

The self-willed child - Basic needs and education in post-mythic times Outlines of a responsive pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

From the beginning of its existence, the child is articulating an unconditional claim to life. Even in the post-mythic era, or rather in the myth-critical world of the modern age, education is confronted with the difficult task of responding to this claim - but now without the possibility of being able to legitimise its interventions and actions by appealing to an unquestionably absolute authority. First of all, this means questioning the coercion that is primordially inscribed in education.

May parents, may teachers, may educators force the compliance of the self-willed child? All guardians of a supposedly true and unconditional social order will answer the question with “yes”. For even since antiquity, human beings have been granted free will, but this - according to the great Church teacher Augustine in the 5th century - is “not always good”. For this reason, education was, and to some extent still is, a project to replace the “bad” self-will with a will that was as fully “good” as possible, or an attempt to at least neutralise or tame the bad parts of the will. In the case of success, so the anxious hope of education, the child can protect itself as well as the community into which it is born from “evil” and from sinful misfortune.

Since the rebellious discourse of the dignity of man, one cannot avoid including the child, even the wayward one, in the circle of dignity. As in politics, so also in education, dealing with resistance and “deviants” shows the real meaning of values such as freedom, justice, codecision, public spirit and the protection of life. The question is how the values are anthropologically justified, normatively interpreted and practically concretised. In more recent times, i.e. in the modern age that is far removed from God and critical of myths, this poses a particular challenge. Now, the legitimisation of education in general, as well as its moments of coercion in particular, can no longer be justified with a “Higher Will” as it was centuries

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ago. Coercion inevitably emanates from the authoritative counterpart of the child, from the holder of the “educational power” - as a spontaneous action of responsible adults as well as in the form of a longer-term and planned effort on the part of socially legitimised authorities.

This study attempts to provide food for thought from historical, conceptual-systematic, various theoretical and practical perspectives regarding the “eternal” question of the inherently contradictory relationship between child and educator or between individual and community/society. In the post-mythic era, according to the thesis, there is a need for a constant dialogue effort based on agreement in the sense of an authentic culture of responsive communication. According to its intention, it establishes a creative space of claim and response in which every human being has a right to a voice and a hearing. In this endeavour, the child to be educated must be included as a relevant co-creator of his or her educational process, if he or she is not to be made a mere object of foreign ambitions and demands. For the possibility of an education that respects human dignity and is resolutely oriented towards universal values is ultimately dependent on the free consent of the child and the later adult.

KEYWORDS

education, basic needs, theories of personality, responsive pedagogy, postmythical times

SELF-WILL AND FREEDOM, NORMATIVITY AND PEDAGOGICAL ACTION

Myth, including religion, as well as all supposedly objective or true social orders, still knew how to present the meaning of life and the cosmos in a coherent world view, mirroring the human longing for security and orientation, to which the educator could and was allowed to subordinate him or herself. And the educator had to use coercion when the child’s self-will threatened his or her salvation. The threat of self-will as resistance to pedagogical imperatives can be directed not only against the cared-for child himself, but also against the community into which s/he is born. Thus, every community or society has an arsenal of means, especially countermeans, with the help of which the self-will of the child as well as of human beings in general is to be restricted, kept within socially tolerable limits or brought onto the “right track”. The unwilling and unyielding, however, are threatened with adversity. Since time immemorial, this has been brought home to children in relevant proverbs, warning tales, religious texts and children’s books, among other things, in sometimes extremely drastic images.

With regard to a real society or a social ideal, the die is already cast with regard to the delicate question of one’s own and free will before the question enters the consciousness of the actors as a real social and psychological problem. The resistant is urged to integration, subordination, obedience, obedient following of the curriculum, observance of the Great Rule and all the small and petty rules derived from it - all this for the protection of oneself and the maintenance of the social order. *For free will as such knows no normative intrapsychic instance that could protect against fantasies of omnipotence and form a reliable corrective in the social world.* This means: free will does not exist on the part of the community or society, except in a more or less strongly restricted, moralised or “healed” form of itself.

ON THE ORIGIN AND SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF FREE WILL

Now who should be this “it” that gives us free will if not “oneself”? Free will is thus an impudent self-attribution. For free will can only be granted by the community or society in a relative sense,



otherwise no human association could form. Any association is based on traditional and unquestionably handed-down or consciously enacted regulations that restrict the “wild” desire of the free human being. The impudent self-attribution of free will is and remains therefore contestable in theoretical, political-pedagogical, empirical as well as recently also neurophysiological terms; and it is permanently contested or denigrated or relativised or denounced as a baseless illusion for the most diverse reasons (cf. Schmidinger/Sedmark 2005). In a distanced perspective, it can indeed turn out to be an illusion, at least in some cases, if it can be shown by the other or recognised by oneself in retrospect that one’s self-will was in fact following someone else’s will and serving someone else’s purposes. All commercially oriented advertising campaigns make use of the psychological mechanisms of need generation and will control. Entire professions live on this: designers, advertising psychologists, campaign consultants and managers, specialised media and IT experts, data collectors and data analysts, in general all the servants of the globally operating company “Big Brother & Co”. They all work on the project of replacing self-will by an alien will that is lucrative for themselves. Their success is based on the appearance of freedom of choice, i.e. on the subjectively experienced feeling of being able to decide freely between alternatives. Only critical and, above all, self-critical attention to such manipulations offers a certain protection against external disposition - a protection that is never completely secure, because no one other than oneself can ultimately decide where one’s own will succumbs to external disposition.

