

# The time for thought... the meaning of education

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## *Reason and education*

On the subject of *educere*, in *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1766) Kant contended that the teacher cannot and should not “teach thoughts”. On the contrary, far from imparting preconceived doctrines, in Kant’s view the teacher should be inspired by the intention of teaching how to think. The issue of teaching critical thinking, linked to the love for learning as a primary human need, has always been a major concern in Western thought, and represents the starting point for the epistemological re-founding of contemporary pedagogy. Man’s education and critical thinking are closely associated in Kant’s pedagogical framework, which questioned *the* traditional educational model characterized by a markedly rational approach.

Kant’s principle of *docendo discimus* is crucial to the redefinition of a pedagogical tradition governed by the logical criterion of pure and self-regulating rationality. As love of knowledge and truth, as pursuit of wisdom and anticipatory comprehension of the essence of things, critical thinking has followed a well-defined path in the history of Western thought, constantly modelled on the principles of reason, truth, universality and necessity.

European philosophers and educationalists have always had clear ideas about ‘whom’ and ‘what’ to teach, as well as the objectives of education. From the Greek archaic period to the post-Kantian tradition, the ultimate aim of human education has been the pursuit of truth meant as what can

be deemed true *a priori*. In both its meanings of *aletheia* and *episteme*, truth involves the very survival of the human race, and represents an effective cure for death and suffering. Hence the origins of myths as remedies for unpredictability and transience, as man's attempts to find a comforting and unchanging order to which he is educated to cling to. This dream of order concerns the social community at large, the *polis*, which, as such, brings together in the *logos* the set of values consistent with the individual needs that must be socially gratified. The *logos* stands for the values of sharing, the mid-line and compromise that justifies the acknowledgement of human rights as historically given. It is at the same time an educational need and an ethical-political necessity. It is a universal law and a meaningful discourse; it represents the knowledge of every thing and the summation of all balances<sup>1</sup>.

Western educational thought thus shows this unchanging factor: it champions the *Logos* as *Nomos*, it adheres to the unquestionable and incontrovertible Truth that is the only remedy to the uncertainties of social life, which it shapes and organizes. In this perspective, to question the sense of education means to question the very essence of rational thinking, which had its justification in the goal of self-preservation through rational and technical means. Moreover, it follows that man's educational path equates with the existential experience of a self that aims at asserting itself socially as a free subject; in other words, it corresponds to the gradual possession, assumed as total but in fact partial, of one's self through reason.

Reason lies at the centre of man's educational process and is the basis of every educational practice for it is the only one that promotes community. Reason is taken as idea and model, as the maximum cognitive horizon,

<sup>1</sup> The *logos* connected everything in a meaningful discourse. Heraclitus, the philosopher of becoming, had already stressed the existence of this universal law and the necessity for man to adhere to it. The insistence on the indifference of many people, on their refusal to submit to the universal *logos* and on their conforming to "private dreams", i.e., their own wisdom, are key themes in Heraclitus' philosophy. When human reason meets cosmic reason, it reconciles with the world and finds in self-knowledge the supreme wisdom: "Wisdom is one thing. It is to know the thought by which all things are steered through all things" (fragment 41). The knowledge of the universal law, preliminary, analogous, and equivalent to self knowledge, is hindered by the private dimension, which Heraclitus calls "private dreams", e.g., by the choice to base one's life on a partial, instead of universal, human wisdom.

which in actual fact and in the course of time has resulted in diverse forms and models without losing its centrality<sup>2</sup>.

What remains constant, in this variety, is the assumption of a rational thought and thinking, rigorous and universal. The principle of rationality is ubiquitous, even when some of its variants coexist in the same educational model: the archaic *paideia*, *theoria*, *metis*, *praxis* and *techne* can all be found in the training of Achilles and Odysseus. In the twentieth century, the principle of reason was re-founded and held out against the numerous attacks aimed at exposing its limits and absolute power, as well as its impure and violent nature. In other words, it has never waned: on the contrary, it has remained the focus of reflection, a critical notion, and an open and controversial category, lacking any postulated certainties. Consistency and truth have been superseded by the notions of deconstruction and probability.

