

Democracy or Fundamentalism: which Education Model?

(<http://evans-experientialism.freewebspace.com/rossin08.htm>)

by Antonio Rossin – June 08, 2007 (1)

Foreword

I'm no official educator having institutional responsibilities. I consider myself a common parent only, having family responsibilities. I had but a job as neuropsychiatrist, and as such I asked myself whether most of my patients' sufferings could have been caused by their own rigid conditioned demand for consent – when this demand had been unanswered. I had also a job as a family practitioner, and as such I often heard too many desperate parents asking me: “Doctor, what could we do, to avoid that our child...”

So it happened that I asked myself for which could be the role of parents to condition the development of children's personality: either rigidly dependent on the leader authority's consent, or independent, autonomous, flexible. The involved age is that from zero to three years of the child, when she is self-fixing her brain network and parents are the only teachers. I wondered whether there is a link between the first learning of language and the self-fixing of the brain structure of the child where she processes her believing and behaving procedures.

I asked everybody – teachers, pedagogues, education academicians, writers, reporters, thinkers and tinkers, for they could give me a practical clue on how a common parent could have performed his educative task with the needed knowledge – thus with a chance of control – towards the wanted goal: in my case, towards the formation of the independent, autonomous and flexible personality, able to unit freedom and responsibility.

Alas, no one was able to gave me any answer. Then, I had to search for it myself, empirically. There resulted a new educative line, which I named “Dialectic Education”. I educated my children accordingly, with satisfaction. Then I wanted to put the new educative option at my colleague parents' disposal; I published my analyses, held conferences and activated debates. I've also devoted an Internet web site. Yet forty years have passed, but I did not see any official answer by the competent authority. Plainly, the Institution needs of being prompted further. This is the why of this last labour of mine, that – let me remark it – does not pretend to be conclusive of an analysis that has not been still deepened as it should need to be, but it wants to be the opening only of the needed debate.

The question

The age zero to three may be crucial in a child's psycho-social scaffolding and enduring basic assumptions. This is well known since the time of Ignace of Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus, who, we are told, said: “*Give me the first four years of a man's life, and I'll turn him into a perfect soldier of God.*”

This statement immediately raises the question: what is the means and ongoing effect of the educative imprinting to which the child's neuro-psychical structure is subjected during those earliest years?

500 years have passed since then; many scholarly studies have been done in both the psycho-pedagogical and the neuro-physiological domains; and yet the link between a pedagogical use of language as an imprinting factor and the neuro-physiological framing of a child's personality has still not been critically investigated as it deserves. Parents, who are

normally the only teachers of children at that delicate age, have still not been called to pay attention to the logical reasoning, communicating, negotiating and consensus-seeking mechanisms that regulate their primary formative role. Actually, traditional education has missed out on making families aware about the knowledge tools which may allow them to make an informed and responsible choice of how to perform their irreplaceable educative task. The “Dialectic Education” proposal, outlined in this essay, offers a critical and constructive contribution to this empty disciplinary domain.

Assuredly, what is at stake is not negligible. At an individual level, everybody knows that psychological dependence imprinting represents one of the greatest factors of risk towards drug addiction in youth. At a collective level, it is equally known that the absence of any capacity for questioning authority represents a basic, rather a fundamental one, propensity to perform those intolerant and violent behaviours whose extreme form appears to include the so-called “holy-war” made by the kamikazes of today’s Islamic religious fundamentalism.

The imprinting

At this point some explanation about the educative “imprinting” mechanism seems necessary. We must keep it clear that the imprinted thing is not the recording and the performing of a given behaviour - like the kamikaze’s. Really, the imprinted thing is absolute obedience to the authority that may indicate or suggest a given behaviour. This authority can be a physical person, or the collective agreement – or else a book, like the Christian Bible, the Jewish Torah or the Islamic Koran. What matters now, is the chance of diminishing the intensity of the imprinting in the child’s brain, so that she/he may be abler to put autonomous, responsible and critical attitudes of her/his own into action, with respect to the presumed authority. In a word, if we call “education” the imprinting of absolute obedience to authority’s wishes, what I’m going to describe is “dis-education” – as the fundamentalist would call it; but let’s call it, more aptly, “dis-imprinting”.