Free will is also occasionally relativised or denied by the accused, possibly by the “we” of a collective subject, with reference to an unconditional duty of obedience, external constraints that cannot be circumvented, reduced accountability or a special emergency situation, if this can avert or minimise the responsibility (warning, punishment, exclusion, conviction) attributed to them by others and which may have consequences under certain circumstances: “I could not or was not allowed (unfortunately) to act otherwise.” “Our hands were (unfortunately) tied.” In legal cases on the basis of most developed legal systems and in educative situations that strive for a just verdict or a just judgement, it is therefore not only a matter of establishing a fact, an achievement, a deed or of reconstructing an event, but also a non- or pre-moral effort to answer the question “how it came or could come to this”. The effort to understand and the search for the motives for the deed precede the judgement or evaluation, or at least it is supposed to.

As the self-will of the other, free will is always a thorn in the flesh of the autocrat and the ruler in general. This also applies to the democratic representative of power. The latter, however, will carry out the (possibly necessary) restrictions by conciliatory means and only resort to power politics, police and/or legal measures in an emergency. *Free will is only conscious and experienced in resistance, on both sides: by the one who ascribes it to himself or takes liberties, as well as by the one against whom it is directed.*

In contrast, the forced alignment with another or even with a “Higher Will”, as well as the alignment sought by oneself to avoid conflicts and headwinds, follows a socio-psychological mechanism that bends and, in extreme cases, destroys the self-will: “I only want to do what I am allowed to do and should do”. But society or community, the autocratic ruler or a “Higher Will” cannot completely prevent the special experience of freedom. It consists in the fact that the ego, in early childhood at first intuitively and experimentally, then more and more consciously according to possibility, can raise its own into consciousness and - provided a creative space is left on the outside - bring it into its actions. This experience gives rise to a feeling of spontaneity, a feeling of not being fixed. This feeling nourishes the primordial trust originally inherent in



everyone or, in the case of its violation, leads back to fundamental trust in the world and in oneself. "I myself can bring about something - despite all resistance. Life and the future hold something lovable for me."

Thus, one's own can only be perceived, experienced and finally cognitively grasped in resistance - in difference - to the limiting other. Self-being presupposes an awareness of the other as a being different from one's own and an always uncertain knowledge or inner image of the other, just as one's own/the self can only be formed through the other or the counterpart. Even the friendly other does not overcome difference.

CHILDREN'S SELF-WILL AND PEDAGOGICAL COERCION

Insofar as the child's self-will comes into play as resistance, the question of the function and form of coercion is unavoidable. An education without coercion, as sweet as the words may sound in the ears of freedom-lovers and pedagogical romantics, cannot really exist. The social is co-conditioned by many prior decisions as well as by those that have to be made in the situation at the moment, in acute cases of conflict especially by the primary person in charge. In their sum, the pedagogical decisions cannot congruently reflect the self-will of the addressees or even serve them without question. Compromises are necessary, sometimes painful ones. Ambivalences remain and threaten agreement and harmony. There is no way to form a quasi-instinctively functioning social human whole, however its boundaries - family, day-care group, school class or a larger community - may be defined.

The ultimate reconciliation of individual and community/society remains a dream, moreover, as history teaches, a dangerous one when endowed with excessive means of power. That is why we still need, to use a popular term in the political discourse of order, pedagogy and welfare education of the 19th century in Germany, the "Policey", as the guardian of order and law. Their actions should, of course, be subject to public control in order to avoid illegitimate encroachments. It provides protection and order in a non-perfect world in need of rules. Its power extends into the family (e.g. protection of children and young people, prohibition of corporal punishment, compulsory schooling of children). In the public space of education, the "Policey" is represented first and foremost by the educator or the teacher.

ON THE PERSONAL REPRESENTATION OF A SOCIAL ORDER AND THE ANNOYANCE OF FREEDOM

However, in the post-mythical "time-space" it is (only) a representation that is intuitively or reflexively broken by the humanity and creativity of the educator. He/she must, because he/she is denied the appeal to a "Great Rule", and he/she may (within certain limits), for the sake of the child, look the other way. For: "If the human being identifies himself completely with the law, he degrades himself to a wolf-being." (Vasse, 1973, p. 148) This means: in the multiply conditioned and necessarily socially regulated life, this life nevertheless contains, insofar as it is not subject to the total control of a "Great Rule", a congruently embedded freedom, as it were, i.e. an implication of the possibility of decision-making that is not subject to the rule or regulation, which in the concrete situation not only invites but compels a personal statement.



