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Educational Authority and Challenge of Freedom: From Ancient Times to *Summerhill*

Autorytet edukacji a wyzwanie wolności:
od czasów starożytnych do *Summerhill*

ABSTRACT

The article is primarily concerned with the relationship between authority and freedom. From the pedagogical point of view, freedom comes from authority because to be free means to be able to express self-control in order to choose only what is good. Educational authority isn't tyranny because the educator must be coherent and must act as he/she teaches. The main challenge to educating people and to people in education – both of them – is to be able to practice virtue, not only to recognize values.

Nowadays, especially the “bad conduct” of youths, people are increasingly concerned about their relationship with permissive educational practices. In fact, the problem revolves around the fact that boys and girls have learned but are unable to lead themselves, they involved in addictions (drugs, alcohol, internet...) and they show their weakness in concrete decisions. It isn't a matter of knowledge, but of will; it is related to the lack of will towards self-care.

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only from the moral point of view, but also from the point of view of their health? Because they are not educated to fix limits to their desires: that problem is related to the lack of authority because authority makes us able to face limitations. For this reason it is necessary to reconsider authority within educational theory and practice.

My purpose in this paper is to support a thesis which is at first glance paradoxical: authority leads to freedom. It would seem to be impossible according to the perspective of permissive education; on the contrary, it is not only true, but also essential in order to make what it means to educate clear. Today's difficulties in conjugating freedom and authority must be considered within our cultural situation. It was very different before, for example during the 19th century when people fought for the liberty of their homeland and they were sure that discipline was necessary to reach their goal. Actually, at that time too, there were permissive doctrines but they were professed only by small groups and singular personalities. Nowadays, on the contrary, that idea is common, but especially the "bad conduct" of youths makes people think about their relationship with permissive educational practices. In fact, the problem centres around the fact that boys and girls have learned, but are unable to lead themselves, are involved in addictions (drugs, alcohol, internet...) and show their weakness in concrete decisions. It is not a matter of knowledge, but of will; it is related to the lack of will towards self-care. Why aren't boys and girls who attend school, are well informed and are without economic problems determined to reject what is bad not only from the moral point of view, but also from the point of view of their health? Because they are not educated to fix limits to their desires: that problem is related to the lack of authority since authority makes us able to face limits. For this reason I want to suggest a reconsideration of authority within educational theory and practice. I will follow the steps outlined below:

- a) the acknowledgment of the role historically played by authority in Western education from its starting point;
- b) the critical discussion of the permissive approach in order to show the misunderstanding within its deep inspiration;

- c) the description of “educational action” as “moral action”;
- d) the reconsideration of freedom and authority from the pedagogical point of view in order to show how they can face the challenge of “youth discomfort”.

1. Education and authority in Ancient pedagogy

Authority has always been present within Western education, but this fact did not mean that educational relationships were necessarily cold, authoritarian and servile, as is well attested from one of the most ancient pedagogical testimonies at our disposal. I am referring here to some lines in the *Iliad* (in Western civilization, the oldest document about an individual educational story, the one concerning Achilles) describing the meeting between the young hero and his old educator, Phoenix. The context is dramatic because, after his quarrel with Agamemnon, Achilles left the Greek army that had begun to lose against Trojans. For this reason the commander in chief – Agamemnon – reluctantly sent Phoenix and other Greek leaders to Achilles in order to convince him of the necessity of fighting at the Greeks’ side. The context is military and archaic, surely more authoritarian than today, but Achilles’ old educator starts speaking by reminding him of domestic memories (IX, 485–495):

And I reared thee to be such as thou art, O godlike Achilles, loving thee from my heart; for with none other would thou go to the feast neither take meat in the hall, till I had set thee on my knees and given thee thy fill of the savoury morsel cut first for thee, and had put the wine cup to thy lips. Full often hast thou wetted the tunic upon my breast, sputtering forth the wine in thy sorry helplessness. So have I suffered much for thee and toiled much, ever mindful of this that the gods would in no wise vouchsafe me a son born of mine own body. Nay. It was thou that I sought to make my son, o godlike Achilles¹.

