



Humanum

Issues in Family, Culture & Science

FEATURE ARTICLE

Issue Four / 2015

The Discovery of Freedom: Incarnate Education and the Work of the Child

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Advocates for the use of computer technology in the classroom tout all manner of benefits that tablets promise for the education of young children—they are stimulating, interactive, and effective. The increasingly widespread use of such novel technologies provokes us to ask: what place do tools have in mediating education? What is the end of education, and what sort of objects can rightly serve as means towards that end? If we keep the scope of this question restricted to early childhood education, we find, in addition to the tablet, that there are other models for including a mediating third in the relationship between teacher and student. As one serious alternative to instructional technologies, we can take the example of the so-called “materials” employed in Montessori education.

The Montessori *Casa dei Bambini*, also called the primary classroom, serves children aged 3–6. The casa employs a host of simple but articulate objects, or materials, that are meticulously designed to support the child’s learning. Maria Montessori spoke of this classroom as a “prepared environment,” in which materials are arranged according to overlapping spheres of knowledge. In this prepared environment, children are individually taught to work with materials in a graduated order. Once he has been shown the form according to which he should interact with a given material, the child is permitted to select it for his work. Throughout the “work period,” children in the *casa* choose materials to which they have been introduced from the shelves in the prepared environment. The whole of the Montessori method revolves around the activity of the child’s slow work with one material at a time.

Invoking this method therefore intensifies our initial question: in what sense can artificial things belong to the act of genuine learning? In what follows, we argue that Montessori materials and tablets offer radically different responses to this problem. In comparing the two here, we prescind from any metric that could project or tabulate the respective outcomes of these approaches to teaching, since surveys and calculation can never be an accurate test of *goodness*. Instead, we proceed by first contemplating the meaning that each of these tools manifests, and then by asking which of these meanings is more adequate to the education of a

small child (or indeed of any human person). After reflecting on the role of the material in the primary classroom (1), we distinguish the tablet from the material in terms of the relationship between appearance and depth that each exhibits (2). What comes to light in the comparison between Montessori materials and the tablet is that these do not merely represent two different kinds of objects, but two different ways of mediating (3). In an effort to specify what we see as the difference between these orders, we will speak here of incarnate mediation (instantiated in Montessori materials) and virtual mediation (typified by the tablet), each of which embeds its own vision of education. Moreover, we maintain that each of these “tools” of learning realizes a different understanding of the child’s fulfillment (4) and a different sense of relation to the world and its Creator (5). Throughout we mount a case against virtual education, doing so in the hopes of contributing to discussions both on the nature of education and, more broadly, on the ontological significance of ‘things.’[i]

1. Incarnation and Incorporation

Before addressing these two ways of being means—the incarnate and the virtual—it will be instructive to first consider the *telos* of education as Montessori understands it. Characteristic of Montessori’s educational theory is her insistence that teaching should be focused on the child’s attainment of independence. She sees it as the imperative of the educator to remove all obstacles that inhibit the development of the child’s spontaneous self-direction. We have to admit that there seems to be a perilous ambiguity in this idea of independence: isn’t it specifically the grandeur of the child to rejoice in depending on the love and care of others?[ii] Doesn’t the child reveal to us in a privileged way that freedom does not first consist in sovereign self-reliance?

As Montessori means the term, independence does not refer to, for instance, the mere fortification of one’s will against infringement by other, competing wills. Rather, she prefers to think of independence as unimpeded, well-cultivated growth. She conceives of the child’s growth as the unfolding of its nature, and thus treats nature in an Aristotelian fashion as the immanent and pervasive principle of a being’s development and fulfillment.[iii] Growth here would be understood as the epiphany of form, the manifestation of what a given organism is, the materially-expressed emergence of its deepest identity. In Montessori’s view, it is the first responsibility of parents and caretakers to both safeguard and *promote* the innate impulse of the child towards such self-burgeoning. In human persons, she affirms, the vital growth of the body accompanies and supports the flourishing of spirit in consciousness and freedom. Her method thus begins from contemplation of the ordered but pliant way in which embodied persons naturally aspire towards corporeal-spiritual perfection. As a sentient and intelligent agent, the child becomes himself always through living involvement with other persons and the physical environment in which he has his place. The formation of his identity is inseparable from his augmented capacity for belonging to a world. This principle stands behind Montessori’s conception of the materials employed in the prepared environment. These are instruments, so to speak, for fostering and awakening potentialities immanent in the child’s given constitution. It is therefore the nature of the child that is the standard for the design and relative ordering of these materials. However, this also means that the child’s rise into freedom is most basically, and abidingly, an act of obedience to an order that it has been given to embody. The liberties of the child in the Montessori classroom are always subordinate to this primary, encompassing obedience to nature. This perspective entails the affirmation that the child is originally good, so that education’s whole purpose is to reverentially enable the child’s goodness to prosper on the basis of his own substantial resources—*i.e.*, to grow.

