students. As Marx noted, in a society that glorifies the production and possession of objects, individuals themselves become the ultimate objects (Marx, 1978).

More and more people began to feel alienated from themselves (Spring, 1976). With the first and second world wars and the growth, through those wars, of the predominance of the U.S. as the military and industrial center of the world, schools became increasingly the site of operationalizing that hegemonic program (Cremin, 1988). To some extent, the Progressive movement in education was an attempt to ameliorate the trend of using public schools in this fashion (Cremin, 1964). The social reconstructionists like John Dewey wished to make schools the place where students, as future responsible citizens, would learn how to challenge such anti-democratic forces in the political economy. They would do this not only by learning about democracy from textbooks, but actually engaging in classes that were themselves instances of democratic processes. Psychological developmental Progressives attacked the problem from a different angle. How, in the face of increasing corporatization and what Durkheim (1977) called anomie (or the alienation of the individual in society of society) can we help students not fall into anonymity but become psychologically rich individuals?

An answer was offered by the administrative Progressives, such as William Torrey Harris, the father of the field of *educational administration*. His response to the question of the individual's role in corporate society was simply to streamline the educational system and to

insure that everyone had equal access. In other words, the administrative progressives' legacy was the "science" of educational administration, which was not meant to question to prevailing social order but simply to make it more efficient (Harris, 2008).

### **The Problem of Individual Identity in Education**

The problem I am addressing, therefore, was the loss of individual identity in increasingly corporatized public education. This situation has become especially egregious since the advent of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). How can we help the student discover, define, and move forward creatively in her life-narrative, organized around what the Existentialists call her "life-project." To the degree that a person is out of touch with her life-project and is not continually creating an ever richer narrative of her life, she becomes alienated, neurotic, and despairing. To approach this question, I turn to the works of Soren Kierkegaard, the locus classicus of Existentialism, to find, at the root of Existentialism, ideas and approaches to education that promote authenticity and health in the student in the classroom.

### **An introduction to Kierkegaard and his major ideas**

Søren Aabye Kierkegaard was born on May 5, 1813, in Copenhagen, Denmark, where he spent all of his life. Søren was the seventh and last child in his family. His father was a wool merchant who at first cursed God, but later in life, had a pietistic faith as he contemplated Christ's sufferings. It was his father's faith that deeply affected Søren and how he viewed the world. In 1830, he entered the University of Copenhagen, where he studied philosophy, theology and literature. Upon his mother's death, he decided to move away from home with the thought the only way he would know what to do with his life was to know himself. He worked as a Latin teacher until 1838, when his father died. The money he inherited was enough to allow him financial independence the rest his life.

Kierkegaard's philosophy and writing was strongly influenced by Regine Olsen, the love of his life and the muse for his writings. He and Regine met in 1837, while they were students at University, and they became engaged in 1840, but he held some undisclosed secret of dark and personal nature. A year later he chose to break off the engagement rather than to reveal his secret to Regine. She married another man and refused to see Kierkegaard again.

Kierkegaard was a profound and profuse writer in the Danish "golden age" of intellectual society. His work crosses the boundaries of philosophy, theology, psychology, literary criticism, devotional literature and fiction. Kierkegaard brought this compelling mixture of discourses to bear as social critique and for the purpose of renewing Christian faith within Christendom. At the same time he made many original conceptual contributions to each of the disciplines he employed. He is known as the "father of existentialism". Much of his philosophical work deals with the issues of how one lives as a "single individual", giving priority to concrete human reality over abstract thinking, and highlighting the importance of personal choice and commitment.

His theological work focuses on Christian ethics, on the institution of the Church, and on the differences between purely objective confirmations of Christianity. He wrote of the individual's subjective relationship to Jesus Christ, which came through faith. Much of his work deals with the practice of Christian love. His psychological work explored individual's emotions and feelings when faced with life choices. His thinking was influenced by Socrates and the Socratic Method.

### **The primacy of subjectivity in Kierkegaard's writings**

Kierkegaard's early work was written under various pseudonyms that he used to present unique viewpoints and interact with each other in complex dialogue. He designated pseudonyms

to look at particular viewpoints in-depth, which required several books in some instances while Kierkegaard, openly or under another pseudonym, critiqued that position. He wrote many Upbuilding Discourses under his own name and dedicated them to the "single individual" who might want to discover the meaning of his works (Bretall, 1946).

Kierkegaard's focus in his writings was always on the individual and her unique relationship to God. This relationship, said Kierkegaard, must take precedence over any dogmatic, canonical truths—whether scientific, historical, ethical or religious. In this insistence, Kierkegaard was posing a challenge to the positivist assumptions of the newly forming social sciences which he felt objectified people and robbed them of their individuality and subjectivity. As will be discussed, Kierkegaard felt that these approaches to objective truth dealt with a reality of secondary importance and were approaches that were suitable to only empirical phenomena. They were *not* equal to the infinite subtlety of each individual's subjective experience. For Kierkegaard it was the preeminent standard of the truth that must matter most to a human being – her relationship to her primary existential motivations.

This is what the Existentialists called one's *existential project*. As is widely acknowledged, Kierkegaard's works were the foundation for this school of thought, which is why he is seen as the father of Existentialism and Existentialist theology (Lowrie, 1962; Tillich, 1948). Kierkegaard felt such generalized truths endangered the individual because they overshadowed her experience of herself in relationship to the Divine and made her just an instance of a category. As the 20<sup>th</sup>-century Protestant Existentialist theologian Paul Tillich would later put it, one's relationship to ultimacy must be the foundation upon which a person approaches other sorts of truth and makes them her own. By the term *ultimacy*, Tillich, who was profoundly influenced by Kierkegaard, meant to indicate that which is at the center of a person's

being. Ultimacy is that which is the ethical alpha and omega in one's life because of one's personal, not institutional, encounter with the Divine.

Kierkegaard warns us against making objective, categorical knowledge primary, making him an early precursor of postmodernism (Hannay, 2003) Such knowledge tends to relegate the individual to a secondary status—at the service of a conceptual generality or a social, ethical or religious system. Kierkegaard insisted that systematic truth—whether scientific, historical, ethical or spiritual—must always be secondary. What must always be primary are the individual and her foundational reality: her subjective relationship to God or to that which is ultimate in her life. From that standpoint she may then appropriate objective knowledge. In order for this knowledge to be morally valid, said Kierkegaard, it must touch the individual at her core. It must also bear practical fruit by making her more into whom she truly is, not what an external system is trying to make of her. She must, in short, become a *subject*, not an *object*. She must discover and pursue her deepest existential projects in life in order to be morally healthy. This is what it means to live in *subjectivity*. To live primarily in *objectivity* and to pay little attention to oneself as a subjective being is merely to be an object of someone or something else's categorical terms and purposes. The roots of Sartre's (1993) idea was the human being as a “being-for-oneself” as epistemologically and ethically primary. This does not mean living selfishly. To the contrary, it means living in line with one's deepest ethical commitments.

Kierkegaard locates truth in the individual and in the individual's experience. In a sense, for Kierkegaard, there are no “general, objective” truths that are morally significant in themselves. Such truths are what Sartre and Camus would later call *essences*—semantic groupings that tell us very little about the individual's personal existence—what those truths *mean* to her and what she *does* with them in her life. Kierkegaard is not interested in grand

systems. Nor is he interested in general codes of ethics that claim to be religion but which are typically just a falsely pious means of legitimating a culture, as he argued in *Attack Upon Christendom*. Kierkegaard is interested in showing how they are a poor substitute for the religious. How they can become a distraction to the truly religious project of one's life? Kierkegaard is ultimately interested in the individual's subjective experience—and those potential detours and distractions to it. He is concerned with the individual's subjective experience of God—her own experience in which there can be no other.

Hence, Kierkegaard asserts that truth is finally not only subjective in that it differs from person to person; the truth *is* subjectivity, and this primary and personal truth never yields to systematic analysis. One can study the individual in systematic terms such as medically, psychologically, socially, philosophically or theologically. However, the knowledge that arises from such study of the individual is secondary—both in terms of what it tells us about the individual and (most importantly) what such knowledge can come to mean for the individual in her search for ultimacy. As with statistical analyses of various populations, categorical truth applies to everyone in general but to no one in particular. For Kierkegaard, to whom the individual is the measure of all things, any categorical knowledge of what man is must always be secondary to an individual's knowledge of who *she* is in her relationship to the ultimate. The primacy of individual's subjectivity might suggest a kind of sophistic relativism. The difference with Kierkegaard is that the individual's subjectivity is her unique way of being in relationship with an absolute truth that the sophist denied.

As Martin Buber claimed, any sociological, educational, or ethical theory is prone to turn the individual into an "It." In other words, she becomes an instrumentality in achieving another person's or another group's goals. Her ethical project, however, is to become fully a "Thou"—a

person who is a goal-in-herself, unique in the eyes of God, and never to be colonized for someone else's purposes.

### **Kierkegaard's Thoughts on Curriculum and Education**

Two quotes from Kierkegaard's work *Fear and Trembling* which are particularly relevant educationally in providing a starting point for the purposes of this study—a foundation for “A Pedagogy of Liminality,” which I present in the article.

What then is education? I had thought it was the curriculum the individual ran through in order to catch up with himself. And anyone who does not want to go through this curriculum will be little helped by being born into the most enlightened age.

(Kierkegaard, 2003, p. 75)

In the old days [of Abraham] it was different. For then faith was a task for a whole lifetime, not a skill thought to be acquired in days or even weeks. (Kierkegaard, 2003, p.42).

The word curriculum is defined as a group of related courses, often in a special field of study. It comes from the Latin word “*currere*,” which means “course” or “to run a course.” However, Kierkegaard invites us to examine two possible meanings for curriculum and education. One view of education is objective, scientific and instrumentalist. The other approach presented by Kierkegaard is subjective, internal and promoting transformative possibilities within oneself. As discussed later, this does not mean that education cannot have objective means and purposes. It does mean, however, that its primary orientation is the subjective enrichment of the student on her personal journey.

The objective approach to curriculum is perhaps best exemplified by John Franklin Bobbitt (1918), an early 20<sup>th</sup> century American educationist. In his view, the curriculum is the

course of experiences and actions, in a school setting, through which children grow and mature and become socially functional adults. To the behaviorist Bobbitt, the curriculum is an instrument of social engineering. Such curricula have two essential features. The first is that scientific experts are best qualified to design curricula based upon their expert knowledge of what behaviors and characteristics are desirable in members of a profession and as adult members of society. Such a curriculum asks what experiences would produce said qualities. The second feature is that curriculum is defined as the deeds-experiences the student ought to have to become the adult she ought to become. It would seem that in such curriculum theorists as Bobbitt, Locke and Hegel (Kierkegaard's arch-nemesis in his writings) have won the day given our current education system with its narrowly defined courses and formulas for achieving test scores. This is especially evident in the *No Child Left Behind Act* and the standardizing consequences it has had for American education.

Kierkegaard's approach to the curriculum is wholly different. From Kierkegaard we get to the core of the question about the ultimate goals of education. The question Kierkegaard posits is, "What kind of course?" We have created curricula that are designed to meet someone else's purpose – to serve the greater society, to mold children into adults that serve the system and society as defined by others—especially, perhaps, by those who, both overtly and covertly, make up the governing elite (Cremin, 1964; Spring, 1976; Tyack, 1974). According to Kierkegaard, curriculum should serve the student to catch up with herself, not to run circles outlined by others.

**Objectivist/Instrumentalist education.** The objective view of education is grounded in the idea that education should serve as an instrument for shaping individuals to function effectively in and serve the larger society. The idea that the purpose of education is to serve the

greater good and society as a whole is as old as philosophy itself. Plato saw education as important in creating and sustaining his ideal *Republic*.

John Locke saw the student's mind as a *tabula rasa*, or blank slate, to be impressed upon by the teacher. It is generally argued that Locke's goal was a virtuous "cultured gentleman." Using Ricoeur's idea of the hermeneutics of suspicion, as in a Marxian analysis the hidden curriculum is for the teacher to fill the student with public knowledge that will mold the student to fulfill politico-economic purposes as defined by others. At any rate such approaches have been and continue to be used as a means of using educational institutions as a form of social control over children with the idea of creating adults with uniform beliefs and values (Cremin, 1964; Spring, 1976; Tyack, 1974). We see the extreme result of this pedagogy in Thorndike's obsession with quantification and in Skinner's radically behaviorist approach to education especially as he presented it in his 1956 work *The Technology of Teaching*.

By definition this type of education is an external race *against* others rather than an internal race *with* oneself. Under Locke's *tabula rasa* view, the student is passive. There is little innate in the student; she is a creature shaped by her teacher and/or the environment around her (Skinner, 1956).

The idea of objective education rests on the idea that (a) knowledge is mastery of discrete units of generalized facts, impersonal theories, and technical skills that can be (b) assessed by standardized tests in order to (c) sort students for their suitability to fill certain socioeconomic roles, which (d) turns students, teachers and the curriculum itself largely into instruments for someone else's purposes, thereby rendering them as static objects instead of rich and dynamic subjects, and (e) all this takes second-order instrumental knowledge to replace (and sometimes erase) first-order moral knowledge of oneself in its uniquely individual form and expression.

Nothing could contrast so radically with Kierkegaard's position of subjectivity and locating truth in the individual (Greene, 1995; Noddings, 1995; Mayes, 2001).

Objectivist education has educators teaching obediently in the service of a system. Whether that system is ideological or institutional is probably less important than that they both tend to depersonalize the student. Such pedagogical practices have the effect, as Marx (1994) observed of corporate society in general, of alienating the student from herself, her fellows, and her work. In a great deal of educational research, whether on left or right, there is an increasing and dangerous tendency to look at the student as capital. As Cremin (1964) points out, the major threat to democracy was the public school's shift toward an overtly custodial function as both anti-American, anti-intellectual, and, ironically, antidemocratic. For Kierkegaard, in order to increasingly engage in rich communion with Divinity, i.e., her own ultimacy – it must be done individually— subjectively. This commitment to subjectivity underlies Kierkegaard's view of education, "What then is education?" (Kierkegaard, 2003, p. 75).

**Subjectivist education.** The subjectivist idea of education focuses on the individual and her internal, subjective relation to herself and ultimately to her experience of what is ultimate in and for her life. At first, this might seem to parallel Rousseau's notion of education for the individual in relationship to the core of her being. However Rousseau believed in the essential goodness of the individual and the duty of education to restore that. For Rousseau education is a homecoming to one's innate goodness. For Kierkegaard, on the other hand, the individual is, as in most traditional forms of Christianity, a fallen creature. Education is thus the continual refinement of one's flawed subjectivity towards the goal of increasing communication with God.

Education is a transformative process, intuitive and aesthetic, and one wherein the individual's deepening in authentic subjectivity is the alpha and omega of pedagogy. Sartre's

idea of “being for others” and “being for oneself” can help clarify this point.<sup>1</sup> In “being for others,” one becomes an instrument of someone else’s purposes. One becomes an “It.” But in being for oneself, one exerts oneself in good faith (as Sartre says, meaning that one is as emotionally, intellectually and morally true to oneself as possible) to discover what lies at the core of one’s being as the most central and important value or values. The individual is freed to do her best to live according to those values. To live according to any other standard is to live in bad faith. Clearly, objectivist/instrumentalist education tempts students with the enticing rewards of good grades and lucrative jobs to be for others and thus live in bad faith. It threatens them with the threat of bad grades and low-status jobs to live according to externally imposed standards, not internally rich ones. In this sense, modern education pushes the student into living in bad faith.

What would it mean for an educational system to promote living in good faith? What would it mean for the curriculum to rise to Kierkegaard’s call for education to be a morally rich existential course that the student runs through in order that he may catch up with himself? It would mean, of course, that the curriculum was not propped up on artificial “I-It” structures but that it grew naturally out of “I-Thou” relationships. It would deepen the student in her subjectivity. It would, of course, have the same effect on teachers.

### **The Purpose of the Study**

In this study I focused on a subject that has been virtually unexamined in either educational or Kierkegaardian scholarship except by one or two scholars whose works are already 40 years old: the educational implications of the works of Kierkegaard. There is a strain

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<sup>1</sup> Of course Sartre’s project is ultimately atheistic while Kierkegaard’s project is ultimately a Christian one, however, the dynamics of arriving at the state of being for oneself is very much the same in both philosophers. This should not be surprising given that Sartre relied too heavily on Kierkegaard in the formulation of his philosophy.

of curriculum theory, especially since the reconceptualist movement that applies existential philosophy to educational issues and questions. There is also a related branch of curriculum theory that looks especially at existentialist theology to cast light on curriculum issues from a more religious slant. Both of these strains of analysis are rooted in Kierkegaard, the father of existentialism and existential theology (Huebner, 1999; Tillich, 1948).

Neither of these studies deals with the topic I wish to examine in this dissertation, which can be called a pedagogy of liminality. A pedagogy of liminality aims at empowering the teacher and student to make what is being studied in the classroom something that each student will appropriate in her own way. The teacher facilitates this process by never letting the student rest for very long in any particular solution to a problem. Rather the teacher positions the student on a landscape which is filled with paradoxes. Each solution breeds a new set of questions and often equally viable though opposite solutions. The teacher thus constantly places herself and her student between dialectical poles, always reaching higher and higher syntheses in recursive process.

The purpose of this is twofold. First, it prevents the curriculum from becoming an inert object but a dynamic growing thing. Second, it requires the student never to rest in any so-called objective answer but always to be striving towards a higher answer and even better higher set of questions. In this way the teacher and student in collective discourse are each appropriating the discourse uniquely in enriching their life narratives. As I discuss later, this is consistent with Kierkegaard's primary emphasis on subjectivity and his view of objectivity as secondary and always ideally in the context and service of subjectivity. We see these points most clearly by going back to the locus classicus of existential critique, Soren Kierkegaard. The intent is to lay

the groundwork for future studies regarding the different ways that Kierkegaard has been used by various scholars, especially educational scholars.

I write for audiences who are interested in the philosophy of education, policy makers, doctrinal students, professors of education and instructional and curricular theorists. Some of the following journals might be interested in this work: *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*; *Journal of Curriculum Studies*; *Journal of Curriculum Inquiry*, *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision*; *Educational Philosophy*; and *Journal of Educational Philosophy and Theory*. I'm examining an existentialist, indeed considered by many to be the father of existentialism, to look at the philosophical foundations of our education system. This is in tradition with theorists such as Ornstein and Hunkins (1988) who argued for looking at education from a humanist/aesthetic approach as well as an intellectual/academic approach. Eisner and Valance (1985) examined education largely from an approach of self-actualization. This work will lay groundwork for someone to trace the evolution of existential pedagogy in light of the source. How have existential theorists used Kierkegaard? All use his theories selectively. Why have so few gone to Kierkegaard as a source for educational theory?

### **Research Direction**

In this work, I wish to examine what an education for subjectivity would look like. Based on the major themes that emerge from the literature review, I will tease certain pedagogical implications out of these themes and then extend them into a pedagogy of liminality in the article component of the hybrid dissertation model.

According to Gouwens (1996), there are five major schools of Kierkegaardian scholarship: biographical, philosophical, literary, deconstructionist, and religious. I have chosen the last school of Kierkegaardian critique, the religious, within which to situate my literature

review found in Appendix A. In Appendix B, the methodology section, I discuss the reasons why the third or literary approach is the most fertile one to take in teasing the pedagogical implications out of Kierkegaard's work. Appendix C has further discussion and Appendix D has conclusions and further questions for study. In the article that follows I will lay out the foundations for a Kierkegaardian approach to education—"A Pedagogy of Liminality."

## Journal Article

### Soren Kierkegaard and a Pedagogy of Liminality

#### Background of Kierkegaard

One of the most influential yet enigmatic philosophers of the last two centuries is the Danish writer Soren Kierkegaard (5 May 1813 – 11 November 1855). Kierkegaard was seen by the relatively few who read him in his day as radical and puzzling, even irritating. The early- to mid-19<sup>th</sup> centuries when Kierkegaard lived was also the birth of modernism. It was especially marked by what postmodernists now call *grand narratives*: sweeping philosophical generalities and overarching systems of truth that reduced the individual to a member of a category whether psychological, political, ethical, or theological. It was Kierkegaard's passionate insistence not only upon the importance of the individual and her subjectivity but his even more radical claim that subjectivity *is* truth, that confounded his contemporaries. It continues to confound many contemporary readers still, with empiricist commitments and/or socioeconomic political agendas.

Kierkegaard's focus in his writings was always on the individual and her unique relationship to God. This relationship, said Kierkegaard, must take precedence over any dogmatic, canonical "truths"—whether scientific, historical, ethical or religious. In this insistence on one approaching God subjectively and uniquely, Kierkegaard was posing a challenge to the social sciences and "abstract objective truth" approach that dominated the 19th century intellectual scene and continues to do to a considerable degree today (Foucault, 1975). Kierkegaard felt such generalized "truths" endangered the individual because they overshadowed her experience of herself in relationship to the Divine and made her just an example of a category. As the 20<sup>th</sup>-century Protestant Existentialist theologian Paul Tillich (1976) would put it, one's relationship to *ultimacy* must be the foundation upon which a person appropriates

knowledge and makes it her own. Tillich was profoundly influenced by Kierkegaard (Lowrie, 1962). Tillich defined ultimacy as that which is at the center of a person's being and is both the deepest and highest motivation.

Kierkegaard warns us against making "objective," categorical knowledge primary. Such knowledge tends to relegate the individual to a secondary, contingent status—at the service of a conceptual generality or the social, ethical or religious system such knowledge expresses. Kierkegaard insisted that systematic truth—whether scientific, historical, ethical or theological—must always be secondary. What must always be primary is the individual and her foundational reality: her subjective relationship to God, or to that which is ultimate in her life. From that standpoint she may then appropriate objective knowledge. Kierkegaard nowhere dismisses objective knowledge; he simply insists we see it as the secondary reality it is in an individual's ethical self-formation. This self-formulation grows out of authentic personal communion with the Ultimate insofar as a person is able to do so. In order for this *primary* knowledge to be morally valid, said Kierkegaard, it must touch the individual at her core. It must also bear practical fruit by making her more into who she truly is and can be within herself, not what an external system is trying to make of her. Such self-knowledge does not exclude service to others, Kierkegaard observes. Such knowledge is the essence of what makes service ethically valid, not just the more or less mechanical doing of good works (usually in expectation of some sort of reward). She must, in short, become a *subject*, not an *object*.

The individual, to *be* an individual in authenticity and courage, must discover and pursue her deepest existential projects in life in order to be morally healthy. This is what it means to live in *subjectivity*. To live primarily in *objectivity* and to pay little attention to oneself as a subjective being is merely to be an object of someone or something else's categorical terms and purposes.

Here we see the roots of Sartre's (1956) idea that the human being as a "being-for-oneself" is epistemologically and ethically primary. For Sartre, too, this does not mean living selfishly. To the contrary, it means living in line with one's deepest ethical commitments. This is what the Existentialists mean by one's *existential project*. As is widely acknowledged, Kierkegaard's works were the foundation for this school of thought, which is why he is seen as the father of Existentialism and Existentialist theology (Walsh, 2009, Watkin, 2001).

