

The Ethical Education for a “Humanist Revolution”: Accepting and Overcoming Conflict

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Abstract. The attempt to overcome the current representative vision of the opposites, typical of western culture, and the openness to a universality where the strict rational and mercantilistic imperatives could leave space to a new (revolutionary) idea of “humanism” (Ágnes Heller), allow to face some questions about the nature and quality of relationships between people. One can observe, on one side, the effects of the discrepancies between individuals and societies that have an attitude of “love for life” (biophilia) and the ones in which instead seem to dominate principles of “love for death” (necrophilia) (Erich Fromm); on the other side, one can instead observe the teachings of the thousand-year old far-eastern culture, in which conflict and violence appear as the completion of a vision of a wider scope, in which the concepts of harmony and cohesion are the ones that dominate (like in the Taoist vision and in the philosophical one of Aikidō, according to Morihei Ueshiba), feasible in a community of practice that should become ethical. The love for life (Fromm), the goodness present in the basic idea of humanity in societies and the universal humanism with revolutionary potentials (Heller) can constitute the pedagogic principles that are fundamental to activate, in any educational environment, firstly school, significant educational-pedagogic and relational strategies, even in the acceptance of the unavoidable conflicts present in human nature.

Keywords. Humanist revolution – ethical education – biophilia and necrophilia – far-eastern cultures– harmony between opposites – with and beyond human conflicts

1. The humanist revolution and the “worth of chance”: the philosophic point of view of Ágnes Heller

The recent passing of Hungarian philosopher Ágnes Heller (1929-2019), from the “School of Budapest”, who theorised the radical needs (identified in introspection, friendship, love, conviviality and game), can serve as a synchronous recall to the necessity of tracing – in education – an indicative paradigm that can constructively answer to the perils expressed by the suggested theme on the possible overcoming of human conflicts. Her philosophical thought on the connection between ethics and history (Heller, 2011, pp. VII and VIII) arises from the desire to understand the tragical happenings of the Twentieth Century, together with the «banality of evil» (Arendt, 1963), about which the

Hungarian philosopher was personally interested, and of which she has been a direct witness – as a Hebrew, she survived the Hungarian Holocaust. More in general, her thought can be associated to the truly human attitude of asking questions, often apparently very simple ones, so that they can be shared with the world of childhood (Perone, 2009, p. 7); actually these questions are so deep that they must be considered as fundamental passages for our self-understanding and our being-in-the-world.

Shortly recalling a few steps of Heller's studies allows us to reflect on the nature of the relation between the individual behaviours and attitudes assumed more or less consciously in the span of our existence and the historic-cultural context of life, as a dynamic summary of socio-anthropological variables which are certainly influential, but not so decisive about the nature of the choices of individual conduct.

Her revolutionary push against totalitarian socio-political systems finds in the human element its highest exaltation. It's no coincidence that she appreciates particularly the Italian Renaissance, an historical, political and artistic enlightened age, far from any totalitarian ideal and close to the human one «The revolution of Renaissance resulted in the revolution of the man's concept [...] and for the first time it acquired self-awareness as *humanity*» (Heller, 2013, p. 668): Heller made of it a subject of in-depth study and of attentive reflection, especially during the first years of her philosophical path, when she writes, in Hungarian (*A Reneszánsz Ember*), *The man of the Renaissance: Renaissance Italy is the inspiration for a possible, but utopian, humanist revolution, that goes far beyond the historical aberration of real socialism, outcome of a deviant interpretation of Marx and Engels' ideas.*

It is, instead, a «privileged locus of the great revolution that celebrates the dynamism of man, “the versatility of character, the power of imaginary”¹» (Recupero, 2013, pp. 160 and 161), a place of humanitarian emancipation and of concrete freedom, of ethically exemplary virtues, able to humanise democratic ideals that in the greats of the ancient times like Socrates or Jesus find the symbols, universally taken to extremes, of the human ideal of the Renaissance. This process of humanisation of ancient western ideals dethrones the divine increasing man's responsibility faced with his possibilities of action: the man of the Renaissance is a man who stands on his own two feet and who is deeply immersed into reality, anchored to nature, who “steps in between” with all his heart likewise the man of the stoic-epicurean ideal, although stripped of his divine nature. The concept of man is dynamic and it is «composed in an *organic unity*» (Heller, 2013, p. 630). This vision of the *human universal* makes “human” any man, opening the door to concepts of freedom, brotherhood and equality «as a political necessity and as an anthropological-ontological fact» (Heller, 2013, p. 631): man, with his abilities, is free to choose between good and evil, and this free will becomes a universal anthropological category as «*integral part of every human activity*» (Heller, 2013, p. 636), to pursue which (this freedom) we need the means of intellect and work, of thinking and doing (Heller, 2013, p. 656).

