

Sante Maletta: abstract of paper read at the seminar held 19 March 2010
Exemplariness of the Righteous and moral education

I should like to make certain theoretical reflections on the Righteous and on moral education that I hope may be useful to the teaching profession.

I shall deal with the subject of moral education with reference to a series of studies and contemporary authors, particularly, though not exclusively, from an Anglo-American context, who have re-proposed an ethical approach of a classical kind. A sort of apology for a humanist education that is part of a strong conviction: today the question of education is central to our time and it is being played out in terms of a critical recovery of the humanist tradition. A tradition that belongs to our cultural heritage – also didactically speaking – and that is often seen in a disparaging or slightly critical light.

First of all, we need to assess the degree of our current moral crisis.

A boy who fails to give up his seat to an old lady on the bus is not a sadist who enjoys seeing other people suffer. The issue is on another plane, at once better and worse. Such boys are frequently unaware of the moral context and the moral significance of their actions, they lack the empathy to appreciate other people's difficulties, to interpret these difficulties and consequently take a decision.

The question of moral education arises first of all in terms of our knowledge or perception of reality. It is a question of people's inability to understand situations that have ethical significance in everyday life. The emotional level is involved since perception involves reason and emotion and only thus can there be a result that leads to decision-making and an act of will. Philosophically speaking, you could say that moral knowledge is of a hermeneutic nature. It is not enough to understand a situation in objective terms to identify its moral significance, there has to be interpretation. It is interpretation that grasps the moral significance of a given situation, involving a series of factors pertaining to the individual, ranging from his perception, reasoning, emotivity, right through to his imagination.

The category of the imagination is key. Some authors believe that today's educational crisis is a crisis of the imagination. Another stereotype that needs to be overcome – typical of a certain rationalistic modern culture – is that emotions are an obstacle to knowledge. In the case of moral knowledge, emotion is an inescapable factor: without emotion we cannot interpret a situation or appreciate its moral aspects. According to Martha Nussbaum – an attentive interpreter of contemporary thought and especially of the phenomenological movement – emotions always have an intentional structure, they are related to reality, to the object, and at the same time to self-awareness.

Emotions need to be educated. Education can no longer be thought of as simply training the intellect, rationality. Emotions are a source of knowledge, they help us to grasp certain important aspects of a given situation that we would otherwise not perceive. In this moral knowledge, fantasy or imagination plays a very important role.

To avoid any misunderstanding, let's use the term 'imagination'. The imagination is a vital faculty from the point of view of moral knowledge for two reasons: first because the moment of deliberation that precedes a decision allows us to consider the alternative possibilities of actions and to foresee the consequences. Moreover, without imagination we would be unable to see things from the other person's point of view. Imagination therefore has a very close relationship with the capacity for empathy and with the emotional sphere. At this point, the question arises of how to educate the imagination. The imagination can be educated above all by means of stories, by means of writing and orality that take on a narrative structure.

When we talk about the exemplariness of a Righteous person, we are talking about an individual matter that comes to our notice via some form of story. Gabriele Nissim has

written and told wonderful stories about Righteous people. Most of the work done by the Committee for the Gardens of the Righteous consists of accounts and stories about Righteous people. For those of us that teach, the mediation of a narrative structure is not a limitation, but a strength, and we have to make sure that it bears fruit.

One aspect among the many that characterize every narrative structure, every story, is that it has a style. The wonderful stories of the Righteous act on our emotional sphere and on our imagination, encouraging us to identify sympathetically with the characters, with the events in which they are involved and with the historical period. In the essay by Fumagalli and Bettetini: *Quel che resta dei media* (Franco Angeli publishers) the authors claim that after a significant reading “the world is clearer, more precise, more colourful, I can appreciate its richness and complexity more thoroughly and I can also understand its nuances more clearly”. This clarification is true of all types of art that have a narrative configuration or structure: we could also talk about a cinematographic or musical vision. The aesthetic experience that we enjoy when we read or listen to a story, for example a story about a Righteous person, is an authentic experience of life. It helps us to perceive reality in all its different aspects, especially of a moral kind, and our conscience, which is also moral conscience, is fortified.

Between 1961 and 1962 Hannah Arendt followed the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem, and elaborated the category of the “banality of evil”. To define the psychology of Eichmann she applied concepts such as: distance from reality, lack of non-stereotyped words and ideas, inability to see the other man’s point of view, an uncritical attitude and lack of imagination. She reached the conclusion that evil is never radical but only extreme; it can invade and devastate the whole world, spreading all over its surface like a river. Evil challenges thought because thought tries to reach deep down, to put down roots. For Hanna Arendt only good is profound, evil is extreme but not profound; the power of evil lies in its capacity to spread over the surface like a river, like a flash flood. Starting from the second half of the Sixties and above all in the first half of the Seventies, Hanna Arendt developed a sort of phenomenology of the Righteous. She tried to understand what unites those that resist evil, the old and the young, women and men, religious and lay people, rich and poor. She concluded that the Righteous were the only ones that dared to judge independently. The “non participants” in evil were those whose consciences did not work in automatic mode. “Their main feature is their predisposition for living alone within themselves, i.e. taking part in that silent inner dialogue usually defined as ‘thought’”. “For human beings, thinking about things past means moving in a profound dimension, putting down roots, acquiring stability”. Arendt’s reflections on the question of the absence of thought and the absence of judgement – a consequence of the standardization of modern society and of the spread of 20th century ideologies – takes us back to today’s issue of the lack of moral education, about the individual’s inability to think, to remember, to imagine, to consider things from the other man’s point of view. This is fertile ground for the spread of evil. The fact that people committed evil without appreciating the moral significance of their behaviour makes us understand why the 20th century was by far the most violent century in the whole of history. A few months before his death, Pasolini compared our youth to the SS, and expressed his concern about the spread of a form of “moral bad manners”, which implies lack of depth, no habit of thinking, reflecting, imagining, remembering; the lack of dialogue with one’s inner self that a classical, humanist education develops and sustains, but which the contexts of standardization and of media standardization in which we are immersed probably oppose.

This is the challenge that faces us today, that makes us understand the link between the totalitarianism of the last century and our present.