Perhaps it is not overstressing the point to assert that for Kierkegaard there are no "general, objective" truths that are morally significant in themselves. Such truths are what Sartre and Camus would later call "essences"—semantic groupings that tell us very little about the individual's personal existence—what those truths mean to an individual or what she chooses to do with them in her life. Kierkegaard is not interested in grand systems. Nor is he interested in general codes of ethics that claim to be religion but which are typically just a falsely pious means of justifying a culture's normative standards, as he argued in *Attack Upon Christendom* (1944). He is concerned with the individual's subjective experience of God—her own experience, which can be no other's.

Hence, Kierkegaard asserts that truth is finally not only subjective in that it probably differs from person to person; the truth *is* subjectivity, and this primary and personal truth never yields to systematic analysis. One can study the individual in systematic terms, of course, biologically, psychologically, sociologically, or theologically, but the knowledge that arises from such study of the individual is secondary—both in terms of what it tells us about the individual and (most importantly) in what such knowledge can come to mean for the individual in her search for ultimacy. As with statistical analyses of various populations, categorical truth applies to everyone in general but to no one in particular, certainly to no one exactly.

As Martin Buber (1965), who was also strongly influenced by Kierkegaard, claimed, any sociological, educational, or ethical theory is prone to turn the individual into an “It.” In other words, she becomes an instrumentality in achieving another person’s or another group’s goals. Her ethical work, however, is to become fully a “Thou”—a person who is a goal-in-herself, unique in the eyes of God, and never to be colonized for someone else’s purposes, however apparently laudable (Buber, 1965, p. 46).

### **Kierkegaard and Educational Curriculum**

The word “curriculum” is typically defined as a group of related materials that are to be the foundation for a course of study in a specific field. It comes from the Latin word “*currere*” which means “to run a course.” Kierkegaard’s work invites the educational scholar and practitioner to turn her attention to two possible modes of curriculum—and education in general. One view of education is objective, scientific (or at least aiming at that status) and instrumentalist. The other view is subjective, internal and ethically transformative. It will prove useful to examine these two educational modes from a Kierkegaardian perspective in order to lay the groundwork for the central purpose of this article as an inquiry into various aspects of a pedagogy of liminality.

**Objectivist education.** The objective approach to curriculum is perhaps best exemplified by John Franklin Bobbit (1918), an early 20th-century American curricularist. In his view, the curriculum is the course of experiences and actions in a school setting through which children mature into socially functional adults. To the behaviorist Bobbitt, the curriculum is clearly an instrument of social engineering. Such curricula assume that scientifically oriented experts in curriculum theory are best qualified to design curricula. They presumably possess privileged knowledge of what behaviors and characteristics are desirable in members of a profession and

adult members of society. They alone best know how to produce curricula that produce said qualities. Therefore, they should be entrusted with the defining and making curricula that are centered around the experiences/skills/dispositions the student ought to have to become the adult she should become. It would seem that in such curriculum theorists as Bobbitt, Locke and Hegel (Kierkegaard's arch-nemesis in his writings) have ultimately won the day, given our current education system with its narrowly defined courses and formulas for achieving test scores, which are then used to "sort" students into their "correct" station in life (Spring, 1976). This is especially evident in the No Child Left Behind Act and the standardizing consequences it has had for American education (Kohn, 2004).

The "objective" view of education is grounded in the idea that education should serve as an instrument for preparing individuals to serve the larger society or some other corporate entity or group of such entities in the political economy. Previously, the scope of that political economy had been the traditional nation-state, however that political economy is envisioned and carried on in more transnational, global terms (Giddens, 1991).

John Locke saw the student's mind as a "tabula rasa," or blank slate, to be impressed upon by the teacher with public knowledge that will mold the student to fulfill political-economic purposes as defined by others. This epistemological position has been and continues to be used as a justification for using educational institutions as a form of social control over children with the idea of creating adults with more or less uniform beliefs and values who are to be content with their proper station in life (Cremin, 1964; Spring, 1976; Tyack, 1974).

By definition this type of education is an external race *against* others rather than an internal race *with* oneself. Under Locke's tabula rasa view, the student is passive. There is nothing innate in the student; she is a creature totally shaped by her teacher and/or the

environment around her. Twentieth-century behaviorism is simply a recent formulation of this idea.

The idea of “objective” education assumes that (a) knowledge is mastery of discrete units of generalized “facts,” impersonal theories, and technical skills that can be (b) assessed by standardized tests in order (c) to sort students for their suitability to fill certain socioeconomic roles, which (d) turns students, teachers and the curriculum itself largely into instruments for someone else’s purposes, thereby rendering them as static “objects” instead of rich and dynamic “subjects”; and (e) all this privileges second-order instrumental knowledge to replace (and sometimes erase) first-order ethical knowledge of oneself in the uniquely individual form and enactment of that knowledge. This view of education is arguably the prevailing one in current U.S. public schooling (Berger, 1967; Giddens, 1991) Nothing could contrast so sharply with Kierkegaard’s focus on subjectivity in locating truth in and for the individual.

**Subjectivist education.** A Kierkegaardian approach to the curriculum is completely different. It is subjective. From Kierkegaard we get to the core of the question about the ultimate goals of education:

What then is education? I had thought it was the curriculum the individual ran through in order to catch up with himself. And anyone who does not want to go through this curriculum will be little helped by being born into the most enlightened age.” (Kierkegaard, 2003, p. 75).

The question Kierkegaard posits is, “What kind of course should we invite our students to engage upon?” We have created curricula that are designed to meet someone else’s purpose – to serve the greater society, to mold children into adults that serve the system and society as defined by others, especially those persons and groups in control (Cremin, 1964; Spring, 2011; Tyack,

1974). But according to Kierkegaard, curriculum should invite the student to catch up with herself, not force her to run circles outlined by others. A good education tends to our deepest longings, enriches them, encourages the questions from which grow the tentative answers that, in turn, create fresh questions about what really matters. Let us look in a bit more depth at objectivist and subjectivist education from a Kierkegaardian standpoint.

For Kierkegaard, in order to increasingly engage in rich communion with Divinity (which, in Tillich's terms, is her own ultimacy), it must be done individually—subjectively.

What I really need is to get clear about what I must do, not what I must know, except insofar as knowledge must precede every act. . . . [T]he crucial thing is to find a truth which is truth for me, and to find the idea for which I am willing to live and die. Of what use would it be to 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 to me to be able to develop a theory of the state, . . . and constructing a world I did not live in but merely held up for others to see; of what use would it be to me to be able to formulate the meaning of Christianity . . . if it had no deeper meaning for me and for my life? [Journals, [naturalthinker.net](http://naturalthinker.net)]

Greene confirms, "I use the term *wide-awakeness*." She adds, "Without the ability to think about yourself, to reflect on your life, there's really no awareness, no consciousness. Consciousness doesn't come automatically; it comes through being alive, awake, curious, and often furious." (Greene, 1974, p. 75). This commitment to subjectivity underlies a Kierkegaardian view of education that education is a lifelong process for self-discovery.

The subjectivist view of education focuses on the individual and her subjective relation to what is ultimate for her as this relationship is revealed and developed through her engagement with the curriculum and its attendant educational processes. By this Kierkegaardian view, education is meaningful (that is, ethically valid) to the degree it discloses and deepens what is ultimate in a student's life. Education emerges as a transformative process that involves not only cognition but also intuition, feeling, and other aspects of a student's total being (Mayes, 2004). Sartre's (1956) idea of "being for others" and "being for oneself" can help clarify this point. In "being for others," one becomes an instrument of someone else's purposes. One becomes an "It." But in "being for oneself," one exerts oneself in "good faith" (as Sartre says, meaning that one is as emotionally, intellectually and morally true to oneself as possible) to discover what lies at the core of one's being as the most central and important value or values. The individual is freed to do her best to live according to those values. To live according to any other standard is to live "in bad faith." By a Kierkegaardian view, objectivist/instrumentalist education tempts students with the enticing rewards of good grades and lucrative jobs to be for others and thus live in bad faith. It controls them with the threat of bad grades and low-status jobs to live according to externally imposed standards, not internally rich ones. In this sense, the objectivist view of education that currently predominates pushes the student into living in bad faith by pulling her away from her own ultimacy. An excerpt from Kierkegaard's letters states:

What I really need is to become clear in my own mind what I must do, not what I must know--except in so far as a knowing must precede every action. The important thing is to understand what I am destined for, to perceive what the Deity wants me to do; the point is to find the truth which is truth for me, to find that idea for which I am ready to live and die. (Lowrie, 1962 p. 82).

But what would it mean for an educational system to promote living in good faith? What would it mean for the curriculum to rise to Kierkegaard's call for education to be a morally rich existential course that the student runs through in order to catch up with herself? It would mean, of course, that the curriculum was not propped up on artificial "I-It" structures but that it grew naturally out of "I-Thou" relationships. It would deepen the student in her subjectivity. It would, of course, have the same effect on teachers.

### **Idea of the Liminal**

Before discussing a pedagogy of liminality in the context of Kierkegaard's works, it is necessary to discuss the word *liminal*, since it is itself a liminal word. Finding its way into English usage around 1890, liminal is the adjective form of the Latin *limen*, which means a threshold or boundary. Put most simply, liminal indicates that which pertains to, or resides on, a threshold or a boundary. In 20<sup>th</sup>-century psychology, it took on a specialized meaning, denoting something which has the potential to reach and perhaps cross the dividing line between two states of perception (in physiological psychology) or apperception (in cognitive and depth psychology) (Jansz, J., & van Drunen, 2004). In more recent scholarly discourse, liminal has come to signify an idea or state of being which exists on the border of a certain social, ideological, or phenomenological norm and has the potential to push beyond the boundary into more or less uncharted conceptual or experiential territory. This view of liminality can be pictured as something poking at the membrane that encloses a "norm," rupturing it and pushing past it. For some of the more radical postmodern writers, this involves "transgressive," or even anti-social behavior. But that last usage is not the sense in which I wish to use the concept of liminality in this essay.

Rather, I rely on Victor Turner's famous anthropological characterization of liminality as a state of being "betwixt and between" (1974). Turner's formulation of liminality relied on the cultural anthropologist van Gennep's (2004) earlier work regarding rites of passage. According to van Gennep, a rite of passage is comprised of three states: the pre-liminal stage, which entails separation of a novice from his normative culture; a liminal phase, which marks the transition (usually involving trials and rituals) of the individual between an old state of being and cultural roles, and new ones; and a post-liminal phase of reincorporation into his culture, but now endowed with new knowledge that makes the individual suited to higher rights, roles, and responsibilities. It is in the transitional state between the liminal and the post-liminal phases that Turner characterized an individual as being "betwixt and between."

In some cases, what an individual is betwixt and between is a developmental stage or cultural role which she has outgrown and a new one that she is not yet fully prepared to assume, as in many indigenous cultures. During this intermediate, preparatory period, she is liminal. Ironically, this being liminal and in a sense outcast may lead the person to a full experience of *communitas*, which, according to Turner, is the experience of equality among all people, regardless of their previous state or qualities, in the liminal phase. For to be liminal is to be stripped of one's previous stature and assumptions. Along with all other liminal individuals, one stands naked (sometimes literally so in indigenous cultures) before the universe. In this sense, the experience of liminality has a certain ontological feel and gives rise to a shared sense of one's finiteness before the infinite. The rites of passage during liminality are made up of ordeals and ceremonies through which a person passes after crossing the exit-boundary of a now outmoded developmental stage or role in order to prepare her to cross the entrance-boundary into the next one. This pattern may be applied to the (post)modern individual as well "as a pattern for

understanding [the liminal phase] as an individual and inner process of growth and individuation” (Mahdi, 1994, p. 3).

A liminal state is therefore an interruption, but it is far from being passive. It is dynamic. Existing between an outmoded structure and a new one, it might be thought that the dynamics of liminality are haphazard, even chaotic. However, that is not the case for: a) the liminal state is not anti-structural but inter-structural, as Turner (1974) pointed out. Indeed, certain liminal states have quite identifiable aspects, which I will examine below in educational terms; and b) a liminal state is a prerequisite space that allows one pattern or state of being to evolve into another one. Of course, the new structures and commitments may, and probably will, be related in some measure to the previous ones; however, they will be different enough that they represent some sort of milestone that is significant to a person in her existential life-narrative (Gumperz, J., & Hymes, D., 1972). This is the sense in which I will use the term liminal in this article—as a vibrant, rich zone of transformation which an individual may occupy for a certain time—however long or short—before a new point of view about something or way of being in general emerges (Mahdi, 1994, p. ix).

As I will discuss, a pedagogy of liminality must also be a dialectical pedagogy. It must be open-ended. For given enough time, the new point of view or way of being which the individual adopts after coming out of the trials of liminality will almost always become inadequate or unsatisfactory to some degree at a certain point in the individual’s development. This development may pertain to something as relatively limited as a certain domain of inquiry or as broad as the person’s existential unfolding in general. In other words, what had once been a new state of being or seeing (the “synthesis” of the tension between the “thesis” and “antithesis,” in dialectical theory) becomes a more or less outworn thesis that the individual must now, in

“antithetical” fashion, move beyond. This sets a new dialectic in motion, requiring the person to move into yet another liminal state before a more evolved one emerges for her and in her. This process is bracketed only by the person’s death, implying something very similar to Heidegger’s (2008) idea of authentic being as “Being-towards-Death.” In this sense, the individual who lives (and learns) in existential authenticity always lives with another period of liminality on her horizon; and after that, another one on a newer horizon. It is therefore possible that an individual may conceive of her life to some extent as generally existing in the ambiguity of liminality. Far from being an occasion for mourning or anxiety, she may see this acknowledgment of ongoing ambiguity, or at least the possibility of it, as a matter of intellectual or ethical commitment. Certainly, this idea is prominent in Kierkegaard when he speaks of irony and paradox as a sort of “dwelling within contradictions” (Manheimer, 1977). This dwelling in paradox can only be transcended by a leap of faith into “the religious” domain, where paradoxes are not so much resolved as simply seen in a higher context that removes their sting and allows one to live productively in faith, the highest existential condition according to Kierkegaard: “Faith is the highest passion of any man.” (Kierkegaard, 2003, p. 53). This also has various pedagogical implications, to be discussed presently.

In the sections that follow, I shall examine some of these aspects of the idea of liminality when it is applied to educational processes from a Kierkegaardian perspective. This examination will discuss how such a pedagogy: a) is one of becoming; b) involves a dialectical process of education as an increasingly articulated and refined, but never fully achieved, communion with Ultimacy in shaping one’s life-narrative—a process which necessarily involves the subjective appropriation of the curriculum; c) involves epistemic crises from time to time as old ways of knowing must give way to new ways—a process that will be an “emergency” (in both senses of

that term) to the extent that the student's "knowing" impacts and is impacted by all aspects of her being; d) requires that the student genuinely engage "the other" by allowing the possibility of the encountering that other at one's own boundaries, and often the other's boundaries, too; and e) requires pedagogy to have a maieutic aspect as the teacher helps the student "birth" into new ways of seeing, being and doing.

Before moving on, however, it will prove useful to look at another image of liminality in examining the pedagogical implications of Kierkegaard's works. Above, I looked at the metaphorical representation of liminality as a moving out of conventional boundaries into entirely new territory, much like a stone puncturing a membrane and continuing its flight off into uncharted space outside of the breached organism or system. Another way of picturing liminality, however, is "not outside of the social structure or on its edges, [but rather] in the cracks within the social structure itself." Turner goes on to state that

...liminality represents the midpoint of transition in a status-sequence between two positions, *outsiderhood* refers to actions and relationships which do not flow from a recognized social status but originate outside it, while *lowermost status* refers to the lowest rung in a system of social stratification in which unequal rewards are accorded to functionally differentiated positions (Turner, 1974, p. 237).

By this view, the liminal person, exploring unacknowledged, even purposefully ignored, tensions, contradictions, and absurdities within her social system, finally returns *to* that system with transformative insights that may reform the system. The first metaphor of liminality—as a phase preparatory to bursting beyond the system and leaving it behind—definitely has its value in understanding Kierkegaard's idea of passing beyond any system into a personal engagement with the Ultimate, which transcends anything systematic and simply goes beyond the reach of

any linguistic formulation. However, the second metaphor is also important in understanding Kierkegaard, who is too often seen as being not only non-social in his orientation but quite *anti-social*, even solipsistic. This view misses Kierkegaard's positive engagement with his culture and its problems, even his hope to make changes in it.

Kierkegaard views the individual and society as standing in a relation of dialectical interaction. Though neither unilaterally conditions the other, they are mutually determined by each other. There is thus an important isomorphism between them, the one reflecting the character of the other; and the privacy of passion or reflection in the individuals who make up society will be an index of that society's shape. Mass society is the society that is produced by, and in turn produces, individuals in which reflection predominates and the idea is essentially absent (Westphal, 1991, p. 47).

*An Attack Upon Christendom*, for instance, was not written in a vacuum, nor was it written in cynicism or despair of ever causing at least *some* change in the superficially "Christian" culture in which Kierkegaard lived. We can only credit Kierkegaard with good faith in wanting his work to be read by members of Danish society and Western culture at large, and for it to have a positive influence on the culture(s) that he loved and within which he worked. Indeed, the misinterpretation and parodying of Kierkegaard in *The Corsair*, for example, distressed him greatly, which it would not have done, one assumes, if he had had no hope at all that the work would be appreciated and that its effects would be beneficial in his culture. The second metaphor of liminality is therefore also hermeneutically useful—as Burke (1989) says—in offering "another way of seeing" Kierkegaard's liminality, or in taking Greene's "cubistic approach" to an idea or topic. In short, the first metaphor captures the purely transcendental

character of Kierkegaard's work, but the second metaphor helps us understand that Kierkegaard's work was also not without its social origins and implications. I will make use of both of these metaphors of liminality in interpreting Kierkegaard for pedagogical purposes.

### **Applying Kierkegaard in Educational Theory**

Reading Kierkegaard through the lens that is increasingly the norm in educational research—that of the social sciences—would lead to seriously misinterpreting him and misapplying his thought to the pedagogical issues I wish to examine in this essay. Indeed, much of what Kierkegaard wrote can be seen as a revolt against the social-scientific model that was beginning to form in his day and predominates in ours (Giddens, 1990, p.40).

In order to read Kierkegaard astutely, and then to apply his ideas to educational issues, requires that we set aside the social science paradigm. But this leaves the educational scholar who sees great relevance in Kierkegaard's works with the question: How are we are to read Kierkegaard and then apply his ideas to educational issues? One answer to this hermeneutic question might be to read Kierkegaard simply as a philosopher, and then use the standard procedures and terminology of philosophical analysis to interpret and apply his ideas to education, as one might do, say, in extracting the educational implications out of Aristotle, Locke or Kant. Although this seems a reasonable way to proceed in discussing a Kierkegaardian pedagogy and although it has its merits, it is not entirely adequate. For, Kierkegaard saw himself less as a philosopher and more as a religious writer. But neither did he wish to be read as a theologian. Indeed, he made it quite clear that it was never his intention to present a systematic theology:

In relation to the intellectual and religious fields, and with a view to the concept of existence, and hence to the concept of Christianity, I am like a

spy in a higher service, the service of the idea. I have nothing new to proclaim; I am without authority, being myself hidden in a deceit; I do not go to work straightforwardly but with indirect cunning; I am not a holy man; in short, I am a spy who in his spying, in learning to know all about questionable conduct and illusions and suspicious characters, all the while he is making inspection is himself under the closest inspection. (1998, p. 87)

In fact, much of his work deals with the limitations of systematic theology. He argued that it too easily objectifies the religious experience by reasoning about it. This makes it not an *experience* at all but simply an impersonal (because universal) exercise in logic, even if that logic is about transcendental matters. Hence, in reading Kierkegaard one must use sparingly and with caution the standard approaches to reading a philosopher (Goold, 1990). Such approaches identify and elaborate on internally consistent, unifying points of view in a philosopher's body of work. This approach has serious limitations in engaging this puzzling "philosopher," who said that if you understood his works in standard discursive terms, then you did not understand them at all, for he did not wish to be understood logically but encountered existentially: "I always reason from existence, not toward existence.[...] Knowledge has a relationship to the knower, who is essentially an existing individual, and that for this reason all essential knowledge is essentially related to existence" (1962, p. 59).

In a sense, Kierkegaard's endeavor largely lay in challenging the standard philosophical and theological discourses of his time. These discourses use the standard philosophical rhetoric of Kierkegaard's time, as they still tend to do. This rhetoric includes the gradual unfolding of an argument from a basic premise, and then the developing of those premises in a methodical

fashion to a rationally necessary conclusion (Spronk, 2004). Philosophical discourse of Kierkegaard's day worked off of this Aristotelian model of clear statement of a thesis followed by a systematic development of its evidences and consequences. Kierkegaard felt that Hegel exemplified this style of argumentation, which is one reason that he so often attacked him. But his criticism of that discourse was not intended to introduce a better alternative or rational critique for the refinement of their theoretical exercises. His criticism was far more fundamental. He often adopted an author's name who showed a brilliant critique of the rational limitations of previous systems or approaches. They were brilliant analyses, but ultimately to show the reader, "See, you can't get there from here!" True approach to Ultimacy is not found in brilliant philosophical or theological analysis. It demands a comprehensive embracing of the person's experience, perhaps consistent with the analysis; but it is not found in analyzing, but in being. He must have believed that a religious life was possible while analyzing, but analyzing did not make it religious. Through Kierkegaard's *own* religious and poetic meditations about the importance of standing in a unique subjective relationship with God, he wanted to stimulate the reader to pursue her *own* journey to the divine.

Kierkegaard's work is shot through with various characters arguing a variety of opinions which it is difficult to say are or are not Kierkegaard's. As Kierkegaard said, the last thing he wanted was for the reader to form a definite opinion about Kierkegaard's own opinions, which Kierkegaard typically obscures. He spoke through many different literary characters such as Victor Eremmita, Johannes de Silentio, Constantin Constantius, Anti-Climacus, Vigilius Haufniensis, etc. Kierkegaard leaves the reader in doubt about what Kierkegaard, the man behind his many pseudonyms, actually thinks. In short, Kierkegaard uses the literary tool of *personas* in his writing. As Kierkegaard wrote:

As is well-known, my authorship has two parts: one pseudonymous and the other signed. The pseudonymous writers are poetic creations, poetically maintained so that everything they say is in character with their poetized individualized personalities; sometimes I have carefully explained in a signed preface my own interpretation of what the pseudonym said. Anyone with just a fragment of common sense will perceive that it would be ludicrously confusing to attribute to me everything the poetized characters say. Nevertheless, to be on the safe side, I have expressly urged that anyone who quotes something from the pseudonyms will not attribute the quotation to me (see my postscript to *Concluding Postscript*). It is easy to see that anyone wanting to have a literary lark merely needs to take some verbatim quotations from "The Seducer," then from Johannes Climacus, then from me, etc., print them together as if they were all my words, show how they contradict each other, and create a very chaotic impression, as if the author were a kind of lunatic. Hurrah! That can be done. In my opinion anyone who exploits the poetic in me by quoting the writings in a confusing way is more or less a charlatan or a literary toper. (*Journals & Papers*, natural thinker.net)

In this way, Kierkegaard accomplishes two things. First, he hides the nature of his *own* subjective relationship to God, or, the *Ultimate*, as Paul Tillich, the 20<sup>th</sup>-century Existentialist Protestant theologian, put it in non-dogmatic terms. These terms are, fortunately, on sound legal grounds in issues relating to existential issues and commitments in curriculum and instruction in public schooling in the United States today (Greene, 1995; Mayes, C., & Ferrin, S., 2001). Second, Kierkegaard stimulates the reader to travel on her own through the ambiguity and many personalities in Kierkegaard's prose. The reader is encouraged to begin to think about her own

unique relationship to Ultimacy in subjectivity, not to internalize Kierkegaard's, whatever that might or might not have been.