The old structured and fixed educational model, which promoted the fullness of form and content as the ultimate human and social goal, has been re-problematized, leading, from a hermeneutical point of view, to the emergence of uncertainties and anxieties which have characterized the stature and appearance of a subject that follows a path of self-experimentation, participating in his multifarious transformations and perceiving himself, beyond any foundationism, as a dynamic construction in an on-going process of self-determination. Descartes' *cogito* inevitably lost its centrality, while a new image of thought, devoid of foundations, has emerged and gained strength from its very tension toward self-criticism and its development as a process of investigation, of unceasing deconstruction and reconstruction<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> See F. Cambi, *Insegnare e apprendere la filosofia. L'esercizio del pensiero*, Roma, Armando, 2000, p. 18: "The function of reason, in spite of the variety of its models, is only one: to create a conceptual order of experience which is universal and necessary [...] In the course of time, however, this function has been determined by a process that proceeds from ontology to instrumentality: reason has been gradually emancipated from a metaphysical-ontological status, which, heir to the ancient *Logos*, regarded it as the point of unity/intersection of thought and reality, as the place of their unification, to mean, instead, a set of procedures that, although drawing on the transcendental idea of rationality (as the location of truth and ultimate form of knowledge), lost any ontological foundation, becoming conventional instruments aimed not at explaining the rational essence of the world, but rather the human ways of controlling and interpreting it".

<sup>3</sup> The repercussions in the field of pedagogical research have been numerous and, in

In this regard, a seminal contribution was offered by the theorization of Adorno and Horkheimer, the two most prominent figures of the Frankfurt School. In particular, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* one of the central chapters of the 1947 definitive edition is titled *Odysseus, or Myth and Enlightenment*. It is interesting to understand the meaning of the chapter's place within a work focused on the attempt to explain philosophically the historical experience of the twentieth century. In Adorno and Horkheimer's reflection the interpretation of Odysseus and his journey is crucial for its educational implications, which enrich the pedagogical research by considering and rethinking the analytical approaches that are most suitable for the new human condition in the age of post-bourgeois, late-modern and post-modern anxiety. The subject that, in Foucault's words, dies with modernity is revived to new life; modern subjectivity dies, and classic *ratio* with it.

Odysseus, who was eulogised for his thirst of knowledge and humanity, in Adorno's eyes becomes the symbol of a 'new' rational man ready to live the twentieth century, the forerunner of the middle-class man. His journey had been praised by a rich literary tradition as man's ideal journey of self-appropriation and fulfilment thanks to self-control, shrewdness, and practical intelligence.

In Adorno and Horkheimer's work, instead, Odysseus has another *habitus*; it follows that his travels, his trials with natural and mythical forces, his *nostos* as a rational obsession, are turned into rational attempts at repressing one's inner nature in order to dominate outer nature: "This repression presents itself [...] as a true precondition for man's dominion over nature"<sup>4</sup>. Odysseus becomes the symbol of instrumental *ratio*, his *metis* is the mark of bourgeois profit, his *nostos* testifies to his will to overwhelm his neighbour.

many ways, revolutionary: it will suffice to think of the notion of education as a complex system and of the emergence of the implicit and the unthought that affect both educational discourse and practices, or to think of the effects of deconstruction on the discourse of pedagogy as synthetic and transdisciplinary knowledge, and as a boundary scientific subject which is inevitably interdisciplinary by virtue of the richness, complexity and polysemy of its educational issues. See A. Mariani, *La decostruzione e il discorso pedagogico*, Pisa, ETS, 2000.

<sup>4</sup> R. D'Alessandro (2014), *Alle origini della razionalità borghese. Letture di Ulisse e le Sirene*, Castel San Pietro Romano, Manifestolibri, p. 124.

