

“The spiritual Man: challenges for an education towards transcendence”

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1. The present as critical time

Nowadays, the notion of human being is in want of meaning due to the paradigmatic impasse resulting from the heated discussion between humanist and anti-humanist trends. To be more radical still, individuals find themselves in a profound crisis as to their existential and vital project, clearly reflected in the anthropological impasses of which the multiplicity of education paradigms is symptomatic.

A brief phenomenology of the current human condition can not fail to realize that human existence lacks transcendence. In his craving for the infinite, the contemporary man searches for himself, letting his mind wonder between Prometheus, Sisyphus and Narcissus: as Prometheus, he steals from the gods “the indefatigable fire’s glare visible from far in hollow Férula” (*Teogonia*, 566) – the fire represents, symbolically, the intelligence of man – and, hoping to do without such gods, he longs to master the art of transfiguring himself and to rule the world, without a reference to the Other-divine; as Sisyphus, he hopes to trick finitude – by chaining death to his neck – yet, as an exhausted and stooping man, he rolls his existential rock to the top of the mountain, in a repetitive quest for self-control and personal perfection which will inevitably lead him to being crushed by time; as Narcissus, he falls in love with his own reflection, and leaving the “fire” behind and giving up the “rock”, he becomes wholly committed to the egocentric consolation of such a weakened man now made real by his feelings, thus turning away from the relational commitment.

The contemporary man has treaded this inner pilgrimage: from the eagerness to achieve Prometheus’s demonstrative reasoning – scientific knowledge –, he moves to the insatiable thirst for Sisyphus’s self-regulation, which, most of the time, leads to solitude and an existential void, to anchor himself, today, in Narcissus’s consumerist and hedonist self-devouring individualism. The pilgrim of our times suffers from an anthropological “disease” at three levels: lack of personal transcendence, of a spirituality that unifies meaning and of a mystic dimension of eternity. The most frequent symptoms of such a “disease” can be described as follows:

The lack of interiority which makes the individual move between two worlds: locked in a Cartesian rationalism, Man sees himself as self-formed; nevertheless, as man does not originate from himself, he perceives himself as relational subjectivity for himself and for the other. He does not have time for the fruitful solitude that will provide him with an answer to the question

put forward by Virgílio Ferreira – “Who lives in me?” – he does not relate reflexively with himself in the quest for his own meaning. On the contrary, he draws away into an unauthentic life (Heidegger), quasi-schizophrenic, as if his life was the life of another and not his own.

The lack of alterity, which, in the personal world, is the result of a “taking the other as a thing” in everyday relations, using it according to his own purposes and egocentric desires. When man relates with the other as an object and thing, he is himself frustrated as the “thing-ed” relation with the other turns him into a thing as well and makes him poorer instead of personalizing him. This is the neo-liberal man’s permanent alienation from himself: he hopes that the possession and use of people, instruments and artefacts will provide him with a meaning for life. In fact, he lacks the primordial ethical experience of meeting the “face of the other” (Lévinas) in his alterity, a fundamental condition underlying spirituality, the production of human meaning, and the deepening of interiority.

The crisis of transcendence from which contemporary man suffers results from the inability to solve the healthy tension between “desire” and “limit”, visible in the inability to overcome and infringe prohibitions, and to project himself ever further: in his deification, he is not able to scrutinize the High (Other-Absolute); in his vertiginous life, he dares not to look Deeper (interiority); in his selfishness, he is not generous enough to look to his Side (Alterity). If we picture this as an exemplification of an anthropological nature, and if we resort to a metaphoric image, we could say that the crisis inhabiting his personal world consists of the inability of man to combine, in a healthy dualistic way, interiority/rooting and receptiveness, immanence and transcendence.

2. Classical notions of “Man” and their educational bases

This critical phenomenology of contemporary man and the consequent illnesses he suffers from requires the human being’s entirety to be brought into the educational sphere and the need to revisit his foundational anthropological bases.

