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Perennial Childhood: Remarks on the “Discipline of Praise”

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Author Anton Schmid presents an essay based on his own book, Disziplin des Lobens [The Discipline of Praise]. We express our gratitude to Adrian J. Walker for providing us with a translation from the original German.

The crisis of contemporary education is rooted in a tendency to look for the ever-fresh newness of the educational task in the wrong place, as if it lay in new pedagogical ideas rather than in new children capable of entrusting themselves with open, vulnerable hearts to the formation received from their teachers. Put another way, contemporary educators often ignore the enduring substance of their profession, turning their gaze from its enduring pattern to adapt themselves to the latest ideological fashions instead. But is there really anything radically new left to say about the learning and teaching of children, or about their growth to maturity, that wasn't already known to our ancestors?

The book presented in these pages harbors no revolutionary ambitions, then, but merely seeks to defend a few important, time-tested truths from three capitulations to the spirit of the age popular among educators in both the German-speaking world and beyond. These tendencies, which pose a dangerous, and perhaps lethal, threat to every healthy form of learning, are: (1) a pedagogical *psychologism* that, having reduced the substance of education to the (dialectical) relation between teacher and student, can at best teach tricks for “getting through” the material, but cannot appreciate the school subjects—which it ultimately regards as neutral, pedagogically insignificant shells—for what they truly are: the “third” that unites teacher and student around their common good; (2) a pedagogical “*materialism*” that, fixated on the subject-matter independently of any personal relation between teacher and student, tends (in its “liberal” variety) to reduce the child's person to his function within the educational machine, while simultaneously turning the teacher into a functionary of the same encompassing system (*mercenarius autem qui non est pastor, cuius non sunt oves propriae, dimittit oves*: “the hired hand, who is no shepherd and to whom the sheep do not belong, abandons the sheep,” Jn 10:12); (3) the “*economic rationalization*” of education, which prolongs the first two tendencies by bending both the subject-matter and the student-teacher relation to serve the same purely external objective or target: a numinous economic profit that, lying entirely in an endlessly deferred future, is incapable of filling the present moment with any real substance—and thus “futurizes” the saturated *kairos* of education to the detriment of the inner principle characterizing the genuine act of learning.

Ironically, all three tendencies fail to achieve the very aim they claim to secure. Given man's natural unity of body and soul, in fact, “psychologism” cannot eliminate the subject-matter without losing the child's soul into the bargain; pedagogical “materialism” inevitably ends up annihilating the subject-matter along with the soul; and “economic rationalization,” “thanks” to its reductively monetary model of “*oikonomia*,” eventually fails to be properly economical at all. This last point bears stressing: Paul, writing to the Ephesians, understands the “economy” precisely as a present fullness, as the fulfillment

offered here and now in a privileged *kairos* (*eis oikonomian tou plêrômatos tôn kairôn*: Eph 1:10).

It doesn't require much imagination to predict what will happen to children exposed to a formation like this. Such children, in fact, will very quickly *unlearn* their intuitive appreciation of the joyful discipline and disciplined joy of learning. An appreciation abundantly manifest in the effervescent excitement with which they practically overwhelmed their teachers on their first day of school!

In 2006, Bernhard Bueb, then headmaster of an elite private school near Lake Constance in Southern Germany, published a thin volume that instantly became a bestseller throughout the German-speaking world. *Lob der Disziplin* [In Praise of Discipline], which would earn Bueb the not entirely flattering title of "Germany's strictest teacher," issued a ringing call for a revival of the old-fashioned and, in the author's view, unjustly neglected virtue of classroom discipline. Although Bueb's plea for a new culture of discipline quickly ignited a firestorm of controversy among German-speaking educators, most of his critics failed to notice the intellectual presuppositions underlying his argument. Echoing Nietzsche (on whom he had written his PhD thesis), Bueb essentially identifies classroom discipline with the teacher's rigorous exercise of something like the "will to power" —as a foil for the pupil's ceaseless self-overcoming, which, in Bueb's view, represents the sure path to the latter's truly autonomous self-possession.

If Bueb—instantly pilloried by Left-leaning critics for his "Brown" educational ideas—had delved more deeply into the substance of his favorite word, he might have discovered at the root of his much-praised "*disciplina*" an etymological richness whose dormant pedagogical potential deserved to be reawakened from its slumber. For the primary meaning of the word is precisely *not* "disciplined behavior." Consider the following etymologically related terms: "*disciplina*"—in the sense of a school subject (e.g. *disciplina mathematica*)—"discipulus" (pupil or disciple), and "*discipere*" (to come to know), which, taken together, suggest that the *disciplined* exercise of real learning ("*discere*") can occur only if, instead of casting about in the dark, much less "fishing in troubled waters," we recover a sorely missing clarity. Clarity, that is, about the beauty and importance of the classical "*school subjects*," about the humanity of the "*pupil*," and about the true structure of the "*cognitive act*." As Goethe put it: "If yesterday is clear and open,/and your work today both strong and free,/tomorrow, too, is sure to greet you,/with a joy to equal these." [i]

What happens, in fact, when the "*disciplinae*," which ought to unite us around the real, actually miss the ultimate goal of education, i.e., a properly human life (Jörg Splett)? Or what happens when a child cannot become a true "*discipulus*" because some teacher-cum-functionary lacks either the capability or the "authorization" to receive the personal gift that he, the child, would like to entrust to his care (a gift that is the child himself)? Or, finally, what happens when the school leaves no room for any real "*discipere*," the cognitive act whose form is a "loving inclination to the real" common to both student and teacher? The answer is clear: No learning (*discere*) can flourish, and discipline can only be imposed with *authoritarian* violence "from above," rather than being called forth intrinsically by *authoritative* command of the subject-matter itself.