Ultimately, the lord of Ithaca, who ponders every action and movement through the logic of self-advancement, is portrayed by Adorno as a modern merchant, the epitome of a profit-driven society dominated by trade.

Adorno emphasizes this aspect, which is also the cornerstone of his reflection. He aims to show the rational phenomenology of pre-modern Odysseus who strives for self-preservation with technical and markedly rational means, and adopts the principle of “most gain with the least pain” by using a logical reasoning free from any supernatural or religious conditioning.

In fact, Odysseus thinks and acts as a subject wholly independent of myths and archaic legends. Differently from Achilles, the Ithacan hero is emancipated from old models of dominion. His educational path is the result of a new approach to existence characterized by a complex process of self-development as an autonomous subject. Self-fulfilment prevails over everything: without yielding to hedonism and aestheticism, unaffected by mythology, Odysseus’ fate is consecrated to the total possession of his self by means of reason.

Poised between freedom and dominion, Adorno’s reading of Odysseus highlights how personal emancipation entails subjectivity. The consequences of Odysseus’s emancipation from the snares of archaic myths thanks to his practical intelligence (*metis*) is visible, according to Adorno’s theory, in some key-episodes, first of all in the well-known encounter with the Sirens. In that circumstance Odysseus resorts to technical stratagems in order to neutralize the power of the old curse. He does not surrender to the temptation of the Sirens’ mesmerizing song, nor does he let his individuality die and has himself bound to the mast of the ship. He listens to the sweet song but, chained, triumphs over the destiny of the fatal mythological laws.

His calculating *ratio*, in line with his thirst of knowledge and fostered by shrewdness, leads to a conduct which enables Odysseus to listen to the Sirens’ song when approaching their island, to be aware of the human impossibility to resist their melody, as well as of his lack of practical means to oppose their lure. This behaviour takes the same shape of cunning, which is none other than a rational challenge played by an empirical intelligence that rescues Odysseus from the yoke of the archaic decree.

In the eyes of the German critic, however, “You can only escape the curse by surrendering to other forms, even if self-imposed, of submission

and self-constraint”<sup>5</sup>. In his introduction to the Italian translation of the chapter devoted to Odysseus in *Dialect of Enlightenment*, Stefano Petrucciani stresses this aspect: “The individual’s assertion of autonomy against superstition, regressive temptations, and enduring customs, comes at a price: repressing within himself every impulse, weakness or temptation which may lead him to be deflected from what, as a rational and emancipated individual, his fundamental *habitus* should be: to inflexibly pursue only self-prescribed goals, to primarily concern oneself with self-preservation and self-achievement by controlling and turning the natural and social environment to one’s advantage, thanks to the shrewd use of a calculating rationality, capable of fitting the means to the ends”<sup>6</sup>.

Confronted with the Sirens, by whose voices and songs he is bewitched in that they promise knowledge, the man Odysseus accepts the original curse, fulfils it, and recognizes the overwhelming power of the creatures. He makes sure that they have what they are entitled to by decree. But he does it in his way, i.e., by preparing his passage so as to avoid falling victim to the deadly power of the Sirens’ voices. Odysseus gradually separates himself from nature, represented by the mythical figures he meets on his journey from time to time; in so doing, he rules over nature through sacrifice and renunciation of every form of enjoyment and pleasure. Self-control can only be gained through the repudiation of pleasure. The same applies to Odysseus’ travel companions who, to varying degrees that reflect class differences, are obliged to pay the same sacrificial price.

Odysseus, who for the Frankfurt School philosophers embodies the man suspended between self-preservation and self-annihilation, lives in the constant effort to let his Self survive, which consists in overcoming his anxiety about death and unhappiness. In this connection, Odysseus’ double choice becomes clear: he orders his men to plug their ears with wax – in order to avoid any distraction – and row vigorously; as for himself, he is tied to the mast of the ship, helpless as he listens to the Sirens although he does not surrender.

<sup>5</sup> T.W. Adorno (2000), *Interpretazione dell’Odissea. Con un dialogo sul mito tra Adorno e Karl Kerényi*, a cura di Stefano Petrucciani, Roma, Manifestolibri, p. 20.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*.