I shall first apologize that to describe the “fundamentalism” phenomenon I referred to its more extreme side, that of Islamic kamikaze fundamentalist – really, all of us know very well that there are far less aggressive sides of fundamentalism. Indeed, there is developing a more dialectical, less extreme and less fundamentalist trend among religionists, even Islamic, evidenced in some international multi-faith movements and endorsement of Universal Rights Declarations by authorities professing to be Islamic, ‘people of the book’ etc.; and despite childhood indoctrination some parents there develop respect for egalitarian marriage stances etc. But we also know very well that, in order to effectively explain any phenomenon, one must figure out its more extreme appearances: and I’ve been unable to evade this explanatory principle.

Parents’ role

To know what happens in a person’s earliest years of life, what is the neuro-physiological and pedagogical substratum into which the fundamentalist imprinting may happen to exert such iron a grasp that it so often demands the sacrifice of life, I refer to the discovery of the Nerve Growth Factor (NGF) that earned the Nobel prize for Rita Levi-Montalcini. Her studies demonstrated that inside the human brain, at about two years after birth, under the effect of NGF, a sudden and overflowing proliferation of connections among the nerve cells takes place. From then on a physiological process of re-absorption of the overflowing connections starts, whose predictable goal is the conservation of those connections that turned out as the more useful ones for survival aims. The final results of this selective

process will be the young individual's psychical framework final self-fixing, that will be, as Ignace of Loyola knew well, that of the "perfect soldier of God" – but whose extreme side, as all of us are able to see everyday in the news, includes the kamikaze of the Islamic religious fundamentalism.

The pedagogic education mechanism controlling this neuro-formative process is known by specialized students as "imprinting", and seems to be to some extent irreversible. Indeed, during those earliest years of a child's life, her survival is bound to her parents' agreement, she knows. The selective criterion ruling the suppression or the conservation of her brain connections is thus tied to the family educative feed-back the child obtains, in answer to her first behaviours by the family authority. There will be therefore saved the nervous connections through which the behaviours in agreement with the family authority are processed, just because of the positive feed-back that those behaviours will obtain. There will be vice versa suppressed the nerve connections that serve her behaviours eventually unwanted – or else punished - by the family leader. On this physiologic selective mechanism, the first and more basic communication model that a child learns after birth is the mother/child hierarchical relationship. The original authority that the child recognizes as having an "all or nothing " status, as all children do, and that she embodies with an imprinting effect, is thus represented by her mother.

Very soon, a second authority enters the child's world: her father. Now the mother-father communicating way becomes crucial. The crucial point is, if the mother submits to the male parent's authority, the child learns that there is a further, more powerful authority that exceeds and transcends the "all " represented by the one she acknowledged originally. This further conditioning element, having a transcendence implication, comes unavoidably to influence the language-mediated hierarchic relationship that the child is embodying (imprinting). The intervention of this second element allows us to spot two distinct educational models, according to the particular way in which mother and father communicate.

We can indeed consider two basic parameters of this communication way:

1. With the "fundamentalist" model, the mother submits her own opinions and her personality to the male parent's higher authority, which she obeys without even questioning it in anything. The family educative feed-back and the child's formative imprinting will run accordingly. The new hierarchic situation in fact binds the child to learn that there is a super-authority that transcends and dominates the original one, naturally represented by her mother, and that cannot be even questioned but only obeyed beyond any natural necessity of survival – even unto the extreme behaviour of the fundamentalist kamikaze. The intensity of the fundamentalist imprinting will therefore parallel the intensity of the hierarchy - dominated by the father but mediated by the mother - that rules the relationship between the two parents, starting from the more delicate age of the child. It is the "zero-to-three" age, when she learns, together with language, also the communication-based inter-individual and social hierarchy.