The text *General Ethics* and especially the first chapter “The Human Condition” – quoted by Heller in the text *A Short History of My Philosophy* (Heller, 2011, p. 79) – converges not only on the contents expressed but, following a pedagogical perspective,

¹ Ágnes Heller (2012), *My eyes have seen*, interview with Francesco Comina and Luca Bizzarri, Il Margine, Trento, p. 24.

also on the description of a meta-cognitive analysis of the processes of thought, which brought the Hungarian scholar to the construction of an extremely articulate and always growing philosophical system – but which in this context is only quoted. Such perspective allows us to analyse in truly human terms the question of the condition of man and of his being-thrown-into-the-world. Birth – being *thrown* into the world, indeed («the accident of birth»: Heller, 2011, p. 79) – is a both genetic and social a priori accident, an anticipatory moment of whichever experience: «Humans are thrown by accident into the world; their “genetic *a priori*” is thrown into a “social *a priori*”» (Heller, 2011, p. 79); experience hasn’t occurred yet and from a genetic point of view what exists is only an universal condition of belonging to the humankind and the singularity of each individual, its uniqueness, while, from a social point of view, the a priori is the fact of being born, always accidentally, in a specific place. The title of one of her recent books is for sure emblematic of the randomness of life: *Der Wert des Zufalls* (2018) (*The worth of chance*).

According to Heller, experience originates by the start of the interaction between two elements, the genetic one and the social one, a «*process of dovetailing*» according to which the child, since birth, actively interacts with the environment, but whose absence is destined to compromise its same existence, even if, at the same time, there could never be a perfect convergence between them. From this incongruity, this «*hiatus*», originates «*human life*» (Heller, 2011, p. 79), a path in which the condition of frustration determines in its turn an answer that generates a cognitive and cultural surplus, which carries as a consequence the overcoming of the social a priori.

In *An Ethics of Personality* (always quoted in *A Short History of My Philosophy*: Heller, 2011, pp. 79 and 80), Heller distinguishes the concept of «accidental» from which of «contingent», present since the beginning of the modern age and expression of the awareness of the condition of being-thrown-into-the-world, in relation to which the individual feels «*the need and also the possibility for self-founding, the task of transforming our contingency into our destiny, opens up at our horizon*» (Heller, 2011, p. 80). This appears as a precise recall to a strictly pedagogical reflection according to which educational goals consist exactly in helping to overcome the being-thrown-into-the-world, in order to favour in everyone the full self-realisation, in accordance with its potentialities and regardless of the conditions in which the individual finds itself at the beginning (Bertin and Contini, 2004).

The educational process joins then this reflection and is taken by the philosopher herself in the moment in which she wonders how much *the role of knowledge and of emotions affects actions*, in particular *actions with moral content* and the «question of evil» which, if it doesn’t reside «in innate human instincts» (Heller is convinced of this), «where does it then?» (Heller, 2011, p. 81). And, exactly in relation to moral, Heller elaborates a theoretic model of the character, according to which we have four characters in one: to the «innate» one, constitutive and present since birth, adds the character of early childhood, defined «psychological» (handled by psychoanalysis starting from Freud), to arrive to the «moral character», that develops during the developmental age until late adolescence. This character reminds in many aspects the development through stages of moral judgement studied first by Piaget (1932), then integrated and further analysed with psycho-anthropological studies by Lawrence Kohlberg (1973; 1976)².

² According to Kohlberg, the stages of maturity, each one divided in two levels or phases, start from the *pre-*

The first three characters described by Heller are influenced by a fourth character, called «intellectual» which, even if it starts to take shape at the same time of the moral one, is destined to change until the mature age and, above all, it is called to carry out regulative actions over the other characters «*can also use, or keep in check the other three characters*» (Heller, 2011, p. 81). Therefore, the intellectual dimension of the character can be interpreted as the necessity for Heller to highlight the importance of experience as the effect of an integral learning, which doesn't finish in the context of formal education, but continues throughout the mature age, being related to the moral dimension of the character and starting inside the individual a dynamic process of self-regulation.