In Adorno and Horkheimer's view, what happens to Odysseus is consistent with what occurs to the middle-class man who renounces pleasures as much as he gains power. Mariners too, with their senses repressed and devoted to the physical exertion of work, likewise mirror the underdog of capitalist society. Odysseus rules over nature, but at the cost of repressing his inner character. His progress, intellectual growth and self-control encapsulate man's path toward rationalization, which gradually distanced him from myths, prehistoric models, religious conditioning and petrified curses.

In Adorno's judgement, this aspect represents the very process of rationalization which has characterized man's educational path in modern Western countries by reiterating and crystallizing determinism, the principle of necessity, mechanism, and rationalism, inherent to the earliest educational spirit.

### *Critical thinking between rationality e reflectiveness*

The history of European thought is marked by the constant preoccupation with apprehending education as the willpower necessary to grant man's survival in the face of life's perils. This concern has turned into a rational obsession with achieving the certainty of the cognitive act and giving definite rules to rational knowledge, by detaching oneself and distancing reason itself from the possibility of investigating what could not be altogether rationally analysed – *in primis* life, the dimensions of meaning, identity, ethics, and the human being's strongest motivations for learning. It is no coincidence that it was a very representative of rationalism like Kant who first felt the need to envisage, besides a pure reason, a practical and an aesthetical reason, i.e., a reason of the 'heart' and a reason of the 'beautiful'.

The need to understand the meaning of every thing – a remedy against life's unpredictability – combined into a whole the meaning of both education and thought<sup>7</sup>. On the one hand, notions were ordered within lear-

<sup>7</sup> See E. Severino, *Educare al pensiero*, Brescia, La Scuola, 2012, pp. 17-45.

ning processes of single disciplinary subjects; on the other hand, education was fixed and organized into models based on a priori assumptions and into regular, static and self-reproducing intellectual forms. Education thus drew its meaning from a didactic and pedagogical approach arranged around disciplinary structures which, as such, involved the use of logical reasoning. There was no trace of what are today called mental attitudes and habits, which cannot be easily taught in an explicit and formal way since they are analogical and cannot be reduced to units or sequences of units. They are not acquired by direct and explicit transmission, but concern the intellectual, relational and existential dimensions of human behaviour. As Franceschini points out, “attitudes like tenacity and perseverance in the study, respect of school rules and of the basic forms of living together are not formally and digitally taught as the disciplinary contents are. Everybody knows that it is not enough to know rules in order to respect them, but we need to be convinced of their relevance and necessity or, in the worst case, fear the consequences of our disregard”<sup>8</sup>.

What we face today is the most apparent crisis of the empirical and neo-positivist model, which has invested education sciences in their traditional essence, and introduced into educational theory and practice categories like indeterminacy, mutability and complexity. These cannot be dealt with by resorting to notions and technical practices, but require new cognitive modes, both plural and pluralistic<sup>9</sup>.

In this perspective, thinking and thought are more and other than activities aimed at replicating formulas and rules, for they are deeply ingrained in unstable and fluctuating experiences, and thrive on actual forms of social interaction and relational organization. Thinking becomes experience and the experience of thinking in its turn produces knowledge, which is neither definite nor irrevocably structured. The cognitive experience grows into an exercise of reflection on reality, into a way of teaching

<sup>8</sup> G. Franceschini, *Lo scenario contemporaneo: dalla didattica applicativa alla didattica critica*, in A. Agosti, G. Franceschini, M.A. Galanti, *Didattica. Struttura, evoluzione e modelli*, Bologna, CLUEB, 2009, p. 188.

<sup>9</sup> I refer to Stephen Stich’s seminal work on the notion of “cognitive pluralism” and on the socio-cultural repercussions of rational activities. See P. Labinaz, *La razionalità*, Roma, Carocci, 2013, pp. 111-115.



to think and consider how thoughts are generated. According to Dewey, this process has a goal, since “The great reward of exercising the power of thinking is that there are no limits to the possibility of carrying over into objects and events of life, meanings originally acquired by thoughtful examination, and hence no limit to the continual growth of meaning in human life”<sup>10</sup>.