Following Paul Watzlawick's sentence that one "cannot not communicate", this can also be said of decision-making. "You cannot not decide."

In the social situation, especially in the pedagogical one, a personal response is thus required that mediates different demands - of the child and of the teacher as a fellow human being as well as an individual-relative representative of a social order. Both sensitivity and indifference (or ignorance) to the different claims have the quality of a response that can be momentous - e.g. recognising and heeding as well as not recognising and not heeding a child's claim or a child's need. The educator's response is only possible as a personal and thus responsible one if he or she is not under the delusion of being able to identify "perfectly with the law" or a particular social order. Only this non-perfect identification opens up the necessary space of freedom, of free decision, and thus of the possibility of responsibility. Both theoretically and practically, we encounter various ways of dealing with the implication of freedom in the history of education up to the present day - often with the aim of (at least) minimising the uncertainty and insecurity connected with it. The dictator and every totalitarian regime, on the other hand, must always try to completely eliminate the implication of freedom, insofar as it is suspected of resistance, in order to be able to enforce the perfect intrapsychic and collective identification with the "Great Prescription" and thus the allegedly perfect social order. Its great and eternal enemy is the self-reflexive Enlightenment with its insistence on truthfulness, on the factuality of the factual, on relevant participation in decisions of general scope, on the value of the free word, on publicness, on political transparency and justice.

ON THE WEAKENING OF THE GREAT MYTHS IN MODERNITY AND THE REVALUATION OF SELF-WILL

Despite all attempts at rescue, the great myths of cultural and intellectual history have largely lost their legitimacy and persuasive power under the influence of an early dogma- and later self-critical Enlightenment as well as non-theocratic (secular) social systems. Their weakening is the result not only of their respective immanent logical contradictions as well as their power-obsessed, often unfriendly actions, but also of their theoretically and politically ultimately undecidable competition with each other. Since a common myth in the public, increasingly value-heterogenous space of neither politics nor pedagogy is not in sight, despite all the efforts of a decidedly philanthropic rationality outside of well-meaning special discourses, the question of action in the post-mythological era arises, in our context the question of the guiding values of pedagogical action. Even such a space would have to search for a common ground if socially functional, meaningful or even solidary action can be thought of and is supposed to be possible. But where the horizon of a transcendental-absolute normativity has darkened, such an endeavour can only succeed on a case-by-case basis and on sight, whereby uncertainty, individual and particular interests as well as contingency remain present as "co-players" on the stage of action. This action should be able to distance itself from the educator's own ideological preferences and pre-judgements to such an extent that the needs, interests, wishes, the child's own will can come into view as something that deserves unconditional respect - as an anthropological given, a human right and a necessary condition for learning processes.

The unconditionality of free will has its subjective, lifeworldly basis in the fact that "I can think and desire what I want". Thinking as well as desiring, thus also the inner valuing of what is



given, authoritatively legislated and perceived on the outside, eludes censorship by the other - to the annoyance of all totalitarian politics and pedagogy. If free will is recognised as a basic condition of the human being and as a central aspect of its dignity, educational actions that pursue the goal of unquestioning or blind conformity to regulations or even the implementation of a “good” will to replace the “bad” will of the child must be renounced. The latter is by no means a rare strategy in pedagogy, not only in the past, and not only in hierarchical-authoritarian structured societies. Another pedagogical restriction concerns the speech and action of the child itself. Both may be restricted externally only to the extent that they do not break his or her will and do not really endanger him or herself and the other.

ON THE IRREDUCIBLE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE EDUCATOR

It is of course difficult to develop a feeling for the assessment of a possible danger, because even on this side of the obvious limit of an immediate danger to life and limb, it is important to make responsible decisions “in the here and now”, both with regard to the well-being of the child today and with regard to its (possible) future. However, their acceptance as well as the consequences on the part of the child are never completely foreseeable. This point of view points to the special importance of interaction, the encounter, the benevolent-empathetic relationship and the open dialogue between child and educator. However, it does not forget the formative influence of the numerous contextual, psychological and social conditions such as cultural or possibly “multicultural” milieu, various social influences, material as well as personal conditions, latent or manifest conflicts, finally also the limitations of knowledge and the imperfection of the actors themselves. As far as the responsibility of the educator is concerned, these factors have a relieving function. “Nothing and nobody is perfect.” Although he/she is responsible by virtue of his/her qualifications, office and duties, he/she is not “responsible for everything”. But the concrete crystallisation point of all the factors that determine the situation lies in the pedagogical action itself, namely in what happens between child and educator in the encounter of both, how they relate to each other, what they have to communicate to each other. It is conditioned by various factors, often indirectly and/or in a covert way, but not thoroughly determined. There still remains a relatively open space of freedom of decision and action. In the unique situation, however predetermined, a personal decision is demanded of the educator, which cannot be taken from any previously written script, guidebook or curriculum. This is the special responsibility of the educator. His/her decision is integrated into a more or less predefined framework, into a complex social situation - but as a decision it is unique, not predetermined, and cannot be revoked afterwards “as if it had never been made”. *Every decision leaves a trace, and sets the beginning of a new story, the continuation of which is uncertain.*