Since physiological development is integral to the maturation of selfhood, Montessori materials are oriented towards engaging the child in bodily movements. They nurture the

child's growth into his own body by the specific interactions for which they call. For instance, the repeated deed of pouring grains or water from one pitcher to another at once enhances the child's muscular strength and balance, while exercising his capacity for concentration. As he grows, the child naturally seeks the fine and gross motor skills that allow him to engage in more sophisticated tasks, and these can only be developed through habitual actions. These materials are designed to support the refinement of the child's movements and sensitivity to the world around him, of which the prepared environment is an interpretive microcosm. Already in the early work of pouring grains, the child is beginning to develop more precise movements in his hands, which Montessori rightly identifies as a major locus of intelligent human engagement with the world. Indeed, the formation of the child's grip and dexterity is a central occupation of an array of materials in the primary classroom, most of which have no express application to advanced manual tasks like writing, even as they indirectly prepare for such feats.[iv]

This indirect aim of helping the child to acquire coordinated movement is especially pronounced in the first lessons introduced to the youngest children in the primary classroom. Notably, the materials with which these works are concerned are also those that are most obviously identifiable as the ordinary things of the home. Fitted to the scale of a child's body, brooms, brushes, and cloths equip the child to perform real tasks in the first community to which he belongs, the family. As recognizable and useful objects, these tools serve a limited purpose that can be brought to a satisfying fulfillment by the young child. At the same time, these "practical life" materials are already preparing the child for more subtle and conceptual work in future years. The child is gradually introduced to higher works in an ordered way at the point when he exhibits a readiness for them. While materials like graded geometric figures are more abstract than basins or even bells, their physicality is no less intrinsic to the work to be done with them. Rather, the child's bodily movement in cooperation with these materials must only become more precise, integrating and enhancing the habits and skills he had previously incorporated. The finesse called for by subtler materials is not a departure from the corporeality more overtly exhibited in basic works, but instead expresses the more acute embodiment of the growing child.

Higher materials guide the child in increasingly delicate sensory differentiation, which is at once somatic and intellectual. For instance, through such work the child learns the real proportions of pitches or shapes, which are neither simply empirical nor simply conceptual. Working with these materials, he arrives at the tacit apprehension of principles that increase his awareness of reality. As his sensitivity to experience is enriched, the child can more adeptly discern the orderedness and meaning of the world around him. His incarnate repetition of such activities is for the sake both of his organic perfection and of his knowledge of the truth communicated by the given work.

To better secure the reason for wedding the child's spiritual awakening to his sensory experience and bodily development, we can invoke in a cursory way the anthropology of St. Thomas Aquinas. Appropriating Aristotle, Thomas argues that the soul is intrinsically available to know the truth of anything, its immaterial form. This means that the soul is always related to things as intelligent, and is therefore in some sense already "interior" to all things even before actively knowing them (*anima est quodammodo omnia*). Correspondingly, beings are always already apt for being-known, and therefore exist from their beginning in relation to minds.[v] By its nature the intellect possesses in itself the principles for drawing forth this intelligibility of things, or wholes. Readiness for truth is original to the soul; it is always already "placed" before and with things, so that all one's acts of knowing are but the recapitulation and ratification of one's fundamental orientation. This inborn orientation towards the depths of things means that the soul is fulfilled precisely in conforming itself to

truth. The soul more intensively belongs to itself the more it stands outside of itself in knowing and loving another whole.

For the human person, composed as he is of body and soul in their natural union, the knowledge of forms is always mediated by the sensory experience of individual, corporeal beings.[vi] For this reason, the human intellect is always capable of attaining to the universal, the immaterial idea, but only in and through its embodiment in the particular whole. Meaning is accessible in things, and only bodies let this meaning open to a human mind. The operations of the soul therefore depend in part upon the integrity of organs like the brain and the eye, or the muscular coordination of one's hands, through which one can become familiar with the material features of beings. It is on the basis of the knowledge to which sensory experience gives rise that the human person can apprehend, affirm, and desire the goodness of things. In the Montessori method, the young child's body develops precisely in and through movements that acquaint him with other things. As he incorporates these habits of relating to things, so does he contemplate and come to understand that which they express. These insights are indirectly accompanied by the child's growth in self-reflexivity, and, in turn, his liberation for encounter with the world, in relation to which he can exercise his own freedom.[vii]

2. Materialized Abstractions

We have begun by dwelling at such length with the growth of the child's body because this brings to light the significance of the material's own (artificial) body. Montessori insisted that each material be modest and beautiful so that it would call forth the interest and delight of the child. However, not only must its look be pleasing of itself, but its ordered appearance must directly serve its purpose of imparting meaning to the child using it. That is, its sensible shape is intrinsic to the material's role as bearer of truth. Its beauty is not a decorative embellishment deployed to market a ware that cannot commend itself. The truth that the material embodies is not a fact for the transmission of which the material is an indifferent device. Rather, its manifest beauty is of a piece with its expressive intelligibility. The definition and orderedness of these limited objects belongs intrinsically to their ability to indicate universal principles with which they are not identical. Montessori sought to capture this idea by referring to these objects as "materialized abstractions." The appearance of the thing's body, both in its pleasing form and in its specificity, is a precise place in which the child has access to the truth the thing represents.

