KIERKEGAARD'S ANSWER TO THE QUESTION: CAN VIRTUE BE TAUGHT?

PAT CUTTING

During the last half of the 5th Century B.C., Socrates answered the Sophists' claim that virtue can be taught. The *Sophistês*[1] (wisdom experts) claimed that not only wisdom, but all other virtues as well, could be taught by using the same methods as those employed for teaching rules of grammar. Thus, for the Sophists, ethics was just one area of inquiry among others. Students could achieve the human excellence of a virtuous life (*areté*) by merely following the instructions of a teacher. Socrates claimed that all virtues can be united in one, wisdom, and this cannot be taught, but can only be encouraged or challenged to grow.

Søren Kierkegaard, during the first half of the 19th Century A.D., again answered the question: Can virtue be taught? He claimed that virtue cannot be taught directly as can objective historic or scientific facts. Rather, virtue can be taught only by the teacher existentially reduplicating the possibility of a virtuous life in his own existence. The teacher demonstrates what virtue is by being virtuous.

For Kierkegaard, ethics is not just one area of inquiry among others. Rather, ethical and ethico-religious[2] capability is of an essentially different nature than that of objective, factual knowledge. The latter can be imparted by educational methods which implant information in the student. Whereas, ethical and ehico-religious skills can only be developed by the student himself who actualizes the potential for ethical living which he already possesses.

Kierkegaard's most concise statement of the difference between ethical capabilities and the objective knowledge of science and history is from a section of his journals and papers[3] in which he develops lectures intended to draw out some of the implications of the existential concepts introduced in *The Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. These entries explicitly draw out a theory of communication based on his two-fold division of knowledge. The major points of the division are shown in the following brief outline:

The Communication of Capability (*Kunnens Meddelsen*)	The Communication of Knowledge (*Videns Meddelsen*)
1. Applicable to ethical and ethico-religious communication	1. Applicable to scientific and historical objective facts
2. Uses the medium of actuality	2. Uses the medium of imagination, i.e., pure thought
3. Uses indirect communication	3. Uses direct communication
4. Through an act of will the subject can appropriate the content of the communication and reduplicate it in his existence.	4. The subject remains disinterested—the communication remains in the realm of pure thought.

According to Kierkegaard, science and history can be taught in a direct way because the information is not appropriated into the individual's own existence—rather it remains in the realm of pure thought, i.e., imagination. The individual can know objective facts that are outside of his own experience only through thinking about them—for him they remain possibilities, not actualities. The teacher can directly tell the student that Napoleon was defeated at Waterloo in 1815, or that water is composed of 2 parts hydrogen and 1 part oxygen. The student can then add these facts to his store of objective knowledge—but they remain in the realm of thought. Since he does not actualize this knowledge in his own existence, direct communication does not interfere with the student's existential freedom.

Kierkegaard has some rather harsh things to say about the 19th Century invasion of science into all aspects of life. He charges:[4] If one were to concentrate in one single descriptive phrase the delusion and confusion of the modern age it is science's lack of naiveté; it's lack of primitiveness. Science has become fantastic pure knowledge and has forgotten what it means to be a human being. More specifically, the confusion is that the distinction between art and science has been forgotten. Everything has become science, and art is understood only aesthetically as fine art. But there is a whole aspect of art which science has taken possession of—or wishes to take possession of—this is the ethical.

There is great confusion when that which ought to be communicated as art is communicated as science. To illustrate this point, Kierkegaard uses the example of a country boy learning the military art. When the country boy begins his training, the corporal does not explain what it *means* to drill, etc. Rather, he communicates it to him as an art; he teaches him to use militarily the abilities and the potential competence he already has. And this is the way the ethical must be communicated. If one begins first of all with a course to instill the meaning of ethical doctrines into the student, then the communication itself never becomes ethical.

> Corresponding to the corporal . . . is an EXISTING ETHICIST [a teacher of virtue], who remains conscious of himself and in reflection returns into himself to be that which he teaches, and he presupposes that every human being is the same potentially. . . . Science can probably be pounded into a person, but the ethical has to be pounded out of him,[5]

i.e., the student must actualize his own potentiality for ethical living.