Indeed, if both parents obey the rule of absolute consent, as how happens in the fundamentalist model, one parent's authority adds itself to the other parent's. Thence there is an intensity increase in the hierarchically dependent relationship the child is necessarily bound to live in -- inside her family domain, and an increase in the subsequent imprinting as well. No wonder then, if such children, once coming out of their families and being entrusted to the "madrasas " schools demanded by some Islamic cultures, where they learn by heart the Koran laws, will be fundamentally disposed to exert absolute obedience only – something else but autonomous criticism – to the authority's suggestions.

2. With the second model, that I call “Dialectic Education” even though we could call it “democratic” in antithesis to the first one, the two parents discuss together and confront each other in a peer-to-peer relationship, seeking the utmost reciprocal respect for any possible divergence of opinions. They both discuss in front of the child too, without concealing from her the dialectic comparison between their eventually different personal opinions. (2) This way, the child will not suffer imprinting conditioned by a transcendental super-authority placed beyond and over the natural authority she has already embodied naturally. Without any peremptory obligation of consent by the dialogue between the two family authorities, every time the two parents confront and question each other, one’s authority will exert a decreasing effect onto the other’s authority, to the child’s eyes, so that the intensity of her family hierarchy (‘peck order’) imprinting will be decreased as well.

So, if the pedagogic model being adopted by parents tends to coincide with the one I concisely described here as “Dialectic Education” - being characterized by the full transparency of every critical confrontation between parents, and by parents speaking “second” to the child in order to provide a space for her demands and to bring her initiative out - she will learn and develop her own critical and constructive thinking, and put into action autonomous, self-conscious and responsible behaviours of social sharing-in to what is known as Democracy. Not only, but also her personality will become more resistant to the risk of drug addiction. (3)

Hence two different educative models, the “fundamentalist” and the “democratic” one, are defined, tied together in each of us in varying proportions, with opposing approaches to a dialectical thesis-antithesis relationship -- the extreme opposite poles of a behavioural continuum. Between these two opposite poles, countless intermediate positions are obviously encompassed, that are “moderated” according with the greater or smaller intensity by which the hierarchical obedience to the family authority is imprinted, and with the greater or smaller place - in an extreme case no place - which parents provide for the child’s initiatives. However, the education model being adopted by each family and each parent could not but tend towards either one only, or the opposite, of these two pole positions of our educational continuum.

The current parenting model

Now let us consider in this perspective the educative behaviours commonly adopted by our families in our western civilization. It is common evidence that parents tend to conceal every even least occasion of critical confrontation of their own, because of their quite groundless presumption to obtain in that way a greater validity of the family structure. Mostly the mother, who is the first educator, tends to prevent or anticipate every even least necessity of the child and so conditions the latter to an excessive degree of psycho-dependence in what is called “seduction by love”; and she usually asks the other parent for consent, thereby submitting herself and the child to the super-authority of the male parent. We can therefore conclude with confidence that the educative model commonly adopted by families in our western civilization tends towards the pole position here concisely described as “fundamentalist”, even though it is far from the extreme of the family model being adopted by those civilizations where religious fundamentalism is the only rule.

Anyway, all of this happens because parents are let believe that concealing any occasion of confrontation from children makes them stronger, and that preventing any initiative of the latter is a sign of love. And yet the voluntary sacrifice of women’s autonomy that characterizes the fundamentalist model has proved itself not only useless, but also producing

the contrary effect, as we can see from the crisis of so many of today's families, and of democracy itself. Indeed, some of the youth of today have become more and more intolerant of any parental and social hierarchic communication, which they rebel at, by leaving the family communication space - but lacking autonomous critical initiative - to enter without any defense the world of transgression and drugs.