Under the perspective of the philosophy of education and in the wake of the classics, the educational axiology of the West as a system of “virtual” values – the paradigm – involved, from the very start, an intention, a purpose or project, an end or *telos*. According to Aristotle, the *telos* of an educator is the *eidos*, the paradigm that legitimates the educational activity, the syntagmatic revision of those values by a subject, individual or collective entity. According to this assumption, the multiple notions of “Man” that surfaced throughout the history of western

thought formed the axiological basis, the paradigms of the various educational projects that embodied the most diverse array of pedagogical practices of its history.

To put it briefly, there are three classical key ideas that continue to influence such projects:

- 1) With Plato, the idea of the “rational man” is born. This “rational man” is virtually equivalent to “spiritual man” in that the soul, being immaterial and immortal, is the noblest and most important part of the human being when compared to the material body. As such, rationality is practically a synonym of spirituality, seeing that man’s most important activity is the contemplative life. One of the characteristics of this anthropological dualism consists of the need for a superior moral life championed by this notion, favouring the life of the “spirit”, as Plato explains in the famous hair image in *Phaedrus*. The instrument used in moral life is virtue, seen as a moral habit, and the need for man to practice it through ascesis, as a concrete provision for moral struggle.
- 2) As a cultural proposal and major narrative that inspired the Jewish, Christian and Islamic monotheist religions, the Bible introduces the idea of “spiritual man”. For the Bible, the ideal of man is not rational knowledge, as in Plato, nor virtue through virtue, as we will see further ahead in Seneca. It is the “salvational” and “dialogical” relation that a living God (the Other unavailable), unique (against idolatry) and transcendent (against anthropomorphisms) suggests to man, by means of a spiritual life. This religious revolution invests man with a “transcendental” dimension, through which he accepts God (faith = involvement of the heart) as his origin, end and means. According to this concept, the anthropological centre is displaced from the head to the heart, and man is defined as an intricate lattice of kindness and evilness, of indigence and hope, waiting to be rescued – “salvation” – from that contradictory condition of existence. God is its teleology.
- 3) Seneca suggests the idea of the “virtuous man”. Born out of Stoicism as the Greek philosophy of life, and adapted by Seneca in the 1st century A.D., the Roman virtuous man is distinguished by his austerity, compassion and abnegation; as an educational model, he is marked by a firm character, spirit of sacrifice, self-control and the power to overcome passions. The ideal of the wise and learned man is virtue – of an intellectual nature – and the indifference before material possessions, a principle of inner freedom of the wise man. This is achieved through will – the only possession –, the struggle through ascesis. The wise man – he who throughout his formative pathway has reached the

highest degree of improvement, by practicing virtue – lives off his inner unity, as suggested in *Letter 9 to Lucilius*:

“You can state in fearless boldness that the supreme good is the harmony of the soul; because virtues should be found where there was consensus and unity; dissidence is a characteristic of the vices”.

This inner unity will produce *ataraxia*, in other words, the imperturbability of the soul.

Notwithstanding the diversity of classical notions of “Man”, they are all based on a utopia of man that embodies a “transcendental” dimension, an unmistakable desire for transcendence deeply rooted in the human heart, a longing for unconditional happiness that has imbued the educational ideals of the West in its various trends. Nonetheless, if these anthropological notions apparently show this thirst for “anthropological fulfilment” that unites them, the worldview that sustains them still divides today – sometimes without them being aware of it – the various educational players. From the viewpoint of philosophy of education, the entire discourse and its respective topics – in this case, the “spiritual man” – must be understood in the light of history in the diversity and multiplicity of discourses. This is where we find the most important dissidence...