His corporeal repetition of work with the material—his prolonged and immersive engagement with the visible, audible, and tangible thing—brings the child into "contact" with its inner meaning, as given through its surface. However, while this surface is encountered as transparent to a depth embodied in it, the child's task is not to wrest a secret content from a discardable frame. The surface is not an obstacle that provokes the child to a contest whose prize is a discrete *datum* behind that which he handles. On the contrary, the "resistance" that material thinghood offers the child's experience attests to the indispensability of its appearance. Only by receiving and learning the thing's limits does the child let it properly communicate that which transcends its singularity. It is of course true that the material is relative to principles that the child comes to understand on the basis of interaction with it, but the material can only impart that to which it points by possessing its own beautiful, good, and true integrity. This integrity extends to the whole of the material's externality. The accessibility of its ideal depth to a spiritual creature like a human person does not mean that the grasp of this depth renders the material's outside redundant; indeed, such "liminality" is precisely what ratifies the abiding significance of its appearance. For this reason, it is fruitful for the child to linger with the solid objects of the prepared environment, and to repeat his work with them. Though an inanimate artifact, the material is a whole that calls for a disciplined patience

analogous to that which is operative in the reciprocal self-revealing of persons—think of the unsurpassable character of the human face. The material can elicit such patience because it is made in imitation of the wholeness that obtains in natural bodies, including the inseparable and unconfused union of depth and appearance in it.

The tablet, by contrast, exhibits at once a hybridization and a divorce of surface and depth. On the one hand, its screen eliminates the distinction between outside and inside. It would be easy to dismiss the tablet on the grounds of superficiality, and this accusation is not simply false. It is more to the point, however, to recognize that it is not *sufficiently* superficial. Through its absorption of all profundity and hiddenness into an exhaustively available simulation, the tablet deprives its icons of any capacity to signify. The ability to “move through” the apparent layers of folders and pages that shimmer flatly on the screen covers over the fact that these displays do not yield to any real penetration. Rather, each appearance merely links to another appearance that stands horizontally beside, rather than inside, the previous; window opens onto window. As such, the tablet does not afford a place for rest, but only a course for continual scrolling that never arrives. The ready visibility of the tablet’s surface disguises its powerlessness to grant access to anything beyond itself. This depthlessness, however, means that there is also no definite appearance to take seriously; the mutability of its display seems to be entirely subject to its user’s manipulation. The fact that there are necessary limits to this engineering by the operator is only regrettable, and each updated version of the tablet’s technology will seek to further surmount these frustrating frontiers. The collapse of all interiority and provenance into the immediate spectacle of the screen evacuates appearances of dignity, such that they no longer present a norm to be observed. There is nothing stable here that can challenge the child to stay, to listen, to obey.

On the other hand, the tablet also commits a thorough *dissociation* of form from content. This is evident first in the structure of the device itself. With no pretensions to beauty or meaning, the sleekness and plainness of the machine underscores its emptiness to carry whatever graphics can be arranged from the pixels it deploys. This neutrality of form to content is a lesson in itself: doesn’t such plasticity represent art’s improvement over the substantial fixity or “this-ness” of natural entities? The form of this non-holistic artifact militates against bodiliness; it neuters the flesh. By rebelling against the imitation of natural forms, such technology covertly supplants the primacy of these wholes and interprets them as deficient copies of itself. What this means is that it changes the sense of thinghood *tout court* according to its own paradigm.[viii] For the tablet, the limits of identity to which the boundaries of the body attest are themselves impediments to power that ought to be surmounted.

This bifurcation of form and content is repeated in the applications stored on the tablet, of which we are here considering those manufactured for the education of young children. Such programs are designed to convey units of information to their users with maximum efficiency. For the purposes of the classroom, their form should be aimed at keeping the child transfixed long enough for them to pass on ideas or lessons as promptly, clearly and distinctly as possible. In natural things, the ideal (immaterial form) is only found within the real (the existing whole) that it pervades and organizes from within. Montessori materials imitate natural beings by embodying the ideas they are made to express. In wholes, the disclosure of the ideal is hardly automatic. The programs employed by tablets, by contrast, isolate ideas in a way that even overcomes the need for attention. The consequence of parting truth from complete beings is not simply that truth is thereby disembodied, rendered ghostly, but, more paradoxically, that truth loses its properties of immateriality and transcendence. It is hardened into a packet of data that is capable of being downloaded onto the child’s memory, understood here as circuitry. At issue in the difference between incarnate and virtual mediation is the opposition between formation and conditioning, between cultivation and programming, between

evocation and violence.