### **Literary Approach to Kierkegaard**

The self-proclaimed ambiguity in Kierkegaard's writing is very similar to what has been called the literary rhetoric of indirection (Handy & Westbrook, 1974). The fact that Kierkegaard characterizes his writing in such terms already begins to suggest a way of approaching him—namely, through the terms and techniques of literary criticism and rhetorical theory. This is certainly consistent with what Kierkegaard said of his own writing.

Indirect communication can be produced by the art of reduplicating the communication. This art consists in reducing oneself, the communicator, to nobody, something purely objective, and then incessantly composing qualitative opposites into unity. This is what some of the pseudonyms are accustomed to call “double reflection”. An example of such indirect communication is, so to compose jest and earnest that the composition is a dialectical knot-and with this to be nobody. If anyone is to profit by this sort of communication, he must himself undo the knot for himself. Another example is, to bring defense and attack in such a unity that none can say directly whether one is attacking or defending, so that both the most zealous partisans of the cause and its bitterest enemies can regard one as an ally-and with this to be nobody, an absentee, an objective something, not a personal man. (Kierkegaard, 2004, pp. 132-133).

**Rhetoric of indirection.** The literary rhetoric of indirection attempts to stimulate the reader's personal curiosity and unique moral sense, and this reflects Kierkegaard's purposes as a writer. This points to the appropriateness of this approach in reading Kierkegaard—as do his

references in the above passage to persona, humor, irony, the nature of authorial presence, rhetorical strategies, and “qualitative unity” in the reader’s unique interpretation of a piece. In contrast, normative philosophical discourse typically aims at leading every reader, in the same way, to the same objective conclusion. Kierkegaard also uses the highly *un*-philosophical technique of telling stories. His characters also tell stories. And he in turn tells stories about his characters. He even engages in the analysis of stories. Hence we see in *Fear and Trembling* layer upon layer of literary devices and purposes. In fact, the entire work consists in a sense of different interpretations of the story of Abraham and Isaac. Hence, we can read *Fear and Trembling*, for example, and many of his others works, as either pieces of literature, exercises in literary criticism, or invitations to the readers to approach his works in the aesthetically sensitive ways in which they approach a story or perhaps even a poem: with the reader’s emotions and moral intuitions in full play.

**Irony.** Above all, Kierkegaard uses the literary trope of irony in his work, as numerous commentators have observed (Lippitt, 2000; Collins, 1983; Gupta, 2005). In reading Kierkegaard, then, and in teasing out his pedagogical implications, it is necessary to have a handle on this device. His dissertation, *On the Concept of Irony* (1841), showed an early interest in this literary technique, which would reach its highpoint in his mature works such as *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* and *Philosophical Fragments* (Lippitt, 2000; Hannay, 2003; Watts, 2003; King, 1996; Carlisle, 2006). Kierkegaard stated, “Irony limits, finitizes, and circumscribes and thereby yields truth, actuality, content; it disciplines and punishes and thereby yields balance and consistency” (*On Concept of Irony*, p. 79; see also Hannay, 2003, p. 165).

Irony consists in saying something at the surface level of the utterance—written or spoken—in such a way that it also undermines (or at least problematizes) itself. The purpose of

this is to point to a deeper level of meaning—one which the writer or speaker may or may not herself consciously realize (Colebrook, 2004). As Lippitt (2000) shows, irony is the perfect rhetorical tool for Kierkegaard. It reflects rhetorically what Kierkegaard is attempting to accomplish existentially in the reader—to stimulate the reader to move between two ideas in tension. In this process, the manifest ideas will reveal their own limitations. Hopefully, this inspires the reader to wade through those limitations to find a deeper, more personally satisfying meaning in the end. Lippitt says that Kierkegaardian irony is intended to set us free. It invites us to access the internal contradictions and limitations of a surface statement to find a more subjectively satisfying place to live in.

Another function of irony—as in the works of writers as varied as Jonathon Swift to Kurt Vonnegut—is that it is a way of challenging the dominant political and cultural assumptions of the day. This suits Kierkegaard perfectly in his assaults upon both Christendom and the reigning rationalist and sociological assumptions of his era. Comedy functions as a tool of moral critique aimed at setting the listener or reader free of assumptions that do not lead to the reader's growth. In this sense, comedy is freedom. The comic's true role is to problematize, even shatter, consensual reality. The great power of the comic is that she can challenge all kinds of existing orders, from the cultural to the religious, so efficiently, and even “entertainingly.” This describes Kierkegaard's purposes beautifully. It may also, as we shall presently see, influence the pedagogical style of a teacher whose purposes are “liminal.”

### **Principles of Literary and Rhetorical Analysis**

I now turn to some fundamental principles of literary and rhetorical analysis that are both well suited to reading Kierkegaard and suggesting some of the aspects of a pedagogy of liminality. These are introduced by three major scholars.

**Burkeian rhetorical analysis.** The general approach I have taken to analyzing Kierkegaard in literary and rhetorical terms comes from Kenneth Burke (1989). Burke argues that every text, oral or written, contains a “terministic screen.” This refers to the unstated assumptions, values and goals that generate the types of arguments, symbols and rhetorical devices that a speaker or writer uses. Sometimes, as in Kierkegaard’s personas, the writer is not even aware of his terministic screens. It is the reader’s challenge to find out what they are and how they relate to the reader. Burke said that the symbol systems that make up a speaker’s or author’s text generate an epistemological universe within which he dwells. In the best cases, the author invites the audience to enter his universe the best she can and consider what it might offer her. At his worst, the author attempts to coax the audience to enter his universe and not to leave it. Because an author generates an inevitably finite universe of discourse in her texts, she must necessarily exclude other such universes. Or as Burke stated, “Every way of seeing is also a way of not seeing” (as cited in Axelrod & Cooper, 1991, p. iii). This certainly fits Kierkegaard’s strategy of examining an issue from the point of view of his many different authors. As we will see below, encouraging students to see an issue or even an entire discipline from many different, even contradictory, perspectives is what Maxine Greene means by the “cubist curriculum” and is central to a Kierkegaardian pedagogy of liminality.

One of Burke’s most significant contributions to rhetorical theory is his claim that our discourses are essentially theatric, consisting of five main elements: Act, scene, agency, purpose, and stage. This is so because any discourse implicitly sets the scene of the discourse in time and space, which becomes the pre-set “stage” of the linguistic act. The speaker is the agent of the discursive drama—the lead “actor,” who, by virtue of that central role, implicitly casts the listener or reader into another role. This role is not necessarily one that the recipient would want,

and one she might even resist. The point that the actor wishes the reader or listener to accept and even conform to, is the purpose of the discourse. The purpose of the discourse is the motivation, within the speaker's or writer's symbolic world, to engage the listener or reader so that the author can develop her own symbolic world and draw the reader into it.

Burke (1989) called these five elements the *dramatistic pentad*. He hoped that by helping us all see the assumptions of the universes of discourse in which we reside, we would understand the limitations of each our discourses. This would make us more open to being changed by other people's discourses. In this manner, the pentad would highlight the importance of coexisting with other people's universes of discourse. Therefore, Burke encouraged each individual to examine and *feel* the subjectivity of her own *terministic screen* as her basic assumptions. She would then be able to use symbols more effectively as ways of expressing that subjectivity. This is quite consistent with Kierkegaard's purposes in his writings. In brief, Burke, like Kierkegaard, is hopeful that we can use our symbols to express our primary subjectivity, not become the object of someone else's symbol systems. Also like Kierkegaard, Burke's hope was that this approach would enable one to enter more sympathetically into another person's subjective universe of discourse.

**Polanyi and personal knowledge.** Also of use in reading Kierkegaard is Michael Polanyi's (1962) idea of personal knowledge. Kierkegaard influenced Polanyi in both Polanyi's scientific and epistemological writings. In these, Polanyi critiqued rationalistic materialism and its faith in empirical evidence and "systematic knowledge." There can be no knowledge claims, Polanyi insisted, even in the sciences, apart from the fundamental, and fundamentally unprovable epistemological, emotional, cultural and ethical commitments of the knower. This is a point that Kuhn (1970) also makes. "Objective knowing" in the Western scientific tradition

arises from various ontological and cultural assumptions that determine what questions may be posed, what procedures must be followed to pursue an answer to the question, what counts as evidence, what constitutes proof, what conclusions are considered meaningful, and the uses to which those conclusions will be put. Like Burke in rhetorical studies, Polanyi in scientific and epistemological research argued that we do not uncover reality through symbols; we create it through symbols that rest upon our basic commitments, which are all beyond ultimate proof. Because Kierkegaard is intent on inspiring his reader to seek out her own personal knowledge in “the stages on life’s way,” Polanyi’s works is useful in approaching both the style and purpose of Kierkegaard’s prose. This idea, so key to reading Kierkegaard, is absolutely key to a Kierkegaardian pedagogy of liminality.

**Ricoeur and life as personal narrative.** I have also referred to the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur’s idea of narrative in reading Kierkegaard. Ricoeur (1983) said that central to being human is to have a narrative of one’s life. “What does the past mean in my life? How has it brought me to this present? And given all of that, in what directions may I direct my life towards a meaningful future?” All of these are the fundamental existential questions that make up human life—if one is to live in a manner that authentically and ethically reflects one’s own deepest commitments. The objective past, present and future as measured mechanically means very little in this context, according to Ricoeur, except for secondary and instrumental purposes. What matters is how one appropriates one’s past ethically in the understanding of one’s present and in the construction of one’s future. *That* is ethical time, as Ricoeur (1983) makes clear in *Time and Narrative*. Furthermore, Ricoeur says that our personal narratives can be meaningful only when seen against the backdrop of cosmic time. This is the eternal dimension of one’s narrative that gives it spiritual meaning. Ricoeur’s emphasis on subjective narrative as ongoing orientation of

oneself to the divine provides an excellent lens through which to read Kierkegaard and is the ethical core of a pedagogy of liminality.

### **Major Aspects of a Pedagogy of Liminality**

Kierkegaard used multiple perspectives to wrestle with a single issue or idea from many directions. His hope was that the reader would join him in that exercise in order to make the issue her own, appropriating and applying it in a way that best advanced her existential journey towards Ultimacy. It makes sense, therefore, to use a similar approach in identifying some of the major aspects of a Kierkegaardian pedagogy of liminality. Accordingly, I have chosen to use Maxine Greene's idea of "cubism" in curricular discourse in order to imagine what a pedagogy of liminality might "look like"—but not when solely viewed as a single, systematic construct or model. As in reading Kierkegaard, overreliance on such an approach would work against the very spirit of Kierkegaard and his works. This would amount to negating Kierkegaard's epistemological assumptions in order to build an educational theory based on his works—an obvious contradiction, especially since educational processes, revolving around the idea of knowledge, *are* epistemological ones. It would clearly be insupportable to use an epistemology that Kierkegaard was challenging to build a Kierkegaardian educational epistemology. This is not to say that one should approach either Kierkegaard or a Kierkegaardian pedagogy in a haphazard fashion. It is to say, however, that one must approach the idea of a Kierkegaardian pedagogy in the same way as one approaches Kierkegaard—from a variety of angles each of which leads to a deeper intuitive grasp and personal appropriation of something—in this case, a pedagogy of liminality. As in cubist painting, there will certainly be overlap and interaction among the multiple perspectives presented on something. If this were not so, then the thing being scrutinized (whether a painting, text, or idea) would simply be an incipient field of unrelated

dimensions and fruitless dissociation. Indeed, it is this multi-perspective interaction which makes a subtle, personal apprehension of a canvas, text, or topic possible. In my discussion of certain aspects of a Kierkegaardian pedagogy, we will see that those aspects interact in a variety of interesting and educationally productive ways. This interaction will undoubtedly be experienced similarly in some respects for various readers and differently in others. This will hopefully allow a “cubist” picture of a Kierkegaardian pedagogy to emerge for each reader, allowing an informed discourse of inter-subjectivity among the readers. I believe this is an approach Kierkegaard would approve of and might even insist upon in educational discourse based on his work.

**Education as “becoming.”** As various Kierkegaard scholars have noted, Kierkegaard placed enormous emphasis on the idea of becoming. Some even see the idea of becoming as the very center of Kierkegaardian thought (Carlisle, 2005; Bretall, 1946). But what does “becoming” mean and not mean in a Kierkegaardian sense, and how does this relate to educational issues and processes? Since Kierkegaard resists exact formulations, it is probably best to approach an answer to that question by looking at what becoming is *not* in Kierkegaard.

Becoming is not shifting from one social class or role to another—as, for example, a person as a member of that group of people we call “students” might, through her schooling, come to occupy another class of human beings that we call “doctors,” “engineers,” “lawyers,” “mechanics,” “homemakers,” and so on. Although moving from one role to another in a given social system is a *change*, it must be seen in Kierkegaardian terms as a second-order one, not a primary metamorphosis of the individual. For, what changes in this instance is the role that a person plays, not necessarily the person herself. This role is a social marker. It indicates where this person is positioned *in* and what she does *as* a member of a professional, vocational,

political, cultural, or other group that performs an objectively definable function in a particular political economy—whether at a local, statewide, national or international level.

Such a “change,” although not negligible in a person’s life, is secondary for Kierkegaard because it merely marks a movement of that person in an objective system from one role to another—roles, moreover, that are more or less defined in socially mediated ways and serve more or less socially instrumental purposes. Such a change, however socially significant it may be, does not of itself constitute a substantial alteration of an individual’s ethical status and existential clarity as a person standing alone before Ultimacy. A person may change over time from being a first year law student to the president of the United States. This would constitute an enormous change according to all sorts of social indicators, but it would not necessarily mean any sort of *becoming* at all on an existential level. Simply because a person has changed from being a student to a chief executive does not necessarily mean that the person has become something or someone different in her state before Ultimacy as a unique individual—always the litmus test, in Kierkegaard’s view, about whether or not something is existentially primary in a person’s life. Indeed, history has shown that not only do certain people not become different people existentially as their social role changes; they often remain in most respects the same person. The only difference is that they are now in their more empowered roles permitted to play out play out their issues and magnify their inauthenticity on a grander stage—often to other people’s harm. Such people may have changed in socially defined and richly rewarded ways, but they have not changed in any existentially significant ways.

“However,” it might be argued, “isn’t it true that some individuals define who they are by what they do?” Kierkegaard would agree that it is true that some, and perhaps many people try to define who they are by what they do—by the roles they perform and the rules they follow in all

sorts of organizations and institutions, whether those roles and rules are cultural, economic, governmental, or even, as he makes clear in his *Attack Upon Christendom*, ecclesiastical. However, rules and roles are necessarily defined in discursive, propositional terms that cannot go beyond a temporal and mortal horizon. In the story of Abraham's willingness to slay Isaac, Kierkegaard even examines how theological rules ("Thou shall not kill") and sacrosanct roles (the role of a father) do not totally satisfy and certainly do not supplant the primary religious imperative that is laid upon every person to stand in unique relationship to the Ultimate. This is true wherever that imperative may take an individual and whatever it might require of her, even to the point of being a scandal and a point of offense to members of an ecclesiastical body that sees itself as ultimately "true," as many such bodies have done in the history of Christendom.

This is, indeed, what Kierkegaard was talking about in his analysis of the story of Abraham and Isaac. So Abraham's story contains a teleological suspension of the ethical. He has, as the single individual, become higher than the universal. This is the paradox which cannot be mediated (Kierkegaard, 2003). However, a person fills a role only with a part of herself but not all of herself since the self is unique and eternal, but she conforms to rules. This is not necessarily a bad thing Kierkegaard would probably argue. He would probably also allow that a person's schooling should enable her to understand the rules and fill the roles when it is pragmatically appropriate for her to do so. However, a Kierkegaardian pedagogy must always allow a "teleological suspension of the ethical" (Kierkegaard, 2003). In educational terms, this means that she must always be allowed to go beyond normative interpretations that are either explicit or implicit in the curriculum. She must be encouraged to form interpretations, either canonical or non-canonical, as she sees fit in her ongoing acts of becoming "that single individual" (Kierkegaard, 1990) before the Ultimate as she ever more deeply engages with it.

This claim is no more or less radical than Greene maintains in her pedagogical writings (Greene, 1995) that knowledge is meaningless unless the individual makes it her own, in her own way, and in the service of the sometimes terrible project of her freedom (Sartre, 1956).

A Kierkegaardian pedagogy, therefore, must see some things as educationally secondary, though not, of course, educationally unimportant. These include vocational education (Willis, 1977), education to be an healthy citizen of a democracy (Dewey, 1916), education to reestablish the United States as the dominant global power militarily and industrially (“A Nation at Risk”, 1983), education for multicultural awareness (Nieto, 2000) education to preserve the Western canonical heritage (Adler, 1982; Bennett, 1977), education to better fit an individual into a given economic order so as to maximize the productivity of that order (Moe & Chubb, 2009) educational agendas devoted to helping (and sometimes forcing) students into “better performance” as defined and measured by impersonal statistical means (Thorndike, 1932; A Nation at Risk, 1983; NCLB, 2010), developmental curricula that look at the student as either a healthy exemplar of or pathological deviation from a “normal” maturational schedule (Piaget, 1969; Kohlberg, 1958); or any other educational program whose primary emphasis is on the individual as a member of a class or group with certain wage-earning potentials, civic rights and duties, psychosocially mediated identities, statistical profiles, and so on. However efficiently and effectively such curricular agendas with their attendant pedagogical practices may be in socioeconomic or psychological terms, they are necessarily secondary goals in a Kierkegaardian pedagogy. They do not necessarily lead a person into a more authentic discovery of her existential core and ethical stance before Ultimacy than she had before such education which Kierkegaard would probably include under the term “social training,” not “spiritual education.” Indeed, such training may lead a person away from her core commitments and spiritual stance

before the Ultimate. If she defines herself in the terms provided (or imposed upon) her by such objectivist educational criteria, she has allowed herself to be turned into an instance of a category only, an example of a psychosocial rubric, and therefore not as an individual at all. In existentialist terms, she is a “being-for-others,” not a “being-for-herself” (Sartre, 1956). This objectification is the very opposite of what a Kierkegaardian pedagogy of liberation-in-pursuit-of-the-Ultimate, true *becoming*, aims at promoting. It is the root of inauthenticity in existentialist philosophy (Sartre, 1956).

Only when a person is living in deepening relationship with Ultimacy in her life is she living in an existentially authentic manner. Thus, only a pedagogy that is committed to this can be considered existentially authentic and educationally primary from a Kierkegaardian point of view. Clearly, education that is oriented around rules or roles must be seen as secondary. Primary to a Kierkegaardian pedagogy, in other words, is the idea that schooling should invite the student to appropriate the curriculum in ways that serve her growing awareness of her own life-world and her finally self-navigated journey through it. Conversely, it should not compel the student to be appropriated by the curriculum in the service of an external ideology, program, or institution. This is not to say that ideologies, programs, or institutions are educationally irrelevant. However, their presence and influence, whether overt in the official curriculum or covert in the hidden or null curricula (Eisner & Vallance, 1985), would only be ethically justifiable from a Kierkegaardian perspective if they themselves were subject to deconstruction in the classroom (a view consistent, by the way, with Dewey’s idea of the classroom as a site of critical democratic discourse) and the student were encouraged to critique and either accept, reject, or modify such things to her own purposes, and as a way of enriching her self-defined journey towards Ultimacy (Huebner, 1999). In short, secondary objective knowledge is important only insofar as it in some

fashion promotes the student's journey towards that most primary of all knowledge—herself in relationship to the Ultimate. As Kierkegaard declares in *The Sickness Unto Death*,

“The self is the conscious synthesis of infinitude and finitude that relates itself to itself, whose task is to become itself, which can only be done through the relationship to God....the self is healthy and free from despair only when, precisely by having despaired, it rests transparently in God.” (Kierkegaard, 1980, p.30)

The word “critique” in the above paragraph, however, does not have the same meaning in a Kierkegaardian pedagogy as it would, say, in a pedagogy of a merely political critique of a socioeconomically unjust system, as in, for example, the work of Michael Apple (1979). Neither would it refer merely to the educational emphasis on teaching canonical methods of philosophical inquiry and judgment, such as that promoted in the pedagogy of Mortimer Adler (1982) and Matthew Lipman (1996). Kierkegaard's idea of what it means “to think” also bears little if any resemblance to Posner et al.'s (1982) idea of “conceptual change” in a student as a fairly formulaic matter of presenting her with new evidence that forces her to form a new concept to account for that evidence as in the scientific method.

A Kierkegaardian attempt to teach a student to think cannot be reduced to a mere modification of a student's “conceptual map” so that it comes more and more to resemble an expert's conceptual map (Feltovich & Glaser, 1981). None of these pedagogical approaches or curricular theories is acceptable, much less desirable, from a Kierkegaardian point of view. They do not constitute existentially valid and educationally primary approaches to helping a student learn to think. Indeed, all of the above approaches to thinking fall far short of Kierkegaard's view of what it means to engage in existentially and ethically sound thought. Kierkegaard suggests

what is existentially valid and would be pedagogically fruitful regarding thinking in the following passage from *Concluding Unscientific Postscripts* (1941):

Therefore, be cautious with an abstract thinker who not only wants to remain in abstraction's pure being but wants this to be the highest for a human being, and wants such thinking, which results in the ignoring of the ethical and a misunderstanding of the religious, to be the highest human thinking. . . . The eternal relates itself as the future to the person in a process of becoming. (p. 268).

Truly to think means to be a subjectively vital agent who appropriates the curriculum in the service of her own becoming, pushing past one border after another towards ever more fascinating horizons in her engagement with the Ultimate as it uniquely presents itself to her in her life. Indeed, what else could claim to be the central educational aim of an existentially authentic pedagogy, spiritually considered? Conversely, truly to think from a Kierkegaardian pedagogical perspective could never have the goal of turning the student as an objective, static cognitive-worker in the service of another person's or another institution's externally imposed goals on the student. Again, this is not to say that such external ideas or goals cannot be appropriated by the student in her ongoing becoming. Clearly, the various ideas, theories, and institutional objectives embedded in the curriculum may be relevant to the student in her constant becoming.

The central point to grasp, however, is that such things must be appropriated by the student in her self-generated trajectory towards Ultimacy. They must never appropriate the student, and thus paralyze that movement and leave the student existentially inert. The former approach to "thinking" is one that enriches subjectivity in its dynamic progression. The latter approach to "thinking" is one that objectifies the student, robs her of her subjectivity, and

prevents her evolution—her ongoing transcendence of any clearly defined present perspective.. It is a perpetual becoming towards a future horizon that cannot be predicted or controlled—statistically managed, in other words. To statistically manage educational processes is to eviscerate them from a Kierkegaardian perspective, to render them not really “educational” at all, but merely technical exercises in the service of someone else’s program, their discourse of power, as Foucault argues in *Knowledge/Power* (1980). This horizon is uniquely, anxiously apprehended by the student as a staging ground for what will hopefully prove to be an even more satisfactory, though never fully adequate, trajectory to a new horizon. And on the process of educational becoming goes—the curriculum serving not as a limiting historical, sociological, ideological or theological structure within which to rest in conventional, and therefore objectifying, “truths.” Rather education is a dynamic limen that is always expanding and that she is always breaking through in her journey to a personal encounter with the Absolute.