3. Anthropogenesis and educational axiology in the West

Broadly speaking, one can say that the History of Humanity has three mental images of the world or civilizations seen as such: the civilizations of rice (Asian, of a Brahman and Chinese nature), of wheat (western/Mediterranean) and of corn (pre-colonial America). The civilization of wheat, i.e., our civilization, was formed by three symbol-cities which were responsible for quite distinct cultural influences: Jerusalem, Athens and Rome (cf. Octavi Fullat, 2005), which we have already mentioned in the previous paragraph. To better illustrate what unites and separates them from an anthropological standpoint, we refer to three major narratives and their leading players, three mythical figures in ancient times: Abraham (Jerusalem), Ulysses (Athens) and Aeneas (Rome). The narratives form a magical place in which, through a lived experience, the real world is rearranged from the fictional world.

We will look closer at these three mythical figures of ancient times:

- 1) In the Bible, Abraham lives his time as a calling/vocation to the future, through an event of relation and receptiveness towards an absolute Other – Abraham leaves his homeland and never returns. The time focus is the future, the quest for values to be accomplished, the prophecy yet to be fulfilled. Jerusalem stresses the educational feature of the human imagination, of the novelty to be discovered, of free decision and will. Here, the individual represents an open identity, a task to be carried through in the calling-promise.
- 2) In *Odyssey*, Ulysses' journey progresses along a cyclic period, constantly in renewal, yet with a planned return in mind. Ulysses is known for his many travels but also for the inability to find a sense of self-awareness and awareness of the other in such travels. When he returns home, to Ithaca, he once again finds meaning in himself. It is a return to the starting point, and at an anthropological level, it represents the acknowledgment of the impossibility to recognize the other in their radical alterity. The predominant time focus is the past, woven with memories, the search for renovation in cyclicity; Athens, which witnessed the emergence of science, privileges memory as the fundamental axiological axis.
- 3) In *Aeneid*, the space of Aeneas's travels is also mythical and geographical, yet it does not drift to circularity nor to cyclicity, but rather to a linear receptiveness. Aeneas is the heroic-mythical creator of a new social, political and spiritual order for the West. The time now is the present time, seen as operable, hence the emergence of technique as the greatest educational value of this culture.

4. The West as the meeting place of two readings of the “real”

The socio-cultural space and the notion of history through which we distinguish the West resulted from the blended axiology of Athens, Jerusalem and Rome and they found in education fertile ground for their germination. As they are imbricated in mentalities, the disentanglement of their differentiating features is today philosophically complex. However, we can find a radical differentiation born out of the readings of the meaning of man and of the world, which inspired the two major philosophical trends that are still in tension and conflict: on the one hand, the Greco-Roman spirit; on the other hand, the world represented by the Judaic-Christian concept. In other words, and using philosophical terminology, the West is the result of the encounter and fusion of horizons between Metaphysics of Nature (Greek) and Metaphysics of Liberty (Judaic-Christian), between cosmic reason and historical reason. To put it briefly and simply, we have

outlined some differentiating strands in these two ontological projects, to make their inspiring principles more transparent, that impact strongly on the educational models that aim to construct the “spiritual Man”.

In the Greek world, Plato’s and Aristotle’s ontological projects are exemplary in their attempt to define the radical fundament and the ultimate reason of things. Prior to being a philosophical construct, Greek culture was a way of interpreting reality, the existing whole, based on nature and its unchangeable determinations. The reflection that determines nature as the founding principle, as *arqué*, as the normative logos of the real could be called “cosmocentrism” (H. C. de Lima Vaz, 1997). As the being of man stems from this, in the Greek tradition, being means, above all, permanence and eternal return (see Ulysses). On the contrary, Judaic-Christianity breaks with this connection between man and nature, to refer him to a personal God in his absolute transcendence. The source of the meaning of man and of the world is now found outside nature, sealed in an alliance between God and man, through dialogue, in the happening, in history, in a total bestowal of liberties – the infinite in the finite. This is why the origin of the meaning of everything is displaced from Nature to the absolute Alterity, from the being to the relation, from permanence to change, from eternal return to eschatology. As a civilizational process, the West emerges from this permanently unstable tension between Rome/Athens and Jerusalem, and can be seen in its metaphysical assumptions: for Jerusalem, and from an eschatology standpoint, “In the beginning there was God... who created all... from nothing”; for Rome/Athens, which explain existence based on nature (from *physis*), “At the beginning there was eternal nature... and only then came the Gods!”