Towards a solution

I've stressed elsewhere (4) some problems that see a common origin in the family communication model characterized by the fundamentalist tendency. In this essay I wanted to underline the part of the mother as she has the greater responsibility for this conduct, because she is its main actor but also - after children - the main victim. Other scholars - from Bettelheim to Bateson, to the Italian psychoanalyst Carotenuto - have exposed the relevance of the mother-mediated family educative imprinting, as a possible source of psycho-pathologies. The mother only, therefore, can put an end to the sufferings of the fundamentalist psycho-dependence, provided only she can perform a role of autonomy and parity within the family, by avoiding or diminishing the intensity due to the educative imprinting of the non-critical psycho-dependence on fundamentalist authoritarianism and the monsters it generates: drug addiction and fundamentalist extremism.

The same Democracy, which the world of today shows it is in an even greater need of, does not seem likely to be dropped - or bombed - from the authority top-down onto the people. Therefore making it spring and flourish from children and the grassroots bottom up, thus from the family education model, looks rather a must. But, how could we tell others to abandon their bent to the fundamentalist educative model, if we were unable to get rid of it - or even denounce it - at home?

Let me conclude. Parents, mothers most of all, have to be properly informed about the parenting chances at their disposal, such as the pedagogic theory "Dialectic Education". This theory, as the "Objective Flexibility" project, has now become a part of the European project Socrates Grundtvig 2 "A New Chance" (5). It is "work in progress", as the "Objective Flexibility" project is free, at everyone's disposal, no copyright.

"Tertium non datur..."

At this point, this work of mine could be considered as ended. The missing information has been put as educative theory, and the subsequent proposal is been spread as European project. Yet please allow me a last passage from the strictly pedagogical domain to that of Philosophy.

As a philosopher, I consider myself an amateur; nevertheless, I've come to the firm belief that human language, for its own nature, cannot express the "Absolute Truth", but only represent the thesis or the antithesis of a dialectic context, from which the "truth" could be withdrawn as a median synthesis as an element of thinking, upstream-before of spoken language. Successively, if uttered in words, this synthesis-thought would become the thesis or the antithesis of a further dialectic context, and so on in an endless sequence.

By confronting these concepts in my on-line discussions, I stumbled over a "Law of the Excluded Middle", which I initially adjudged to Kant. And I wondered whether this could have been the "Absolute Truth" that the German philosopher did so peremptorily exclude from the general universe of human discourse.

I asked an historian of Philosophy, Silvano Borruso (6). He punctually corriged me

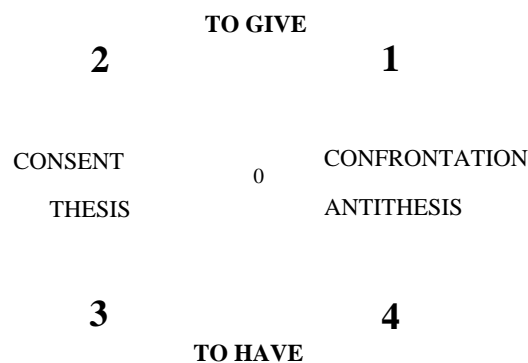
“ The aphorism "tertium non datur" does not come from Kant, but the Scholastic philosophy. It says that in the middle of two contradictory statements (A is / A is not) no middle way is admissible. This, but, is valid if only the truth is respected as 'adaequatio intellectus et rei '. If truth is not respected, or it is modified like Descartes did, and Kant and Hegel followed, the two contradictory statements become thesis and antithesis, and from their clashing together a synthesis comes out, which is but a prerogative of whom advances the reasoning... “

and added:

“ Truth is absolute if its contradictory is unthinkable. To stay in the example, ‘tertium non datur’ is absolute truth because its contradictory ‘tertium datur’ is unthinkable. Provided only we adopt the same definition of “truth” as 'adaequatio intellectus et rei' , that Aquinas (1225-74) adopted from Avicenna (980-1037).”

But then, I guess, just the historical application of this principle into the family educative communication, could have been the factor that deprived the child – who represents the ‘tertium’ inside the family – from the logical context which is necessary to withdraw a synthesis from the dialectic confrontation between her parents.