The nature and quality of the relationship established with the other is determined by the interaction of many dynamic elements where the context, surely important, interacts with the developmental path of the individual, who can determine him/herself in directions that can also be different from one's own origin and can choose his/her conduct. Following Heller's reflection, the being-thrown-into-the-world entails the assumption of rules and norms, and many of these have a moral value (Heller, 2011, pp. 84 and 85). It is interesting to observe that the attention of Heller's moral philosophy is focused not so much on extreme situations experienced by people, like in existential philosophy, as on situations present in everyday life, refusing in this way every form of hierarchy of actions, even moral ones. This can also be evinced by the fact that her philosophy is self-founded: the issues presented derive from a concrete and personal reference, being the result of the comparison with the action of a significant person who belongs to the familiar sphere, the father (like for Kant were his parents), who becomes the criterion of comparison for a reasoning about moral. This passage induces us to affirm and confirm the pedagogical value of the example and the importance of evidence for the adult in relation to the realisation of a full and conscious existence that can be called moral. The adult educator, in facts, showing coherence in his/her conduct, that is a continuity between who he/she is and what he/she does, carries out an educational role which is certainly indirect, but extremely effective (Recalcati, 2016).

The argument about the validity of moral rules allows us to understand better *the nature and quality of our relationships with the other*. The philosopher of the School of Budapest offers a formula that raises the idea of universal validity of the moral by affirming that the honest person follows the rules as long as these are not in contrast with the norms and rules of likewise honest persons, on a circular process based on respecting the other. The rules and norms that align with this principle are delineated in many ways and they are certainly not recent (to take care of the others, not to offend or hurt someone intentionally, be committed to limit sufferings etc.). The news of modernity about these issues concerns the concept of *respecting the other's autonomy*, and this becomes the essential condition from which all the others derive, and which can be summarized «with the Trinitarian formula: giving, receiving, reciprocating» (Heller, 2011, p.

conventional one, which can be approximately made correspond to Piaget's "heteronymous" morality, then comes the *conventional* one, in which moral judgment is affected by the group's conformism and the respect of preset rules, typical of the pre-adolescence period. The last level is the *post-conventional* one: the individual is sufficiently mature to have assumed all the critical requirements in order to overcome conventionalism, autonomously judge moral relativity of action and strive for universal ethical principles, pursuing an own inner moral coherence.

85). Reciprocation, the gift in the triangular process of giving, receiving and reciprocating, represent an indicative paradigm in which actions can be inserted to understand their nature. Indeed, again in *A Short History of My Philosophy*, the Author describes the path she undertakes to research the definition of good persons and good citizens: if the first care about their existential dimension, the latter care about their dimension of citizens, distinguishing throughout the years that good citizens in countries ruled by a dictatorship become «heroes of decency» (Heller, 2011, p. 86), because they are forced to defend with great sacrifice the democratic principles.

Modernity, then, is founded on the good citizen and the good person, this latter expression of an existential choice, since it is based on the willingness to be considered a moral subject (Heller, 2009, p.64) who, as we said, overcoming the genetic and social *a priori*, addresses his/her life to follow certain values and certain ideas of justice (Perone, 2009, p. 12).

At this point it is interesting to understand how Heller overcomes the consolidated contrast, typical of our western culture, between material needs and spiritual or rational needs. The interpretative key seems to reside in the acknowledgement of the existence of the human condition, which can include opposites: the traditional duality body/soul or the tripartition body/mind/spirit (Heller, 2009, pp. 107 and 108) could be faced starting from the Aristotelian hylomorphistic tradition, according to which life is an entirety and the living beings who inhabit the cosmos have a soul, that makes the cosmos not exclusively formed by matter (Heller, 2009, p. 117).

Anyway, it is mostly in her *study of feelings* that she underlines that cognitive processes cannot be distinguished from emotions (such as the neurosciences today state in considering certain impulses and emotions in the formulation of cognitive constructions: cf. for example Damasio 1995; LeDoux, 1996): «since there is no emotion without a cognitive element, there is no cognitive impulse nor a motivation lacking feelings» (Heller, 2009, pp. 128 and 129). Therefore, it is clear that feelings become an expression of humanity that regains its bodily dimension, as an expression of the human condition of being-thrown-into-the-world we talked about before. Needs, thanks to the awareness of the close connection between mind and body, find their *raison d'être* and, moreover, find the reason to be all listened to, because they are part of the human condition even if some contradictions, if not a true antagonism, can rise between them. Then, in this way we may conceive the source of the conflict, that can have ethical, moral or religious characteristics (Perone, 2009, p. 12). However if philosophy – broadly speaking – is not able to solve this conflict, everyday actions rather can be, thanks to the «creative arising of conscience» (Perone, 2009, p. 12): the individual can mark an extremely this border that separates the coexistence of needs from conflict for their possible realisation. Dualisms then, in Heller's philosophical thought persist and don't find a final solution. In regards to this, Heller affirms:

I tried to explain my conviction that philosophy, after the fall of the metaphysic tradition, needs to rethink duality. Metaphysic interpreted duality as dualism, but in the contemporary philosophical context the concepts of two substances or two attributes that are not related to each other, or the contrast between immortal soul and mortal body, between pure reason and impure abilities of knowledge, can hardly demand to be accepted (Heller, 2009, p. 130).

This surely isn't a negative element, because it would be more difficult to affirm the perfect and ideal homogeneity of the human condition: «a perfect individual autonomy could turn human beings into monsters» (Heller, 2009, p. 129). On the other hand, Heller herself wonders if doubting is actually a good thing, that philosophy begins with the doubt, making clear that the doubting is of existential nature, concerning the relationship between oneself and the world; and it is exactly by doubting of ourselves that we can have a true self-confidence (Heller, 2017). So she concludes one of her main works about the duality of good and evil: «and there are no final answers, not even for the individual, since the question must be risen again and again» (Heller, 2009, p. 130).

2. Biophilia or necrophilia? The pedagogical and humanist perspective of Erich Fromm

The duality described by Heller meets the thought of many contemporary scholars interested in understanding the reasons of the contradictions of the human soul, scholars who, like her, find it difficult to give final and unambiguous answers. One of them is the philosopher and humanist psychologist Erich Fromm, who is of Hebrew origin too and he is interested like Heller in understanding the reasons of evil in totalitarian systems: his attempt to understand the meaning of it puts him in front of the *duality between the concepts of biophilia and necrophilia*, a typical duality of an historical and socio-anthropological conflict whose enigmatic reason is the main focus of the famous text *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, written in 1973, where the psychologist from Frankfurt tries to shed light on the possible psychosocial reasons of the destructive character.

Every scholar of the western thought, dealing with the relationship good/evil, starts, like Heller too does with the psychological *a priori* (together with the genetic one), from the first educational phases and then from the first relationships with the original psycho-relational environment of the child. Actually, the (psycho)pedagogical approach to distress shows how much the first life experiences (including the first socio-educational experiences) are decisive to influence the quality of the social relations which will take shape in the adult age: it seems of fundamental interest the dialogic relationship mother-child, not only starting from the first year of life, but also during the different phases of the gestational period (Odent, 1990; Tsuda, 2000). Many are also the problematic consequences of an unsuccessful process of attachment (Bowlby, 1989), of a relational deprivation (Winnicott, 1984), of an inhibition of individual emotive reactions through even violent educating behaviours (Miller, 1980): those are educational actions, often implicit, sometimes justified with ambiguous rationalising systems, which can lead to a disposition of psychological distress and, in extreme cases, to antisocial and destructive behaviours and, then, to the identification of the individual and social Ego with a character “devoted to evil” and, in general, to relational cruelty.

The pathogenic deviation seems, in any case, a deviation from a deeply human and humanising undertone, an undertone of the person that a “humanistic” approach (Fromm) – like Heller’s one – favourable to the rebirth of Renaissance humanism – recognises as “biophilic”, recalling the idea of a “loving” underlying impulse of human nature, devoted to the interpersonal and ethic good, thanks to which the child is naturally driven to grow in a “positive” sense when it is not hindered by an obstructing socio-familiar context and by a community that is likewise inhibitory, if not assimilated to a widespread conflictual and distressful feeling.

In regard to this, Fromm seems to be convincing in his critique to Freud, when he affirms that *human nature* is fundamentally *biophilic*, being the unconscious pushes of man biologically and psychologically of the evolutionary-creative kind: the individual tends to naturally follow the principle of pleasure and his/her being becomes involuntarily-destructive, pursuing the opposite principle of death only when he/she is not allowed to do differently, due to the intervention of an inhibitory environment and in its turn destructive. The formation of sadistic or, worse, of *necrophilic* tendencies would be nothing but the direct consequence of a developmental hindrance of relational origin.