This Kierkegaardian vision of education is constant transcendence in pursuit of the authentic self. This represents a radical revolt against education as merely a process of shaping the student into a more or less static being fulfilling a merely finite role—even (and perhaps especially) when that role speciously advertises itself as having some sort of absolute religious function. This objectification of the student as the object of a theological program into which she must fit, would be, from a Kierkegaardian perspective, false religion, ultimately a culturally conditioned religion, as he portrayed it in *Attack Upon Christendom*.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Kierkegaard was a radical Protestant who, like Karl Barth in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century (a theologian who was profoundly indebted to Kierkegaard) grasped what is arguably the essence of the Protestant vision. It is the insistence—as Barth puts it in his gloss on Paul’s *Epistle to the Romans* (date)—that any church, no matter how good, is, in the last analysis, a provisional thing. This is because any church is (from the radical Protestant view) finally just a finite formulation of an infinite truth that transcends all discursive languages, historical traditions, liturgies, ordinances, or rites. Subject to all sorts of historical and cultural biases and deviations, any church must, from the point of view of radical Protestantism, constantly be “erasing itself” in the service of an Ultimacy that presents itself uniquely to each individual and that therefore could never claim ultimacy in any generalities, no matter how pious. The individual before the Ultimate, in unique encounter with the Ultimate, is, according to both Kierkegaard and Barth,

To conclude this section on a Kierkegaardian pedagogy of liminality in terms of one of its various aspects—“becoming”—it is useful to return to one of the two primary quotes at the beginning of this essay. We may now grasp this crucial educational statement by Kierkegaard with even greater intuitive depth by approaching it through one of the Kierkegaardian lenses we are employing: becoming.

What then is education? I had thought it was the curriculum the individual ran through in order to catch up with himself. And anyone who does not want to go through this curriculum will be little helped by being born into the most enlightened age. (Kierkegaard, 2003, p. 75)

Undaunted, Kierkegaard begins by approaching head on the most central pedagogical and curricular question: “What then is education”? This is the question that, semantically and ethically, should be asked in earnest and answered with great care, at the most primary level. This must be done before one launches upon the project of building a theory of education, at a secondary level, that will then inevitably generate specific curricular goals and pedagogical practices, at the necessary but merely tertiary level. And yet is that what was happening in Kierkegaard’s day? Is it, indeed, what happens in ours? Clearly not. One detects a note of typically Kierkegaardian irony in what follows—a wry grammatical subtlety: He *had thought* that education was the curriculum the individual ran through in order to catch up with himself. The past perfect “had thought” implies something that ended in the past because something else happened to qualify or change it between then and the present. What are these two things or events—namely, what Kierkegaard *had thought* education was, and then what *foreclosed* or at least *changed* that previous idea of education?

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the heart of the Protestant revolution. This poses unique challenges and possibilities to Christian education. However, that subset of church-education issues from a Kierkegaardian perspective is not the topic of this paper, but is one that certainly calls out for further analysis.

What Kierkegaard *had thought* about education was that it was an act of existential running (*currere*, from which the word “curriculum” derives), one that brought an individual to herself. Education, Kierkegaard *had thought*, lay in the discovery of the self, and not as an exercise in narcissism but as a coming-to-oneself, a be-coming towards one’s eternally unique identity in relationship to the Ultimate. This was the idea that Socrates expounded in virtually all of his works. It was the idea that informed the oracular wisdom at Delphi to “know thyself.” It was the idea that Christ preached when he warned that it will not profit a man to gain the whole world if he loses his soul—his eternal identity, his self. Kierkegaard, therefore, *had thought* the education to be those experiences, readings, discussions, activities, meditations, agonies and ecstasies through which one approaches the Ultimate. He *had thought* that education was the course one runs in order to catch up with himself. He *had thought* it was a sacred activity and commitment—“the highest human thinking, . . . the eternal [relating] itself as the future to the person in a process of becoming” (Nietzsche, 1999) He *had thought* this until when? Until, presumably, a newer idea about education came along to supplant the old one that he had held to before.

What was that newer idea that supplanted ancient wisdom? Again, Kierkegaard, achieving his ends through indirection and ambiguity, does not answer that question directly. Rather, he says—in a mixture of irony and admonition—that “anyone who does not want to go through this curriculum will be little helped by being born into the most enlightened age” (Kierkegaard, 2003, p.45). Presumably, this educational “alternative” offered by “enlightened ages” is finally a shallow alternative to the deep, abiding truth that education is morally valid to the degree it rests on this principle: The student must be allowed, even encouraged, to run her own race, to catch up with herself, to become “that single individual” (Kierkegaard, 1941)

standing alone before the Ultimate. “The most enlightened” (we now sense the irony in this phrase more keenly) forms of education—based in his day and even more so in ours—on the objectification of the student in the service of an ideological, socioeconomic, institutional, or even theological program are bogus. Again, it must be stressed that such things have their purposes. Kierkegaard never denied that. Neither does a Kierkegaardian pedagogy. However, if those purposes are not kept secondary and understood to be instrumental in the overriding goal of helping the student “catch up with herself,” then they must ultimately generate educational systems that turn the student into an instrument of an externally imposed system: a socioeconomic system (the object of Kierkegaard critiques of Hegel’s world-historical fantasizing) or a theological system (the object of his critiques of programmatic Christianity in *Attack Upon Christendom*). Kierkegaard leaves no middle ground.

Education that does not allow the student to constantly push beyond boundaries to catch up with herself, to *become*, must ultimately make her the object of something external, paradigmatic. It will turn her into something frozen, not vital; static, not dynamic; objective, not subjective; and stop her dead in her existential tracks, not becoming ever closer to herself in her run towards the Divine. It will contain her within a life-sapping prison not liberate her to push through boundary after boundary in her race towards God and towards her eternal identity before Him in His eternal identity. This is a pedagogy of becoming. And if the French Jesuit priest and theorist Teilhard de Chardin (1960) as well as the Protestant theologian Charles Hartshorne (1991) are correct in their notion that the Divine also evolves eternally, a Kierkegaardian pedagogy emerges as part of a universal process of unfolding into increasing sanctity both *before* and *as* evolving Divinity which is also evolving.

**Education in and as the student's life narrative.** A body of literature has formed over the last several decades that looks at how a teacher's narrative of her life as a teacher and her existential narrative of her life in general may affect each other and even be tightly interwoven. As Huberman, Gronauer, & Marti, (1989); Pajak & Blaise (1989); Bullough (2001), and Mayes (1998) have claimed, a teacher's life as a teacher is not separable from her life in general—or should not be. For when it is, then the teacher too easily becomes alienated from her labor (Marx & Engels, 1978) as relatively low-status cognitive-worker in a corporate system. Her job then is no longer to foster the growth of the whole student (Mayes, 2007) in the student's evolution as an existential agent. Under such conditions, the teacher is no longer a force for good in encouraging the holistic growth the curriculum should promote, even defend in the face of dehumanizing forces that must reduce the student to one or two measurable dimensions. Instead the teacher's primary task now is reduced to one of merely operationalizing this or that corporate program, its hidden curriculum (Eisner & Vallance, 1985) functioning to turn students into uncritical "worker-citizens" (Spring, 1976). This not only violates the student in a total existential sense but compromises her ability to be a perceptive and participatory citizen in an open democracy (Dewey, 1916; Freire, 1970).

In Kierkegaardian terms, if a teacher's work is co-opted by the corporate agendas of the military-industrial-educational complex (Cremin, 1988) and therefore not connected to her central commitments as an existential being, then that work is not part of her striving towards Ultimacy that is her life-narrative. Her work becomes an ethically and spiritually trivial activity at best and all too easily a spiritually damaging one. Being inauthentic, her work pits her against herself, and this self-estrangement will form a forbidding roadblock on her journey towards Ultimacy, her narrative of herself as an ethical being.

It is probably true that the many deeply committed and effective teachers come to teaching through a sense of calling, of vocation (almost in the religious sense of that term) (Serow, Eaker, & Ciechalski, 1992). For such teachers (and one hopes that there are many of them tending to our children in the schools), the ethical and spiritual consequences of being forced to deliver a curriculum that is morally and emotionally uncomfortable to her and might even be repugnant, are potentially great. A teacher cannot be unaffected by being forced to deliver a curriculum that runs contrary to her running towards the Absolute, her narrative of herself as a teacher and as an existential agent in pursuit of ultimacy. As Lortie (1975) asserted, this “disconnect” between a teacher’s existentially grounded sense of calling and her feeling that the educational system is objectifying her and her students, may well be a major cause of teacher burnout.

For a teacher with such a sense of calling, the alienation and distress will be all the more acute if she believes that she is being forced to obediently and more or less anonymously deliver a curriculum that objectifies her students, trains them to be merely standardized test-takers, and strips them of their rich individual subjectivity by forcing them like pegs into the holes of a rationalized, materialistic system of emotional and political colonization (Cremin, 1964; Spring, 1976; Tyack, 1974). As she sees such an objectivist curriculum close down the subjective horizons of her students’ narratives of themselves, it must also close her own down as well. As Albert Camus (1991) said, the jailor is bound to the prisoner. In objectifying her students, a teacher necessarily objectifies herself, and both teacher and student find themselves imprisoned in a world of anti-narrative, anti-liminal facts. All that then matters are official ideologies and the student’s ability to parrot them back as measured on the next standardized test. And this

brings us to the next aspect of a Kierkegaardian education of liminality: The educational centrality of the student's life world and life-narrative.

The relationship between the student's daily experiences in the classroom and her overarching sense of existential identity is a theme that has been richly explored in American cinema over the last six decades, starting with *Rebel Without a Cause*. However, it is not an issue that figures very much in educational literature, which is not surprising given the anti-subjective, anti-esthetic tenor of our times. However, from *Rebel Without a Cause* in the 1950s to *The Graduate* in the 1960's, followed by such movies in succeeding decades as *Stand and Deliver* (1988), *Finding Forrester* (2000), and *Freedom Writers* (2007), the theme of "The Existential Role of Schooling in a Young Person's Life" has become an important genre in movies. Yet, except for such books as Kozol's *Death at an Early Age* or Bullough's *Uncertain Lives*, this existentially rich topic goes relatively unexplored—especially in today's human-capital, NCLB environment. The inadequate focus on this dimension of schooling (which involves all three Kierkegaardian domains of the esthetic, ethical, and spiritual) is not surprising, given the fact that esthetic assumptions, methods, and goals do not figure prominently into mainstream educational theory and practice except in the very limited form of "arts education." And it is important to note that even here, arts education is generally justified only if it can be shown to augment a student's cognitive skills and thus turn the student more profitable cognitive worker in today's political economy. Of course, this is the very antithesis of what art ideally does in the curriculum, which is to expand a student's existential horizons in subjectivity, sometimes even providing her with examples of pushing beyond normative boundaries and into uncharted existential landscapes, the territory of liminality (Greene, 1974), where the only profits to be found are spiritual ones on the inner-landscapes of heightened awareness.

This brings us to a recent idea, and a very Kierkegaardian one, in curriculum theory—one that centers on the students subjective appropriation of the curriculum in the service of her life’s enrichment: The subjective curriculum. As Mayes (2009) has written in psychological, not philosophical, terms:

[J]ust as there is an ‘official curriculum’ with essentially cognitive goals that teachers then personally ‘operationalize’ in their own unique ways (Eisner and Vallance, 1985), so there is also an unofficial, ‘subjective curriculum’ (Cohler 1989, p. 52). The subjective curriculum refers to how the student experiences the official and operational curricula. That experience includes ‘such factors as the child’s relationship with both teachers and fellow classmates, the personal significance of the curriculum, and the importance of a sense of self as a requisite for taking on the challenge of new learning’ (Cohler, 1989, p. 57). The subjective curriculum may also include the teacher’s experiences, for it is ‘in part, the invention of both teacher and students. Each one projects distillates of his own inner perceptions and experiences, past and present, onto the subject under study, be it mathematics, reading, history, or literature’. (Field 1989a: 853 as cited in Mayes, 2009)

Although Kierkegaard would probably object to Mayes’ psychological approach to the student’s and teacher’s subjectivity (Kierkegaard, 1941) the point being made is, I think, basically the same in both cases: How the teacher and student each subjectively *experience* the curriculum is central to what each of them will *make* of the curriculum in the furtherance of their individual life-stories. It is the student’s appropriation of the curriculum, the incorporation of her

memories and expectations into the subject under study regardless of what that subject is, that is primarily in Kierkegaardian pedagogy.

The curriculum, filtered through the student's narrative of her past and perceived present, becomes the springboard from which she imagines future possibilities, and projects life's horizons. For, whatever the subject (even the most technical ones), it will inevitably be experienced, interpreted, and used by the student to some degree in terms of her past experiences, present situation, and future hopes. This is why, as Pintrich, Marx, and Boyle (1993) have insisted, cognition is inherently "hot," not analytically "cold." Or as holistic theorist Mayes (2004) claims in similar terms, the best pedagogies are those that invite the student to grasp something with her entire being. This involves interpreting it in light of her past experiences, her present possibilities (and constraints), and her projection of herself towards meaning. And all of this is, from start to finish, a narrational act, for it operates in the service of the student's spiritual evolution—her encounters with her evolving self in its run towards itself, which is most fully experienced only in the light of Ultimacy, in the closest possible relationship to it.

Another way of understanding the narrational nature of an existentially authentic pedagogy is to say that it must be one of *hope* (Bullough, 2001). It must energize the student's self-projection towards Ultimacy—the revelation of herself to herself in light of her evolving grasp of what is ultimate for her. Indeed, this deepening apprehension of the Ultimate in the self's discovery of itself, is the heart of what Kierkegaard means by spirituality, and must be central to a Kierkegaardian vision of education as primarily a spiritual act and commitment. As Kierkegaard declared

A human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self?

The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation's relating itself to itself. (Kierkegaard, 1980, pg 13)

This relating of the self to the self in subjective procession towards the fullness of the self in the presence of the Ultimate, is the heart of a Kierkegaardian pedagogy of hope. For hope in Kierkegaard's writings means nothing more or less than the "throwing" (both trusting and fearful) of oneself, in freedom and beyond reason, towards the Ultimate. The ongoing story of this existential throwing of oneself towards Ultimacy is a person's life-narrative. A Kierkegaardian pedagogy is therefore a foundationally narrational (and therefore fully subjective) "pedagogy of hope," as Freire (2004) puts it. It is awareness of oneself as a unique spirit running towards the Ultimately Unique Spirit. A pedagogy of objectification of teacher and student is just the opposite. It stalls the running. It even shuts down the running. And in doing this, it becomes a pedagogy not of hope but of hopelessness. For this is what hopelessness is: The death of the adventure of subjective liminality in the prison-camp of bondage to objectivity. A Kierkegaardian pedagogy of liminality is one of hope—hope in oneself as spirit constantly sojourning into the risk of liminality, and towards Spirit.

A Kierkegaardian pedagogy of spirituality emphasizes above all else the primacy of subjectivity in narrational unfolding towards the Ultimate. "But to be unaware of being defined as spirit is precisely what despair is" (Kierkegaard, 1980, p25). And this is why a primarily objectivist curriculum must result in despair. An objectivist pedagogy of preparing students merely to be mediated members of a class, institution, or system, or to be exemplars of some ideology or other, can only be seen through a Kierkegaardian lens as finally a pedagogy of

despair and an erasure of spirituality. That is to say, it is an anti-narrative pedagogy, for an object can never be the subject of a narrative. Only a subject can be the subject of a narrative. To the degree an educational system objectifies a student, to that very degree does it also shut the student down, abort her narrative, and carry on education in an ethical and spiritual wasteland.

This difference between a pedagogy of narrative richness and a pedagogy of narrative impoverishment is the difference between what I will call a “mediating pedagogy” and an “immediate pedagogy.” A pedagogy that focuses on objectification of the student into occupying a more or less static socioeconomic role (the role may change in certain ways, of course, but it remains essentially embedded in an objectifying system no matter where it is positioned) is a pedagogy that *mediates* between the student and some categorical role she is to play—professionally, politically, culturally, or even dogmatically. Here, the emphasis is not on the student so much as on the role she will play. This focus is not insignificant educationally, nor need it be one that is ethically problematic from a Kierkegaardian pedagogical perspective. However, it must be understood and constantly emphasized that this focus must finally be secondary, contingent, and merely instrumental. But such is not the case today, nor was it apparently in Kierkegaard’s either. For both are ages in which the theories, power, and allure of “the most enlightened age” and its latest shiny pedagogy did not hold a candle, in Kierkegaard’s view, to what true faith and true education were and remain—“a task for a whole lifetime, not a skill thought to be acquired in days or even weeks.” (Kierkegaard, 1985, p.42).

Only when mediating educational agendas and objectives lay claim to being primary or foundational do they become pedagogically and spiritually problematic from a Kierkegaardian perspective. When they understand themselves to be instrumentalities that the student is using to build her primarily important life-narrative, they can be the very stuff upon which curricular

choices are made and the grist of classroom conversation and creative productivity. These secondary, categorical issues and roles will certainly play into a student's education. They will often govern choices that the teacher will make about what is to be read, the experiences to be had, and the products to create in the classroom. However, the point is simply that all of this is secondary to the primary purpose of a Kierkegaardian pedagogy: Not the shaping of the student into the mold of the curriculum, but the availability of the curriculum as a resource for the student in shaping of herself. Thus, for a pedagogy to be authentic in Kierkegaardian terms, it must be *im-mediate*, must be promoting true *currere*—the narrativel running of the student to catch herself in the unmediated embrace of the Ultimate, the naked encounter of the individual with her Ultimacy.

To disrupt a student's life-narrative by making secondary educational goals primary, leads to "education as the practice of social violence against children," as Alan Block (1997) has put it. Although Block's statement may seem exaggerated at first glance, is it really? If curricular constraints and pedagogical practices work to objectify a student—if this is, indeed, the hidden curriculum in a sense—and thus impoverishes the student's life narrative, what else could this process be called than "the practice of social violence against children"?

There are practical classroom management issues that are involved here as well. To ignore aspects of a student's being is to breed what holistic theory calls local pathologies in that part of her total being that have been neglected (Mayes, 2007). And like any pathology in an organic system, it will generate toxins that will sooner or later infect the whole system, and limit, if not fatally compromise, that narrative of her life that *is* her life. For if the whole student is not engaged in educational processes that by state mandate occupy a great portion of her growing-up years, there is always the danger that the parts of her being that have been neglected will become

ill. They will either atrophy, resulting in student detachment from what is going on in the classroom, or revolt, resulting in disruptive and unproductive behavior in the classroom. In this sense, the pedagogical practices and curricular approaches are healthiest and most productive when they honor the subjective curriculum that varies from student to student. I believe that Kierkegaard would affirm the idea of the subjective curriculum and would agree that education is at its best a matter of narrational enrichment of the student's life as her personal *currere* constantly carries her beyond previous personal boundaries and conventional limits into a more holistic sense of being and a more authentic way of acting in the world. At any rate, these are pedagogical points that emerge with a certain insistence from Kierkegaard's thoughts.

What I really need is to get clear about what I must do, not what I must know, except insofar as knowledge must precede every act. . . . [T]he crucial thing is to find a truth which is truth for me, and to find the idea for which I am willing to live and die. Of what use would it be to 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 to me to be able to develop a theory of the state, . . . and constructing a world I did not live in but merely held up for others to see; of what use would it be to me to be able to formulate the meaning of Christianity . . . if it had no deeper meaning for me and for my life? (Søren Kierkegaard's Journals & Papers IA Gilleleie, 1 August 1835.)

Certainly this is what Freire is pointing to in his idea of education as personal liberation and pedagogy in the service of hope (2004). Unless, that is, the student has been so divested of her own subjectivity by an objectifying educational system that she is no longer able to learn as a

free individual running towards her unique self, with the narratively ethical goal of standing in the unmediated presence of Ultimacy: the self before the eternal Self. Or as Paul Ricoeur, another philosophical descendant of Kierkegaard's, has observed, our individual narratives in time take on moral significance when they are seen against the backdrop of eternity. When our and our students' educational narratives are situated against the larger questions and contexts of their life narratives, then we are in the realm of what Huebner has called "education for ultimacy" (1999)—the realm in which a Kierkegaardian pedagogy operates. Indeed, the realm which a Kierkegaardian pedagogy *creates*.

**Education and epistemic crisis.** Education that aims at the continual development of a student's life-narrative—education as becoming—cannot be static. It cannot exalt any given curriculum, through either the authority of tradition or the compulsion of the state, into an inert thing to be either uncritically revered or merely obeyed. Such an approach to education turns the curriculum into either an object of idolatry (confusing something finite and created with the Infinite and Uncreated, in Kierkegaardian terms) or an instrument of political conformity (a reification of a particular set of cultural norms as ethical, and ethically absolute (another spiritual error, in Kierkegaard's view that he continually lays out in his idea of "the ethical"). Rather, a curriculum for becoming in the service of the student's potential divinity in her ongoing approach to the Eternal must be both porous and open-ended. Such a curriculum encourages each student to penetrate its porousness with probing and radical critique at various levels of analysis. This means that the student is encouraged to insert herself into the curriculum in her own way, explore its assumptions and claims at various levels as those assumptions and claims have a possible bearing on her life world, challenge what she finds dubious or egregious, and take into herself that which is "spiritually up-building," as Kierkegaard wished his own work to be for

“that single individual”. A curriculum for becoming must also be open-ended, which is to say that it must be in constant transformation as the teacher has conceived it at the beginning of the term and as the teacher and class negotiate it throughout the term in authentic discursive transactions with each other.

All of this being the case, a Kierkegaardian pedagogy must be what Victor Eremita (Either/Or) has called a pedagogy of “epistemic crisis.” What does this daunting phrase—a pedagogy of epistemic crisis—mean? It certainly does not mean that the student lives in a state of anxiety, although anxiety will sometimes be a part of any truly educative process as an individual moves from one state of existence to another. Becoming necessitates crisis. Crisis is the stimulus for existential shift from one life-narrative direction to another, no matter how small or great that shift may be. As noted above, a Kierkegaardian pedagogy is dialectical. This implies tension between two different viewpoints—in other words, a crisis—that can only be resolved in a synthesis. And this synthesis must in time become a new thesis existing in opposition to a new antithesis in what is hopefully a similarly generative crisis. A pedagogy of becoming that does not honor, even cultivate, crises among students in classroom discourse and within each student in the constant reshaping of her life-narrative is oxymoronic. Needless to say, the discursive and internal crises must be civil and constructive. There is no room in a Kierkegaardian pedagogy for what Huebner has called “power-talk,” which is the imposition of one person’s worldview on another. That is education as colonization and runs directly contrary to the Freirian goal of consciousness-raising for each member of a community of classroom discourse.