But todays, after Heisemberg’s “Principle of Indetermination” and Goedel’s “Theorem of undecidability”, most of all the last discoveries of Physics, the denial of a “tertium” and the exclusion of a “Middle” do not seem to be sustainable any further. In this light I tried to rationalize the common barebone structure of both educative communication and the same family, seen as a system of interpersonal relationship. I present it as such to the patient Reader. This structure is shaped like a cross, and divides in four sectors the general field of communication:



Here we will get, conveniently

- a upper half, the “to Give – to Answer” domain;
- a lower half, the “to Have – to ask” domain;
- a left side, the “ Thesis - Consent” domain,
- a right side, the “Antithesis – Confrontation” domain..

and subsequently, four participation options by whoever speaks:

1. a upper right quadrant, the “Giving in Confrontation” domain;
2. a upper left quadrant, the “Giving in Consent” domain;
3. a lower left quadrant, the “Having in Consent” domain; and finally
4. a lower right quadrant, the “Having in Confrontation”.

Let's notice, for whomever speaks "in Consent" from the left 2. and 3. quadrants of our chart, the right 1. and 4. quadrants of communication are not necessary, but quite absurd. This is the case of the education model I describe as "Fundamentalist". A thesis, to be stated as absolute dogmatic truth, doesn't need of any antithesis. That way the resulting dialectic structure of communication will be amputated: there will be no "synthesis" chance at the disposal of the family "*tertium*", to wit, the child.

Vice versa, to whomever speaks "in Confrontation" from the 1 and 4. quadrants of our structure, the 2. and 4. quadrants look absolutely indispensable. Any antithesis, to be such, needs of a thesis having been previously stated. In this case, the thesis is not taken as axiomatic truth, but as an hypothesis to be systematically subjected to critical verifying, at the advantage of the final user – the "third", the child in the real family and the People in the social family; This way, the synthesis domain is open to them, "*Tertium datur*", and "the Middle is included"... This is the model I describe as "Democratic", with the name of Dialectic Education. According with this "democratic" model, the barebone structure of communication becomes actually enriched and completed by the dialectic confrontation thesis-antithesis, in full respect and valuation of every diversity.

Therefore, as shown above, the language of whomever speaks or writes can be partisan only: either thesis or antithesis, either consent or confrontation. In every dialectic consent, that is, whenever there is a divergence between one thesis and one or many antitheses, the possible synthesis becomes an element of thinking, upstream of spoken language. This "*middle*" synthesis cannot be expressed as impartial truth because - if it could - it would become Absolute Truth, and the absolute truth does not belong to human language. Indeed, within the overall structure of communication, encompassing Education, no "*Tertium*" is given the chance of speaking from the "middle" position, between thesis and antithesis. This "*middle*" position would correspond to the "zero" point of the Cartesian chart (in the figure)

A final, crucial question remains. Could a schematic rationale, like the above shown, be enough to grant full awareness to whomever is charged with education responsibilities? In my experience, I would answer it isn't. In the middle position of the chart, between the two voices of thesis and antithesis, a third presence becomes necessary, that of Love: "*Love yourselves like I loved you*", that voice told us.

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Notes;

(1) - First version at the "Ferrara Estense" Lions Club (district 108 1/Tb) meeting, March 16, 2007 - Last version at the 3rd Reading on 'EDUcare' of "Imago Ricerche" (www.imagopsyche.org), Bolzano Bozen, April 18 2007

- English editing thanks to Doug Everingham

(2) - Details at: <http://www.flexible-learning.org/eng/einstein.htm>

(3) - Health authorities recommend parents to perform educational messages aimed to develop the same characteristics of child's personality - see for instance the Oct. 20, 1984 blueprint n° 84 by the Italian Superior Institute of Sanity, become an integral part of the Italian law on Drugs, containing: Indications about interventions of Primary Prevention against drugs addiction.

(4) - <http://www.flexible-learning.org>

(5) - <http://www.flexible-learning.org/eng/objective-flexibility.htm>