The tablet's materiality frames a display that hastily denudes itself in favor of a content to which it remains entirely incidental. The diaphanous quality of the Montessori material, its capacity to express, depends on its own opacity, even "modesty." The tablet's self-effacement, on the other hand, conflates teaching with input. By their simplicity and obdurate definition, Montessori materials invoke in the child a certain disinterestedness. This reflects a sense for the material as an "other" to the child, which withstands a forward advance. It gently invites the child's exertion in engagement with it, whereas the tablet uses its putative boundlessness to mesmerize the child into docility. While virtual education takes the person as a resource susceptible to being produced, incarnate education prepares its student for living in companionship with other beings.

What, then, does this technology say about the child's relation to the world? Virtual mediation, we contend, betrays a misplaced concern to protect the child from his environment and the challenges it presents, challenges that should serve to enliven the child's freedom to respond. The tablet seeks an attractive relatability that unwittingly prejudices the child against the uncomfortable formidability of things. Its flux of simulacra tells the child that his environment is a frustrating or threatening obstacle, and bespeaks a sense of freedom as the clearing away of inhibitions set by nature. Bodily involvement is superfluous for the acquisition of "truth." By sparing the child the patience needed to receive and enter into another, the tablet partially blocks the child's contact with a world of wholes, none of which can be controlled by the single stroke of a fingertip. This mode of relating to things prevents the child from finding himself at home in this world.

3. Mediating Direction

The determinate body of each Montessori material structures the child's interaction with it from the outset. He must continually adjust himself to the concreteness of something that precedes and guides his initiative. Indeed, the whole of the child's work in the prepared environment comprises such adjustment or correspondence to the anterior order of things. The teacher in a Montessori classroom, whom Montessori preferred to speak of as the "directress," has an integral role in mediating the child's standing towards the material. That she "directs" implies both that she is herself relative to a truth of which she is not the arbiter, and that the child's knowledge of this truth must come through an experience to which she can only invite him. In this sense, she stands with the child in his act of discovery.

The directress can be efficacious in her role first because she is herself determined by the actuality of the materials in the prepared environment. To be sure, it is she who arranges the environment to best foster the development of her pupils. Likewise, she is responsible for judging when a child is ready to work with a new material and for introducing the child to the right use of that material. However, in all of this the directress always serves the event of encounter between child and material. This means that she first must take a contemplative stance towards the materials, since it is such a stance into which she seeks to bring the children in her class. More profoundly, however, it is the child who is the first object of her reverence, and it is from him that her action must take its measure.

All forms of education can succeed to the extent that the teacher has the good of the student in view. It is the teacher's love of the student and her desire for his perfection that precedes and enables the student's learning. In its very form, the method employed in the Montessori classroom embodies this pedagogical structure of love in a particular way. The directress initiates the encounter of a child with a new work when she recognizes that he has

incorporated the kind of habits that prepare him to successfully engage this material. She begins in contemplation of the child, out of which she proceeds to invite him to receive a lesson in the new work. She goes on to prepare the child for an ordered use of this material by modelling to him the pattern of this interaction. The child's first exposure to a work, then, calls for obedient attention to the movements of another: the child is introduced to the material as he attends to the concentration of the directress on her task. The directress educates him by looking towards the work, and he discovers his work by contemplating his directress. Through her objective enjoyment of and reverence for the material, on display in her peaceful exemplification of its proper use, the directress liberates the child to answer her by entering into his own relationship with the material. It is by turning her focus to the work she is demonstrating to the child that the directress walks alongside the child towards his own intimate awakening to truth.

Montessori speaks of the directress as the "dynamic link" through whom the child is initiated into his vis-à-vis meeting with the objects of the environment. Often, such modelling will have to be repeated before the child has internalized the form of action he himself must exercise. However, once the child has been shown the pattern he should follow, the directress withdraws to leave him to his work. She commends the child to his own proper task, sending him away from herself, as it were, into the risk of an encounter. Having begun his engagement with a particular material by beholding its exemplary use, the child goes on, in his imitative appropriation of this pattern of action, to find in the material itself the norm of his interaction with it. The structured use that he has learned from his directress is what opens the space for him to discover the thing. Throughout this process, the child is met with an order that is prior to his will, into which he has been personally initiated. At the same time, he has been prepared and released to venture his own attempt at receiving what the material itself has to say. It is vital that the directress not anticipate the child's work by clearly spelling out a lesson that the child is to extract from the work. Likewise, this work is not a riddle that the child can be "over and done with" once he has teased out a solution. Rather, learning happens for the child in the slow process of merely remaining with the material, which is what its "right use" supports. It is in this doing, which is no less contemplative for being "experimental," that the child incorporates the principles materialized in the object. The directress does not abandon the child to fend for himself, but gives him all he needs in order to fulfill his work. Likewise, she does not leave him to indulge his own whims. There is room here for puzzlement and for the slow ripening of the child's insight, but the child's risk is pervaded by the atmosphere of the original trust that the directress has exhibited towards him, which carries his own willingness to persevere. In this way, the directress remains present with the child, eliciting and enabling his own action, without replacing or otherwise preempting it.