To get a better grasp on what I mean by a pedagogy of crisis, consider the etymological base of the word in the Greek *krinein*, which simply means “to decide” or “to be at a decision point.” In modern parlance, it refers to a point of change from one state of being to another, a

time requiring decision, evolution, and reformation. A pedagogy of crisis, then, is one in which the teacher—in forming, presenting, and guiding her students in exploration of a body of material or in various activities—has herself made decisions about what to present and how to present it that are the result of curricular decisions that she has made from the most lucid and compassionate places in her own life-narrative. For the student, a pedagogy of crisis is one that constantly challenges the student to make decisions about what is being studied or done, and the classroom discussions that surround it, in the furtherance of her unique narrative towards the Eternal. For “that single individual” must constantly be making decisions to move herself forward on her existential journey. Indeed, what moral significance does a journey have if it is not one of *becoming*—one that arrives from time to time at poignant junctures, decision points, where the journeyer can choose between one path and one or more others? In this sense, only a pedagogy of epistemic crisis, in which one is not only questioning what one is seeing at the present moment but also sometimes how one *sees* and *knows* in the first place, is consistent with the idea of human freedom. For freedom is the disposition and ability to make decisions for oneself; and freedom in a Kierkegaardian sense is that disposition and ability directed towards ever closer communion with the Ultimate. Thus, such a pedagogy not only is consistent with human freedom; it is the only kind of education that finally serves human freedom. This freedom may sometimes be, as Sartre in his notion of being “condemned to freedom” implied, a terrible thing. It may require decisions of great emotional depth, interpersonal consequences, and spiritual moment.

On the other hand, a non-crisis pedagogy of simply compelling students to perform to state-determined standards or conform to tradition-determined commonplaces is not only a non-crisis pedagogy but also an uncritical pedagogy. It lulls the student into a sleepy conformism—

the very antithesis of the Kierkegaardian goal of enriching the life-narrative of each student as “that single individual.” Indeed, a non-crisis pedagogy and an uncritical pedagogy go hand in hand. For when a curriculum is enshrined as absolute it is also static, for it cannot bear radical critique. Having no point at which critique could enter it, it is not porous. Not being susceptible of radical change, it is not open-ended. In short, it is dead, which is the very opposite a pedagogy for becoming. Such a pedagogy is also, therefore, quite un-Kierkegaardian. Education that basically disallows crisis is quite inconsistent with a Kierkegaardian view of education. Where teacher and students are not constantly interrogating not only the curricular item before them but indeed their very ways of seeing—when, that is, there is no epistemic crisis in the classroom—then education has become anti-narrative. “Excellent” grades in such a classroom become a path of empty glory leading only to an existential grave. Anything and everything in classroom discourse must be susceptible of becoming porous, open-ended, and of being appropriated in unique ways by each student in order for a pedagogy of liminality to exist in a classroom. In such a classroom, borders and boundaries of old understandings are sometimes reconfigured in epistemic negotiations, sometimes even shattered and redefined in epistemic revolutions. However, this is always in the service of the student in her ongoing trek towards the Ultimate in her life—indeed, the Ultimate *as* her life.

**Education as I-Thou encounter/teaching as Maieutics.** Kierkegaard places his primary emphasis on the unique individual, often as that individual comes into contact with another unique individual on their respective journeys toward Ultimacy. These journeys will never be precisely the same, of course. Identical journeys—the kind that standardized education promotes—are not journeys at all as Kierkegaard understands how each of us journeys through our specific mortal pilgrimage. “Identical journeying” in existential terms (standardized

education, in pedagogical ones) is not journeying. It is lockstep marching towards some impersonally defined and externally imposed objective through objective means. This, by any sort of Kierkegaardian definition, could never be Ultimate.

Sometimes the journeyers' paths toward Ultimacy will be similar (at least as seen from the outside; we cannot say what their individual *experiences* of that external similarity are), sometimes quite different, sometimes radically different, and sometimes even dialectically opposed. Still, even in the case of the most extreme differences, there may be the possibility of communication, and therefore mutual edification (Fay, 2000) if both journeyers are willing to stretch beyond their limits in order to find and cultivate common ground, or at least sketch out in the sand a shared place for both to stand within for a while.

This kind of conversation, whatever the degree of difference between the discussants, can be intellectually and ethically up-building for all who are engaged in the conversation if they do so civilly and in good faith—conditions which must exist in any Kierkegaard-informed pedagogy. When this happens, all conversants may be enriched in what Buber called dialogical ethics (1965). Here, within this space, conversants are called upon to go beyond their usual emotional, epistemic, and ethical limits in order to encounter the Other in good faith. Hopefully, there will be agreement on some matters but even when there is not, there remains the standard of civility and the hope of mutual edification. And this is true not only in spite of their differences but sometimes precisely because of them. Hence, a Kierkegaardian pedagogy of liminality is consistent with a postmodern pedagogy of “alterity.” This should not be surprising given that Kierkegaard is seen by some as the father of postmodern thought (Evans, 2009; Gouwens, 1996; Hannay, 2003).

It is not only the similarity of the content of the two (or three, or four, etc.) unique life-journeys that offers a space for communication, but also the ethically pivotal fact that two “single individuals” are trekking in good faith towards Ultimacy. It is this that fundamentally allows discussion—so crucial, as noted above, to a Kierkegaardian pedagogy, which is necessarily dialogical. It is the teacher journeying in good-faith towards her own Ultimacy and inviting the student to do the same thing in her own terms—that provides the foundation for dialogue and is the prerequisite of any approach to education that wishes to lay claim to a Kierkegaardian pedigree. The insistence upon encounter in education—between teacher and student, student and student, and both teacher and student with the curriculum as a living thing—is probably one of the reasons Kierkegaard so deeply admired Socrates’ dialogical pedagogy. Causing discussants to authentically encounter the teacher, each other, and the subject they are discussing is precisely Socrates’ *modus operandi*. Kierkegaard states, “...even the richest personality is nothing before he has chosen himself, and on the other hand even what one might call the poorest personality is everything when he has chosen himself; for the great thing is not to be this or that but to be oneself, and this everyone can be if he wills it.” (Kierkegaard, 1962, p. 45)

It is this insistence upon the importance of unique life-narratives touching each other at crucial and sensitive points that underlay Martin Buber’s idea of the I-Thou relationship as the central axiological issue. Again, this is not surprising given Buber’s indebtedness to Kierkegaard (Zeigler, 1960). In the broadest possible spiritual terms, Buber declared that an I-Thou relationship has eternal dimensions and consequences—that it is Ultimate, in short, because:

every particular *Thou* is a glimpse through to the eternal *Thou*; by means of every particular *Thou*, the primary word addresses the eternal *Thou*. Through the

mediation of the *Thou* of all beings, fulfillment, and non-fulfillment, of relations comes to them: The inborn *Thou* is realized in each relation and consummated in none. (Buber, 1965, p. 75)

Thus, as Buber wrote elsewhere (1965) in discussing ethical means and aims of education, an I-Thou relationship is the alpha and omega of any deeply educative act just as it is the basis of morality, for “the relation in education is one of pure dialogue” (Buber, 1947). Dialogue cannot exist where the parties involved are not willing to extend themselves beyond the solipsistic safety of unquestioned assumptions. When that is the case, the result is pseudo-dialogue, the maintenance of official limits by “power talk” in the classroom, as Huebner (1999) calls it. This unfortunately is what occurs in many classrooms where the teacher is exercising power over the student by forcing the disempowered student to conform to the standard interpretation (and exact reproduction on standardized tests) of subject-matter. This renders the subject-matter inert, just another “It.” This mirrors how the teacher herself may be the victim of state-determined, standardized things to teach, ways to teach them, and instruments of assessing student retention/reproduction of it all.

A pedagogy of liminality cannot exist, much less thrive, in anything less than the medium of I-Thou relationships; for, this *only* is the element in which teacher, students, and even the curriculum can healthily live and grow. Growth is life, stasis is death. For this reason, I-Thou relationships in the classroom serve life. I-It non-relationships paralyze the teacher’s relationship with students, the students’ relationships with each other, and everyone’s subjective appropriation of a now static, “objective” curriculum. Just as the I-Thou relationship is the medium in which education thrives, so the I-It relationship is the poison in which education dies.

Indeed, I-It anti-relationship is fatal to a pedagogy of liminality because being objective and objectifying, it imposes externally-determined and usually quite truncated limits on the classroom situation. Another way to envisage the I-Thou relationship of constant limit breaching and expansion in the classroom is through a metaphor that has found its way into the pedagogical literature recently (Wirzba, 1996; Norton, 1973). This is the maieutic image of the teacher as a midwife assisting the birth of the student into a new world of intellectual and ethical possibility. Birth is the ultimate liminal situation. The child leaves the safety of one developmental stage in its life-journey into a new stage of developmental tasks that make the child an increasingly free being. In a sense, the child emerges out of the matrix of eternity into temporality but headed towards another eternity. In so many ways, the teacher as midwife is a poetic image that captures a good deal of Kierkegaard's finally literary thought in general and its pedagogical implications specifically. He wrote:

In so far as the learner was in Error, and now receives the Truth and with it the condition for understanding it, a change takes place within him like the change from non-being to being. But this transition from non-being to being is the transition we call birth. Now one who exists cannot be born; nevertheless, the disciple is born. Let us call this transition the New Birth, in consequence of which the disciple enters the world quite as at the first birth, an individual human being knowing nothing as yet about the world into which he is born, whether it is inhabited, whether there are other human beings in it besides himself; for while it is indeed possible to be baptized en masse, it is not possible to be born anew en masse. (Kierkegaard, 1962, p. 14)

A maieutic pedagogy celebrates the emergence of that “single individual.” It emblemizes border-crossing. It symbolizes a person’s constantly being born into the Divine. In sum, it captures the essence of a pedagogy of liminality, and is a fitting place to conclude this inquiry. In its humane poeticism, it summarizes and secures the whole idea of a spiritual pedagogy that grows organically, like the embryo itself, from the seminal thoughts that the great Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, has given each of us on our private treks towards Ultimacy.

### **Conclusion**

In Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling* there is a moment when the reader finds herself disaffected with his message that faith cannot be rationalized. Yet, as she continues to read, in a flash of insight, she feels enlightened when she realizes that this conundrum is inherent in the nature of faith. Kierkegaard finesses his readers to struggle through this contradiction as well as many others, and in so doing, through deferred narration, intentional silence, distinct rhetorical approaches, and irresolvable contradictions, Kierkegaard helps the reader toward faith precisely by making it harder to attain. It is clear that absurdities are important, and his writings use them in its content and in its structure in order to make the reader discover. It is not easy and in the majority of these cases, the reader is often left frustrated. The biggest contradiction of all is that through these absurdities, the reader finds the meaning of faith.

Kierkegaard is the liminal pedagogue. Through the profound strength of his text he takes his reader into “border territory” or that unformulated point of transition. His curriculum is that unique, unformulated curriculum one runs through in order to catch up with herself. In the religious realm, Kierkegaard describes this transition, boundary or instant of learning as a point where finite meets the infinite. Liminality is the place of shocking removal from our ‘comfort zones’, but equally it is the place of potential for the new. Philosopher Karl Jaspers contributed

to this idea through his concept of the “axial age,” which was “an in-between period between two structured world-views and between two rounds of empire building; it was an age of creativity where ‘man asked radical questions’, and where the ‘unquestioned grasp on life is loosened’” (Thomassen, 2006).

Liminality is an anomalous “no man’s land” between two walls of definition. It is an experience of loss and deconstruction—betwixt and between. The old has gone but the new has not yet arrived and so the now is existentially opaque. Liminality is not a great void of nothingness, though it may lead into that if the experience is not resolved or managed in an appropriate way. Rather, the liminal moment is essentially transitional. We encounter it when our limits have been reached—when the old dies. The student cannot choose to go forward, because she has reached the limit of her own capacity. To experience human finitude is to experience a moment of powerlessness. Herein lies some hope to be seen for the student who is coming into being. This is the point the maieutic teacher helps shepherd the student through the process with a delicate touch and yet steadying hand.

This transition takes place with freedom. All coming into existence takes place with freedom, not by necessity. Whatever we believe or try to the contrary by way of standardized curriculum, testing and expectations, formulation ultimately crushes the individual, not enlightens her. Nothing comes into existence by virtue of a logical ground, but only by a cause. Every cause terminates in a freely effecting cause. The illusion occasioned by the intervening causes is that the coming into existence seems to be necessary; the truth about intervening causes is that just as they themselves have come into existence, they direct back ultimately to a freely effecting cause.

This coming-into-existence kind of change, therefore, is not a change in essence, but in being, and is a transition from not existing to existing. But this non-being that the subject of coming into existence leaves behind must itself have some sort of being. Otherwise, “the subject of coming into existence would not remain unchanged during the change of coming into existence”, unless it had not been at all and then the change of coming into existence would for another reason be absolutely different from every other kind of change, since it would be no change at all, for every change always presupposes something that changes. But such a being, which nevertheless is a non-being is precisely what possibility is; and a being that is being is indeed actual being or actuality; and the change of coming into existence is a transition from [Overgangen] from possibility to actuality (Kierkegaard, 1962).

Our current course of education is a dangerous one. For years we’ve argued about the appreciate focus of schools. From math and science skills to self-esteem and then to methodologies, to achieve those goals, we’ve lost sight of the most important aspect of schools – the student. We tend to think of students in terms of test scores and objectives rather than concern ourselves with the personal life of the student. Heubner rightly suggests that teachers [through no fault of their own] have become increasingly removed from concern for the uniqueness and individuality of the student qua person. Heubner (1999) states

The educational task has been so strongly focused by the need for the teacher to teach and the student to learn that neither has time to think about how that which is taught influences the life of the student - his unfolding journey through a difficult time in history (p. 443).

For Kierkegaard, a full engagement with the anxiety or dread that goes with being human is, in fact, central to the spiritual task of realizing one's humanity. With our penchant to drug

students into submission, we completely miss the point of “currere”. It was because of this tension of the inner life that members of the Socrates guild, such as Heidegger and Sartre, could begin to philosophize about angst. In one journal entry, Kierkegaard wrote, “All existence makes me anxious, from the smallest fly to the mysteries of the Incarnation; the whole thing is inexplicable, I most of all; to me all existence is infected, I most of all. My distress is enormous, boundless; no one knows it except God in heaven, and he will not console me...”(Journal,)

Is there any doubt that were he alive today he would be supplied with a refillable prescription of Ritalin? Kierkegaard’s prescription in “The Concept of Anxiety” and other texts is that if we can, as the Buddhists say, “stay with the feeling” of anxiety, it will spirit away our finite concerns and educate us as to who we really are. As educators we need embrace this liminal state of “fruitful chaos” and work with the human situation - through the improbable and complex events of this world, welcome the mind and its wanderings, and understand how these two, our outer and inner lives, play together as necessary partners. Only then will we be serving “that single individual” student to whom Kierkegaard dedicated this life’s work.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Review of Literature**

The body of literature on the works of Soren Kierkegaard has grown steadily since Kierkegaard began to be more widely read in English. The first substantial translations in English appeared on the scene in the opening of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this dissertation, I propose to focus on a subject that has been virtually unexamined in Kierkegaardian scholarship except by one or two scholars whose works are already 40 years old—namely, the educational implications of the works of Kierkegaard. Given the prodigious size of his collected works and the various directions that has been taken in Kierkegaardian scholarship, it is necessary for the purposes of this study that I focus on the works that are richest in possibility in formulating the basic outlines of a Kierkegaardian theory and praxis in education. Accordingly, this literature review will primarily examine the scholarship surrounding those works with special reference to their educational relevance.

The extent of Kierkegaard's works as well as his language and style of writing through the use of irony, pseudonyms and practice of indirect communication has led to the emergence of a cacophony of scholarly opinion about his thought and philosophy. Add to this Kierkegaard's own wish to create in the reader a desire to question rather than provide an answer, his dialectical complexity provides a noteworthy collection of commentary regarding his works and philosophy. Patrick Goold (1990) notes that Kierkegaard "writes so as to discourage the lazy reader and to perplex those with an unreflective cast of mind." (p. 56).

## **Five major schools of Kierkegaardian scholarship**

According to Gouwens (1996), there are five major schools of Kierkegaardian scholarship: biographical, philosophical, literary, deconstructionist, and religious. These schools of thought and some of the major authors of that scholarship will be examined.

**Biographical.** Walter Lowrie (1962), best known as a major translator and biographer of Kierkegaard, characterizes an early type of scholarship that chose to look at Kierkegaard's work through the lens of his personal life and struggles, particularly his broken engagement to Regine Olson, his relationship with a rather harsh, puritanical father and to a lesser degree the Corsair newspaper incident. Kierkegaard himself writes of the impact these relationships had on his life and work.

**Philosophical.** The philosophical approach looks at Kierkegaard as a thinker who challenges some of the pervasive ideas of his time as particularly expressed in Hegelianism. Kierkegaard declares himself to be a religious writer and expressly objects to his works becoming a diversion for future professors and philosophers.

The contents of this little book affirm, then, what I truly am as an author, That I am and was an author is related to Christianity, to the problem of "becoming a Christian", with a direct or indirect polemic against the monstrous illusion we call Christendom, or against the illusion that in such a land of ours all are Christians of a sort. (Kierkegaard, 1998, p. 5f)

Because of his rejection of the traditional approaches of philosophy to existence, reason, and faith, Kierkegaard is often referred to as an "anti-philosopher." Conant (as cited in Lippitt, 2000), however, rightly reminds us of Kierkegaard's epistemological interests and his attention given to

ourselves as thinkers and questioners. These, of course, are issues of traditional approaches to philosophy.

**Literary.** It has been claimed that a literary approach to Kierkegaard is essential to his meaning. Kierkegaard was an aesthete, critic, novelist and some suggest a poet, although he never wrote even one verse. His use of pseudonyms, indirect communication, irony and humor are among his literary strategies. One of the strengths of a literary approach is to look at Kierkegaard with a deeper appreciation of his intent as opposed to an attempt to read his mind. Walsh (2009) looks at Kierkegaard's understanding of the poetic in his theory of existential aesthetics. Emmanuel argues that Kierkegaard's literary techniques are designed to push the reader to appropriate truth by turning inward to gain meaning from the text.

**Deconstructionist.** The fourth approach, one to which Kierkegaard would most likely have objected, is that of the deconstructionists. Deconstructionism deals with what an author doesn't state directly. Deconstruction reads between the lines and endeavors to interpret an author's silences—especially as those silences evidence the author being either a perpetrator or victim of a discourse that appropriates power at the expense of marginalizing others. While this approach allows for multiple readings of Kierkegaard's work, it also suggests that one should not make claims concerning the author's stated intent. Ree and Chamberlain (1998) talk about a new Kierkegaard coming forward and examine his texts focusing on his use of irony, duplicity and pseudonymous uses. Although the deconstructionist approach is valuable in so far as it requires us not to simply take at face value what an author purportedly intends, the other schools of Kierkegaardian critique are certainly correct in pointing out that the deconstructionist approach summarily dismisses Kierkegaard's stated intentions, which is to commit an error at the other end of the spectrum. As the religious readings of Kierkegaard are quick to point out, the

deconstructionists are probably motivated in this opposite error because of their own ideological agenda which would tend to segment the divine entirely out of any academic discourse.

**Religious.** Kierkegaard was a religious thinker and perhaps it is that religious perspective that is the most common approach to his work. This is the body of literature which I will review in this study, and from which, in my essay, I will be teasing out the pedagogical implications in order to lay a groundwork for a Kierkegaardian theology of pedagogy (Collins, 1983; Walsh, 2009; Watts, 2003; Gardiner, 1988; Evans, 2009; Carlisle, 2005; Emmanuel, 1996; Mooney, 1996; Watkin, 2001; Gouwens, 1996; Manheimer, 1977; King, 1996; Gupta, 2005). C. Stephen Evans examines the way Kierkegaard looked at the unconscious in his works and notes in particular the way in which the development of the unconscious self affects one's relationship with God. Similarly, Julia Watkin argues that to Kierkegaard, one's relationship to God is so significant that it requires total self-renunciation. Gouwens explores Kierkegaard's role of the maieutic and his regard for the Socratic method and position of being a midwife in helping give birth to discovery and new thought. Kierkegaard, like Socrates, did not claim to know the truth but strove to help the reader turn inward in her own personal search for and discovery of God. For Kierkegaard, God is objective (and objective in a way that transcends mere rational objectivity) but the individual's truth is always her subjective relationship to that ultimate objective reality. As Saint Paul said, "Now we see as through a glass darkly" (1 Cor. 13:12). Perhaps when we no longer see through mortal eyes but are on the other side of mortality, we may indeed see "face to face" (1 Cor. 13:12). Perhaps this face to face encounter with God will be one of transcendental objectivity. Kierkegaard does not seem to make any statements one way or other about this. His writing deals with the subjective processes of the individual in this life.

Kierkegaard's stated intention was for his works to be read in a "primitive" manner, prompting the reader to reflect deeply and move inwardly by personally appropriating truth. He differentiates himself from a premise author who lacks inward direction from an "essential" author who is inwardly directed with a distinct life-view.<sup>3</sup> The premise-author has "premises for living but no conclusions"; although he may write and even be published, he cannot write the essential part of the discourse. The essential author, on the other hand, is inwardly directed whose purpose is an edifying project. His work is nurturing where the premise-author is consuming. Kierkegaard consistently maintained that he himself was without authority. His wish, above all, was for his reader to think with him and to enter into existential concerns with passion.

It is one thing to be a physician . . . , and another thing to be a sick man who . . . communicate[s] bluntly the symptoms of his disease. Perhaps he may be able to express and expound the symptoms in far more glowing colors . . . . But in spite of that there remains the decisive qualitative difference between a sick man and a physician. And this difference is precisely the same decisive *qualitative difference* between being a premise-author and an essential author. (Kierkegaard, 1955, p. 3)

Any of these approaches would offer an internally consistent critical and literary lens through which to examine Kierkegaard. I have heeded Maxine Greene's (1974) idea of what she calls a cubist approach to examine a text or product in educational terms. She feels that this is appropriate because of the existentially complex and multidimensional nature of deep educational questions. Therefore, in order to enrich the reading of

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<sup>3</sup> Since Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authors are all not him this distinction between essential and premise authors may "fit" his different pseudonymous authors with varying degrees of accuracy which, in true Kierkegaardian fashion, he leaves it up to the reader to decide.

Kierkegaard, I have drawn from literary criticism various perspectives and analytical tools to approach him in the richest way possible. It might be useful to consider Kierkegaard as an enigma at the center of a circle. These narrational and literary approaches that I have employed, each of them related to but also different from each in other in significant ways, offer different points of entry into the circle. This allows the reader to enter into the ambiguity which is Kierkegaard, which is expressly what he wants his writings to be.

