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First Steps Into Reality

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Humanum was launched four years ago with an inaugural issue on “The Child.” The reason for that beginning was that the child, in our judgment, exhibits essential features of the human face—playfulness, dependence—whose features are increasingly at risk of being overlooked, disregarded, or disparaged in our culture, all at great cost to us. We cannot help but think of the draconian practices aimed at children especially when their childlikeness is particularly imposing at the beginning of life, or those aimed at the elderly and infirm when the same childlikeness reasserts itself towards the end. But the stakes are high for all of us. Childhood, after all, is not just a stage to grow out of quickly at the beginning, or to avoid at all costs at the end. Were we not told to “become like a child”? And are we not told to do so in order “to enter the Kingdom of Heaven,” in order, that is, to live? Childlikeness, then, is a matter of life or death for every one of us.

The most obvious fact which childhood sets before us is the fact that we were born. In a culture which prides itself on self-making, and which understands the tool of that same self-making (namely, freedom) to be the absence of any bonds, especially prior ones, this fact cannot but be problematic, something to be surmounted or overcome. Being born, we have an origin that precedes our own making, doing, and choosing. In our second year, dedicated to *Recovering Origins*, we saw the various ways in which we try to disentangle ourselves from our origins (or our children from theirs), by removing children from parents through divorce, artificial reproductive technology, same-sex household arrangements, and absent fatherhood. In each of these cases, however much we still—for the moment—have to be put into the world by others, the fact of owing ourselves to others becomes a faint memory, and in many cases, increasingly, a sorrowful one, one to forget altogether.

Allan Bloom, in the introduction to his translation of *Émile*, writes of Rousseau’s ideal future student—whose “bible” is Robinson Crusoe—that “he cares no more for his father than his dog.”[1]

In a way, the doubt about the goodness of one’s origins is nothing new. Ancient myths are replete with cannibalistic fathers and patricidal sons and daughters. But the newness of our situation as moderns and post-moderns is that the judgment on our origin has become a matter of principle—a “state of nature”—and not a matter of the Fall. Adam, as Locke said, had the unique fortune of being created in the perfect state, because he was not born. We are supposed to alienate ourselves from our origins. What was once a tragic flaw, or result of original sin, then, is now the “new normal,” not to mention a self-fulfilling prophecy. Like obedient children (sic) we rush to fulfill our duty, whether we like it or not!

It is against this backdrop that we take up what Benedict XVI called the “emergency” of education. The child, of course, has to be “brought up,” and “led out” (*e-ducare*) into the world. But what does this mean against the dominant backdrop of calling into question the essential features of childhood, those features so necessary for living? What exactly is the child’s relation to the world, and how exactly is that relation mediated by the “first educators” of the child, his or her parents? That is, what is their

role? The answer to these questions will determine (as they already do) what we intend when we educate and what it is we are aiming at tacitly in bringing a child to adulthood.

In his essay “On the urgent task of educating young people,” Pope Benedict XVI notes the two critical points of the “educational emergency.” The first of these raises the question about the subject matter of education, about what is to be communicated in education, if anything at all. It is the “crisis of trust in life,” where “essential certainties are lacking,” above all the goodness of life. In the current situation of profound doubt about life, can there any longer be anything to hand on (*tradere*): a patrimony, a culture? And can we really think of introducing a child to the world, of leading him out into a relation with it? Moreover, can we really think that we are taking him anywhere in particular, according to some concept of humanity, as did the traditional *paideia* (education of the young in view of the ideal)?

The profound doubt about the goodness of life in fact renounces all of this in favor of a “constructivist” approach which would disencumber the child of his past, and equip him only with “problem-solving skills” by which to confront the raw material of the world: all for the goal of “constructing his own meaning.” Instead of leading the child anywhere, we would merely push him forward, as it were, once he has been fashioned into a self-determining, choosing self, so that he can turn in any which direction, and “follow his dreams.” But here is the problem. Instead of great spurts of freedom and engagement, which such “dreams” promised to release, there is great apathy. Robert Spaemann, whose analysis of the current state of education is similar to his coeval, Benedict, notes in his magnificent essay “Education as an Introduction to Reality”:

If a person believes that there are many different paths man could take to reach his goal, he does not infer the resolution to follow one of them in a faithful way. Instead, he draws the inference that there is no need to follow any particular path, and he leaves them all as hypothetical. The pathological inability to make a commitment that afflicts many young adults today is already the product of such an approach to education.

Bloom puts it succinctly in his *Closing of the American Mind*: young people “can be anything they want to be, but they have no particular reason to want to be anything in particular” (87).

Everything hangs on whether or not life is good, in essence. If it is good, education will be an introduction to reality, as Spaemann and Luigi Giussani describe it. This is not, of course, an introduction to Freud’s “reality principle” which is to bring about a compromise with the “pleasure principle,” the two having no inner relation to the other. Nor indeed is it an introduction to statistical “reality,” namely, what most people do (allowing the regular use of contractions instead of teaching good grammar, permitting endless use of the TV, etc). Rather, it will be, an introduction to *real* reality—however seldom it is sought or seen: to the good, the beautiful and the true, manifest first in the faces of one’s mother and father, who betoken the promise of fulfillment (pace Freud), even if desire has to be educated along the way. And, since one’s relation to the world would not be principally negative and defensive, one would be trained to have a relation with it, wanting to know it as it is, “for its own sake,” not merely as something useful: an attitude for which a child, whose very work is to play, is already well equipped. He will be drawn into it, into a “greater than himself,” to the point of being drawn into the Greater than himself and the world put together. Not a pious spirituality or ethical add-on, the question of God will be a necessary dimension of questions about the world, questions like “what is that?”, “why is that?”, and “who am I?”, as Sophia Cavalletti recognized so aptly.