The child becomes immersed in repetition of a work, in making new attempts at incorporating its *logos*. To observe a child in the prepared environment is to find him absorbed in the slow exercise of abiding with the work before him. At its best, the environment facilitates the child's ability to inhabit the material to which he is attending; he turns his focus away from himself to imaginatively rest in the thing before him. Such indwelling is the condition for the child's grasp of the meaning immanent in a given material. At the same time, it is this grasp—which occurs in and with the work and not merely "after" its completion—through which the child realizes and unfolds his freedom. The growth of the child that it is the purpose of the material to facilitate is never focal in the child's interaction with it, but his self-abandonment to a task that draws him beyond himself is the very place where he comes to himself.

The child thus discovers himself precisely where he loses himself in meaningful work. Just as the directress pointed away from herself in introducing the child to the material, so too does the child forget himself in focusing on his work with the material. The instruction of the

directress was oblique, disinterested: she made no objectives explicit other than to interact in an ordered way with the material. This is reflected in the child's own quiet absorption in the material, which is itself the source of his enjoyment and repose, not his own success in working with it. However, the material can serve the end of bringing truth to light for the child and thereby of expanding the child's sphere of action only because it is itself worthy of the child's attention. The indirectness of the child's aim has to do with the nature of the material itself. It is not that the material uses subterfuge to sneak in teaching while distracting the child with amusements. Rather, it only has the power to lead the child beyond itself because it is itself an engaging, attractive, and good whole in which the child can immerse himself. Because the work communicates a transcendent meaning without directly bypassing its surface, it is capacious enough for the child to rest in and with it.[ix]

The self-forgetfulness that characterizes the child's indwelling of the material is quite different from the oblivion instilled by the fascinating diversions that virtual education relies on for the attainment of its goals. The "edu-tainment" that programs on a tablet provide is a tactic that beguiles the child into learning supposedly boring content through a supposedly fun form. By this technique, such programs mask a false view of work (as necessary but unfulfilling drudgery) with a false view of play (as a fantastic escape from limits). Despite these distortions, there is a true sense in which the child's absorption in his work shares in the nature of play.[x] An objection sometimes posed against the Montessori method is that it neglects the vital place of play in the child's life, and prematurely seeks to mold the child according to an adult form of labor. To the contrary, the child's bodily handling of the material, his prolonged abiding with his work, and his availability to the gradual self-disclosure of the material all integrate dimensions proper to child's play into his education. These dimensions all converge on the character of the work as its own relative end, interaction with which is good for its own sake. Just as the grace of play is pervaded by the child's trust in the faithfulness of his parents and his original experience of the world's goodness, this play-like work is predicated on trust in the real, as embodied in the materials themselves. The material yields itself only when the child gives himself to it attentively; such disinterested and satisfying engagement of one's freedom is as much play as it is work.[xi]

Montessori instruction is contemplative in its very form, and therefore reveres the child as good prior to his work and the material as good prior to its use. By contrast, we argue, the tablet mobilizes an order of learning that is essentially productive. Virtual mediation is predicated on an implicit worldview in which things are vacant of intrinsic goodness, and its whole enterprise contributes to the reification of the living child. The cybernetic canon of factuality (not truth) and value (not goodness) is functionality. It is this outlook into which the tablet conditions, or programs, its operator. This can be more clearly seen in the difference of the tablet's mechanics of transmission from the indirectness with which the child learns from the Montessori material. The virtual mode of instructing sets for itself the task of equipping students with the know-how needed to perform certain pointed operations. Programs are designed to efficiently convey information to the child, and thus take a rectilinear approach to this data-transfer. The passive "learning" that the tablet supports is a uni-directional delivery of facts or ideas that treats the child technologically, insofar as the child is meant to record the input that is sent to it. Such imposition fails to liberate the child to the kind of freedom that is inherent in play and all feats of excellence. This mode of education represents a kind of training, but does not call the child to an incorporation of habits that allow him to more readily receive the manifold world about him. Indeed, the ulterior motives of this training treat the child as a functionary rather than as an agent whose flourishing can be regarded as a worthy end in itself. At the same time, the tablet also stands in the place of the teacher, since it holds all the information the child needs. In principle, if not yet in fact, the teacher is left with the role of maintaining the technology and regulating its use, rather than serving as the

indispensable guide into the mystery of being.