### **Kierkegaard's View that Ultimate Truth Resides in the Individual's Subjectivity**

Man's ultimate hope, according to Kierkegaard, should reside in the ultimate—or God. Conversely, says Kierkegaard, the finite *is* despair. There is a gap between the finite and the infinite which is in no way physically or conceptually bridgeable by any finite device or practices. Man is alienated from God *because* man is finite. Our finitude—in all dimensions of our temporal being—*is* our alienation from God. When one truly apprehends with one's whole being (which is to say, when one apprehends it in existential authenticity) one's finitely absolute breach from the infinite, it leads to despair at one's finiteness (Collins, 1983; Walsh, 2009). If the individual stops at this point of existential awareness, she is living in absolute despair. This is the case with the Existentialism of Sartre and Camus, who finally yield to and remain caught in absolute despair (Camus, 1975; Sartre, 1993). The false and ultimately doomed "remedy" to this absolute despair is the attempt to sidestep it by turning something finite into something that might serve as infinitely adequate. For instance, one places one's faith (locates one's ultimate concern) in a beloved, an ideology, a psychological or esthetic practice, an institution, a nation, and so on. For Kierkegaard all of these inappropriate faiths are a form of idolatry because they substitute something other than God for ultimacy.

This is one of the reasons that Kierkegaard is difficult to read. He does not want to lead the reader to a particular system of thought (Collins, 1983; Hannay, 2003; Watkin, 2003; Watts, 2001). He is not espousing a philosophy as such or a systematic theology. Rather, he is attempting to lead the reader to her own experience of the transitory, occasional, but all important moments of the intersection of the timeless with time, the infinite with the finite. This, according to Collins, is “the Archimedean leverage/reference point” that is our true home as finite creatures always striving towards the infinite. This is the core paradox in all of Kierkegaard’s work—and the one which the religious camp of Kierkegaardian scholarship alone captures—namely, the paradoxical tension between temporal acts and eternal outcomes is to enter into one’s “inheritance of transcendence” (Collins, 1983).

The Paradoxical is the point of intersection between infinity and the finite, where thought/language reaches their limits and thus split, revealing their essential and essentially limited nature. This, in essence, constitutes a break with understanding at the same time it is a movement toward understanding that which we cannot ultimately understand. Paradox thus becomes the thin-wedge that allows a doorway into the transcendent, post-paradoxical world of faith. It is understanding in hot pursuit of discovering its limits. (Walsh, 2009). According to Kierkegaard, “The supreme paradox of all thought is the attempt to discover something that thought cannot think. This passion is at bottom present in all thinking, even in the thinking of the individual, in so far as in thinking he participates in something transcending himself. But habit dulls our sensibilities, and prevents us from perceiving it” (Kierkegaard, 1962, p. 46). Paradox is the objectively absurd: the idea that the infinite can become finite. For Kierkegaard, God transcends human rationality and the supreme paradox is manifest in the Incarnation. Therefore, the truth for Kierkegaard is the way in which each individual subjectively inhabits that

Archimedean point from time to time—and acts from that position. In other words, to cite perhaps the most famous of Kierkegaard’s sayings: “Truth is subjectivity” (Kierkegaard, 1941).

**“That single individual” as the site of subjectivity.** Kierkegaard’s focus in his writings was ever on the individual and his unique, almost idiosyncratic, relationship to the Divine—quite apart from dogmas or institutionalized “truths” of any kind. In this, Kierkegaard was exhibiting a radical response against the social sciences and abstract objective truth approach that dominated the 19th century—an approach that erases the individual and puts her at the service of some conceptual generality or social system or other. Kierkegaard rejected Hegelian systemization of truth and the individual and declares there is one foundational reality and one only: my subjective relationship to the Divine. Moreover, in order for this knowledge to be morally valid, said Kierkegaard, it must resonate with my heart and make me more into who I truly am and can be within myself, not what some external systems, such as those conceived by Hegel, are trying to make of me—an object, an instrument of their grand designs, and nothing that is personally relevant to me as an individual before and in God. Kierkegaard uses Hegel in order to present the objectivist ethos that was dominating the times and displacing the subjectivist view. To critique something is not necessarily to objectify it. If this were so, then a sensitive critique would be impossible. The argument that one cannot make a social critique without objectifying it is invalid. That is why Kierkegaard, except when he was personally attacked, rarely spoke of particular individuals but created fictional characters.

Kierkegaard situates truth in the individual, and in the individual’s experience—unique, felt, and accordingly foundational to everything else. In a sense, for Kierkegaard, there are no general, objective truths. Those are simply empty philosophical categories, lacking existential life-blood. Kierkegaard is not interested in Hegel’s grand systems. Nor is he interested in general

codes of social ethics operating under the pretext of Christianity but which is really just a superficial means of validating a culture. He is concerned with his own subjective experience of the Ultimate—his own experience which can be no other's. "All knowledge which does not inwardly relate itself to existence in the reflection of inwardness is essentially viewed as "accidental knowledge" (Emmanuel, 1996, p. 34). As Kierkegaard's Johannes Climacus makes very clear in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, objectivity is a second-order truth.

Walsh (2009) points out that objectivity is a first hermeneutic movement because it requires abandonment of self/subjectivity. According to Kierkegaard, subjectivity is the primary criterion of truth, or as Walsh suggests, the second hermeneutic movement, and is the only way that an individual makes the objective knowledge her own—and therefore *really* real—in her fundamental subjectivity.

Although Kierkegaard's focus is on subjectivity as the individual's own experience of truth, his intention was never to erase objectivity. Indeed, as Gouwens (1989) has suggested, it is probable that Kierkegaard's seemingly narrow focus on subjectivity was, at least to some degree, a response to the excessive objectivity that dominated philosophy and privileged the newly formed social sciences. In response to the growing attraction, even obsession, with the social sciences that were beginning to dominate the intellectual scene in Europe at this time (Foucault, 1975), Kierkegaard, as Gouwens notes, was continually highlighting his conviction that the anthropological approach gives us facts about man as a specie and tells us nothing about what it means to be a person in search of ultimacy and attempting to live life in light of the personal quest towards Ultimacy.

**The secondary nature of facts as subordinate to the primacy of individual subjective appropriation of facts.** Kierkegaard insisted that facts are based on a representation of existence. They are conceptual approximations of generally valid statements at the objective level, but offer us nothing in understanding what it means to exist morally as an individual in relationship to God (Watts, 2003). As the classical philosophical maxim goes, “One cannot derive “ought” from “is”.” Facts, in Kierkegaard’s view, “are bland generalities and bloodless universals of collective thought” (Gardiner, p.36). Facts, as Watkin (2001) said, may be stubborn things. However, they are also quite inadequate things for the individual who, in her ethical responsibility and sovereignty, must decide what to *make of* those facts. Lowrie is therefore right on the mark when he identifies Kierkegaard as the father of modern Existentialism. For the Existentialist motto, “Existence precedes essence” (Sartre, 1956) arose from Kierkegaard’s primary focus upon subjectivity. Kierkegaard is the father of the Existentialist emphasis upon the subjective *existence* of the individual in relationship to her “living in” her idea of ultimacy ethically and ontologically.

According to the existentialists, an individual’s subjective existence precedes and takes priority over any categorical statements one might make about her as a member of a group - which are statements of objective essence, not the subjective (and thus primary) experience of the ultimate (Watkin, 2001). Stated simply, the objective approach cannot shed light on the unique nature of individual in her existential project (Sartre, 1956) of defining herself ethically *vis a viz* the ultimate, and then acting consistently with that. Facts are based on representation of objective existence, are conceptual approximations, and as such are insufficient in the face of how an individual ethically defines and acts on her life before God (Watts, 2003). Indeed, as we will see later, it is the fact that God became an individual in Jesus Christ that makes Christianity

the most compelling religion, in Kierkegaard's view. For Christ did not come so much with a message as he came as an embodied *individual* whose example as an individual was to model for humanity what it means to live a life in relationship to the ultimate, in spite of the general rules and regulations that are manifest in and enforced by the Pharisees (Watkin, 2001).

Not only that, but Kierkegaard anticipates postmodernism as well in certain respects in his then-shocking assertion that what are considered facts may be colored, and sometimes even determined, by our subjective commitments. This is a point that Kuhn (1970) has made in his notion that even scientific revolutions arise not so much because of new facts that are discovered but because of paradigm shifts, as he calls them, which reorient us as to what "counts" as a fact, evidence, or theoretical soundness. For Kierkegaard, therefore, what matters more than any compilation of data or spreading of theories is what he referred to as "the intervention of the will"—the root of the Existentialist idea of one's existential project. The "intervention of the will" refers to how an individual, through the exercise of *agency*, decides upon what to make of objective existence in terms of her relationship to the ultimate, the infinite, the divine: God (Collins, 1983; Walsh, 2009; Watkin, 2001; Carlisle, 2005).

**Freedom – the power to choose oneself as a subjective being in relation to the Ultimate.** It is here that we find true freedom, said Kierkegaard, for freedom is the power of choosing oneself. Objective truth does not allow for freedom. Indeed, it does not even permit it for one is compelled to believe objective truth. One cannot personally take issue with a fact of science. One is obliged to accept such knowledge on its own terms and in its own province. But this province is plainly secondary in relationship to the individual as an ethical being who, in her subjectivity, exercises freedom and makes choices (Carlisle, 2005). Belief is an expression of

the will, and, it is in this exercise of the will that an individual defines who she is in religiously significant terms.<sup>4</sup>

As Walsh states, far from seeing herself as a member of a category, the primary right and responsibility of a human being, her ongoing quest in life, is to become, as Kierkegaard put it, “that single individual” in her unique subjectivity—her experience and appropriation of the divine. This is why Kierkegaard insists in *Fear and Trembling* that, as Carlisle has noted, “religious faith is a greater task and rarer achievement than rational thought” (Carlisle, 2005, p. 61). Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous author for *Fear and Trembling*, Johannes de Silentio can understand Hegel easily but Abraham fills him with wonder. There is not a rational system that can explain what happened that day on Mount Moriah, which leads us directly to the absurdity of the ordeal due to its inexplicability yet complete clarity. (Kierkegaard, 2003).

**Faith –the individual’s subjective relationship to Ultimacy.** Kierkegaard’s faith in Christ, as noted above, was certainly not a matter of mere intellectual consent to a doctrine. For Kierkegaard, assent to a doctrine falls in the secondary realm of objective truth. Thus, a group of people, primarily a church, may agree on doctrinal objectively, but that agreement tells us little, if anything, about how a given individual will take that truth into her total being, what effect it will have on her being, and how genuinely and faithfully she lives that truth out in different circumstances. However, it is, as Gouwens (1996), Walsh (2009) and others observe, necessary at this point to avoid the postmodern error in reading Kierkegaard or attributing to him pure subjectivism. Rather, the individual should always be moving, according to Kierkegaard, into deeper subjective relationship with God, who alone is eternally real, although that reality will

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<sup>4</sup> This expression of the will should not be confused with Nietzsche’s expression of the will. Nietzsche’s proclamation that “god is dead” makes the expression of the will a deification of the self. This is clearly contrary to Kierkegaard’s notion of the expression of the will as a willing of oneself towards God.

never be fully manifest to us in this realm of existence. It is this paradoxical tension between subjectivity and eternal truth that the religious scholars of Kierkegaard grasp so well.

Thus we see that Kierkegaard's Christianity is not a matter of doctrine but subjectively dwelling in eternal truth. Kierkegaard's Christianity, rather, revolves around the belief that God became an individual person first and foremost to perfectly model for individuals what it means to be an individual who stands in personal and unique relationship before God. This is why Watkin (2001) and Collins (1983) understand Kierkegaard to be saying that every individual is born with the possibility of becoming a "self" in her own way. This relationship to God is therefore both subjective (in the individual's unique approach to God) but eternally real in that the God she is approaching is eternally real. Johannes de Silentio says,

The paradox of faith, then, is this: that the single individual is higher than the universal, that the single individual...determines his relation to the universal by his relation to the absolute, not his relation to the absolute by his relation to the universal. The paradox may also be expressed in this way: that there is an absolute duty to God, for in this relationship of duty the individual relates himself as the single individual absolutely to the absolute (Kierkegaard, 2003, p.54).

Kierkegaard talks of the movement from the outer to the inner and aims at preventing understanding unaccompanied by inner change. Kierkegaard's notion of "repetition" as the new category of truth marked the beginning of existentialist thought, turning philosophical attention from the pursuit of objective knowledge to the movement of becoming that sets apart each individual's life. Living in either non-relationship to God or in merely doctrinal objective relationship to Him can only breed illness because, as we read in the *Confessions of St. Augustine*, "Thou hast made us for Thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find

rest in Thee.” (Augustine, 1960, p. 43). Kierkegaard’s *Silentio* talks of the challenge and mystery of this movement in *Fear and Trembling*, “For the movements of faith must constantly be made by virtue of the absurd, yet in such a way, be it observed, that one does not lose the finite but gains it every inch. For my part I can well describe the movements of faith, but I cannot make them.” (Kierkegaard, 2003, p. 43).

Kierkegaard was unequivocal in his belief that God uniquely manifested Himself in Jesus Christ. I share that belief. However, it is well to point out that, for this purposes of this study, I will adopt the 20<sup>th</sup>-century Protestant theologian Paul Tillich’s use of the term “The Ultimate” to refer to God. Whatever resides at the very core of an individual’s ethical and spiritual commitments Tillich characterizes as Ultimacy. In fact, Tillich’s use of these terms derives from his reading of Kierkegaard, who was one of the primary influences in the shaping of Tillich’s theology, and indeed of 20<sup>th</sup>-century theology in general, at least in Protestant academic and theological circles. Walsh, therefore, puts the Kierkegaardian project in modern theological terms when she states that the individual becomes individual in relationship to God/Ultimate.

The value of using this term is that it will provide a basis upon which to build a Kierkegaardian approach to education that is non-denominational and not culture-specific. It is as such well suited for a pluralistic society. It is also legally supportable because it offers an approach to allowing the student to explore her “ultimate concerns”, as Tillich puts it, in a way that need not be construed as “religious” in any conventional sense, but is merely attempting to help a student define what is of most worth to her in the shaping of her life story. This is the approach to spirituality in education that has been advocated by such leading scholars in the field as Nord, Knicker, Warshaw, Mayes and Ferrin (1994; 1985; 1986; 2001). In view of that, this is the approach that I will take here.

Such an understanding of the self is not to be confused with the insistence upon individual self-fulfillment and examination of the psychological as the ultimate standard. To the contrary, as Gouwens (1996) argues, to Kierkegaard the self is a valid idea only insofar as the self represents a “vocabulary of self-examination and purification before the eternal God.” It is in this sense, then, that Lippitt argues that Kierkegaard considers self-knowledge as the only *essential* knowledge, all other types of knowing are secondary. In an epistemological sense, it is true that all knowledge is self-knowledge by definition since it is the self that knows, but there is a vast gap between that basic epistemological fact and the challenge to the individual of making knowledge morally active at her core. And it is precisely in this primary knowing of self in relationship to God that true religion exists, not in institutional systems or implementations of doctrines or dogma (John 17:3).

Carlisle (2006) is correct, therefore, in arguing that since this kind of knowledge is most important to Kierkegaard, he must be considered primarily—as he characterized himself—a religious writer, not a theologian or speculative philosopher of any type. Such intellectualism is, for Kierkegaard, distinctly second-order knowledge—the kind of thing that Hegel is awash in, and the reason that Hegel is so often the butt of his criticism. Thus for Kierkegaard, Christianity is not primarily a matter of fixed doctrine but rather of an active communication between an individual—in all the uniqueness of her existence—with the Divine.

**The collective as the site of objectivity.** As mentioned above, Kierkegaard’s faith in Christ was primarily a matter of seeing in Him God becoming an individual living, *as* an individual, in an absolutely authentic relationship to God, or the Ultimate. This is why Kierkegaard was almost as suspicious of Christian dogma as he was of the new dogmas of the social sciences. Kierkegaard saw this new social dogma originating in and justified by Hegelian

philosophy. Hegel saw political arrangement in society as the manifestation of the mind and will of God in history, indeed as their ideal. Kierkegaard felt that this was to reduce God as the ultimately unknowable and completely transcendent Other to a mere political system. He, therefore, saw the new social sciences as rooted in a basic philosophical error that secularized God. Kierkegaard was especially critical of any approach to the human being that was fixed in any sort of psychological or sociological theory, most of which were beginning to rely more and more on statistics. For Kierkegaard the statistical statements about human beings—although they might have a secondary, instrumental purpose—were quite inadequate in the ultimate project of the individual finding herself *as* an individual in relationship to the Ultimate. Kierkegaard was arguing against the reductive orientation of the social sciences.

Implicit in Kierkegaard's critique of Hegel as well as in his critique of speculative philosophy, whether secular or theological, was that it puts itself between the Ultimate and the individual and/or, in fact, makes claim to be the Ultimate. (Carlisle, 2006; Walsh, 2009). From this, we may safely assume that Kierkegaard would have viewed our present obsession with statistics, or as Richards (1982) has called it, our "orgy of tabulation," as limited precisely because of their program of not dealing with or describing any individual *per se* but only groups of people in general. The statistical approach—one may confidently assume—would, at best, have been relegated to a secondary position by Kierkegaard because a statistic is that which is precisely *not* about an particular person.

Treating the individual as just a member of some category or other and then (as is now the fashion) erasing her individuality statistically in the service of some objective or sociological program, renders that person's life anonymous. She becomes the object of a larger system—whether a local, national, international or even cosmic one (as in Hegel's view of history as the

rational unfolding of the “Absolute Spirit.”) For Kierkegaard, the only developmental certainty about the individual is that she will encounter the Ultimate in different ways as she makes her individual trek on “the stages of life’s way.”

Additionally, Kierkegaard’s dislike of systematic approaches to a specific person is that they are static, not dynamic. According to Bretall (1946, p.201), “system and finality correspond to one another but existence is precisely the opposite of finality.” This is because a systematic thought aims at becoming perfect, self-enclosed and unchangeable. In other words, the ideal of systematic thought is stasis. On the other hand, for Kierkegaard, authentic living means constant movement in the direction of deeper relationship with God and the individual’s intervention of the will between objective existence and eternal reality in order to know how to appropriate objectivity in the service of subjectivity. Or as Watts puts it, the subjective is in this form of being, becoming, action, and involvement, and this process occurs not in disembodied speculation but as an existentially unique person goes through it in her own way.

**Passion “a genuinely human quality” immeasurable by social sciences.** Carlisle (2006) concurs, declaring that subjectivity means a dynamic existential movement towards inwardness—that is, subjectivity is essential to the process of becoming. Because the individual makes this movement in the totality of her existential being, Kierkegaard characterizes it as passion as opposed to the sterile anonymity of objective truth. Kierkegaard sees the goal of this passion as the individual’s need to come into contact with a living reality that transcends herself, the Ultimate. It is the place where God is, the Path to Him. This is why Kierkegaard repeatedly insists that passion—in this sense of the term, not in the self-absorbed sense of Romanticism—is more important than reason. “Passion is a genuinely human quality,” Kierkegaard’s *Silentio* insisted, which is why, in his opinion, many people have forgotten what it means to exist: their

passion for God has been compromised by something lesser—political, ecclesiastic, or what have you—usually an objective system.

Every movement of infinity comes about by passion, and no reflection can bring a movement about. This is the continual leap in existence which explains the movement, whereas it is a chimera which according to Hegel is supposed to explain everything, and at the same time this is the only thing he has never tried to explain. (Kierkegaard, 2003, p.71)

Carlisle (2006) reminds us that Kierkegaard saw himself not primarily as a philosopher but as a religious writer. This is because he saw most philosophy and most philosophers as engaged in abstract speculative reasoning that did not come to fulfillment in any passionate commitments or actual acts. However, as Carlisle points out, we may still legitimately see Kierkegaard as a philosopher if we enter into Kierkegaard's only understanding of that area of human inquiry as not just objective analysis but as subjective appropriation resulting in *praxis*. Still, Kierkegaard was not concerned with a single correct philosophical position but rather his reader's own dynamic movement ahead in subjectivity and passion. Kierkegaard is not asking his readers to believe this or that but rather to respond to his challenge to become what he called subjective thinkers whose "Task...is to achieve self-understanding in existence." (Walsh, 2009, p. 38). This is not solipsism however, throughout his writings Kierkegaard speaks of the necessity of authentic relationship with others in one's journey to God. But Kierkegaard insists that one cannot be in authentic relationship with another if one is not in authentic relationship with God. It is not surprising, therefore, that Martin Buber was deeply influenced by Kierkegaard in the idea that authentic relationship with God and authentic relationship with the Other are of a piece. Indeed, it is the heart of Kierkegaard's stated purposes in writing to lead

each individual to a deep examination of herself to find out what it means to live Christianly, which means in charity with others. Gouwens (1996) puts it succinctly when he writes that for Kierkegaard philosophy must be practiced or else it is merely impersonal conditional reasoning, which brings the individual not one step closer to the Ultimate.

**The individual's will – trumping any “objective” social science project.** This brings us to Kierkegaard's idea of “repetition,” which is the other side of the Platonic idea of recollection. Recollection is a remembrance of preexistent truths. On the other hand, repetition consists in living those truths forward in subjective relationship to the Ultimate. Therefore, repetition is the process of becoming. Platonic truth, self-existent and preexistent in itself, is static, inert knowledge. Repetition might be pictured as an upward spiral. As in the process of faith (which is, for Kierkegaard, our most important existential movement), we are always in process of updating and deepening our communion with the Ultimate, living the truth forward. Thus we must Kierkegaard advises, always be in the process of realigning our actions to comport with the updated understandings of who we in relationship to God. In other words, true philosophy and authentic encounter consist in living the truth forward. As Watkin (2001) insists, truth to be truth must be lived from the position of ultimacy in subjectivity.

The challenge here, according to Emmanuel (1996), is that people do not want to leave their self-centered worldly existence, or, as the novelist Saul Bellow puts it, most people do not dare very much, if anything at all, because of their “rage for normalcy.” This rage makes them all-too-susceptible to the statistical approach, which centers around the idea of the mean and minimizing degrees of variance. Christ, being the ultimate individual in Kierkegaard's view, would also be the ultimate “outlier.” He is precisely that human being who lives in such total and real relationship with his Heavenly Father that his existence defies any other point of reference

except God. This, for Kierkegaard, is the sole criterion of psychological and spiritual health—anything else inevitably resulting in ethical and emotional illness for the person. This separation from the Ultimate, or “sickness unto death”, is what Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous author calls despair.

Whether you are man or woman, rich or poor, dependent or free, happy or unhappy; whether you bore in your elevation the splendour of the crown or in humble obscurity only the toil and heat of the day; whether your name will be remembered for as long as the world lasts, and so will have been remembered as long as it lasted, or you are without a name and run namelessly with the numberless multitude; whether the glory that surrounded you surpassed all human description, or the severest and most ignominious human judgment was passed on you -- eternity asks you and every one of these millions of millions, just one thing: whether you have lived in despair or not, whether so in despair that you did not know that you were in despair, or in such a way that you bore this sickness concealed deep inside you as your gnawing secret, under your heart like the fruit of a sinful love, or in such a way that, a terror to others, you raged in despair. If then, if you have lived in despair, then whatever else you won or lost, for you everything is lost, eternity does not acknowledge you, it never knew you, or, still more dreadful, it knows you as you are known, it manacles you to yourself in despair! (Kierkegaard, 1980, p.107).

This is what Collins (1983) means by the deeper self in Kierkegaard’s writings. It is where a person exercises the “intervention of the will” in order to become “that single individual”—the deeper self—who is operating not from a position of socially sanctioned ego

(what Kierkegaard calls “the first self”) but rather from her unique connection with God in ethical passion.