The «interpersonal», «sociohistorical» or also, as we said, «humanistic» (Greenberg and Mitchell, 1986) psychoanalytical approach of Erich Fromm broadly examines the deep, unconscious motivations of the *destructive tendencies of man* both in his/her entity of individual and in the historical and social one of group. Unlike the classic psychoanalytic point of view, according to which the innate and inner pushes of the individual are destructive and criminal, Fromm, definitely distinguishing the innate pushes (instincts) from the existential ones, purely human, of historical origin (passions), is convinced, also thanks to a particular attention given to the historical-anthropological evolution of man, that destructive, sadistic if not necrophilic, can be only certain passions arisen during the human evolution, result of a progressive civilisation, more and more based on possess, technic and depersonalisation of the individual: throughout its phylogenetic growth the animal man, the prehistoric man, from a social and productive being, is forced to become narcissist and destructive and to replace the great part of its instincts with behavioural passions that allow it to relate to the rest of the world, both human and natural, in order not to remain isolated and face insanity.

In Fromm's opinion the individual has all the biological and psychological components to orient him/herself towards the world with love, to experience human fraternity, independence and freedom: man is fundamentally *biophile*. This is the original, leading passion of his nature, the essential reason of his existence. Interrupted the symbiotic bond to the mother and cast out of heaven for having eaten the fruit of the Tree of Good and Evil, he becomes aware of himself, of his helplessness and of his finiteness and he will do anything to create a bond between himself and the external world, to become free from the power of the past, independent and life-loving.

The caveman used to behave like that, and so does the "original man" of Fromm, who will be able to fully realise Marx's utopian socialist ideas, of a human and productive society, only when the historical, economic and political conditions will really have become mature. In the meanwhile, man continues to suffer the "negativity" of social conditioning, being his character the historical-evolutionary product of the relationships with the socio-cultural context of belonging, and only exceptionally he is free to live in a full and productive way. Often he must react appealing to his least creative passions in order to survive in environmental conditions that are not favourable to the development of love for life, as happened during the dictatorships between the two wars or as happens currently where consumerism and cybernetic alienation rule, in any case preventing the progressive tendencies to develop in a creative way.

If the environment hinders the process of progressive unity inside and outside oneself, the individual, compelled to familiar and social events – but Fromm doesn't exclude also the genetic importance of some possible biological events – will be led to establish a

symbiotic relationship with the world, not based on love, but on the sadistic or masochistic dependence, that is narcissism. Those reactions, pushed to extremes, entail the possible outbreak of psychotic or para-psychotic tendencies. Instead of manifesting his/her own instinct of life the person, *as an alternative* (and not *together*, as Freud believed), must turn to the forces of evil, giving voice to the impulse of death: «*life turning against itself in the striving to make sense of it*» (Fromm, 1973, p. 9).

Aggressiveness then is no more biologically necessary, naturally «defensive», and therefore a vital expression like the one of the animals, indispensable to survive. It rather becomes a destructive and criminal human manifestation, a sort of «evil aggressiveness» “typical” of man – that can’t be found between animals. These vicious and cruel manifestations can certainly be casual, isolated, due to particular and not durable circumstances, but, and Fromm points out this aspect, they also can become «character»: the individual is then narcissist, or sado-masochistic, in the worst cases he/she can become a necrophile and death-loving. Each of these behavioural solution is characterised by a scarce sensitivity towards the other and by potential destructive impulses, certainly in different ways and stages. The necrophile is nothing but a progressive degeneration and so a vicious form of Freud’s anal character, going through the sadistic character (normal anal character > sadistic character > necrophiliac character). Even if Fromm doesn’t face certain human expressions connected to antisocial deviancy in criminological terms, it is easy to presume that he considers individuals who have such behavioural elements more inclined to crime or to any deviant action than who is integrated and projected towards life.

Random cruel manifestations are mostly manifestations of destructiveness that Fromm distinguishes from the behavioural one and that, opposite to this, occur in a «spontaneous» and specific way, since they are characterised by explosive impulses triggered by absolutely particular circumstances, like in the case of the «vengeful destructiveness» (that «is a spontaneous reaction to intense and unjustified suffering inflicted upon a person or the members of the group with whom he is identified» [Fromm, 1973, p. 271]) or of the «ecstatic destructiveness» (Fromm, 1973, p. 274) (that consists in reconnecting with nature through individual or collective rituals of the destructive kind, like certain states of self-induced trance, certain delirious sexual orgies, a certain use of drugs etc.).