Should we carry these reflections to the field of man’s conception – since it is extremely important in the context of our theme –, we will find there are profound anthropological differences between two of the thinkers who are representative of their trends of thought: Aristotle and Augustine. Aristotle placed man within psychology, within the reality of living beings, within the horizon of nature, yet he did not account for the spirit as personal reality, the human personality that Augustine dwelled upon:

“Despite the profoundness of his reflections on the spirit (*nous*), [...], he does not conceive the spirit as personal reality. Augustine, on the contrary, discovers the outline of the human personality: the specificity of the human being, to put it in Aristotelian words, is not the substantial immortal soul, or even its essential relation with the body; it is the fundamental receptiveness to the absolute. The human being is at its core [...] the possibility of transcending his own finitude, the confrontation with the absolute. He is, therefore, able to transcend time”. (Araújo de Oliveira: 2000, p. 64).

The profound differences in world view (*Weltanschauung*) and of the human person are now obvious: the questioning of the ultimate fundament of existence and of the whole “real”, which transcends the causal order of things, was an unknown issue to the Greeks. The opposition between the absolute God and the created world will throw down the Greek idea of Cosmos, since the world loses its ontological autonomy. As Lima Vaz (1992, p. 117) puts it:

“These statements generate an inversion *per diametrum* towards the transcendence perspective as it was intended by metaphysics. Instead of having the ‘rise’ (*anabasis*) of the soul to the absolute as the supreme idea, we have a descent (*katabasis*) from the absolute as existence”.

This reflection makes it clear that reason encompasses a movement of transcendence on two levels:

- 1) On a first level, it departs from the phenomenon to its being-fundament, the subsistent Being (God, Spirit, Cosmos...). All things are seen and validated from a universal level and thought derives from the subject whilst reason which ponders. In this notion, transcendence is a movement from the human being that relates the singular to the universal, the incidental to the immutable.
- 2) On a second level of reason – the Judaic-Christian novelty –, everything is referred to God, and is no longer derived from the human being but rather from the strength of the light granted by God himself to the human being. This light is not known by reason through the exponentiality of its faculties, rather a “happening”, an encounter (Cf. Araújo de Oliveira, 2000). It is precisely this second movement of reason that the Greeks were not aware of. In this last movement, transcendence is an historical happening, coming from the Absolute to the human finitude; as it breaks away with the limits of such finitude, it is capable of revealing its original receptiveness. The receptiveness of the human being is, therefore, a gift of Alterity that unbalances the tension between nature and history.

5. Transcendence as the answer to the construction of the “Spiritual Man”

Should we analyze thoroughly the divergence that exists in the notion of the “spiritual”, we will likely find bridges that unify these ontological margins. With this in mind, let us take one of the most important challenges of all times very seriously into consideration: the desire for

transcendence deeply rooted in the heart of the human being. We could succinctly say that transcendence is always an *actio trasiens* – an act of transgressing reality, of ‘*protest-action*’ – of act of protestation (Boff, 2000), of overcoming oneself, of excess. Put this way, this category brings up the issue of the intrinsic dynamism of the human spirit, of a vital *elan*, of the original reality of the human being that we have already come across in Plato, Seneca and in the Bible. Having said this, we do not refer to the representations we make of the transcending “reality” articulated in theologies and moderated by religions into the dualisms heaven/hell, being/living thing, etc. This, say the philosophers, is metaphysics – the projection of the human spirit. Along the line of thought followed so far, the notion of transcendence must be clarified from the standpoint of the two anthropo-philosophical matrices mentioned – the Greek and the Judaic-Christian ones – which today influence the models/paradigms of education in the construction of the “spiritual Man”.