Agency, the exercise of the will, is nothing less than making decisions affecting one’s present condition and eternal happiness from the standpoint of passion. Anything less is conformity that too easily becomes the “road to serfdom” (Hayek, 2007). Since Kierkegaard clearly understood that all of our subjectivities and all of our actions that grow out of them are limited and flawed, there will always be the element of sin which Kierkegaard clearly believed could only be covered by the Atonement of Christ. When he was dying his brother asked him if he believed if he was covered by the Atonement and he reportedly said, “Of course, what else?” (Ref) Again it bears emphasizing that for Kierkegaard this passion is not the same as the commitment to sheer emotion as in English and German Romanticism of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (although Kierkegaard was influenced by the Romantics early in his development). Rather, it is the longing for and pursuit of God (Walsh, 2009; Gupta, 2005).

Thinking—when it is merely mimicking theories and facts—does not further our existence but is a disruption of existence into our subjectivity. On the other hand, when our mental processes surface from our pure and subjective relationship to God, thinking is not only valid but is inseparable from our being itself. The statistical approach, as valuable as it might be as a secondary mechanism, is contrary to real thinking because it erases our individuality. Kierkegaard felt that most people were prone to fall prey to this type of pseudo-thinking because it is precisely their individuality that they are trying to flee by losing themselves in the crowd.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> By a Kierkegaardian analysis those who use statistics as a way of objectifying others may at least in some cases, be attempting to place themselves as the all-seeing eye over the crowd by defining them from some position of omniscience. In this manner they may be attempting to transcend the human condition by categorizing the rest of humanity from with they stand apart. The subconscious reason for this would then be to deny the fact that they are human beings like everyone else and face the same existential sickness that Kierkegaard is writing about. This is reminiscent of Rousseau’s description of the social man as a numerator and a fraction where one artificially

And this, said Kierkegaard, explains most people's terror of being alone, "And I will remind myself that, after all, every human being is alone, alone in the infinite world" (Kierkegaard, 2997, p.).

**True community as subjective versus herd mentality as objective.** Most people succumb to herd mentality—an especially egregious error, in Kierkegaard's view, because the crowd is untruth. Gardiner reminds us that submitting to majority opinion is intellectual and moral cowardice. Kierkegaard is not arguing for anarchy, in fact he is not arguing for any political solution. He is simply saying that one should not forfeit one's subjective truth simply because it does not fit a majority opinion. To do so would represent an essential violation of one's subjectivity, which Kierkegaard is discussing in phenomenological not political terms.<sup>6</sup> Not to allow one's subjective truth to be violated by majority opinion, however, is especially difficult, according to Kierkegaard, because individual subjectivity, although providing what this present de-personalized age needs, does not provide this age with what it openly demands. Nevertheless, it remains true that responsibility for ourselves cannot be provided or justified by an objective determiner.

All human effort tends towards herding together – Let Us Unite, etc. Naturally, this happens under all sorts of high-sounding names, love and sympathy and enthusiasm and the carrying out of some grand plan and the like. This is the usual hypocrisy of the scoundrels we are. But the truth is that in a herd, we are free from the standard of the individual. So, millions of men live and die. They are just numbers and the numerical becomes their horizon. (Kierkegaard, 1965, p. 37)

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reduces the masses as the denominator in order to increase one's size as the numerator. One thus furthers this self aggrandizement by becoming a somebody in a particular group. However, this simply folds one into a higher status group.

<sup>6</sup> The question of Kierkegaard's political beliefs is a complex one and has been dealt with by Collins,

Kierkegaard sees equality not in terms of statistical comparisons but as each person's right and responsibility to stand before God in his or her own unique way. Kierkegaard's idea of individuality and equality are intertwined. As one moves inward, in passion, on a quest to intersect with the Divine, the idea of equality before God becomes pronounced as we all stand before Him as that single individual. Collins (1983) states that Kierkegaard sees equality then as immeasurably subjective not measurably objective.

Kierkegaard was anti-establishment and diverged from the statistical approach to man. Walsh (2009) fairly suggests that the numerical categorization of human beings has a drugging effect on the individual in terms of her task of becoming a self with others and ultimately with God. Humankind needs to engage itself into deeper individuation thereby creating greater intimacy with one's fellow beings rather than seeking for shallow social enmeshment leading to further despair and isolation. For Kierkegaard true community, as opposed to the merely superficial statistical view of the public, is a free association of individuals. "Only when there is no strong communal life is it possible for the press to create a phantom of the public, which is made up of unsubstantial individuals who are never united or never can be united in the simultaneity of any situation or organization and are yet claimed to be a whole," (as cited in Walsh, p.91)

Walsh goes on to say that for Kierkegaard, the idea of equality finally just amounts to a corporate leveling of the individual so that they will all ultimately be alike and mathematically manageable. In *The Present Age* Kierkegaard states, "The public is the actual mastering of leveling, for when there is approximate leveling, something is doing the leveling, but the public is a monstrous identity." (Kierkegaard, 1962, p. 91). Watkin (2001) observes that Kierkegaard resisted such conceptual abstractions being applied to the individual because abstraction is a

victory over the individual. This is so because the individual then no longer belongs to herself or God but an abstract group. The only equality is the right and duty of every individual to stand alone before God.

**The preferability of authentically believing an error to inauthentically accepting a fact.** Kierkegaard at this point therefore makes the controversial assertion that being with subjective passion in a truth, even if that truth is non-canonical and possibly not objectively true, is preferable to being non-passionately in an objectively true truth. As suggested by an example in the Works of Love, two people come to pray: one is a passionate pagan engaged in true prayer to a false god, the other is a Pharisee offering a false prayer to the true God. Kierkegaard finds the first worshipper more laudable in her subjective authenticity than the second person in his subjective inauthenticity. For Kierkegaard, Christianity is different from any other religion in that it is not principally a commitment to a dogma but ever deepening relationship and way of being in relationship with the Man who embodied individuality above all others. As such, this relationship, like all relationship, entails a deepening of subjective involvement with the other. Kierkegaard proposes the following definition of subjective truth: “An objective uncertainty, held fast through appropriation with the most passionate inwardness, is the truth”. It bears stressing that Kierkegaard is not talking about just any kind of passion but is specifically pointing to the passion for the existential completion of oneself in God, which in some cases may entail a denial of all other passions or some of them. (Kierkegaard, 1941, p.181) Walsh says:

This definition also corresponds to the definition of faith in a formal or general sense as the passionate leap or risk by which one becomes related to an objective uncertainty as the basis of one’s eternal happiness. According to Climacus, “if I am able to apprehend God objectively, I do not have faith; but because I cannot

do this, I must have faith”, which he likens to being “out on 70,000 fathoms of water” – Kierkegaard’s” favorite expression of the uncertainty of faith. (Walsh, 2009, p. 35).

**Kierkegaard’s rebuttal that his is not a solipsistic axiology.**

Although Kierkegaard’s extreme focus on inwardness is sometimes misinterpreted as a kind of solipsism, nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, Kierkegaard’s idea of truth as subjectivity implies relationship. As in Buber, truth occurs in the individual’s relationship with God and the Other, which means that it is constantly changing and even ambiguous. For an existential thinker like Kierkegaard, despair is seen as a central human emotion that arises from non-relationship with self and with God. "The Sickness Unto Death" provides an incisive analysis of the modes or ways we choose to embrace our existence. The self is defined as a conscious synthesis of the infinite/finite, the temporal/eternal, and freedom/necessity, all in relationship to God, who is the Source of self-conscious life. We will be in a state of despair when we attempt to deny any one of these paradoxes and thus choose to understand ourselves apart from relationship with God. We all stand at the crossroads of the eternal and the temporal, and we can only know ourselves for what we are when we surrender to God for each choice of our lives (Watkin, 2001; Gardiner, 1988).

## **The Psychoanalytic Approach to Education as a Way of Working out the Pedagogical Implications of Major Issues in Kierkegaard.**

As Mayes (2009) has shown in this article, the self-esteem movement has been mostly centered around enhancing, what is called in that literature, the learning ego. Since the child's view of herself as an effective learner is inseparably intertwined with her view of herself in general.

Education is part of a student's life and self-esteem that contributes to learning. He suggests that we need to avoid the twin perils of false institutionally imposed self-esteem on the one hand, and callous disregard for student self-esteem on the other, which is educationally so counterproductive by ignoring the need for child to feel legitimate self-esteem.

The current self-esteem effort is, in many cases, just more objectification. Some schools are setting up a straw man such as the character self-esteem movement, which inevitably breeds self-absorbed hedonists. But that was never what the beginners and practitioners of the self-esteem movement intended. What they did intend was the creation of healthy responsible citizens with intact ego.

This look at true self-esteem is good justification for going back to Kierkegaard to see what real subjectivity is. Hedonism is not authentic subjectivity. Hedonism is, in fact, escaping authentic self. Therefore it is no coincidence that as society becomes more and more objectifying, people become more and more hedonistic. This creates a false consciousness and is existentially inauthentic.

A subjective approach to curriculum does not mean that we abolish the curriculum, but it is an invitation to students to confront who they really are. In its best form and at its roots the self-esteem movement encourages deep self-awareness and responsible citizenry. Indeed, the

psycho analytic literature on education has asserted the indispensability of healthy self-awareness for a responsible citizenry.

By all means we need normative, rich curriculum but we want it also to be susceptible to criticism from various cultural points of view. That is how you have discussions with different perspectives. That is how we have democracy for education.

Subjective education is also way to avoid imposed morality on religious bases, which the courts have clearly excluded on one hand, and also as a way to avoid education with no ultimate purposes leading to moral relativism on the other hand. This middle path allows students to discover their own sense of ultimacy. This is exactly what a leading voice in moral education in the schools, Thomas Lickona (1992), advocates as not only the best but indeed the only way to approach the issue in the schools.

### **Spheres of Existence**

All of the above ideally refers to living in the religious sphere, as Kierkegaard calls it. However, there are two other spheres of existence that people also occupy: *the ethical and the esthetic* (Kierkegaard, 1982). Neither the ethical nor the esthetic is bad if it is understood as merely conditional, finite, and always relative to and in the service of the infinite (Lowrie, 1965). In this case, the ethical and esthetic each serves an important but secondary and non-absolute function during and in the service of our earthly passage through finitude (Collins, 1983). In our lives we all more or less move through, occupy, and even combine these spheres of existence. But psychological health relies upon a primary commitment to the religious sphere because that is where the individual meets the deeper self and God.

The former, the ethical, is the basis for socially functional institutions and constraints. The latter, the esthetic, gives life its emotional and artistic richness. But when the ethical or the

esthetic sets itself up as ultimate— as substitute for the infinite, the (supra)natural order of things then becomes inverted and leads to illness, sin, and despair. Becoming concerned primarily with ethical or esthetic aims, men unwisely invest the finite as their main concern over the infinite (if the infinite is even recognized at all anymore at this point). Such false infinitizing of the finite results in a false-immortality projects, both of which are different roads to despair and death (Lowrie, 1965).

**The ethical.** Ethical systems, cultural models, and the endless searching for one's own deep psychological desires are important examples of such false immortality projects. Ethical systems which advertise themselves as infinite and adequate lead to grand religious and political programs. These are rigidly enforced. They objectify the individual by erasing her experience for the sake of the collective. The result of this can only be despair in the individual. Such programs will fail because they run counter to deepest human nature, which is to live somehow in genuine relationship with God (Watts, 2003).

**The esthetic.** On the other hand, the esthetic, or the endless exploration of one's personally and culturally constructed self, is solipsistic. It is caught in personal and historical limitations. Consequently, it leads to despair since temporality is the core of finitude and hence the essence of despair. Cultural tendencies and practices are a mix of the ethical and aesthetic, and therefore result in despair. When such things are not seen as secondary and where there is no movement of the individual will to transcend them and encounter God *as* an individual, they must lead to absolute despair. Kierkegaard regards despair as a sickness when one strives for a different state of the self—which is a different self—a person is rejecting his self.

An individual in despair despairs over *something*. So it seems for a moment, but only for a moment; in the same moment the true despair or despair in its true form

shows itself. In despairing over *something*, he really despaired over *himself*, and now he wants to get rid of himself. For example, when the ambitious man whose slogan is "Either Caesar or nothing" does not get to be Caesar, he despairs over it. But this also means something else: precisely because he did not get to be Caesar, he now cannot bear to be himself. Consequently he does not despair because he did not get to be Caesar but despairs over himself because he did not get to be Caesar.... Consequently, to despair over something is still not despair proper.... To despair over oneself, in despair to will to be rid of oneself—this is the formula for all despair. (Kierkegaard, 1980, p. 19).

Only the true Christian can overcome despair because the self ultimately can rest only in the One who made it, not in aesthetic substitutes.

**The religious.** However, if the realization of one's separation from God as well as the fact of death, are confronted in faith, then one has moved into the realm of religiously productive despair. This dynamic despair is opposed to static despair (Gouwens, 1996). Dynamic despair exists in that finitely unbridgeable gap between the finite and the infinite. In this region, the finite individual, in her individuality, reaches out in good faith to the Infinite. The Infinite, in its sovereign dealings with the individual, is free to go beyond ethical, cultural, and esthetic norms in its existentially unique relationship with the individual. This process may change the individual beyond any of her imaginings. Good faith is a total giving over of oneself in absurdity because it has no finite bases. It is also an act of freedom since there is no finite compulsion to do so, only an inner resolve to find the Hidden God (Luther's "Deus Absconditus").

First comes despair over the earthly or over something earthly, then despair of the eternal, over oneself. Then comes defiance, which is really despair through the aid

of the eternal, the despairing misuse of the eternal within the self to will in despair to be oneself.... In this form of despair, there is a rise in the consciousness of the self, and therefore a greater consciousness of what despair is and that one's state is despair. Here the despair is conscious of itself as an act.... In order to despair to will to be oneself, there must be consciousness of an infinite self. This infinite self, however, is really only the most abstract form, the most abstract possibility of the self. And this is the self that a person in despair wills to be, severing the self from any relation to a power that has established it, or severing it from the idea that there is such a power. (Kierkegaard, 1980, p. 67).

What, then, is the infinite and unconditioned? It is God. But about this true and living God (not a popular conception of Him) we cannot ultimately assert anything except that He is beyond our assertions. Although God does not necessarily negate certain of our assertions about Him, those assertions, being a product of language (a closed, finite system) cannot adequately capture His nature. For His nature is transcendent and ultimately unknowable and inexpressible by anything finite. May the individual, then, hope for any type or degree of access to this infinite and unconditioned Being? She may if she exerts herself in freedom to strip herself of any *ultimate* reliance upon the finite realm—as, for example, in ethical systems or in psychological focus on the finite self as an end in itself. All ultimate commitment to the finite is idolatry, according to Kierkegaard, even if the system or a core curriculum is a theology or a church dogma.

## **The Absurd According to Kierkegaard as of the Movement Beyond Merely Objective Fact into Passionately Subjective Truth.**

The possibility for living communion with the living God breaks through when one opens herself up—in anxiety and in the absurd—to trust God’s ultimate love and goodness no matter the finite cost to the believer. This means opening oneself up to the always risky operation of the Infinite upon oneself. This giving over of one’s will (e.g., the free willing of one’s will to the Will of God) is the ultimate in the individual’s exercise of freedom. It is the intervention of the will, as discussed above. And it is an absurd act because there are, by definition, no finite grounds for such a total move towards God—except frustration at the limitations of the finite realm itself.

Kierkegaard believed that God, in His free grace, offers each person the possibility of entering into such a transcendent individual relationship with Him. But he insisted that the relationship must be individual and unique, or else it would be to some degree corporate, categorical, or systematic. In other words, it would remain in the sphere of the merely ethical. In Concluding Unscientific Postscripts Climacus says, “To become a Christian is the ultimate, to want to "understand" Christianity, as if it were some doctrine, is open to suspicion,” which is what Climacus does.

It must also be a transcendent relationship, or else it would ultimately be just an expression of a finite individual’s finite tendencies, tastes, cultural preferences, and finite emotional makeup. In other words, it would remain in the merely esthetic. And it must be individual because God is an individual who reaches out to us in our individuality. In other words, the despair that is the dead-end of any finite project—esthetic or ethical—must be moved beyond by the individual for her to establish a transcendent personal relationship with the

transcendent personal God. The individual does this in her free exercise of willing her will to the Will of God. This free willing of one's will to God in great uncertainty and trust means to lay herself open to the sovereign, certainly transforming, and possibly shocking encounter of the finite individual with what Luther called the Hidden and Unknown God.

This transcendent, *in-finite* God, has manifested Himself, according to Kierkegaard, only once in history in Jesus Christ, who is both personal and transcendent. Here the infinite and the finite met, only once. God in this way showed Himself for us in our hopeless condition, which only He can turn into hopefulness. This he does with each of His children individually in personal terms. Christ accomplishes and embodies in His own person the bridging of the finite and the infinite to which the infinite in us responds in each person uniquely in their subjective movement towards Him. We are finite beings with infinite characteristics and yearnings Kierkegaard time and again makes the point, therefore, that Christ must be grasped and taken in as a person, not primarily as a doctrine or through a mediating church. In this we see Kierkegaard's profound Protestantism and protest against Protestantism.

Christ is the cause of our faith that God is with us in what is to Kierkegaard the basic paradox of our lives—namely, that we are finite beings in search of the infinite and infinite beings living in the finite. The very fact of His existence as the infinite in finite form is the bridging of the gap, the conquering of the absurd. Kierkegaard says, “The absurd is—that the eternal truth has come into being in time, that God has come into being, has been born, has grown up, and so forth, precisely like any other individual human being, quite indistinguishable from other individuals” (Kierkegaard, 1941, p. 188). According to Kierkegaard, we must grasp this fact, and understand it, as individuals. We must also grasp it, and be grasped by it, in an eternal present—the present of communion with Christ in our hearts. In this sense, the advance

of Christendom or of a particular church historically means little, if anything, to Kierkegaard. That is simply objective history.

What matters is the individual subjectively being in and with Christ, who is always present for us as individuals, not as a group. Although this may at first glance to be inconsistent with the saying of Jesus that where two or three are gathered in my name, there will I be also (Matt 18:20 KJV) it is really quite in accordance with Him from a Kierkegaardian point of view. For the mere fact of two or three individuals gathering purportedly in Christ's name does not invoke Christ's presence, according to Kierkegaard, but rather the gathering of three individuals who are in authentic subjective relationship with God is more likely to invoke His presence, from a Kierkegaardian perspective.

By accomplishing this otherwise impossible bridging of the finite and the infinite, Christ manifests God's awareness of our dilemma and is Himself the solution to it. He does not *proclaim* the resurrection and the life. He *is* the resurrection and the life. He also symbolizes what each of us should be engaged in: the ongoing communion of our finite self with the infinite God through that which is eternal within us—namely, the will to give one's will over the Will of God in absurd trust in God. This ultimate movement of the individual toward the infinite must exist and operate over and above the logic of ethical duties, the demands of institutions, or the pull of personal aesthetics. Only in this way may one as an individual stand in authentic, awe-inspiring relationship with the individual God, who may then shape us each as eternal individuals. As such we are in a process of ongoing self-transcendence that happens one individual at a time, and leads to the dawning and refining of one's eternal identity.

## **The Limits of Conventional, Propositional Discourse According to Kierkegaard.**

Our relationship with God in the dynamically despairing zone between our finite nature and our infinite hope in Him presents itself to the individual as ongoing paradoxes on “life’s stages,” as Kierkegaard puts it. The process of knowing and the language that makes knowing possible exists, according to Kierkegaard, in this zone between the finite and the infinite. Any language must therefore reach its limits at the point of touching the eternal. This is why thought and language, at their limits, evolve into paradoxes which then dissolve under their own weight. But these paradoxes become the occasion for us to seek an even deeper or higher truth to answer the paradox. *That* process will then lead to yet another paradox, but one that is hopefully more satisfying and abundant. This is why Kierkegaard so deeply admired Socrates and approved the Socratic dialectical method.

Kierkegaard saw Socrates as always undoing what a student thought they knew by showing how that certainty leads to a paradox. The goal of Socratic dialectics, as Kierkegaard saw it, was to invite the student to use paradox as a springboard into a higher truth. This would lead to a new paradox, which would hopefully create in the student even more humility as she strove for an even higher truth. These truths, in dialectical fashion, will become new paradoxes, thus creating a need for even more spiritually and intellectually powerful resolutions, which as we will later see is an essential point in constructing a Kierkegaardian pedagogy. The perfect resolution to all of the paradoxes that sprout like weeds when we finitely approach the infinite is never reached, of course. However, Kierkegaard’s hope and belief is that by engaging in the dialectical process, one would get ever more valid glimpses of the infinite God in one’s personal dialectical journey.

To be authentic, to be a “movement in good faith” towards God, this reaching of the individual beyond his finitude towards the infinite must be a free act of will. It cannot be mere obedience to an ethical code, however good, or as a response to compulsion by an external force, however legitimate. Codes and institutional force have their place, of course, and Kierkegaard never denied this. However, that place is secondary, finite. If they are used in a vain attempt to try to sidestep the primacy of the individual’s subjective relationship to God, they become an instance of the finite attempting to supplant the infinite, which is sin. A life lived in authentic giving of oneself in freedom, in the context of the absurd, and under the pull of the Unknowable God, is good faith. It is a complete giving over and opening up of oneself to the sovereign action of God that may well cause her to transcend, and may even negate, her previous understandings of and hopes about God.

When the question of truth is raised in an objective manner, reflection is directed objectively to the truth, as an object to which the knower is related. Reflection is not focused upon the relationship, however, but upon the question of whether it is the truth to which the knower is related. If only the object to which he is related is the truth, the subject is accounted to be in the truth. When the question of the truth is raised subjectively, reflection is directed subjectively to the nature of the individual’s relationship; if only the mode of this relationship is in the truth, the individual is in the truth even if he should happen to be thus related to what is not true. (Kierkegaard, 1941, p. 17).

Such a life is one lived in the productive zone of dynamic despair and absurd faith in the Transcendent God, Whom we trust to love us, although that love may also crucify us. However, this love is always preparatory to a higher

knowledge of Him, communion with Him, and life in Him. This is true religion, in Kierkegaard's view—the antithesis of institutional religion as he experienced it.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Kierkegaard's focus in his writings was ever on the individual and his unique, almost idiosyncratic, relationship to the Divine—apart from dogmas or institutionalized truths of any kind. In this, Kierkegaard was offering a powerful response to the social sciences and abstract objective truth approach that dominated the 19th century and beyond. Such an approach, argued Kierkegaard, erases the individual and puts her at the service of some conceptual generality or social system. Kierkegaard rejected Hegelian systemizations of truth and the individual and says there is one foundational reality and one only: my subjective relationship to the Divine. Moreover, in order for this knowledge to be morally valid, said Kierkegaard, it must resonate with my heart and make me more into who I truly am and can be within myself, not what some external systems, such as those posited by Hegel, are trying to make of me—an object, an instrument of their grand designs, and nothing that is personally relevant to me as an individual before and in God.