Achilles’ speech has the same style because the hero orders his servants to give rest to the old brave warrior (IX, 608–619):

Phoenix, old sire, my father, nurtured of Zeus, in no wise have I need of this honour: honoured have I been, I deem, by the apportionment of

¹ Homer, *The Iliad* with an English Translation by A.T. Murray, in two volumes, Cambridge, MA, London 1924.



Zeus, which shall be mine amid the beaked ships so long as the breath abideth in my breast and my knees are quick. (...) Be thou king even as I am, and share the half of my honour. Howbeit these shall bear my message, but abide thou here and lay thee down on a soft couch, and at break of day we will take counsel whether to return to our own or to tarry here².

The ancient text makes us to recognize how, in archaic society just as today, the practice of authority – precisely of educational authority – was connected to love and affective feelings, a proximity to the family environment. We receive confirmation from historical testimonies too, for example the well-known *Hippocratic Oath*. The Homeric poem goes back to the 10th century B.C. describing a civilization five centuries more ancient. The Hippocratic text dates back to the 5th century B.C., but there is the same domestic reference. In fact the young physician says to the old master:

I swear by Apollo Physician, by Asclepius, by Health, by Heal-all, and by all the gods and goddesses, making them witnesses, that I will carry out, according to my ability and judgment, this oath and this indenture: To regard my teacher in this art as equal to my parents; to make him partner in my livelihood, and when he is in need of money to share mine with him; to consider his offspring equal to my brothers; to teach them this art, if they require to learn it, without fee or indenture; and to impart precept, oral instruction, and all the other learning, to my sons, to the sons of my teacher, and to pupils who have signed the indenture and sworn obedience to the physicians Law, but to none other³.

We can also find the same custom in ancient philosophical schools. Two examples are surely convincing because of the authority of their masters. The first comes from the most ancient school formally established within Western civilization, the Pythagorean. In his *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* Diogenes Laertius – speaking about Pythagoras – says (VIII, 10):

indeed, his disciples did put all their possessions into one common stock. For five whole years they had to keep silence, merely listening to his discourses without seeing him, until they passed an examination, and thenceforward they were admitted to his house and allowed to see him⁴.

² Ibidem.

³ W.H.S. Jones, *The Doctor's Oath*, Cambridge 1924, 11, 12.

⁴ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. R.D. Hicks, Cambridge 1972.

It's clear that there is strong discipline at work inside the school, but – at the same time – it's clear the domestic reference related to the final destination to Pythagoras' "house", i.e., to be on terms of familiarity with him. It's the same situation described by Plato's *Letter VII* (341c):

concerning all these writers, or prospective writers, who claim to know the subjects which I seriously study, whether as hearers of mine or of other teachers, or from their own discoveries; it is impossible, in my judgment at least, that these men should understand anything about this subject. There does not exist, nor will there ever exist, any treatise of mine dealing therewith. For it does not at all admit of verbal expression like other studies, but, as a result of continued application to the subject itself and communion therewith, it is brought to birth in the soul on a sudden, as light that is kindled⁵.

When Plato speaks of "communion therewith", he refers to the living together peculiar to family life. We find something similar in his most famous disciple, Aristotle, when – in *Nicomachean Ethics* (1172a) – he goes as far as to invent a new verb – *synphilosophéo* ("to think together") – in order to put common life at the root of education: it's the concept expressed both from Pythagoras and Plato. Actually the whole history of Western pedagogical thought shows the same. Starting from Socratic "maieutics" (concerning the deep dialogue between master and disciples), through Christian education (for example, the *Paedagogus* by Clement of Alexandria), up to 19th century pedagogy, there is always reference to love in education – as a communitarian reference – both in secular (Pestalozzi, for example) and Catholic education (Don Bosco, for example). The same is true of 20th century pedagogy, principally related as it was to the value of the person. Actually, the practice of authority has always been accused of being its opposite, that is authoritarianism which does not educate at all. Perhaps the most meaningful testimony comes from Kafka's *Letter to My Father*. There is a passage (pp. 5-6) very clear:

What was brought to the table had to be eaten, the quality of the food was not to be discussed, but you yourself often found the food inedible, called it 'this swill', said 'that cow' (the cook) had ruined it. Because in

⁵ Plato, *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 7, translated by R.G. Bury, Cambridge, MA, London 1966.



accordance with your strong appetite and your particular predilection you ate everything fast, hot, and in big mouthfuls, the child had to hurry; there was a somber silence at table, interrupted by admonitions: 'Eat first, talk afterward', or 'Faster, faster, faster', or 'There you are, you see. I finished ages ago'. Bones mustn't be cracked with the teeth, but you could. Vinegar must not be sipped noisily, but you could. The main thing was that the bread should be cut straight. But it didn't matter that you did it with a knife dripping with gravy. Care had to be taken that no scraps fell on the floor. In the end it was under your chair that there were the most scraps. At table one wasn't allowed to do anything but eat, but you cleaned and cut your fingernails, sharpened pencils, cleaned your ears with a toothpick. Please, father, understand me correctly: in themselves these would have been utterly insignificant details, they only became depressing for me because you, so tremendously the authoritative man, did not keep the commandments you imposed on me. Hence the world was for me divided into three parts: one in which I, the slave, lived under laws that had been invented only for me and which I could, I did not know why, never completely comply with; then a second world, which was infinitely remote from mine, in which you lived, concerned with government, with the issuing of orders and with the annoyance about their not being obeyed; and finally a third world where everybody else lived happily and free from orders and from having to obey. I was continually in disgrace; either I obeyed your orders, and that was a disgrace, for they applied, after all, only to me; or I was defiant, and that was a disgrace too, for how could I presume to defy you; or I could not obey because I did not, for instance, have your strength, your appetite, your skill, although you expected it of me as a matter of course; this was the greatest disgrace of all. This was not the course of the child's reflections, but of his feelings⁶.

I think in this way that we can explain the rebellion against authority in education which began in the second half of the 20th century, precisely from the end of the Sixties. It was a justified reaction against authoritarianism, but it was not justified to draw an equation between authority and authoritarianism, as the second one is the opposite of the first one, i.e., its degeneration. Among the authors who gave their contribution to this aim, Alexander Scott Neill is one of the most important. For this reason I will now proceed with a critique of his ideas.

⁶ F. Kafka, *Letter to my Father*, Available at: <<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1CK480j6khmHzAZYdR26Zu1Iu064uCo32JnESIulbFYw/preview?pli=1>>.

2. The critic of authority: good motivations and wrong considerations

The Alexander Scot Neill's criticism of authority is very important because his statements had a wide ranging influence over ideas declared by supporters of protests against authority at the end of the Sixties. Neill's permissive and anti-authoritarian attitude stemmed from his political opposition to Nazism. In his book *Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Child Rearing*⁷ he remembers the huge crowds around the German despot: he believes that their submissive attitude was determined by an educational style under the rule of obedience. Surely there was also a conformist tendency in the origins of the Nazi victory in Germany (as in other countries under tyrannical governments), but Neill is wrong because he misinterprets human freedom twice.

First of all, Neill deals with human liberty as if it were complete from its starting point. Actually, if freedom were mature at the beginning, obviously authority – giving limits to human activity – would be an obstacle to human growth. But things are very different. At first human liberty is present, but not in a mature way, in fact a baby's life is under instinctive necessities. On the contrary, freedom is present, but like a germ which aims to grow. Day by day, month by month, a baby is more and more able to express his/her intentionality. It's a dynamic process, for this reason it isn't complete at the beginning and authority doesn't oppress anything because freedom isn't actually completely formed.

There is another misunderstanding on what regards human liberty according to Neill's thought. I refer here to his idea of the human character as being totally under manipulation. In his book, he says that our characters may be shaped like dogs. For this reason – he says – people generally like dogs, because of their obedience, because of their servile attitude toward masters. Neill says that human education is very similar to the “education” of dogs. He is sure that, as dogs are trained, so children are educated.