Despite the uniqueness and unrepeatability of individual decisions, meaningful action is dependent on prospecting, projecting and planning. Educational action has to deal with (at least) twofold uncertainty. Neither the conditions of success nor the conditions of failure can be reliably reconstructed causally in retrospect. Nevertheless, the question of the “why” of success or failure is justified, even if the answer itself is hypothetical and must remain so because of the unrepeatability of the (past) situation. Only in the subsequent (self-)critical reflection is it possible to gain experience, namely as a hunch or assumption that something could have gone



differently (better or worse) due to other decisions or due to other circumstances. The second inescapable uncertainty is that no future causal sequence can be derived from the hypothetical causality of past chains of events that could safely guide actions in the future. To be able to recognise and accept these uncertainties in principle and to learn to deal with them in a meaningful way little by little - this is what distinguishes the (self)critical from the autocratic educator personality, who identifies completely with the law or with the "Great Rule".

EDUCATION IN THE FIELD OF TENSION BETWEEN CONTINGENCY AND PLANNING CONSTRAINT

Leaving everything to chance is certainly not a sensible option. Action always consists of trying to cheat contingency, even if it can never be defeated. Therefore, the search for theoretical, ethical and practical perspectives of public education - this is what we are primarily concerned with here - must not be abandoned, even in the post-mythical era. What this search could be oriented towards, and what experiences, insights and ideas it could refer to, characterises the search line of a responsive education. As a result, it tries to promote responsibility in the sense of a solidary consciousness, i.e. a pedagogical responsibility that has to prove itself in the situation through an irreducible personal decision. This would be bound in form and content to the goal of reducing fear and gradually forming a circle of trust, i.e. of fellow human care or concern, in which the child's self-will has a chance to articulate and develop in connection as well as in confrontation with other people, with things and circumstances. The hope for the future of education has always been that this development would lead to a consciousness of social responsibility; that the egoistic interest necessary for life and survival would be supplemented or tempered on the level of motives and actions by an equally necessary social-ethical motive in the sense of care that can be universalised in the vanishing point. It is a hope that is doubly uncertain and cannot be definitively secured in pedagogical terms. In post-mythic times, its guiding value cannot be defined in an absolutely binding sense, and thus requires a constant collective or dialogue effort aimed at agreement. The child to be educated must be included in this effort as a relevant co-creator of his or her life, if he or she is not to be a mere object of foreign ambitions. For the possibility and realisation of the unsecured hope remains - ultimately - dependent on the free consent of the child and the later adult.

THE BASIC PSYCHOLOGICAL NEEDS OF THE CHILD (AND OF THE HUMAN BEING) AS ORIENTATION MARKERS OF PEDAGOGICAL ACTION

If the child's ability to consent in principle is a value, it is possible (and necessary) to ask about the conditions under which consent would be possible. The child would have to be able to recognise a positive connection between education and his or her own life and experience - at first more in a bodily-mental sense, later increasingly as a cognitive-conscious approval of his or her situation of being socially integrated. Education should therefore recognizably have something "to do with the self" of the child. This view refers to the extremely rich theoretical discourse and empirical studies on the question of "basic needs" or "basic psychological needs" or "basic motivational systems".



A “basic psychological need” here is supposed to be an (obvious, latent or credibly tangible) psychological or inner state that (only) becomes manifest in the situation of lack or prolonged deprivation. Without its elimination or at least mitigation, serious damage to the development of the child (and the human being in general) is being promoted. It is this dimension that is consistently of great importance in education - just as functional or incidental learning and intentionally stimulated cognitive learning serve to mitigate a deficiency, even if it does not always manifest itself acutely (unlike the experience of emotional rejection by important attachment figures).

The term “basic psychological need” is thus understood here in analogy to the physiological needs (food, clothing, protection from violence and weather) that are repeatedly described and urged to be taken into account in almost all contexts of human and/or social development. These are (of course) closely connected to the psychological ones, and are closely linked to the latter in early childhood. “Feeding” and “eating”, for example, is almost always also a mental, cultural, social and emotionally strongly loaded event - in all cultures and at all ages.