Since every individual must give a meaning to his life, to prove to himself and to others that he exists for a purpose, who suffered an oppressive and humiliating, strongly prohibitive childhood, will have to redeem himself actively towards the world, in the unconscious attempt to heal his still open wounds. Fromm affirms:

The child is usually defeated by the superior strength of the adult, but the defeat does not remain without consequences; it would seem to activate a tendency to overcome the defeat by doing actively what one was forced to endure passively: to rule when had to obey; to beat when one was beaten; in short, to *do* what one was *forced to suffer*, or to do what one was forbidden to do (Fromm, 1973, p. 236).

A child who lives in a frustrating and inhibitory environment, not exciting because of the exclusive presence of «simple» stimuli and not «activating», bored and depressed, little inclined to manifestations of love and understanding, and with no hopes, easily reacts by withdrawing into itself in a narcissistic way and avoiding the others, resentful and humiliated. It needs to be specified that the distinction made by Fromm between

simple and activating stimuli consists in the fact that the first ones presuppose an immediate and passive answer, while the second ones are more complex and require a receptive individual, "touchable", capable «of being humanely responsive» (Fromm, 1973, p. 241). Usually in our culture there is a clear prevalence of simple stimuli, reason why they «have to be changed constantly, lest they become ineffective» (Fromm, 1973, p. 241). People are incapable of reacting to activating stimuli because they are generally lazy, passive, inhibited and fearful, due to an education that, from the age of six years old onward, progressively made children «docile, unspontaneous and passive» (Fromm, 1973, p. 241). Simple stimuli contribute better to the formation of the sadistic-destructive character, since it is easier to excite the organism with rage, anger and cruelty rather than with manifestations of love: in this latter case commitment, patience, discipline, concentration and a good ability of enduring frustrating situations are required.

If, in addition, the mother-child bond persists because of «malignant incestuous bonds» with a «death-giving mother», rather than with a «life-giving mother», the child perceives not the motherly love but feelings of death, distance and coldness on the part of the mother: «her embrace is death, her womb is a tomb» (Fromm, 1973, p. 363): «if there is no way of being related to mother or her substitute by warm, enjoyable bonds, the relatedness to her and to the whole world must become one of final union in death» (Fromm, 1973, p. 363).

It is very probable that in such a relational context, where neither the negative influences are negligible, even future ones, of a wider familiar and social environment, the individual can develop a *destructive and necrophiliac character* (from the Greek *nekròs*, that means corpse, dead, dweller of the afterworld), and that for his whole life he is driven by an unconscious and pathologic attraction for all «that is dead» and led to turn into a dead thing what is alive. It is possible, however, that he would show real necrophiliac manifestations only if the attempt to build a relationship with the others through less destructive bonds fails «as sadistic control of others or the satisfaction of narcissism by gaining boundless admiration» (Fromm, 1973, p. 364).

Fromm doesn't exclude either the possible existence of genetic elements (which reminds very much of Heller's genetic *a priori*) that predispose the child to the necrophiliac coldness and repulsion, although the relationship with the mother and with the socioeducational environment is then essential: a warm mother can "warm up" the innate coldness of the child, like on the other hand a cold mother could be appeased and moved by a warm and loving child. On the other hand he doesn't exclude the possibility that a «malignant incestuousness» (Fromm, 1973, p. 364) can arise as a result of particular traumatic situations, even if actually these are not so frequent.

Moreover, it must be pointed out that the development of character doesn't finish within the edipic age but it continues to evolve at any age (even if at an advanced age it is more unlikely), and that therefore the facts of the future social life can determine important changes throughout the whole existence, both in the direction of love and in the opposite one. It is certain that any particularly intense relational situation that makes the child, the adolescent or the adult empty and helpless can create the sufficient conditions to turn a naturally biophile individual into a sadistic or destructive one.

The necrophiliac traits that distinguish who is attracted by death (of others and of himself) differ from the ones of the less dangerous *sadistic character*, who is simply sati-

sified to see the victim suffering and basically wishes to control the others, submitting them to a symbiotic bond with him: his unconscious attempt consists in turning an intimate sensation of helplessness into the experience of omnipotence, creating the illusion to transcend the objective limits of human existence.