Bueb's inverted sense of discipline called, then, for an "inversion" of its own. Hence the title of our book, which turns his "praise of discipline" on its head and speaks of a *Disziplin des Lobens*, a "*discipline of praise*," instead. This title reflects our conviction that to "praise" the object of study—to love, approve, and affirm its goodness—is to receive from it the kind of discipline its nature demands. It bears repeating that such discipline is not primarily an external duty to be enforced by the teacher, but an attitude born of loving praise, which, by its very nature, engenders the disposition of soul that undergirds concrete, competent, and successful learning, by which it is augmented in turn.

As the foregoing suggests, the pedagogical act is founded upon a common “loving inclination to the real.” Put another way, the joy of (and between) teacher and student presupposes a shared affection inclining both towards an intrinsically lovable, and jointly beloved, “Third”: the subject-matter that forms their specific “*condilectum*,” as Richard of Saint Victor might have put it. The affection that teacher and pupil express here is not, however, primarily a psychological mood. It is above all a form of justice rooted in the subject-matter itself; it is a response evoked by the depth and human significance of the realities taught and studied, realities which unite teacher and student while enabling them to transcend themselves at the same time. It is within this triadic structure that children learn, and no real learning can take place outside it. “The opposition between autonomy and heteronomy” invoked by Bueb “is [thus] a violent rupture that occurs only when the substantive realities binding us together fade from our view” (Robert Spaemann).

It goes without saying that the ideas presented in our book have to take flesh in an appropriate environment, one finding its measure in a truly human aesthetic (in the Greek sense of “*aesthêsis*,” meaning “apprehension” or “sensation”). Three points suggest themselves here:

(i) The child can experience his surroundings as “beautiful” only if both the school and the student body are small enough to “*take in at a glance*,” as it were. The school can become an aesthetic education only if it is a perspicuous, beautifully ordered whole in its own right.

(ii) Although the *sexual difference* fundamentally shapes the aesthetic of our human world, it is consistently flattened out by our schools, which prefer to focus their pedagogical efforts on cultivating equality while undervaluing difference. In order to do fuller justice to both the unity and the diversity of boys and girls, then, we propose a model of “*parallel monoeducation*,” which provides for a mixed-sex school offering instruction in single-sex classrooms (while leaving ample room for common events and activities that form an important part of the pedagogical program). In our view, this model could prove particularly helpful for boys, who—having become uncertain of their role in school and society—are already being written off as “losers” in the education game.

(iii) The effort to get the aesthetics of education right could further benefit from mobilizing another rich, though sadly neglected pedagogical resource: the interaction among the school’s *different age-groups*, which can complement one another in all sorts of educationally interesting ways, as when older students tutor and mentor their younger peers both inside and outside the classroom. In the age of the only child, the importance of experiences like these can hardly be exaggerated.

The teacher’s concern for the future can serve as a basis for education only if it is rooted in a love of his origin. The best teacher, in other words, is the one who inwardly remains in the “grace” of childhood, to which, after all, he is permanently indebted for all that he is. It is just this perennial childhood, in fact, that enables the teacher to prolong, in a new time and place, the experience that Hans Urs von Balthasar describes with such profundity in his last book, dedicated to the divine-human child who, binding up the wounds of his fellow children, leads them home to the great feast in the encompassing Mystery of the Father (Lk 10:25ff; 15:11ff).

Now, this experience, which Balthasar locates at the origin of the child’s first awakening to consciousness, is the revelation of the beautiful, the good, and the true in their mutual interpenetration. The heart of education lies here, in the disclosure of being’s limitless plenitude, the praise of whose riches engenders both the common discipline and the common joy of both teacher and student alike.

We can fittingly conclude with Balthasar’s description of the child’s first awakening to consciousness, which, as the present book seeks to show, remains the perennial source of the entire pedagogical act:

When, standing just a short distance away, the mother looks smilingly at her child, she prepares the occurrence of a wonder, for one day the child, in his turn, will recognize the sheltering love expressed on his mother's face, and he will answer this love with a first smile of his own. This event enacts with primal force an intuition so perfect, so immediate, that the only proper response is to marvel at it as a miraculous wonder: love, that most original principle, has been understood, and through this understanding the slumbering bud of self-consciousness begins to open in the child; love between I and Thou becomes the disclosure of the world and, more deeply, of being itself in its absolute, limitless plenitude. And insofar as this opening occurs by reason of love, being's unlimited fullness shows itself as the quintessence of all consistency and rectitude, in short, as a truth that is identical with the Good. The intuition described here always occurs as part of the concrete encounter between mother and child, and it therefore conveys just the opposite of an abstract concept of being. Nevertheless, it, too, bears a limitless fullness, one reaching into ultimacy, into the divine, which explains why, at first, the child cannot conceive any separation between his parents' [or teachers': AS] love and God himself. Love, it thus becomes clear to him, realizes itself only in a vis-à-vis, which is held together in its difference by the spirit of love, which, far from threatening the vis-à-vis, intensifies it in this very act.[ii]

[i] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, "Zahme Xenien, IV."

[ii] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Wenn Ihr nicht werdet wie dieses Kind* (Freiburg: Johannesverlag, 1998), 19f.

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