The mode in which the directress leads the child to understanding, the child's objective in interacting with a material, the material's access to the truth it communicates: all of these have an oblique rather than rectilinear trajectory. The directress *lets* the child discover the material, the child *lets* the material reveal itself to him, and the material *lets* the child indwell it—and here *letting* is a mode of *enabling*, of *actualizing*. This three-fold obliqueness of teaching, learning, and mediation preserves each of the three members of the educational event—directress, child, and material—from functionalization. The result of this indirect approach is a surprise: the “lesson” comes forth from the child as though the insight has its source in him. Indeed, this is often regarded as a hallmark of the Montessori method. We can affirm that incarnate education enables the child to “teach himself,” but we must be careful to guard against obvious misunderstandings of this claim. By no means is this self-directed learning and discovery exercised as a self-formation divorced from and set against authority and dependence. In the first place, the child lets the material he encounters have its effect on him. Likewise, it is the form that he has received from his directress, as well as her self-withdrawing entrustment of him to his work, in which she continues to accompany him “invisibly,” that has yielded fruit in his richer knowledge and freedom. The “self-teaching” of the child is the success of the directress in him, and his discovery is always drawn forth through a more basic receptivity.[xii] Thus, it is in pointing to the material that the directress remains intimately present in the child's acting without propping or substituting his own efforts. Through her surrender, she frees him so that the truth which the material mediates can come forth from the child himself—as if, *mirabile dictu*, for the first time. It is in this sense that incarnate mediation has a form that shares in that of love. Compare this to the tablet, which, in its rectilinear management and conditioning of the child, replaces and obscures the personal role of the teacher, and thereby ends up stifling both the child's capacity *for* surprise and the child's capacity *to* surprise.

4. Discovering Reality

Throughout we have been speaking of the use of materials for the purpose of freeing the child through his encounter with truth. How can we hold together this utilizing of the material with the affirmation of its wholeness? Doesn't such instrumentality amount to the same function served by the tablet or any other media? In the end, aren't the two essentially convertible with one another?

In the prepared environment, it is the material's own goodness that draws and empowers the child's agency in relation to it. While the child's interaction with the material is an act that is performed for its own sake, this end is nevertheless instrumental towards the child's own awakening, development, and flourishing. The material is an educational tool. However, his contemplation of the material for-its-own-sake is the first lesson that the child is meant to learn from this instrument. Yes, the material's ultimate end, in the context of the Montessori *casa*, is to serve the emergence of the child into awareness of truth and free self-movement. That is, even as the end of the child's attention and bodily engagement is the contemplative interaction with the thing, this work is still subordinated to the child's liberation through his work. Indeed, the child's initiation into the reception of and involvement in reality is always and at once the formation of his own creative self-expression *vis-à-vis* the world. The person's conscious spontaneity always grows and is realized in correspondence to the prior order of the intelligibility and desirability of things. However, this points to the truth that the educational material as means is not a dispensable vehicle whose function is the efficient relay of data; the child is liberated through and in his work only because the material has its own integrity and finality (even as symbolic). Here utility and gratuity are not at odds with one another. The

material's status as its own subordinate end is the *sine qua non* for the higher end of the child's discovery of freedom, for it is the nature of freedom to adhere only to the good.[xiii]

If his sensory experience of materials engenders in the child the consciousness of certain principles, it is his integration of these principles that blossoms in the child's fuller relationship to reality. The material does not only disclose a teaching *about* the world, but quietly transforms the child so that the world itself is open to him in a new way. His new awareness of reality frees him to engage with things more subtly and more intimately. As the call of the goodness of things becomes more perceptible to the child, so can his embrace of things be more ample and confident. This is expressed within the prepared environment in the progression of materials: the insight afforded by an earlier work yields access to a higher work. The fact that the more advanced child has more options of works to choose from only subordinately reflects the more fundamental truth: this child is freer to enter into, dwell with, and rest in the reality of things. He thus has a more comprehensive vantage, and from this follows the greater number of objects that are available for his embodied contemplation. Choice is thus integrated within the ordering of freedom. This returns us to the question, posed at the beginning of this article, of what Montessori means by independence. Our reflections on the child's growth, on materialized abstractions, and on the role of the directress make it clear that Montessori sees this independence as correlative with formation, with being-ordered from without. Far from the mere approbation of the child's ability to wield his own will apart from the direction of another, independence here means the child's ability to consciously and imaginatively assent to the world. The child is shaped by the actuality of a world that faces him in advance. His entry into relation with this world demands a process of growth, which necessarily draws upon the developing person's cooperation. Incarnate education is thus a strenuous and rewarding *feat*. However, this does not mean that the world stands imposingly before the child as an obstacle to be overcome. The freedom at which the formation of the child arrives should not be regarded as a kind of mastery that subjects the conquered realm to the productive powers of its colonist and pioneer.

The victory of freedom is commitment to the real. Freedom has its satisfaction, its realization, in embracing the prior truth and goodness of the universe. This does not represent a passive posture, for such an embrace engages the entire person, and serves one's perfection. Nor does this victory entail an assertion of power or the defeat of an opponent, but the total affirmation through which one can enjoy communion with another. Freedom is not attained in opposition to that which oneself is not, but in a reciprocity with one's other that includes assent to the other's difference from oneself. The child is "independent" to the extent that he comes to freely entrust himself to, participate in, and abide with the plenitude of the reality into which he has been conceived and born. He is carried into this movement by the loving freedom of his elders and the anterior goodness of things, but is carried in such a way that his own spontaneous collaboration can arise from his maturing spirit.