Although a unified theory of the child’s (and the human being’s) basic needs is probably still a long way off, there is a broad scientific consensus on the assumption that without sufficient consideration of the child’s (and the human being’s!) fundamental psychological needs in education, severe damage to personality development is to be expected. A responsive pedagogy therefore strives to address this dimension by seeking an answer to the child’s claim to life. It recognises in the child an unconditional claim to respect and consideration of his or her basic needs, a claim that arises from the social integration as well as the neediness and vulnerability of the child.

Taking into account and critically receiving numerous theories of needs and motivation as well as psychotherapeutic and pedagogical experiences, the view can be defended that the following needs must be respected if the child’s psychological and social well-being as well as his or her possible consent to his or her upbringing are to be given central importance:

1. the child/human being has a need to belong
2. the child/human being has a need for recognition (by the other person)
3. the child/human being has a need for new experiences
4. the child/human being has a need for self-efficacy (authorship)
5. the child/human being has a need for self-responsibility and co-responsibility
6. the child/human being has a need for aesthetic perception
7. the child/human being has a need for spontaneous expression of his/her inner state (or inner world)

In a broader perspective, seeking the child’s consent would mean exploring the conditions for intrinsically motivated learning - as a self-directed learning - and, if possible, implementing it in practice. The approach of needs-based education just outlined contains numerous clues to the question of what a “nurturing” environment corresponding to basic psychological needs might look like. If learning, if school, has something recognisably to do with the self of the child, if it answers his claim or “demand de vie” - then the chance is given to gain his confidence. The development of his social and moral abilities is also crucially tied to this answer. The decisive corrective of a “wild” self-will lies in the early experience of recognition by others, and in the insight into the meaning of community and responsibility.



EDUCATION AS A PRESENT EVENT IN THE HORIZON OF AN OPEN FUTURE

Education takes place in and under the given conditions of the present. In addition to the numerous tasks it has to fulfil in yesterday and today, such as nurturing, protective, custodial, disciplining, qualifying functions, education is in its very core related to the future. Its custodian is the educator. Presumably and hopefully he/she will remain as a person and living human being for a while, even in the digitalised world. His/her presence and the “analogue” contact of the educating community have gained a previously hardly known appreciation, especially in times of massive disruption (keywords: pandemic, isolation, loneliness). Physical presence and direct contact are obviously still indispensable prerequisites of life and education. Here, too, scarcity raises awareness of the value and importance of what is lacking. Hardly anyone will speak out in favour of a largely automatised upbringing and education after the collective experience of this lack, even though it is precisely the call for the perfection of digitalisation at all levels, including education, that creates the conditions for pushing forward the automatised education as well. In the digitally transformed pedagogical space, the teacher inevitably assumes a new function, namely that of an agent for the production of human beings suitable for machines of every kind and function. The powerful, elusive subject of digitalisation, which is now systemically, functionally and comprehensively embedded in the lifeworld, is thus working, partly mediated via the New Teacher, to perfect the child, the teacher him- or herself and the human being in general in the direction of suitability for automata.

The educator nevertheless still represents, to a greater or lesser degree of responsibility and awareness, a necessarily imaginary image of the future: his or her own image of the child and of the world, and in the pedagogical institutions at the same time officially one that reflects the demands and visions of the future of the community/society in many mediated ways (school constitution, curriculum with learning goals and areas, legislation, professional training).

In the post-mythic era, the future is open to a degree that was not imaginable in the mythic era with its transcendental solutions. People knew what they could and should hold on to. In and with modernity, the security of life guaranteed by God or based on the predestined course of the world was replaced by the experience and awareness of uncertainty, unpredictability, contingency and social change. The norm-giving authority inevitably had to move from the transcendent “above” via the “middle” of the state or the hierarchical society into the “in-between” of people communicating with each other in the deliberative society - without, however, as shown, being able or wanting to completely give up the transcendent reference (Habermas’ “transcendental shadow”, Apel’s “ideal communication community”, Hösle’s “ideal sphere” - see Habermas, 1992/2013; Hösle, 1990; Kuhlmann, 1985).

CATEGORIAL MODES OF PEDAGOGICAL DECISIONS

This “move” of the norm-giving authority “downwards” and its concomitant weakening in the post-mythical world results today in the necessity of a categorial decision with far-reaching consequences. Their opposites can ideally be summarised in the theoretical and practical modes of action “back (or towards) an (if necessary new) authoritative order of absolute authoritativeness” or “acceptance and communicative dealing with openness”.



The first mode is historically the older and stronger, and perhaps for many people still the more enticing one, especially in the more ideologically homogeneous sociotopes. It will offer itself to the discontented and angry with the offer and promise of a renewed stable order of either religious or quasi-scientific justification to overcome the many problems and conflicts in heterogenous society. Its psychological and socio-psychological addressee is the fear of chaos. All apologists of a “harder line” rely on this fear with their specific offers of meaning and orientation for politics and pedagogy. They will offer themselves as masterminds to those who are searching for meaning and those who are insecure, and suggest to those who follow that thinking for oneself is only a matter of following the authoritative law and the valid.