In Dewey’s view, education is the achievement of speculation meant as the exertion of man’s thinking faculty aimed at becoming speculative and argumentative<sup>11</sup>; education is the same as philosophy for it is a reflective activity expected to develop critical-argumentative, creative and moral abilities. The essence of education therefore lies in its being a progressive fashioning of paths whereby speculation is entwined with and functions through the educational mediation of experiences and their interaction<sup>12</sup>.

If today the goal of education is defined negatively by rejecting the idea and practice of teaching notions, and if, as a consequence, learning is other than a mere and meaningless process of transmission, it follows that in the current problematic society educational activity must draw on a renewed concept of both knowledge and rational man.

This is the legacy that marks the end of a mechanical and limited notion of knowledge and man, and that ushers in the era of a cognitive and human model which is shaped by reflectiveness, meant as the conscious capacity of embracing complexity, of being critical and aware that no ultimate truth can be apprehended, but that it is necessary to look for diverse explanations, to know that one does not know, to come close to truth by a conscious effort and through argumentation. Knowledge is always based on previous knowledge!

There cannot be formulas and rules for and in a society characterized by constant motion and rapid change. If uncertainty represents the ma-

<sup>10</sup> J. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, London, Macmillan, 1916, p. 173.

<sup>11</sup> See J. Dewey, *How We Think, Revised Edition*, in *The Later Works. 1925-1973*, ed. J.A. Boydston, vol. 8, Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1933, p. 128 (It. tr. *Come pensiamo*, La Nuova Italia, Firenze 1961, p. 83).

<sup>12</sup> See M. Striano, *La filosofia come educazione del pensiero. Una conversazione pedagogica con Matthew Lipman*, in *Filosofia e formazione, 10 anni di Philosophy for children in Italia 1991-2001*, a cura di A. Cosentino, Napoli, Editore Liguori, 2002, p. 64.

for difficulty and alienating aspect of our age, the possession and use of critical thinking prove to be remedies for asserting the right to the full individual and social realization of every citizen of the earth. Educational practices and activities perform a fundamental function in the life of every individual, for they are oriented to the development of mental habits that encourage the broadening of one's horizon. The aptitude for reflective thinking is typical of those who doubt and adopt puzzlement as a research method.

If our mind demands to be educated, if the educational process is designed to train intellectually every individual, that is to train citizens to exert their attitude to reflection and regard reality critically with an open mind, it follows that this type of education is integral to every civilized society; indeed, educational practices generate a civilized society<sup>13</sup>.

In its classical meaning of the ability to think and act by conforming to the abstract principles of deductive reasoning, rationality also implies unconventional notions fit for contemporary reality and its real demands, and which meet the need for an education that prepares learners for life and its inevitable changes. If we delve further into this line of reasoning, the close connection that this new interpretation of critical thinking establishes between the sphere of education and the life lived emerges; especially when we consider Alfred N. Whitehead's belief that education should be directed at preparing youths for critical-thinking activities<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> Popper elaborates further on this topic when he insists on the notion that civilised behaviour is related to the reduction of violence, which he regards as the precondition for both democracy and the development of critical minds: "This is the main function of civilization: in a civilized society what we try to do is to reduce violence. [...] Now the course that I am proposing would test them [people] on the importance of education, on the difficulties of education, and on the central point of education: not only to learn facts, but also to learn how important it is to avoid violence". K.R. Popper, *The Power of Television* (1994), in K.R. Popper, *After the Open Society. Selected Social and Political Writings*, ed. J. Shearmur and P.N. Turner, London and New York, Routledge, 2008, p. 422 (It. tr. K.R. Popper, *Una patente per fare Tv*, in K.R. Popper, J. Condry, *Cattiva maestra televisione*, Reser-Donzelli, Roma 1994, p. 22).