Indeed, Kierkegaard ultimately makes the radical claim that truth is not only subjective (varying from person to person); the truth is subjectivity, and therefore never opens to methodical philosophical analysis. No one could be more anti-Lockean than Kierkegaard. For Locke, the student has no or very little subjective-innate nature; she is purely an object. For Kierkegaard, the individual is her personal nature/subjectivity, and everything should serve its enrichment and development. For most interpretations of Locke, the student is merely an object. For Kierkegaard, the student is primarily a subject. In terms used by the Jewish existentialist

theologian Martin Buber, Hegelian philosophy and Lockean educational theory both would turn the student into an “It,” an instrumentality in achieving another person’s or another group’s goals, not into a “Thou,” a person who is a goal-in-herself, just as she or he is unique in the eyes of God and never to be exploited for someone else’s purpose.

## **Appendix B**

### **Methodology**

#### **The hermeneutic question of reading Kierkegaard**

As seen in the literature review, Kierkegaard saw himself less as a philosopher and more as a religious writer. But he was not a theologian, for he did not wish to present a systematic theology. In fact, much of his work has to do with the limitations of systematic theology. He argued that it too easily objectifies the religious experience and reasons about it. This makes it not an *experience* at all but simply an impersonal (because universal) exercise in logic. Hence, in reading Kierkegaard one must use with care the standard approaches to reading a philosopher, which look for an internally consistent, unifying point of view in a philosopher’s body of work. This approach offers little help in interpreting or engaging this puzzling philosopher.

In a sense, Kierkegaard’s endeavor largely lay in challenging the standard philosophical and theological discourses of his time. These discourses use the standard philosophical rhetoric of Kierkegaard’s time, as they still tend to do: the gradual unfolding of an argument from a basic premise, and then the developing of those premises in a methodical fashion to a rationally necessary conclusion (Spronk, 2004). Philosophical discourse of Kierkegaard’s day worked off

of this Aristotelian model of clear statement of a thesis followed by a systematic development of its evidences and consequences. Kierkegaard felt that Hegel exemplified this style of argumentation, which is one reason that he so often attacked him. But his criticism of that discourse was not intended to introduce a better alternative or rational critique for the refinement of their theoretical exercises. His criticism was far more fundamental. He often adopted an author's name who showed a brilliant critique of the rational limitations of previous systems or approaches. They were brilliant analyses, but ultimately to show the reader, "see you can't get there from here!" True Christianity is not found in brilliant analysis, even brilliant analysis of Christianity. It demands a comprehensive embracing of the person's experience, perhaps consistent with the analysis, but it is not found in analyzing, but in being. He must have believed that a religious life was possible while analyzing, but analyzing did not make it religious. The religious had to be primary and it might manifest itself in numerous activities that may or may not be helped by studying such analyses.

As we have seen, Kierkegaard did *not* want to present his reader with the objective presentation of a universal truth that compelled the individual to impersonally submit to it. Kierkegaard's goal was quite opposite. Through Kierkegaard's *own* religious and poetic meditations about the importance of standing in a unique subjective relationship with God, he wanted to stimulate the reader to pursue her *own* journey to the divine. Each individual's relationship to God would be personal.

All of this being the case, how then shall we read Kierkegaard? What method should we use to approach a philosopher who was not a philosopher in most typical senses, one who time and again refuses to be approached through the standard tools of rational analysis? Indeed, Kierkegaard's work is shot through with various characters arguing a variety of opinions and

arguments which it is difficult to say are or are not Kierkegaard's. As Kierkegaard said, the last thing he wanted was for the reader to form a definite opinion about Kierkegaard's own opinions, which Kierkegaard typically obscures. By speaking through many different "characters" such as Victor Eremmita, Johannes de Silentio, Constantin Constantius, Anti-Climacus, Vigilius Haufniensis, etc. Kierkegaard leaves the reader in doubt about what Kierkegaard, the man behind his many pseudonyms, actually thinks. In short, Kierkegaard uses the literary tool of *personas* in his writing. As Kierkegaard wrote,

... As is well-known, my authorship has two parts: one pseudonymous and the other signed. The pseudonymous writers are poetic creations, poetically maintained so that everything they say is in character with their poetized individualized personalities; sometimes I have carefully explained in a signed preface my own interpretation of what the pseudonym said. Anyone with just a fragment of common sense will perceive that it would be ludicrously confusing to attribute to me everything the poetized characters say. Nevertheless, to be on the safe side, I have expressly urged that anyone who quotes something from the pseudonyms will not attribute the quotation to me (see my postscript to Concluding Postscript). It is easy to see that anyone wanting to have a literary lark merely needs to take some verbatim quotations from "The Seducer," then from Johannes Climacus, then from me, etc., print them together as if they were all my words, show how they contradict each other, and create a very chaotic impression, as if the author were a kind of lunatic. Hurrah! That can be done. In my opinion anyone who exploits the poetic in me by quoting the writings in a confusing way

is more or less a charlatan or a literary toper. (Journals & Papers,  
naturalthinker.net)

In this way, Kierkegaard accomplishes two things. First, he hides the nature of his *own* subjective relationship to God. He is not a St. Augustine writing about his fiery encounter with the divine, as in the *Confessions*. Second, he stimulates the reader to travel on her own through the ambiguity and many personalities in Kierkegaard's prose. The reader is encouraged to begin to think about her *own* unique relationship to God in subjectivity, not to internalize Kierkegaard's, whatever that might be.

The system presupposes faith as given (a system that has no presuppositions!). Next, it presupposes that faith should be interested in understanding itself in a way different from remaining in the passion of faith, which is a presupposition (a presupposition for a system that has no presupposition!) and a presupposition insulting to faith, a presupposition that shows precisely that faith has never been the given.... In order, however, to avoid confusion, it should immediately be borne in mind that the issue is not about the truth of Christianity but about the individual's relation to Christianity, consequently not about the indifferent individual's systematic eagerness to arrange the truths of Christianity in paragraphs but rather about the concern of the infinitely interested individual with regard to his own relation to such a doctrine.... The objective issue, then, would be about the truth of Christianity. The subjective issue is about the individual's relation to Christianity. Simply stated: How can I, Johannes Climacus, share in the happiness that Christianity promises? Now, if Christianity requires this infinite interest in the individual subject..., it is easy to see that in

speculative thought he cannot possibly find what he is seeking. —This can also be expressed as follows: speculative thought does not permit the issue to arise at all, and thus all of its response is only a mystification. (Kierkegaard, 1962, p. 57)

The reader searches in vain for any positive statement about who God *is* or what a subjective relationship to Him should be. Kierkegaard did not want to impose a particular subjective relationship with God on the reader. Rather, Kierkegaard simply wanted the reader to have such a relationship with God of her own.

### **A Literary Approach to Kierkegaard**

The ambiguity of Kierkegaard's own position on certain matters is what has been called the literary "rhetoric of indirection" (Handy & Westbrook, 1974). This is precisely what Kierkegaard says is his style of writing.

Indirect communication can be produced by the art of reduplicating the communication. This art consists in reducing oneself, the communicator, to nobody, something purely objective, and then incessantly composing qualitative opposites into unity. This is what some of the pseudonyms are accustomed to call "double reflection". An example of such indirect communication is, so to compose jest and earnest that the composition is a dialectical knot-and with this to be nobody. If anyone is to profit by this sort of communication, he must himself undo the knot for himself. Another example is, to bring defense and attack in such a unity that none can say directly whether one is attacking or defending, so that both the most zealous partisans of the cause and its bitterest enemies can regard one as an ally-and with this to be nobody, an absentee, an objective something, not a personal man. (Kierkegaard, 2004, pp. 132-133)

A rhetoric of indirection is meant to stimulate the reader's personal curiosity and unique moral sense. In contrast, the analytic rhetoric of direction simply aims at leading every reader, in the same way, to the same objective conclusion. Kierkegaard also uses the highly *un*-philosophical technique of telling stories. His characters also tell stories. And he in turn tells stories about his characters. He even engages in the analysis of stories. Hence we see in *Fear and Trembling*, where the entire work consists, in a sense, of different interpretations of the story of Abraham and Isaac. Hence, we can read *Fear and Trembling* as something of an exercise in literary criticism as well as a spiritual piece.

Above all, Kierkegaard uses irony in his work. His dissertation, *On the Concept of Irony* (1841) showed an early interest in this literary technique, which would reach its highpoint in his mature works such as *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* and *Philosophical Fragments* (Lippitt, 2000; Hannay, 2003; Watts, 2003; King, 1996; Carlisle, 2006). Kierkegaard stated, "Irony limits, finitizes, and circumscribes and thereby yields truth, actuality, content; it disciplines and punishes and thereby yields balance and consistency" (Kierkegaard, 1965, p.271). Hannay (2003) further points out the positive use of irony in Kierkegaard's works, "The sense in which irony levels is one in which it discloses the ethical space in which a self can appear, if only the subject will move into that space instead of fleeing it, as the reflective aesthete more or less deliberately does, or instead of refusing to enter into in spite of a latent acknowledgement that it is the place to go." (p.165). I will return to the topic of irony in Kierkegaard in this chapter. For now, it is enough to recognize that it is one of Kierkegaard's major authorial tools.

While the use of characters, plots, ambiguity and indirection, irony, and so on does not fit into traditional philosophical hermeneutics, they do fit into another interpretive model—literary analysis. The devices that Kierkegaard employs are, in fact, the basic material of poetry and

fiction. This is why various Kierkegaardian critics, such as King (1996) and Gupta (2005), have argued that we read Kierkegaard more validly if we read him as a poet, dramatist, ironist, and religious writer, not as a philosopher or theologian. This is the approach I have used in my own reading of Kierkegaard. It is also one of the major approaches I will use in teasing out of his works their educational implications. Thus, I now turn some fundamental principles of literary and rhetorical analysis that are well suited to reading Kierkegaard.

**Burkian rhetorical analysis: the idea of the “terministic screen”.** The general approach I take to analyzing Kierkegaard in literary and rhetorical terms comes from Kenneth Burke (1989), considered by many to be the greatest rhetorical theorist and one of the greatest literary critics of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Burke argues that every text, oral or written, contains a “terministic screen.” This is the unstated assumptions, values and goals that generate the types of arguments, symbols and rhetorical devices that a speaker or writer uses. Sometimes, as in Kierkegaard’s personas, the writer is not even aware of his terministic screens. It is the reader’s challenge to find out what they are and how they relate to the reader. Burke said that the symbol systems that make up a speaker’s or author’s text generate an epistemological universe within which he dwells. In the best cases, the author invites the audience to enter his universe the best she can and consider what it might offer her. At his worst, the author attempts to coax the audience to enter his universe and not to leave it. Because an author generates an inevitably finite universe of discourse in her texts, she must necessarily exclude other such universes. Or as Burke stated, “Every way of seeing is also a way of not seeing.” (as cited in Axelrod & Cooper, 1991, p. iii). This certainly fits Kierkegaard’s strategy of examining an issue from the point of view of his many different authors.

**Starting with symbols.** So central are symbols to human existence, says Burke (1989), that man may be defined primarily as the symbol-making, symbol-using animal. We do not so much *know* reality through symbol-systems as we *create* realities through symbol-systems. We see only what our symbol systems allow us to see and act in ways that our symbols oblige us to act. In fact, symbols themselves are one of our primary tools of action. Furthermore, no symbol is neutral, says Burke. Every symbol validates itself in the individual's world because it determines what procedures of inquiry are acceptable and what counts as valid evidence. This necessarily excludes other ways of seeing and acting. Indeed, symbols are not only the primary way humans create realities but are also the primary way man convinces others of his worldview or imposes it on others. In this sense, language is best seen as a form of social action.

**Burke and the “dramatistic” pentad.** One of Burke's most significant contributions to rhetorical theory is his claim that our discourses are essentially theatric, consisting of five main elements: Act, scene, agency, purpose, and stage. This is so because any discourse implicitly sets the scene of the discourse in time and space, which becomes the pre-set “stage” of the linguistic act. The speaker is the agent of the discursive drama—the lead “actor,” who, by virtue of that central role, implicitly casts the listener or reader into another role. This role is not always one that the recipient would necessarily want, and might even resist. The point that the actor wishes the reader or listener to accept and even conform to, is the purpose of the discourse. The purpose of the discourse is the motivation, within the speaker's or writer's symbolic world, to engage the listener or reader so that the author can develop her own symbolic world and draw the reader into it.

Burke (1989) called these five elements the “dramatistic pentad.” He hoped that by helping us all see the assumptions of the universes of discourse in which we reside, we would

understand the limitations of each our discourses. This would make us more open to being changed by other people's discourses. In this manner, the pentad would highlight the importance of coexisting with other people's universes of discourse. Therefore, Burke encouraged each individual (and not just intellectuals, for Burke had great faith in the common person) to examine and *feel* the subjectivity of her own "terministic screen" as her basic assumptions. She would then be able to use symbols more effectively as ways of expressing that subjectivity. What Burke wanted to avoid was the individual buying wholesale to a symbolic system external to her and then defining/objectifying herself by it. This is quite consistent with Kierkegaard's purposes in his writings.

Clearly, all of this is Kierkegaard's subjective purpose stated in rhetorical and literary terms. That is why Burke's method is so suitable to Kierkegaard. It helps in grasping his rhetorical strategies. It is also helpful in understanding exactly the kind of symbol-producing and symbol-interpreting that Kierkegaard was trying to stimulate in his reader. In brief, Burke, like Kierkegaard, is hopeful that we can use our symbols to express our primary subjectivity, not become the object of someone else's symbol systems. For Burke, language as social action is a valid and useful exercise when discourse is inter-subjective. This means that symbol systems interpenetrate to the benefit of all without sacrificing the uniqueness of any. This is the kind of discourse of which Kierkegaard that would certainly approve, and it is an approach to reading him that is consistent with his assumptions and goals as a writer.

### **Formalist criticism**

In reading Kierkegaard, the basic tenets of Formalist Criticism are also useful. Appearing in the 1950s, Formalist Criticism remains an important school of literary analysis (Rivkin & Ryan, 2004). Stated briefly, Formalist Criticism argues against trying to analyze a literary text

“outside of itself.” That is to say, although historical and biographical information may have a secondary use in analyzing a piece of literature, one must approach the text as a thing-in-itself. Even the author’s intentions are not necessarily the main thing in analyzing a text. Formalism takes a text structurally and conceptually on its own terms—as a universe in itself. This is particularly useful in reading Kierkegaard, where, in a more-than-usual sense, each text *is* a universe in itself. It defines a particular perspective that Kierkegaard invites the reader to consider, maybe even to “try on”, without attributing that perspective to Kierkegaard himself. Many of Kierkegaard’s works are offering the perspective of a pseudonymous author, and then place that perspective in contrast with another pseudonymous author, and then another, and yet another. This provides a variety of perspectives that affect each other and also critique each other in order to create paradoxes and tensions in the reader. These paradoxes and tensions are meant to encourage the reader to find her *own* unique way of dealing with them—and in this way come to her *own* engagement with the divine. Thus, Kierkegaard’s use of many authors is itself a literary example of the Socratic method that he so admired.

### **Kierkegaard and Polanyi on personal knowledge**

Also of use in reading Kierkegaard is Michael Polanyi’s (1962) idea of personal knowledge. Kierkegaard influenced Polanyi in both his scientific and epistemological writings. Polanyi critiqued rationalistic materialism and its faith in empirical evidence and “systematic knowledge.” There can be no knowledge claims, Polanyi insisted, even in the sciences, apart from the fundamental, and fundamentally un-provable epistemological, emotional, cultural and ethical commitments of the knower. This is a point that Kuhn (1970) also makes. “Objective knowing” in the Western scientific tradition arises from various ontological and cultural assumptions that determine what questions may be posed, what procedures must be followed to

pursue an answer to the question, what counts as evidence, what constitutes proof, what conclusions are considered meaningful, and the uses to which those conclusions will be put. Like Burke in rhetorical studies, Polanyi in scientific and epistemological research argued that we do not uncover reality through symbols; we create it through symbols that rest upon our basic commitments, which are all beyond ultimate proof. Because Kierkegaard is intent on inspiring his reader to seek out her own personal knowledge in “the stages on life’s way,” Polanyi’s works is useful in approaching both the style and purpose of Kierkegaard’s prose.

### **Ricoeur and Kierkegaard on life as personal narrative**

I have also referred to the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur’s idea of narrative in reading Kierkegaard. Ricoeur (1983) said that central to being human is to have a narrative of one’s life. “What does the past mean in my life? How has it brought me to this present? And given all of that, in what directions may I direct my life towards a meaningful future?” All of these are the fundamental existential questions that make up human life—if one is to live in a manner that authentically and ethically reflects one’s own deepest commitments. The objective past, present and future as measured mechanically means very little in this context, according to Ricoeur, except for secondary and instrumental purposes. What matters is how one appropriates one’s past ethically in the understanding of one’s present and in the construction of one’s future. *That is ethical time, as Ricoeur (1983) makes clear in *Time and Narrative*. Furthermore, Ricoeur says that our personal narratives can be meaningful only when seen against the backdrop of cosmological time. This is the eternal dimension of one’s narrative that gives it spiritual meaning. Ricoeur’s emphasis on subjective narrative as ongoing orientation of oneself to the divine provides an excellent lens through which to read Kierkegaard.*

**Irony.** Kierkegaard's major literary device is irony, as numerous commentators have observed (Lippitt, 2000; Collins, 1983; Gupta, 2005). In reading Kierkegaard, then, it is necessary to have a handle on this device. Irony consists in saying something at the surface level of the utterance—written or spoken—in such a way that it also undermines (or at least problematizes) itself. The purpose of this is to point to a deeper level of meaning—one which the writer or speaker may or may not herself consciously realize (Colebrook, 2004). As Lippitt (2000) shows, irony is the perfect rhetorical tool for Kierkegaard. It reflects rhetorically what Kierkegaard is attempting to accomplish existentially in the reader—to stimulate the reader to move between two ideas in tension. In this process, the manifest idea will reveal its own limitations. Hopefully, this inspires the reader to wade through those limitations to find a deeper, more personally satisfying meaning in the end.

Lippitt says that Kierkegaardian irony is intended to set us free. It invites us to access the internal contradictions and limitations of a surface statement to find a more subjectively satisfying place to live in. What Kierkegaard did *not* want to create in the reader, however, is cynicism, which according to Lippitt is failed irony because there is finally no deeper subjective meaning that goes beyond the surface contradictions to point to the divine. According to Lippitt, Kierkegaard disliked cynicism. He saw it merely as a state of being stuck in contradiction without using contradiction to go more deeply into subjective encounter with God.

Another function of irony—as in the works of writers as varied as Jonathon Swift to Kurt Vonnegut—is that it is a way of challenging the dominant political and cultural assumptions of the day. This suits Kierkegaard perfectly in his assaults upon both Christendom and the reigning rationalist and sociological assumptions of his era. Comedy functions as a tool of moral critique aimed at setting the listener or reader free of assumptions that do not lead to the reader's growth.

In this sense, comedy is freedom. The comic's true role is to problematize, even shatter, consensual reality. The great power of the comic is that she can challenge all kinds of existing orders, from the cultural to the religious, so efficiently, and even "entertainingly." This describes Kierkegaard's purposes beautifully. Consider an example here—Kierkegaard invents Climacus who writes *Philosophical Fragments*—(it might have better been called "scraps") It describes the difficulties of becoming a Christian. One of the major challenges is that Christianity requires a commitment to act before all the evidence is in. Most historians are forever chasing evidence to be included in the parenthesis or footnote—thus they cannot be true Christians because the final evidence never comes.

This first book is fairly short. Then Climacus writes a postscript (a P.S. to the scraps), with an introduction, lot's of chapters, a conclusion, an appendix, etc. It is much longer than the original and ends by declaring, if you have understood this work—you probably missed the point. You really can't become a Christian by doing this type of analysis.

**Humor.** Lippitt (2000) observes that the comic/ironic mode also fits Kierkegaard because it really has nothing to teach in terms of fixed ideas and systems. Humor is the challenging of all fixed ideas and systems—precisely Kierkegaard's goal. Humor, therefore, when it is healthy as in Kierkegaard, takes us to the limits of our present understanding in search of something better. Perhaps that explains why humor is so often defined as seeing ourselves and all of our mortal follies and shortcoming in the context of eternity—which is why most of Kierkegaard's personas are funny. Humor therefore by definition operates in the spaces of all that is transitional and borderline. It serves the individual by inviting her to explore that which always lies just beyond all of our finite horizons. For Kierkegaard as a writer, then, irony is a not only a method but a

way of being in which one is always viewing what is objectively real in the eternal context of what is subjectively true in the search for God.

## Appendix C

### Questions for further study:

1. Given many parents' desire for education to advance their children socioeconomically, is it justifiable for a pedagogy to make such things secondary—especially in state-sponsored schools?
2. If a teacher feels that a student's self-defined "journey towards Ultimacy" is taking that student in dangerous directions, is she justified in intervening, possibly even informing school counselor or parents of her apprehensions as the child's teacher? What are the ethical dimensions of this question? What are its legal implications, if any?
3. The Supreme Court has asserted that the state has a "compelling interest" in the education of the child. May a teacher or student resist this compelling interest by asserting that their existential status may trump the state's interest? What are the philosophical grounds of a Kierkegaardian position in this regard? What are the legal ramifications? What are the differences regarding this question between public schooling and private schooling?
4. Is a Kierkegaardian approach to education even possible in a public-school venue?
5. Does "teleological suspension of the ethical" allow a student to insert into classroom discourse ideas that the teacher feels are educationally disruptive to classroom functioning, and possibly even ethically/emotionally dangerous to the other students' psychological and moral wellbeing? What kinds of ethical/legal criteria would one have to use in order to approach this question?
6. Some work has been done on Kierkegaard and religious education (Best, 2000; Gouwens, 1996; Manheimer, 1977; Erricker, 2001), but much more is called for. What are the gaps (and they are probably many) in this body of literature? Are there differences (or would there be differences) in how a Kierkegaardian pedagogy plays out in various churches—Protestant, Catholic, Mormons, etc.? And would these differences also be relevant to religious education in non-Christian settings?

7. What are the developmental considerations that must be taken into account in working from a Kierkegaardian pedagogical standpoint? At what point, if at any point, is it most appropriate to focus on a student's subjectivity in the K-12 spectrum? Is it better earlier on? Later on? Both? In increasing measure? In decreasing measure? Might it be safest to use a Kierkegaardian pedagogy mostly/only in higher-education settings, where teachers' students have been given greater latitude in study and speech?

8. Are some sorts of teachers more comfortable with an objectivist curriculum than a subjectivist pedagogy—or vice versa? This would be an interesting topic for phenomenological research into teachers' views/attitudes/personality types/personal experiences of schooling—and how all of this might or might not make a teacher more prone to a Kierkegaardian approach to teaching and learning. Should a teacher be adept in both an objectivist approach to pedagogy and subjectivist one? What are the implications of all this for teacher education?

9. Rooted as it is in radical Western individualism, would a Kierkegaardian approach to education be appropriate in more communally-oriented cultures—such as Asian, Native American, and in general First Nation cultures?

10. How should one best respond to the critique that a Kierkegaardian pedagogy is, finally, self-absorbed and irrelevant to the pressing concerns of the day and the role that public schooling is supposed by many to play in addressing those concerns?

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Possible Journals for Publication

Journal of Curriculum Theorizing

Journal of Curriculum Studies

Journal of Curriculum Inquiry

Journal of Curriculum and Supervision

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Journal of Educational Philosophy and Theory