As such, and from a Judaic-Christian perspective, we stand before the self-revelation of transcendence in God the creator/saviour. Man (immanence) does not simply have to *know* about transcendence; he must play an active role in it – a spiritual life –, develop a relation of communion, in a dialogue of freedoms, but without rejecting or juxtapositioning alterities. In the Greek school of thought, the concept of transcendence is linked to the question of the ultimate reality, whether it is the Platonic *Good* or *Beauty* (source of knowledge and of being), or whether it is formulated as the *Being as Being*, as championed by Aristotle. According to this Greek notion, transcendence means to overcome the living thing in the identity of the being, and the spiritual man is seen as he who shows this adequacy to the being in the three ontic spheres: in the *polis*, in the cosmos and the gods. From a Greek point of view, the movement of transcendence corresponds to a fusion in Totality, to the overcoming of difference in identity; in an Hebraic perspective, it means the communion of diversity within a relation. If Greek transcendence is seen as accessible to reason, Judaic-Christian transcendence is, at the same time, the movement of reason and the excess of the gift of divine “light” shed upon human reason. For the Judaic-Christian tradition, the spiritual man is he who acts and perceives within the Spirit of God.

6. Educate towards transcendence through desire

Having referred to the different notions of movement of transcendence within the Greek and Judaic-Christian cultures that lead to the distinct notion of “spiritual man”, we will not address the multiple attempts to conciliate theology and philosophy found in the various schools of thought. We will attempt to find a platform of cultural understanding from which we will be able

to erect educational paradigms that are compatible with the two fundamental models presented in the construction of the “spiritual man”. For this purpose, note the shift in reasoning introduced in the last few lines, the binomial immanence-transcendence. We will work with this binomial using it not as entirely different terms but as dimensions of a single reality, which is the human person in its existence.

The word *ex-istence* with the prefix ‘ex’ means to project outside, to build the person’s being in history through accession, refusal, acceptance and transgression. The existential condition of man is that it is rooted in immanence – through interiority – and, yet, it means receptiveness without any sort of strings attached to thoughts and emotions, that can be based both on the loved one and on God and, therefore, is also transcendence. The ability to transcend is accomplished in the transfiguration of the “real” it constantly operates: since it is capable of being a utopia, it creates symbols and projections; it creates dreams to reach even further and break with daily life, thus becoming a creative being that imagines alternatives. The human being is an infinite project, a measureless project when it is put into practice, unable to be contextualized and, yet, able to welcome the other within itself.

However, there is also pseudo transcendence. Pseudo transcendence promises and explores the ability of the human being to go even further, but does not endow it with the possibility of a lasting plenitude and does not help him to assume daily life. True transcendence allows light to illuminate darkness, and enables the healthy part of our being to heal our wounds.

“The true key to pseudo transcendence is that it manipulates our structure of desire and focuses our ability to desire on a limited thing, identifying it with the whole of reality. [...] But the worst of it is that it allows the illusion of fulfilling that infinite desire as identified with the infinite object”. (Boff, 2000, pp. 63-64).

However, desire is that internal engine of the human being that Aristotle and Freud identified as being the basic structure of man. The dynamic of desire has no limits: we do not desire to live just a little; we desire to live forever; we live in finitude, yet we desire to touch the unlimited. To remain faithful to our interiority requires such an infinite receptiveness, which is only possible if we keep permanence and receptiveness, immanence and transcendence united in our daily existence.

We identify desire as a structure of receptiveness and of the human being’s search for the infinite. A philosophical and, in turn, theological problem then comes into light: who or what can fill that void in man’s interiority? What is the proper object that is capable of satisfying the infinite desire? Why do we desire the infinite, and can only find the finite? The infinite

uneasiness that inhabits man is his greatness and calling. As such, to provide answers to these questions, and in line with Leonardo Boff (2000), we consider that there are three possible contemporary attitudes of receptiveness to the unlimited, which correspond to three different attitudes of transcendence:

- 1) Following the ideas of so many existentialists, such as Sartre, man is considered an absurd passion, a being that desires the absolute, yet is condemned to live the relative. In his work *Being and Nothingness*, the author includes a chapter on transcendence and states that the phenomenology of the human being (how it manifests itself) consists in man revealing himself as a “being out there” in the world, receptive to the other and to totality. Since this is his original condition, the author does not accept that such receptiveness include an object. The human being is a spring in tension with the universe, and human greatness consists in accepting this tension and remaining receptive, but without a defined object.
- 2) Another attitude of many agnostics is that they feel the desire of the spirit, of eventually identifying an object of desire, yet they are afraid to get involved and end up distancing themselves. They prefer the receptiveness to the principle rather than the existential anguish of the definition. They suffer with the lack of answers and seek to decode the existential question they conceal.
- 3) The third attitude is to give a name to the object of desire, calling it God. But in this perspective, God only has an existential meaning if it is the answer to a radical search of light and meaning against the obscurity of life. To murmur respectfully that word which the Hebrews dared not to pronounce is a synonym of “mystery”, it is “unutterable”. If God has any meaning, it must be understood as the secret object of the human quest, he who hides behind all paths, he who leads us, supports us and in whom we finally rest.

7. The “spiritual Man” unifies immanence and transcendence

In this reflection, one same reality unites these three attitudes: the dimension of spirituality. Regardless of whether they are atheists, agnostic or believers, the thirst for a profound spirituality is, for everyone alike, the bridge that can link apparently distant margins, and conciliate immanence and transcendence. We reapply Husserl’s phenomenology and that which he called “transcendence in immanence” linked to the notion of “horizon”: this thirst for the

infinite no longer designates a metaphysical or believing invention, rather the realization of a unquestionable dimension – that of excess – in the human existence within the actual “real”. Even showing signs of a markedly atheist attitude, as in *The soul of atheism– spirituality without God*, André Comte-Sponville (2006, p. 210) states:

“What is spirituality? It is our finite relation with the infinite or the immensity, our temporal experience of eternity, our relative access to the absolute”.

This original experience of the human being can, if interpreted, open up the meaning left to be discovered, as Luc Ferry (1997, p. 42) wrote:

“A phenomenology of transcendence could thus outline the space of a “secular spirituality”: it is from the human and from his inner self that a certain idea of sacred is unveiled”.

The need to care for the spiritual dimension is confirmed by Carl Gustav Jung when he states:

“Among all my clients in their second stage of life, i.e., over 35, they all showed that their most profound problem involved the issue of their religious attitude. Ultimately, they were all ill as they had lost that which a lively religion had always provided its followers. And none actually became healed without recovering their religious attitude. This is quite clear. It does not depend solely on adhering to a specific creed, nor to become a member of a church; rather the need to incorporate its spiritual dimension”.

In times of fragmented lives and reason, without interiority, alterity and transcendence, it is important to educate (*educare*, bring from the inside...) towards the construction of a spiritual man that is able to experience this unifying encounter when, in the same movement, he mobilizes reconciled interiority and radical receptiveness to alterity, finite immanence and the encounter with the finite “face” of the other. Only this experience constitutes its ontological identity, because it is profoundly human; an identity which cannot think of happiness and eternity except as being an extension, in an infinite way, of that experience filled with meaning. An experience, therefore, that fulfils the ultimate aim which is to “awaken interiority”, the element needed to trigger the “intimate attraction required for the truly human choices” so badly in want by the social dimension.

It makes no difference of where the loving movement stems from – if it is the Spirit that descends or the spirit that opens up (to the world, to the others, to the available eternity), as André Comte-Sponville states – what matters is that it is a loving experience. This is where the

opinion of the mystic and the wise men coincide, as confirmed by André Comte-Sponville (2006, p. 211):

“It is love, not hope, that makes you live; it is the truth, and not faith, that liberates you.”]

For this anthropological fulfilment to become effective, we must develop, in terms of education, spaces for interiorization, for silence, for the integration of the transcendence that resides within us and for the true encounters with alterity. And we need to accustom our eye to contemplative patience...

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