<sup>14</sup> See A.N. Whitehead, *I fini dell'educazione e altri saggi*, a cura di A. Granese, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1992. Two key concepts seem particularly prevailing and interesting in the study of the British scholar: on the subject of early "mental deterioration", he deems necessary not to "teach too many subjects" e "what you teach, teach thoroughly".

Education is such if and only if it is helpful for life and in our lives, even more so in an era like the current one, dominated by relativism and marked by an alarming crisis of personal values. Anxiety, apathy and indifference, existential uncertainties, the proliferation of substitute models, the ambiguous understanding of freedom, and the crisis of formal education, are all factual phenomena that require a likewise factual educational campaign<sup>15</sup>. In our time education proves to be fully involved in a demanding process that goes beyond the simple, albeit essential, traditional transmission of disciplinary knowledge.

The issue of education deeply concerns man and his destiny, especially his need to learn to be confronted every day with various readings and interpretations of real life<sup>16</sup>. Such a challenge demands dedication, on man's part, to his personal identity. In this sense, education represents the guiding principle *of* and *in* the development of the whole person as a being in the process of formation; education provides a beacon in the "the hardest battle of the spiritual soul, [in] the incessant fight against the sleep of life, which is the sleep of the spirit"<sup>17</sup>. Undoubtedly, the answers to all questions cannot be found in the possession of disciplinary knowledge and in the application of well-regulated procedures, but rather in the ability to generate and re-generate knowledge thanks to experience. Events, the challenges of everyday life, and life's problems do not call for technical solutions but, on the contrary, require hermeneutic investigation and profound reflection.

The capacity to find solutions to problems, to rethink and renegotiate is an attribute that cannot be taught nor be dependant on others' suggestions, but is a creative activity which originates and thrives on the interaction with the broader world, and is crucial in the prevailing contexts. It can be rightly claimed that creativity is integral to human beings, that there exists

<sup>15</sup> On this aspect see Z. Bauman's seminal study, *Mortality, Immortality & Other Life Strategies*, Stanford CA, Stanford University Press, 1992 (It. trans. *Il teatro dell'immortalità-mortalità, immortalità e altre strategie di vita*, il Mulino, Bologna 1995).

<sup>16</sup> The reference to 'man's destiny' also recurs in the report drafted by the International Commission, chaired by Edgar Faure, which UNESCO appointed in the Seventies to carry out a study on the state of world education. See E. Faure, *Apprendre à être*, Paris, UNESCO, 1972.

<sup>17</sup> E. Mounier, *Trattato del carattere*, Roma, Edizioni Paoline, 1960, p. 247.

no person, child or adolescent, who is unable to create. Potentially, creativity is an inborn quality, but, being a process, it needs to be fostered and continually exerted by balancing the intellectual and emotional dimensions essential to revise and reinvent in relation to new forms of existence<sup>18</sup>.

*Beyond the educational confusion and the domains of reason: the aesthetical dimension*

Sensitiveness, flexibility, and originality are components of an educational design in tune with a society like ours which continuously encourages us to make a choice between alternative options, and that, being itself the ground and the result of choices, imposes changes and renegotiations of acquired habits, remakes and redefinitions with and into other and diverse existential forms<sup>19</sup>.

Striving to transcend his individuality with a disposition that invests the whole universe, man himself affects the outer world by reshaping and adapting it to his own needs. He does it in accordance to his personal history and to his past experiences that also shape his cognitive history and are reflected in the unique and personal ways in which he acquired the knowledge necessary to his social integration, to improve his living conditions, to interpret, relate to and modify his living context, in particular to reconcile his personal past with his historical time.

<sup>18</sup> Of particular interest is V. Lowenfeld and W.L. Brittain's contribution to *Creatività e sviluppo mentale* (Firenze, Giunti, 1967), revolving around the thesis that "educating for creativity means educating for the future of society".