5. Sacramental Things

The Montessori method embeds a *Weltanschauung* according to which the prior wholeness of things discloses the criterion for our relation towards them. The child's work in the prepared environment is fundamentally responsive and abidingly contemplative. The view that well-ordered artifacts have an integrity of their own—and, by virtue of this integrity, symbolically mediate truths that transcend their particularity—is a view that is inwardly open to a metaphysics of creation. Things possess their own intelligibility and goodness because they participate in the being of the God who is intimately present to each creature that he grants to be, preserves in existence, and releases to its own substantiality and proper activity. To own that things are good before human labor and fabrication makes them so is to hold that things

are naturally epiphanous of a divine goodness that precedes them ontologically and upon which they constantly depend. Thus, the density of existing wholes can indirectly elicit the human person's innate desire for happiness in communion with God. Indeed, this affirmation of the finite world is already implicitly religious, and is even ingredient in any adequate sense of God as eminently worthy of grateful praise. It is no coincidence, then, that Montessori saw her method as culminating in worship; in fact, she explicitly conceived this method in light of the Catholic liturgy. It is appropriate, therefore, to speak of Montessori's approach to her materials as informed by a sacramental vision of nature, and therefore as an initiation into what Balthasar referred to as the "piety of Being." [xvi]

We have argued that virtual education is an obstacle towards an embrace of reality as holy, and is thus an inhibitor of the child's freedom. Virtuality is but the currently-trending model of nihilism. [xvii] This is why the large-scale adoption of tablets in schools is so distressing and dire. If embodied contemplation, of which the Montessori method is but one possible expression, frees the child for fruition of the world, this is because it takes seriously the unity of the ideal and the real in things both natural and artificial. In this way, incarnate mediation forms the student, indirectly but truly, towards the freedom of thanksgiving manifest in adoring and consuming the Eucharistic body and blood of Jesus Christ, which brooks no simulation.

[i] The work of Martin Heidegger represents one of the most robust efforts to retrieve the category of the thing as a viable matter for philosophical reflection. See the essays collected in Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: HarperCollins, 1971).

[ii] "To be a child is to owe one's existence to another." Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Unless You Become Like This Child*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 49.

[iii] Aristotle, *Physics* II.1-3 (192b, 8–195b, 30); III.1-3 (200b–202b, 30). Also, Maria Montessori, *The Discovery of the Child*, trans. M. Joseph Costelloe, S.J. (Amsterdam: Montessori-Pierson, 2007), 57–65. For instance, on p. 63: "[The child] grows because his potentialities for life are actualized, because the fertile seed from which life comes is developing according to its natural destiny. ... Life increases, becomes manifest, and perfects the individual, but it is confined within limits and is governed by insuperable laws. Therefore, when we speak of the freedom of a small child...we understand by this the freeing of his life from the obstacles which can impede his normal development."

[iv] Montessori wrote a number of eloquent reflections on the significance of the hand for human intelligence and freedom, in which she also explains the place of the hand's development in the prepared environment. See, *inter alia*, Maria Montessori, *The Secret of Childhood*, trans. M. Joseph Costelloe, S.J. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), 80–87; and *The Absorbent Mind*, trans. Claude A. Claremont (Amsterdam: Montessori-Pierson, 2007), 136–44.

[v] The ground of this intelligibility is, of course, its ever-prior relation to the divine Intellect by which its formful existence is always sustained. Cf. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I. Q. 16, A.1. For more on this issue, see Pieper's profound study, *The Truth of All Things [Wahrheit der Dinge]* published in Josef Pieper, *Living the Truth*, trans. Lothar Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 9–105.

[vi] See, for instance, Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I. Q.84, A.6; *De Veritate*, Q. 10, A. 6.

[vii] For a complementary discussion of childhood development in light of Thomistic

principles, see Martin Bieler, “Attachment Theory and Aquinas’s Metaphysics of Creation” in *Analecta Hermeneutica*, Volume 3 (2011).

[viii] For more on this inherently pedagogical property of technology, see George Parkin Grant, *Technology and Justice* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1987).

[ix] This is what is at stake in the good opacity and superficiality of the well-ordered thing. The trustworthiness of its appearance invites the child to know and enjoy it. The non-immediacy of the depth that its surface begins to disclose affords room for the child’s intellect to inhabit it.

[x] The Christian philosopher Ferdinand Ulrich offers a remarkable reflection on the play of the child. Pondering the child’s act of building a tower from blocks of wood, Ulrich notes how the child lets his identity emerge precisely in going outside of himself into the thing he makes. Ulrich thematizes the indirectness (*Indirektheit*) according to which the child comes to himself in play, and shows how this same indirectness is recapitulated in his mother’s relation to him: sharing his delight in the tower, rather than drawing attention to him as builder, the mother commends the child to personal flourishing in his creative deed. Ulrich’s perspective here has thoroughly inspired our meditation on Montessori education. Ferdinand Ulrich, *Gabe und Vergebung: Ein Beitrag zur Biblischen Ontologie* (Freiburg: Johannes Verlag Einsiedeln, 2006), 354–70.