The second critical point which Benedict XVI notes is the doubt about the role of the educator itself. If life is not good, the role of the educator can be neither to pass on anything (e.g. a tradition), nor of course to suggest a view of the world (except a cultureless one, which is, of course, still a view of the

world!). She would have to go to great lengths to “be objective,” making sure she does not communicate anything she has committed herself to, since it can only have been “a choice,” one of many possible choices. The educator can only present the “menu items,” again, with an eye to turning her student into someone who “makes his or her own choices” and learns, accordingly, to tolerate others who make theirs.

This view makes itself felt especially where the “first educators” are concerned. They, after all, have handed down to their children their very lives, and with it, a genetic code, a family, a place, a home, a language, a family name. They have saddled their children, that is, with a tradition of the most radical sort. It is not without reason that, beginning at the dawn of our fledgling liberal nation, treatises on education were aimed at the discipline of parents, as James Block and Jay Fliegelman explain in their fascinating books on the topic of rearing the “child-citizen” in the New World. And it is no wonder that there is a growing trend to think of parents as suspect “gate-keepers” in principle and advocate that it would be desirable to provide children with a more “neutral” substitute. The French Minister of Education proposed one such substitute by proposing the institutionalization of children as early as two years old (e.g. into state-funded day care) so as to “wrest from them every possible social, philosophical, familial and religious determinism”! (Quoted from a letter to chief education officers dated 4 January 2013, in *L’Express*, 2 September 2012.)

If, by contrast, there can be a deep trust in the goodness of life, then we would turn principally to those who first introduced us to life in order to learn about what the role of the educator is. The mother and father would not only be the first in a line of educators—the most willing subjects for the care of young children—nor merely the ones to decide how, where, and when their children get their schooling (thought that is certainly also true!). Rather, the mother and father would be the archetype of the educator. As we have said, it is clear that by being born one is faced with a tradition, literally incarnate in the faces of one’s own parents. One is “Caught up in a Story,” as Sarah Clarkson would put it. But this fact, this “back-pack,” as Giussani calls it in *The Risk of Education*, far from being a burden, coincides with the introduction to the very *logos* of reality. Spaemann reminds us of the obvious: a child learns what to call things—“that’s the moon” and “those are the stars”—by learning his “mother tongue.” Then too, it is because of a good dependence that the child achieves a good independence, as is being confirmed in the field of psychology under the label of “attachment parenting,” by figures such as Daniel J. Siegel, Mary Hartzell, Tina Payne Bryson, and Robert Karen, reviewed herein.

There are other features of the educator that we can garner from the “first educators” and which have been adopted by some of the great educator saints. We can think, for example, of Don Bosco whose “preventative method” meant above all the personal investment of “walking alongside” troubled at-risk-adolescents (in his case), communicating to them above all that they are loved in a family-like atmosphere. Then too, there is the “risk” with the freedom of the adolescent, who must always “decide” “starting anew,” though accompanied by the correction of love, and not the tolerance of indifference. As Benedict says:

The educational relationship...is first of all the encounter of two kinds of freedom, and successful education means teaching the correct use of freedom. As the child gradually grows up, he becomes an adolescent and then a young person; we must therefore accept the risk of freedom and be constantly attentive in order to help him to correct wrong ideas and choices. However, what we must never do is to support him when he errs, to pretend we do not see the errors or worse, that we share them as if they were the new boundaries of human progress.

Above all the educator is a “witness of the truth and goodness” of the world and of life. He or she is the

incarnate presence of an all-encompassing positivity—“life is good, beautiful and true”—and a positivity, moreover, which is addressed to the child: “it is good that you exist!” All of this, of course, may be offered imperfectly and partially. The child will have to eventually judge this “witness” against “his heart as God made it” (Giussani) and the “love and desire for God which everyone has in the depths of his being” (Bosco). This is why we will ultimately need witnesses who have been caught up by the very Incarnation of the Good, True, and Beautiful to guarantee his certainty, as the US Bishops have said in their 2007 instructions on the religious education of adolescents, *Doctrinal Elements*.

As you see, in this issue, we are taking up education at the most basic level, asking what it means to be “brought up” and led out into the world. Beginning with our “reprints” from Benedict XVI and Robert Spaemann, then with our beautiful witness piece from Léonie Caldecott, moving to our features on Catholic Social Doctrine (written by Jeanne Schindler) and the political challenges to education (by Ellen Roderick) and our multiple book reviews, we are taking our cues from nature (and Catholic Social Doctrine) that the paradigm of education (its students, subject material, and teachers) can be found in the “first educators” of every child. As Jean-François Millet shows us so clearly in his painting (on the cover of this issue), the fact that a child takes his “first steps” into the world “on his own” between his mother and father serves as the paradigm of education, and is not its temporary exception or suspect beginning.

In our second issue on education we will take up the question of schooling in the disciplines. We will then look at sex education, broadly conceived as the education of girls and boys to the point of becoming men and women who are capable of making irrevocable gifts of themselves to each other or to God in their states of life. Finally, we will take up the vexed question of technology as it pertains to all levels of education.

[1]Allan Bloom, introduction to *Emile, or: On Education*, by Jean Jacques Rousseau, trans. Allan Bloom, (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 15.

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