<sup>19</sup> In this aspect, according to Bauman, resides the major difference between the post-traditional behavioural pattern and the conduct defined as the 'observance of tradition': "The first [behavioural pattern] may happen solely in a no-choice situation in which the very absence of viable alternatives prevents the practised way from being given a second thought, let alone being viewed as a choice. The second is an outcome of choice: the profusion of visible and ostensibly available alternatives effectively staves off the possibility of forgetting that what is practised is indeed a choice and could be replaced – at short notice or without notice – with another, perhaps even a quite different, form of life. By necessity rather than by design, ours is a society of choosers; of such choosers, moreover, as tend to be taught to make a virtue out of this necessity". Z. Bauman, *In Search of Politics*, Stanford CA, Stanford University Press, 1999, p. 134.

His daily existence is marked by behavioural experimentation, conducts, actions and options in the various fields of his life. In this sense, he is the creator of his destiny, the very protagonist and manager of his as well as others' lives. Being the premise for taking on responsibility and the practice of participation that recognizes the legitimacy of his and others' choices, freedom represents an end that educational institutions can practically further by fostering dialogue, plurality of thought, and openness of mind. From this perspective, the meaning of education lies in the practical modes that make it possible to think rationally through learning, through the dialectic exploration and interpretation of complexity in all its interconnections. To think problematically and 'plurally' implies creativity since this is a *modus pensandi* which advances learning and mental habits by means of self-reflection, and creates knowledge and cognitive attitudes as it builds cognitive processes.

The whole human being is involved in the educational process: the rational-cognitive faculties are enlivened by the dimensions of irrationality and sensitivity. The power to think always presupposes the capacity to rethink, which prevents the subject from resorting to enactment and enables him to re-consider himself and re-think in different ways and forms.

At the same time, it is the whole universe of relations and of the relational subject that is involved in any search for meaning in educational activity. The vast world of dualities/antinomies/juxtapositions of the pedagogical discourse (*ego/alter*, change/preservation, unity/plurality, sociality/singularity) demands an original meaning, an impulse of reflectiveness that undermines the absolute dominance of technical rationality. It is an impulse that recovers in an original manner the idea and the ways of unconventional thinking, which is free from any presumption of absoluteness. It follows, from this premise, the necessity to anchor both education and the learner to the surrounding reality, to the real world in which the phenomenology of the educational events takes place.

Reflective thought feeds on its deep-rootedness in the real world, but at the same time as such it needs to withdraw from the world. Education must meet social demands; however, it cannot and must not for this very reason conform and be subjugated to them, ending up in homogenisation and conformity. The existence of the subject is scattered with risks: on the one hand, he is the player who actively participates in and experiences the urgent problems of the real world, and, by acquiring specific skills, must learn to think and act in order to find a possible solution to them. On the

other hand, he is the spectator who observes himself and the world from a privileged standpoint, in that *topos noetos* from which everything appears as it really is, far away from appearances and any partiality. It is the spiritual eye, not the rational one, which observes and understands what the logic had obscured or seemed indifferent and meaningless from a coherent and rational perspective.

In realizing this bewilderment, the subject gradually broadens the horizon of his activities, which on the one hand go beyond and are not wholly affected by materiality; on the other hand, they are closer to imagination and more suited to the loneliness of the thinker, partly other than the present reality and already future possibilities at the same time.

He also discovers and re-discovers forms, light, movement, fullness of life, and affectivity, along a path of identity acquisition and formation; hence, the dynamic understanding of the meaning of life and things takes place 'irrationally'. The act of *educere* is thus given prominence and new consciousness thanks to aesthetic openings; it goes beyond the notion of an all-embracing reason, and recovers its own space in the emphasis on the harmony of all man's thinking faculties, on his freedom of expression, on his irrational and unconscious impulses, and on his interpersonal communication<sup>20</sup>. Hovering between utopia and disenchantment, education becomes the metaphor for a possible and productive course of action, aimed to restore dignity to human existence in its formative significance, and make life, as continuous learning process, worth living.