The communication of ethical capability is of subjective interest to the student, and can only be communicated indirectly, because the medium is that of actuality, rather than merely pure thought. This involves Kierkegaard's theory of reduplication which states that each individual can choose, from among his live-options, which possibilities to actualize. Thus, he makes a transition form thought-possibilities to the actualization of these possibilities, i.e., from the realm of pure thought to the realm of actuality.

The importance of the theory of reduplication for Kierkegaard's answer to the question of whether or not virtue can be taught is obvious. The primary role of the teacher is to aid the student to become aware of his potentialities so as to increase the quality, as well as the quantity, of his live-options. But always, the other individual must be left free to make his own choices.[6] It is this latter criterion which limits the type of communication which can be employed. No coersive direct methods can be used. The teacher of virtue is never "the authority"—but only "the possibility."

It is the teacher's actualized existence which is the communication, for it presents possibilities to the student for his own existence. The student can see a virtuous life as a potentiality for human-existence and can become aware of his own potentiality for actualizing the virtues. Thus, they become live-options for him, and yet, he is left free to choose whether or not to reduplicate any given virtue.

Since the main concern is how the teacher and the student are related to the virtue which is to be communicated, the essential teaching is one's own existence. Kierkegaard states, "A person teaches with this every hour of the day and with power quite different from that of the most elegant speaker in his most elegant moment."[7] Thus, it is not from the pulpit, nor from the assistant professors lectern, but in the stream of life, in the marketplace, that the discourse about virtue best takes place.

One of the main requirements for teaching virtue is that each student retain his/her existential freedom. But how can the teacher avoid infringing on the freedom of "the other"? In the book that has been translated into English as *The Present Age*,[8] Kierkegaard discusses three stages of development in the relationships *between* individuals, which roughly corresponds to his three stages of development *for* the individual. Both developments, that of the individual and that of the individual in community, lead from inauthentic earlier stages to the highest stage in which authenticity is possible. Taken together these stages lead to the possibility of authentic individuality in community. The theory of reduplication allows the transition of such authentic relationships from the realm of thought-possibilities to the realm of actuality.

The dialectical movement in the relationships between individuals is described as a movement *from* the first stage, the age of antiquity, in which outstanding individuals leap-in[9] to take over the responsibilities and choices of lesser individuals; *through* the present age in which the crowd demands that each individual choose which possibilities to actualize according to the values or norms of the crowd; *to* the highest stage in which authentic relationships between individuals are characterized by one individual leaping-ahead[10] for the other. By demonstrating the potentiality for human existence at the highest stage of development, the teacher leaps ahead of the student and frees the other in freedom for himself.

During antiquity society was a concrete group which supported outstanding individuals. To be a man meant something like this: "the generation made every effort to raise up and support a few eminent individuals. In these the rest of the people envisioned themselves. By way of these eminent individuals (to whom they were all related), the concept of the infinite elevation of what it meant to be man was maintained."[11] Thus, the dialectic of antiquity tended toward a social structure in which there were two types of people, the few outstanding individuals who were leaders and the masses who were the followers.

The relationship of Being-with-Others in this first stage of development corresponds to Heidegger's inauthentic mode of Being-with-Others, in which one person, the outstanding individual, with inauthentic care, takes away the responsibilities and the choices of "the other." This type of inauthentic Being-with-Others is characterized by one individual leaping in and dominating the care of the other—disburdening him of the responsibility of projecting and choosing which possibilities to actualize in his own life according to his own values—and depriving him of his authentic self.[12]

In the second stage of the development of relationships between individuals, the present age, it is the crowd, not the outstanding individual, which leaps in and takes over the choices of the individual members of society. The crowd projects the virtues of the ideal average man which each individual is required to strive to reduplicate in his own life. In doing so, all individuality is leveled down to the average, the norm. The ideal man which is projected by the crowd is one of mediocrity and averageness, with no individuality of his own. The crowd grinds smooth the individual's angularity and essential acidentality.[13] The present day member of the crowd "finds it too venturesome a thing to be himself, far easier and safer to be like the others, to become an imitation, a number, a cipher in the crowd."[14]