Clearly, totalitarian governments have exploited character education, the transmission of behaviors gradually built according to models, but the fact that it has been exploited isn't enough to despise and reject discipline in itself. We must recognize that good and bad education stand side by side. Discipline can be badly practiced, but it can be prac-

⁷ A.S. Neill, *Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Child Rearing*, New York 1960.



ticed well too. A fierce opponent of the Nazi regime and a great educator of young people – Romano Guardini – underlines that nothing great can be done without strong discipline because man's true strength is related to character (the English word comes directly from the Greek *kharakter* which means “print” as “inner identity”).

Both of Neill's ideas about freedom are incorrect. On one side, we must recognize that liberty is a task, not only a fact: human life is the challenge to reach the maturity as the capacity to get freedom which is a means, not an end in itself. That is why there was always a metaphor concerning maturity in order to identify human moral growth in pedagogy. The only complete treatise from antiquity (*How to Educate Children* by Pseudo-Plutarch), is full of references to human growth being similar to the growth of fruits. On the other side, the human character is totally different from that of a dog's (animal) character because to educate human beings isn't the same as training animals. The crucial difference is that only the human being is free. What does it mean? Both human creatures and animals are conditioned by environmental factors (inside and outside), but animals are determined to act, men and women not. For example, when animals are hungry, they look for food; hungry men and women do the same, but not necessarily: if they have a reason to defer the satisfaction of needs, they are able to do so, while animals are under compulsion.

Neill's charge is only good against authoritarianism, but is completely false with regard to authority. During recent decades permissive theories were unfortunately able to affect public opinion, but nowadays we can observe negative consequences, starting from youth problems about morality and good conduct. It is necessary to make clear what it means to educate and what is the task of authority within education.

3. What does it mean to educate?

It is common to speak about the crisis of education, referring to difficulties in order to educate. I think that this problem is also related to the fact that the meaning of the word “education” is today too large. In fact, people generally think that to educate means simply to be in relation with someone, arguing that any type of relationship is good in this respect. Actually, the human being is always involved in relations but not each relationship is educational only the one com-

mitted to the “conquest” of freedom. Information, knowledge, operative skills aren’t enough to educate because the deep peculiarity of human identity is freedom and education is peculiar to human beings: that’s why to educate involves moral engagement.

Even animals learn skills, but it means that they are involved in training, not in education. To train means to lead in order to do something useful; to educate means to lead in order to do something good. When the human being satisfies basic needs or learns an instrumental competence, certainly he/she acts in more complex way than animal but not enough to show the very difference as regards to it since his/her originality is related to freedom as the progressive maturity of moral identity.

From the lexical point of view we can connect “to educate” and two Latin verbs: *educāre* and *educēre*. The first literally means “to feed”, “to grow”, “to lead” and immediately refers to actions under an educator’s rule, emphasizing the role of mentor which is often associated with the adult leading the child. *Educāre*, coming from the verb *ducēre*, stresses education as an oriented process, intentionally guided from someone who has greater maturity than young people committed to him/her: the emphasis is on the educator’s authority as his/her strength to lead to the best and to make the child to grow (Latin word *auctoritas* – “authority” – comes from the verb *augēre* that means “to make someone to grow”). So what identifies educative authority? Perhaps the power of the older over the younger? Not at all, as it clearly shows in another Latin word.

The verb *educēre* means “to draw out”, “to pull out”, “to take out”. The reference is still to an educator’s action, but in a very different way from before. In fact it is possible to draw/pull/take out only what is previously inside. Now an educator’s action depends on the inner identity of the person under education, the one that takes the lead. The educator doesn’t shape the pupil’s identity from the outside, but from the inside because to educate means to make the singularity to come out of each one. As I have mentioned before, human originality is related to liberty and it is true from two points of view. First of all from the personal point of view: to be free means to express the singular decision of each one and this is the meaning related to the verb *educēre*. On the other side, there is also the singularity of mankind, expressed by culture as human creation: this is the meaning of freedom related to *educāre*.