According to Fromm, the most common kind of non-sexual sadism is represented by the abuse and mistreatment of children, carried out especially under educational purposes: this kind of “pedagogical sadism” – which finds many analogies in Miller’s “black pedagogy” (Miller, 1980) – reaches its peak in the moment in which the child, still defenceless, begins to have its own will and to react actively to the adult’s orders. Other than physical, this sadism tends to materialize also and especially through manifestations of «mental cruelty», without using physical strength, but with the simple and less strenuous use of the word.

Moreover, it can’t surely be forgotten that man is distinguished by various behavioural features, and that it is difficult to find a person characterised exclusively by a unique «passion-rooted-in-the-character»: if these instincts are the same for every man, men differ one from the other exactly in what Fromm defines «dominant passion», result of the both personal and social history of the individual. Indeed, the sadistic passion can be mixed to the biophilic one inside the behavioural structure of the same individual, such as to create in certain cases a true inner conflict; or one of the two passions can have more influence on the other and justify a great part of individual actions. In fact, in any case, the most typical traits of sadism observed by Fromm – such character can be represented as a syndrome of different connected behavioural elements – consist essentially in the admiration of power and of who holds it, in the contempt and the control of the weak, in the fear of changeable and unpredictable situations (as changeable and unpredictable is life, in fact despised and feared), in the need to systematise and structure life (own and other’s), in the cowardice and the masochistic submission (the sadist feels helpless and incapable in front of stronger persons), and finally in the inclination to compensatory authoritarian and dominant behaviours.

The warning thrown out by Fromm consists in the not happy verification that sadism «corresponds to the social average, with individual deviations above and below» (Fromm, 1973, p. 297), signing a sort of *social sadism* which is apparently unavoidable for every new-born, while less common even if much more alarming for society appears the *destructive character*, devoted to evil and so potentially to crime, because the passion that pushes to action the necrophile leads the individual to desire the transformation of life in death (and not simply the vision of the other’s suffering), as it was in the case, widely described by Fromm, of Adolf Hitler: thanks to an in-depth analysis of his childhood, adolescence and youth, he pinpointed in the vicious incestuousness of the relationship with the mother and in the continued scholastic and artistic defeats, after a first period of success, the cause of a destructive hate for life that led him to sacrifice the Germany/mother, its people and thousands of Jews (the defenceless/sacrificial victims). His behaviour can be judged homicidal and suicidal at the same time, and anyway destructive in each of his expressions. Basically, the personality of Hitler exemplifies adequately all the most evident characteristics of the necrophile: attraction for death, destruction which is an end in itself (despite of the many rationalisations) and accentuated interest for all that is mechanical, lifeless and routine. Fromm’s cry seems to project every hope in the future, not without warnings:

Hence sadism will disappear (except as an individual sickness) only when exploitative control of any class, sex, or minority group has been done away with. With the exception of a few small societies this has not yet happened anywhere in history (Fromm, 1973, p. 297).

The German psycho-sociologist, in addition, highlights several times the importance that the social group takes on in the process of the formation of the individual's character, since the group «tends to reinforce all those character elements that correspond to it, while the opposite elements become dormant» (Fromm, 1973, p. 298): if a society, for example, were not sadistic but based on love, the individual sadism would be soon "dried out", because not shared nor wished by the group. It is clear that most of the times just the opposite happens. Fromm supposes the presence of necrophiliac tendencies in about the ten per cent of the American population.

Defeating the current elements of social sadism and destructiveness seems quite utopian, especially if one agrees with Freud about the fact that it is not much the «social character» to change following the modifications of educational techniques, but rather the one which supports itself through suitable and specific educational methods, whose the direct instruments are the family and the various educational-pedagogic institutions. Indeed, the educational function of society consists in shaping the individual so that he becomes interested as much as possible in the social character of his group and he begins to have wishes as much as possible pertinent to the necessities of his social role (Fromm, 1941). Recovering the spontaneous original activity, of which there are evident traces in children and in certain, but rare, individuals like some artists, and with which only it is possible to be full and free, is a not very simple educational-pedagogic task.

Fromm undoubtedly invokes the fact that this activity never disappears completely, even in the most oppressed and frustrated individual, and that it is ready to re-emerge every time concrete favourable environmental conditions occur. After all, even in the hardest forms of oppression (like the political or the familiar ones), a strong reaction of hate and narcissistic isolation is nothing but the reflection of a deeper impulse of freedom which has been betrayed and frustrated, but which – although removed – tends to never disappear. The educational action would have truly the goal to make the individual aware of such original breath of life and of the environmental obstacles that have hindered his development, awakening in him the strength to affirm himself. Indeed, the child's frequent spontaneous expressions of self-affirmation are often misinterpreted and then punished as if they were rebellious aggressions against the parents and considered as disobedience and sin: this is a wrong educational interpretation of familiar and social contexts where an authoritarian «irrational and exploitative» atmosphere reigns.