However, the present age is an intermediate stage between the age of antiquity and the authentic stage where the individual can escape the tyranny of the crowd and be capable of authentic relationships with

others. The person who learns the most from the leveling of the present age does not try to become a public hero or an outstanding man and, thus, be thrown back into the age of antiquity. Rather, if he has understood the lesson of leveling correctly, he goes forward to the highest level and becomes a man in the completely equalitarian sense. According to Kierkegaard, the individual can learn to escape the demands of the crowd of the present age if he learns "in reality to be content with himself before God, and learns instead of dominating others, to dominate himself."[15] It is the individual who must reform the crowd and usher in the new age, the age in which the ideal is for each and every man to become "the individual."

The authentic individual at the highest stage will not impose his values on others, rather he will remain "unrecognizable," i.e., without authority. In this way he will maintain the proper relationship between himself and others. According to Kierkegaard, when the highest stage of development of the relationship between the individual and society is reached "the great man, the leader . . . will be unrecognizable."[16] To be otherwise would be an inconsistent way of realizing individuality. To accept recognition as an authority would only put a stumbling block in the path of the other individuals in realizing their own authenticity. At the highest stage each individual gives support through indirect communication and so aids the other individual to achieve an authentic reduplication of virtues in his own life.

Individuality reaffirmed at the highest stage of development *does* lead to the possibility of authentic relationships of individuality in community. This is analogous to Heidegger's authentic mode of leaping-ahead of the other. According to both Kierkegaard and Heidegger, the authentic individual leaps ahead and frees the other in his freedom for himself. Heidegger explains this mode of Being-with-Others in terms of "authentic solicitude" which leaps ahead of the other in existential potentiality-for-Being, not in order to take away the responsibility of the other, but rather to give it back to him authentically.

In summary, Kierkegaard's authentic individual remains unrecognizable, i.e., without authority, in order to allow the other to remain free to choose which possibilities to actualize in his own life and, thus, retain his own authenticity. However, the authentic individual does work diligently to indirectly aid others to become aware of their potentiality for actualizing virtues. He does so by indirectly communicating such possibilities, in the medium of actuality, by reduplicating them in his own life. Thus, unlike the person who makes a direct statement, under the auspices of "authority," he allows the other individual to freely choose whether or not to reduplicate the virtue in his own life. The teacher of virtue is never "the authority"—but always "the possibility."

NOTES

[1] "The word *sophistês* is composed by adding to the word for wisdom a suffix connotating a man who practices a profession, and who is thus in some way an expert; a sophist therefore means something like a 'wisdom expert.' " Philip Wheelwright, *The Presocratics*, (New York: The Odyssey Press, Inc., 1966), p. 236.

[2] Kierkegaard uses the term "ethico-religious" to refer to ethical choices made at the highest stage of development, the religious stage, in which authentic individuality has been achieved. This is in contrast to ethical choices based on universal ethical norms which are made at the ethical stage. At the religious stage "the original ethical viewpoint has disappeared and the ethical viewpoint has been sharpened into the ethico-religious. The individual is the basis for ethical decisions, 'the crowd' must be cast aside as the basis." (Translation mine) Jens Himmelstrup, *Terminologisk Ordbog til Søren Kierkegaards Samlede Vaerker* (København: Gyldendals Uglegøger, 1964), p. 62.

[3] Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers* (Bloomington, Indiana, and London, England: Indiana University Press, 1970), Vol. I, pp. 267-308.

[4] Ibid., pp. 268-69.

[5] Ibid., pp. 269-70.

[6] William James, *The Will to Believe and Human Immortality*, (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1956), pp. 2-3.

[7] Hong, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, Vol. I, p. 460.

[8] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, translated by Alexander Dru, (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1962).

[9] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1962), p. 158.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Hong, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, Vol. IV, p. 192.

[12] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 158-59.

[13] Søren Kierkegaard, *Sickness unto Death*, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1954), p. 167.

[14] Ibid., pp. 167-68.

[15] Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, p. 57.

[16] Ibid., p. 80.

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