Educāre and *educēre* have different meanings but also common features too, according to which it is possible to recognize two essential characteristics of education:

- a) education identifies something intrinsically “dynamic” (as it is clearly expressed from the linguistic connection to the verb *ducēre*, “to lead”) under an educator’s leadership role;
- b) the pupil also has a leadership role, because an educator’s guide is oriented by the baby’s/child’s/boy’s and girl’s originality: to educate doesn’t mean *ducēre* arbitrarily from the educator’s side: it means *e-ducēre* from the point of view of baby’s/child’s/boy’s and girl’s originality (in Latin, the preposition *e* is related to movement from somewhere).

In the first sense the educator is *magister* (in English, the term coming from this Latin word is “master”) because he/she expresses “more” as regards to the baby/child/boy and girl (*magis* in Latin). It is matter only of maturity, because the dignity is the same. In the second sense the educator is *minister* (in English the term coming from that Latin word is the same, “minister”) because he/she expresses “less” (*minus* in Latin) as regards to his/her identity in the sense that the educator puts himself/herself on the same level of the baby/child/boy and girl in order to make him/her to grow. Education is the opposite of standardization. Even if the educator starts from models in order to lead the educational process, he/she must adapt them to the concrete identity expressed by the person committed to him/her.

In German “education” is expressed by the word *Bildung*, coming from *Bild*, “image”. The term is deeply related to the Biblical doctrine concerning the creation of man and woman in “God’s image” (Gen 1). For this reason, “education” as *Bildung* means to show the inner identity of human being through what in him/her shows “God’s image”, i.e., freedom. The word itself shows the power – freedom – involved in moral maturity as the ability to lead himself/herself. The corresponding Greek word is *enkráteia*, well transliterated in the English word *empowerment*, “to be in power”, i.e., to be able to lead himself/herself in order to act coherently with human dignity.

Education is transformation, but we must remember that in Greek philosophy the word “form” means not only what is visible from outside, but principally which identifies from the inside. The human being is the only animal with dignity. It means that each one

of us has value in himself/herself. That's why we are called to responsibility which means to correspond (the response inside *responsibility*) through our actions to our dignity, i.e., to choose, to decide only according to what deserves our intrinsic value. There isn't enough "training" to reach that ability because it is associated with functional skills; being the human creature as such principally because of his/her moral maturity, the most important skill to attain is the ability to act well from the ethical point of view, not only from the technical.

How is it possible to act in this way? It is necessary to govern our needs and desires and this is why we need authority. We can lead ourselves only if we are able to limit ourselves and this can happen only if we are in relation with someone – the educator – expressing authority over us. When we become able to express authority over ourselves, we become adult and morally responsible, for this reason we can become educators in our turn: the challenge is to attain authority over ourselves – in this sense authority generates freedom.

4. The authority as "maieutics" of freedom

What does it mean to educate someone? It means to lead him/her – through the educator's authority – to be able to express authority over himself/herself. If I am aware of my intrinsic value, I must lead myself to choose only what deserves me. But, in order to be able to act in this way, I must be able to put limits to my needs and desires: that is why it is necessary to deal with authority in order to be free, and an educator's authority is the baby's/child's/boy's and girl's freedom "maieutics". This ancient word comes from the activity of one of the most important Greek educators, Socrates. He used dialogues with his disciples (the most famous was Plato) in order to lead them to find the truth by themselves. Socrates says that he only helps as the obstetrician helps women to give birth: Socrates helps in the same way to give birth to the truth – his art is "maieutics", the obstetrician's art in spiritual sense.

At the beginning of this article I referred to the *Iliad*, now I intend to close with the same reference. The Homeric poem is opened by a dramatic scene: the dispute between Agamemnon and Achilles. The second is braver than the first, but younger too: for this reason he must be under the rule of the other, otherwise the Greek army will be destroyed. That is why Athena only becomes visible to Achilles



to order him to repress his fury against Agamemnon. It's the ability associated with the word *enkráteia* ("self-control"): Achilles gives proof of *auctoritas* over himself, for this reason he is a hero. In short: Achilles shows that he has wisdom (Athena is the goddess of wisdom), in Greek *phrónesis*, a word coming from *phrén* ("heart" as the source of instincts, emotions and feelings): the hero is well educated because he is able to govern his heart. What does it mean? That he has authority over himself, for this reason he is free.