The enhancement of the aesthetic dimension of education clearly introduces a criticism to the educational practices characterized by conformism and stereotyped principles, since it shifts the focus to an unexplored field and acknowledges the subject's power to transform and be transformed, to experience different modes of social and cultural change, to keep alive the impulse to fullness and infinitude underlying the human finite condition.

The idea of goodness as a human impulse is inherent to the beautiful for it implies a distancing, the movement towards a temporal *elsewhere*,

<sup>20</sup> See P. Malavasi, *Vita, educazione*, in A. Mariani (a cura di), *25 saggi di pedagogia*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2011, p. 51: "The aesthetic appeal signals a further sense, the crossing of the physical boundaries of things".

the loss of oneself, the need to get out of oneself, and the attraction to the other. In any case, the beautiful discloses the sense of creativity and mystery, of the not-given, and the yearning for meaning as a distinguishing human feature. In this regard, the pedagogical discourse also invests territories that had been only superficially explored. There only is it possible to recover an essential dimension, which, invisible to the eyes of reason, is the driving force behind a reasoning on which a possible future can be built and the horizon of education reshaped as both the ethical tension to sympathetic and altruistic bonds, and as educational responsibility.

The beautiful as a cognitive style refers to a dynamic image of thought, which enables the subject to test different readings of human and social reality by promoting the elaboration of hidden meanings. The aesthetic dimension as a pedagogical system encapsulates the ideal of the authentic experience of a subject who thinks, ponders, overcomes the sense of existential finitude by losing himself, like Socrates, in a spatio-temporal non-place, and asserts his ability to give new meanings to his own and others' lives<sup>21</sup>. Education to beauty, for its very connotation, means education to reflectiveness that also involves dialogue and discussion, free self-expression, opinion giving, consciousness of the surrounding world, and speculation on fundamental aspects of one's and others' lives. In this sense, the dimension of the beautiful, far from being reduced to a mere hedonistic search, contributes to support education by releasing the educational potential inherent to the dynamics of a particular way of approaching and 'sensing' reality, of viewing existence through the emotions stirred by the inner eye<sup>22</sup>.

Ken Robinson makes a similar claim when he stresses the anti-aesthetical structure of the school system which, in his opinion, is unfit to promote the necessary cultural change precisely because it "kills creativity"<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>21</sup> See H. Arendt, *La vita della mente*, It. tr., Bologna, il Mulino, 1987, pp. 291-319.

<sup>22</sup> For further reference on this analytical perspective, see Marisa Musaiò's provocative work. In particular, see *Pedagogia del bello. Suggestioni e percorsi educativi*, Franco Angeli, Milano 2007.

<sup>23</sup> K. Robinson, *Do Schools Kill Creativity?*, TED Conference talk, 2006; *Bring on the learning revolution!*, TED Conference talk, 2010; *Changing education paradigms*, TED Conference talk, 2010. Watch the video at <http://sirkenrobinson.com/skr/>.

The same perspective is shared by the major international educational organizations, which identify in the aesthetic and artistic dimension the best instrument to “foster cultural awareness and promote cultural practices”<sup>24</sup>. As Dallari maintains, “there can be no education without *Aisthesis*, for emotions and wonder not only accompany, but are an intrinsic part of every invention and discovery apprehended for what they really are: a discovery and an invention, not mere ‘learning’”<sup>25</sup>. It’s a way of knowing which generates skills in every participant involved to varying degrees and with different roles. There cannot be education without the emotion and wonder that emerge throughout the educational path as a process of continuous creation, and that represent the quintessence of *educere* as the very source of motivation.

<sup>24</sup> *Road Map for Arts Education. The World Conference on Arts Education: Building Creative Capacities for the 21 st Century*, Lisbon, 6-9 March 2006, pp. 3 and 6. <http://portal.unesco.org>.

<sup>25</sup> M. Dallari, *La dimensione estetica della paideia. Fenomenologia, arte, narrativa*, Trento, Erickson, 2005, p. 26.