The second mode, because of its decidedly historically and educationally philosophically justified renunciation of a prior authority, only knows the appeal to the partners in action to regulate things themselves within the horizon of “reasonable” or at least socially acceptable values; i.e. to issue the necessary regulations themselves in a participatory process, and to keep them so open that there are possibilities for their modification, possibilities also for the integration of people who, for whatever reason, are in danger of falling through the majority-favoured normative grid.

“IN-BETWEEN SPACES” OF THE EDUCATIONAL AND THE DARK SIDE IN THE HISTORY OF EDUCATION

Of course, these opposing perspectives are only ideal-typical poles. They certainly do not determine the practice of education in general in an absolute sense. Intermediate spaces are rather realistic. Even the scribe and scribe’s scholar had to make an effort some 4,000 years ago to reach, if not the hearts, then at least the minds of his “boys” entrusted to him. Otherwise he would not have been able to achieve success and pass on his knowledge. And he had possibly already gained the insight, later formulated by Democritus, the pre-Socrat, that his rod does not necessarily lead further in the case of resistance or inability, and that persuasion is often more appropriate to bring about action out of insight. Was this already the seed of a reflexive effort that takes into account the individual possibilities and the human dignity of the child? Or was it only due to practical experience that you can also be successful with milder means? In any case, the rod remained in use for centuries, but its use was probably not as excessive as sometimes portrayed (“black pedagogy”; “intergenerational reign of terror” - cf. [Rutschky, 1977/1997](#); [Galeski, 2019](#)), despite the understandable complaints of those who suffered.

More or less explicitly in the history of education, the idea of a child- and human-friendly education becomes powerful - with a climax in the thinking of Comenius (1592–1670). He brings the self of the child into play in a comprehensive way; both from a theoretical point of view, in his case still embedded in a universal Christian world view and salvation event, and practically in relation to almost all relevant and “eternal” basic questions of education. This appeal subsequently remains a sting that can be brought into position against any purely authoritative and violent education.

APPEAL OF THE TOTALITARIAN APPROACH

With regard to the second, the conciliatory mode, it must be seen on the one hand that the apologists of a child-friendly education have not infrequently fallen into the former mode



unintentionally and unrecognised. Their own theoretical standards, because they were claimed to be scientifically proven, could even surpass religious-mythical thinking in terms of totalitarian prescriptiveness. There, the child should and had to be brought up correctly, if necessary “to its bones” (Blonskij), in accordance with its nature and its destiny as well as that of humanity. The most important lesson to be learned from the partly failed attempt at “child-appropriate” is the insight into the ambivalent, because necessarily power-supported process of education itself. No educator can completely escape this and the resulting coercion. Without authority, there is no education. But there is the possibility of awareness, also of criticism and self-criticism, and of sensitisation to the processes of possible alienation associated with authority through unconscious transference by the teacher as well as through the excessive enforcement of curricular and disciplinary regulations. The danger of misuse of power and the temptation to occupy the psychic space of the child, especially the self-willed and wayward one, is latently always present.

NEEDS ORIENTATION AS THE COMMUNICATIVE FOCUS OF EDUCATION

The approach of subject-sensitive education outlined and defended here now defines the pedagogical as respecting and responding to the basic needs of the child, and thus feels connected to and committed to the second mode. This implies a specific anthropological statement, which of course can no longer be presented *ex cathedra* as an authoritative teaching. Nevertheless, a confession is required, namely the belief and the demand to regard the child and the pupil from birth as an already socialised fellow human being. He may need care, education and teaching, but he does not need to be “improved”. Like you and me, he is already “good enough” for life in the community. Only in this view can the child appear as a relevant author, as a subject, or at least co-author of his life - and be won as such. This view is also not new, as just indicated. In its concretisation, despite the numerous transcendental or quasi-scientifically based assaults on the “nature” of the child, it has produced didactic-methodical concepts which, in a demystified and/or demythologised form, have enriched the discussion on questions of education and schooling in general. It is therefore by no means necessary to start from zero.

THE JUDGEMENT OF THE EDUCATED - A PHILOSOPHICAL NOTE ON EDUCATION

Even in mythical times and in mythical space there was and is the self-willed child. It is the object of a special concern of the ancients, who want to lead it back on the predetermined and only right path. If the child achieves the goals set for it, it may be satisfied and happy together with those who care for it. If one asks the taught and converted once headstrong child of mythical times about the core of its self-understanding, it will (perhaps) answer: “I am who I was allowed to become and be and should be”. And perhaps it will add: “I am happy with it”. No critic is in a position or legitimised to claim that self-attribution and self-experience are only the product of a mere foreign determination. The initially alien other can lead to an authentic, a “true” self, because one’s own cannot always be sharply distinguished from the external, neither by oneself nor by the other. Through the processes of confrontation and (if necessary) appropriation, the other is always also a motive and determinant of the self. The voice of the



(converted) child can “give voice” to his or her inner self in a convincing way; it can be an “expression of oneself” or the authentic “self-expression” that Kovač (Kovač, 2016) assumes, for good reasons, to form an important and fundamental system of motivation.