There one final question to deal with. If authority is necessary to education, but it tends to turn into authoritarianism, in which way is it possible to mark the difference between educative authority and non-educative authoritarianism? Both the educator with authority and the authoritarian person put limits on other people's conduct, but the first submits himself/herself to rules given to those under education; on the contrary, the authoritarian person – like every tyrant – makes laws for others but he/she doesn't respect them. In other words: the educator expresses authority when he/she is coherent with (rational, not arbitrary) limits that he/she fixes. The advice given by Isocrates to an ancient father (*To Nicocles*, 38) is still relevant:

Make it your practice to talk of things that are good and honorable, that your thoughts may through habit come to be like your words. Whatever seems to you upon careful thought to be the best course, put this into effect. If there are men whose reputations you envy, imitate their deeds. Whatever advice you would give to your children, consent to follow it yourself⁸.

Centuries later, John Locke says the same:

As the father's example must teach the child respect for his tutor, so the tutor's example must lead the child into those actions he would have him do. His practice must by no means cross his precepts, unless he intend to set him wrong. It will be to no purpose for the tutor to talk of the restraint of the passions whilst any of his own are let loose; and he will in vain endeavour to reform any vice or indecency in his pupil, which he allows in himself. Ill patterns are sure to be followed more than good rules; and therefore he must always carefully preserve him from the influence of ill precedents, especially the most dangerous of all, the examples of the servants; from whose company he is to be kept, not by prohibitions, for that will but give him an itch after it, but by other ways I have mentioned⁹.

⁸ Isocrates, *Isocrates with an English Translation in three volumes*, by G. Norlin, Cambridge, MA, London 1980.

⁹ J. Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, London 1693, §89. Available at: <<http://www.bartleby.com/37/1/9.html>>.

It is precisely the opposite behavior of that of Kafka's father. The educator must follow the advice about his/her coherence in order to lead the boy and the girl to become man and woman, to be able to choose the best. Here is, according to Aristotle, the *érgon* (the proper task) peculiar to human beings (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1098a):

the function of a good man is to perform these activities well and rightly, and if a function is well performed when it is performed in accordance with its own proper excellence – from these premises it follows that the Good of man is the active exercise of his soul's faculties in conformity with excellence or virtue, or if there be several human excellences or virtues, in conformity with the best and most perfect among them¹⁰.

Education is a challenge to freedom being the defining peculiarity of humans. Some sentences by Benedict XVI's letter to the Diocese of Rome about the educational challenge (21.01.2008) are particularly noteworthy:

We thus arrive, dear friends of Rome, at what is perhaps the most delicate point in the task of education: finding the right balance between freedom and discipline. If no standard of behavior and rule of life is applied even in small daily matters, the character is not formed and the person will not be ready to face the trials that will come in the future. The educational relationship, however, is first of all the encounter of two kinds of freedom, and successful education means teaching the correct use of freedom. As the child gradually grows up, he becomes an adolescent and then a young person; we must therefore accept the risk of freedom and be constantly attentive in order to help him to correct wrong ideas and choices. However, what we must never do is to support him when he errs, to pretend we do not see the errors or worse, that we share them as if they were the new boundaries of human progress. Education cannot, therefore, dispense with that authoritativeness which makes the exercise of authority possible. It is the fruit of experience and competence, but is acquired above all with the coherence of one's own life and personal involvement, an expression of true love. The educator is thus a witness of truth and goodness. He too, of course, is fragile and can be mistaken, but he will constantly endeavor to be in tune with his mission¹¹.

¹⁰ *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, vol. 19: *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by H. Rackham, Cambridge, MA, London 1934.

¹¹ *Letter of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Faithful of the Diocese and City of Rome on the Urgent Task of Educating Young People*. Available at: <http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/letters/2008/documents/hf_ben-xvi_let_20080121_educazione.html>.



The statements of the Pope emeritus are coherent with the task of leading young people to conquer liberty as the ability to choose – by themselves – the best from the moral point of view. In the task is strictly involved authority as “maieutics” of *freedom*: self-dominion related to the authority over themselves as the gift offered by a true educator’s authority.

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