[xi] While we don’t want to confuse work and play, we should also see their distinction as inside of their more basic coextensiveness. “Children are not like adults./For children playing, working, resting, stopping, running, it’s all one./Together./It’s the same./They don’t make the distinction./They’re happy./They have fun all the time./As much when they work as when they play.” Charles Péguy, *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope*, trans. David Louis Schindler, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1996), 28. We might go further and say that this coextensiveness of work and play obtains also in all adequate forms of adult labor.

[xii] Commenting on Ferdinand Ulrich’s understanding of gift as the enablement of another’s fruitfulness, an event which Ulrich characterizes with the Kierkegaardian paradox that “love presupposes what it does,” Stefan Oster reflects on the pedagogical act in terms similar to our own. He writes: “The child brings forth entirely ‘by himself’ the very same thing that the educator proposed to him as a kind of ‘future.’ The child could do this because the proposal preceded him, lying as it did in the freedom of the educator. At the same time, however, what the child brings forth had always lain in him, was always the presupposition of the educator’s love. We thus return to Kierkegaard: Love presupposes that what it achieves in the other is already there.” Stefan Oster, “Thinking Love at the Heart of Things: The Metaphysics of Being as Love in the Work of Ferdinand Ulrich,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 37.4 (Winter 2010): 660–700.

[xiii] Analogously, craft, which first takes its cue from the thing made and serves this work as its own intrinsically worthy end, is always directed beyond itself to the flourishing of persons, both that of the worker and those whom his work will serve. Here the instrumentality of that which is made is not at the expense of its relative finality. Likewise, the instrumentality of the worker towards his craft, far from an instance of abasement, is the very path along which he is liberated into flourishing. So it is that Pope Saint John Paul II wrote that work “is not only good in the sense that it is useful or something to enjoy; it is also good as being something worthy, that is to say, something that corresponds to man’s dignity, that expresses this dignity and increases it. If one wishes to define more clearly the ethical meaning of work, it is this truth that one must particularly keep in mind. Work is a good thing for man—a good thing for his humanity—because through work man not only transforms nature, adapting it to his own

needs, but he also achieves fulfilment as a human being and indeed, in a sense, becomes ‘more a human being.’” Pope John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, §9.

[xiv] St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I. Q.8, a.1; Q.104, aa.1-2; Q.105, a.5. Perhaps it is not too audacious to think of the invisible role of the directress in the work of the child as an image of God’s liberating but hidden presence to all things.

[xv] For more on this, see the collection of essays *The Child in the Church*, ed. E.M. Standing (Chantilly: The Madonna and Child Atrium).

[xvi] “[A] ‘supernatural’ piety, oriented to God’s historical revelation, cannot be such unless it is mediated by a ‘natural’ piety, which at this level presupposes and includes a ‘piety of nature’ and a ‘piety of Being.’” Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, vol. 1: *Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press), 447.

[xvii] Universal (transcendental) goodness implies the existence of an infinitely transcendent Good. Indeed, goodness is the objective reflection, inscribed into created being itself, that the creature has been comprehensively loved into existence by God. Likewise, the foundation of the truth of each thing is its relation to the divine mind by which it is known into existence. The systematic denial of divine transcendence thus redounds on our relation to the world, reducing the horizon of meaning to immanent evidence, and ultimately evacuating worldly things of prior goodness and truth. In its place, man arbitrarily dictates the value of things. Having deprived himself of a sense for the transcendent, he has to compensate for what he perceives as the innate deficiency of the world through his assertive act of “estimation” (Nietzsche). In this case, goodness has been collapsed into the immanent act of the will, whose power is not actualized by the call of a beloved (God, person, world) that precedes it, exceeds it, and makes a claim upon it. Whether a person or an institution identifies as atheist or not, a forceful relation to the world that is primarily experimental, constructive, and consumeristic betrays that such a forgetfulness of God has already effectively taken place. “God is dead, and we have killed him.” What preserves the child’s original wonder at the felicitous blessing of existence is his opening into the worship of the transcendent God, for the promise of this relationship to God is already latent in one’s most basic experience. The child’s naïve and innate confidence in the world and in his parents, the confidence out of which he can freely play, is saved to the extent that it develops into a more all-embracing trust—namely, faith in the ever-faithful God. Worship thus leaves open the space in which persons can recognize and assent to the goodness of things; conversely, awakening to such goodness is already a movement that aspires towards worship. In the context of our study here, incarnate education (manifest first of all parental rearing) enables the human person to grow into such doxological freedom in part by fostering his reverence for the givenness of things as bearers of an ever-greater meaning.

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