In the post-mythic period, however, and this is the important difference from the mythic period, every educational intervention is subject to the possibility of an evaluative judgement by the child himself in the waking consciousness of the carer(s), the teacher and the educator, both as an accompanying moment of the intervention itself and with regard to the future. The future judgement (that of the child) is present in the educator’s consciousness in the form of an anticipatory intuition. It follows the question: “Am I acting justly?” In doing so, the educator knows that the actual competent and only judge of her actions is the child and future adult him/herself. S/he judges and speaks retrospectively “in his/her own cause” on the basis of his/her own bodily-mental experience. In doing so, he/she will not (except in justiciable cases) refer to a general canon of values and commandments of whatever provenance, nor will he/she ask any supposedly competent other for advice.

What happens person to person can only be processed and judged by the individual self in terms of the psycho-dynamic processes of exchange in the encounters with the empathic and caring other. The many authentic “friendly gestures” of the educator(s) have a hardly assessable, never really measurable influence on the well-being, the empathy ability, the learning motivation of the child and the later adult. The “friendly gestures” are only authentic or genuine if they really originate from empathic and responsible care, i.e. they are not just an outward appearance of an otherwise authoritarian attitude. The friendly gestures born of empathy and goodwill can then be interpreted and experienced as such by the child for good reasons. Thus even gestures of disapproval and disappointment can be friendly in the sense mentioned, and experienced as such.

“What happened to me in education - was it good for me? Did it help me, does what I experienced and learned continue to carry me?” The self-willed child, as well as the now adult human being with a free will of his own, when asked about his judgement of his becoming, will possibly answer, “I am who I am, and what I am becoming I cannot know, nor do I want to know. And still I am becoming.” *The child or human being may neither define his identity himself nor allow it to be defined by others. The self-aware and self-reflective person keeps his secret from himself and from others.*

ON THE RELATIONSHIP TO THE SELF, TO THE OTHER AND TO TRANSCENDENCE IN THE POST-MYTHICAL TIME

In the experience of deficiency, the desire for what is lacking is born. The irritating ambivalence of fulfilment and denial determines the psychological and social dynamics of life and self-formation on the worldly stage. Emotional and cognitive relationships are formed on this stage: the relationship to oneself and to the other, including the stage, i.e. the world as a whole as the great, inescapable counterpart and the “nourishing ground” of the self.

The life-world also holds the experience of transcendence in store - if it breaks into one’s own existence. Even in post-mythic times, it deserves recognition, and there is no rational reason to deny or minimise its personal evidence and cultural significance, or to suppress its articulation in the public sphere. But there is an indispensable moral demand that is made on



the believer. It is not to renounce, as so often happens in the context of competing value systems, the public confession of a particular faith and its cultural representation. It is only to renounce any mission that does not respect the free will of the child and the human being; furthermore, to reject all measures and precepts that make use of violent means of conversion. Thus the mythical (and the mystical experience) can be welcomed in the post-mythical age, and it certainly deserves a safe place. But it cannot (any longer) dominate the place and time of the post-mythical in a comprehensive sense; otherwise the post-mythical “time-space” would not exist.

THE GENERAL, THE PARTICULAR, THE SINGULAR AND THE FREEDOM OF (ONE’ S) WILL

Science is concerned with the general, the generally interesting and the regularity of an otherwise “wild” and disorderly-seeming event. This was and still is the case - from ancient astrology to modern natural and social science. Superficially, it is about the symbolic representation of the (for now still) secret order of things, but basically it is about the order of the mind, and about man’s self-understanding in and vis-à-vis his world. This also applies to myth, poetry and religion. In their depictions and interpretations of the world and individual fates, human beings - every human being - should find themselves with their judgements and feelings, fears and hopes. It is often forgotten that we cannot live in the medium of the general, even in the poetic visualisation of the particular - as helpful as all this may be from a practical and spiritual point of view. This has to do with the simple fact that every moment of life is a singular and concrete one, which was not preconceived anywhere, neither in God, nor in science or poetry, and which cannot be repeated in the same way. Michael Wimmer consistently applies this thought to education by emphasising the singularity of the decision in the encounter with the Other (Wimmer, 2014).

The meaning of the scientifically determined general and the poetically depicted particular would then consist in being able to better understand the concretely experienced situation in retrospect; and its prospective meaning would consist in the creative inspiration for proposals for action. Education could then, while respecting the principle of continuity (no excessive or even traumatising breaks in the child’s life course) and in the medium of needs-oriented and caring communication, contribute to the self-willed child, i.e. every child who has had the experience of the resistant, integrating the infinite number of moments of encounter with the other into a view of self and the world that is coherent and consistent for him or her. By being able to stand “with both feet” in inner as well as outer reality, and by forming and preserving an integrated self, it could counter the modern fragmentation of life and the often profit-oriented attack and grasp on its inner self with something protective, namely its own self-confident will.

ON THE RESPONSE AND RESPONSIBILITY OF EDUCATION

A pedagogy based on respect for the other and the freedom of choice can only start from the concrete experiences and expressions of the persons involved. Experiences and expressions, both linguistic and non-linguistic, are of course never completely unambiguous. On the semantic level, they permanently require personal interpretation: “How is this meant, how is this to be



understood”; on the psychological or existential level, spontaneous, intuitive, preconscious or conscious evaluation: “What does this mean for me, what does this mean for my life and/or for the present situation”. Dialogue in education is a constitutive moment, constitutive because even in a totalitarian environment, the educator must take into account the possible response and the child’s own inner evaluation, even if this is only vaguely perceptible - if he does not want to permanently talk to a wall. But dialogue is not good in itself, because a “good” value cannot only be defined formally. The form requires a content whose moral value is not bound to the form. Among business friends, a “fruitful” dialogue may well arise on the question of how best to invest one’s shares (i.e. for one’s own benefit and, if necessary, with simultaneous indifference with regard to possible harm to others), and this may well strengthen friendship within your own group.

Understanding the other, therefore, does not per se lead to his respect as an equal partner worthy of and in need of my fellow human concern. Even a high capacity for empathy and an understanding of the vulnerability and neediness of the other based on this does not generate good per se. It can be used strategically to one’s own advantage, even more successfully the better this understanding is developed. Not to use the Achilles’ heel of the other for arbitrary purposes, on the contrary, even to want to protect it - this requires a special moral decision that can neither be prescribed as a decision nor found in the situation itself.

If dialogue is brought to bear in education as free speech and counter-speech in the consensual mode of understanding within the horizon of universal values (such as the protection of life and the foundations of life, the legitimate interest of the other, the rights of freedom of all, justice, solidarity with the weak), it is no longer a rational-technically useable way of communication for the enforcement of individual or particular interests of domination. The same is true in reverse. The intrusion of rational-technical elements for the purpose of pedagogical empowerment weakens the dialogue in the sense just defined, in extreme cases with the tendency to its destruction. A pedagogy of respect and dialogue can therefore not be realised in a planned way, but it can be brought “into the play of forces”. It will not want to and cannot completely overrule the traditional authoritative imperative of adaptation, but at the same time it will meet the children’s self-will with respect and understanding in order to give the “new imperative” a chance as the possibility of free discussion and solidary action. The chance is that the individual or a group transcends his or its purely self-interested desire in a free decision with regard to the other (also with regard to the other group) or - at least - accepts that the restriction of egoistic or particular interests brought about from the outside (e.g. through legislation) has a legitimate purpose that can, according to possibility, benefit everyone.

In the social space with its conflicts and possibilities for action, responsibility is based on the necessity as well as the possibility of decision-making, which presupposes a space of freedom. Following Hannah Arendt’s philosophy of responsibility, it can be said that no human being has the right to obey. This is not an appeal to unconditional disobedience or unreasonable resistance. The sentence says that the negation of responsibility with reference to the external compulsion to fulfil one’s duty is morally questionable.

Without being able to rely on an ultimate norm-giving authority, the appeal to abandon the breaking of the child’s will emerges in the field of education in post-mythic times; to abandon it in favour of understanding and an open-minded willingness to engage in dialogue within the horizon of universally justifiable or - to express it somewhat more modestly - at least socially acceptable values.



NOTES ON THE BASIS OF THE PRESENT STUDY

a) The basis of the present study is the author's work "Das eigenwillige Kind - Bedürfnis und Erziehung in nachmythischer Zeit. Grundzüge einer responsiven Pädagogik". According to an announcement by the publisher "Beltz-Juventa", the book will be published in German in spring 2022 (364 pages; ISBN 978-3-7799-6877-1 print; ISBN 978-3-7799-6878-8 e-book - PDF). At the time of writing (November 2021) for HERJ, the book had not yet been published. - The reader finds here a concise thesis-like introduction to the main features of the Responsive Pedagogy approach. The introduction is essentially based on the aforementioned work, but, partly due to the necessary brevity and the continuation of some aspects, sets somewhat different emphases compared to the reference text.

b) Not all (implicit) references of the study can be mentioned in the following. In the book mentioned under a), a bibliography with approx. 250 book and journal titles is included on pages 355–363. The list can be requested from the author at skiera@uni-flensburg.de.

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