Actually, often the child is not sufficiently mature yet to seriously "disobey" (this could rather be its Achilles' heel): Fromm gives to the action of "not obeying", of saying «no» to power, an actual autonomy of thought and of action, being it a necessary ability to prevent any form of prevarication and oppression (cf. Fromm, 1981). The child simply tries to affirm itself and to creatively expand its potentialities, while the adult, indoctrinated by a society based on power (political, economic, technological, etc.), is induced to, mostly unintentionally, to use his sadistic power on the child, restraining its vital expansion, making it docile and obedient, and weakening its self-fulfilling pushes behind the shield of a "good education to give".

Fromm doesn't make explicit pedagogical suggestions – for him not proposable, indeed – but he wishes that historical times could mature through the action of the individuals, in order to favour the growth of man in the *direction of love and humanity*. One of the few historical exceptions of a free social group, which is activating, productive and focused on man, mentioned by Fromm, is the experience of the *kibbutz*, who established a lifestyle similar in some ways to the one of the first hunters-harvesters and of the first farmers, where the atmosphere is of fraternity and community. He doesn't deny, either, that truly free individuals exist, and that who really wants it can “reawaken” from the boredom of conformism and free himself from the pincers of social oppression, and thus rediscover his true self, but throughout his work a veiled pessimism concerning contemporaneity can be perceived, arisen from the awareness of the deceptions and objective restrictions of the present sociocultural structure, even if his ideas seem to be supported by the hope that in the future, following the ongoing historical evolution, an increased awareness will lead men towards a greater social and individual maturity.

3. The non-duality in the Taoistic and aikidoistic vision: for a pedagogy of conflict and unity

A look on other anthropological *formae mentis*, historically rooted in the East, allows us to explore a cognitively different perspective from the traditional duality between good and evil, biophilia and necrophilia, a duality that has been characterising the western mindset for an immemorial time, in the face of the western one, which is marked, instead, by the concept of unity and by the ideal of fusion between the opposites. Between the end of the Fifties and the beginning of the Sixties of the last Century (an historical period in which cultural exchanges used to be less frequent than nowadays), a well-known oriental philosopher belonging to the *zen* culture, D. T. Suzuki (1960)³ – was the first one who clearly and authoritatively remarked the conceptual division between the eastern thought and the western one, counterposing the irreducible dualistic vision of the *aut-aut* (West) on a side, and the markedly holistic vision on the other; a vision which is inclined to a unitary representation of mind and body, subject-object, I-You-Us (East).

A diametrically opposite conception of the couples of contraries is in fact the one which is testified by the multimillennial tradition of Far-east's philosophical thought, most relevantly the Chinese one, starting from the *school of Taoism*, which poses the so-called “opposite” concepts on the extremities of continuous and not distinguished scales, within which the passage from the one to the other belongs to the natural order of things. For this reason these couples are used to be called with the definition of *complementary oppositions*, a dynamic vision that involves the role of a channel between the opposite dimensions of Sky and Earth, which the human being recognizes for himself.

The element which allows a good flowing between concepts, to the detriment of the hard quarrels typical of the western rationalist vision derived from Greek philosophy, is the stream of *qi* (*ki* in Japanese), a term which is packed of contents and is not actually translatable; it may be tried to be approximately translated in “vital flow”, primigenial

³ The famous text *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis*, written in 1960 together with E. Fromm and R. De Martino, is the result of a conference on psychoanalysis that took place in Mexico in 1957.

spring and fundamental element of the cosmos. If the flowing of the *qi* reminds the image of water, made famous by the great classics of the Taoist school like the *Laozi*, another concept we can metaphorically link to the bed river is the *dao*⁴. It can be associated to the other key concepts of the Chinese thought by the difficulty we get into when we try to make an equivalent translation of them. *Dao* nominally means “road”, “path” and, for figurative extension, “method”, “way of proceeding”; in its verbal acceptation beside its meaning of “walking”, “advancing”, “proceeding”, it can also signify “speaking”, “stating”. For this reason there is an idea of *dao* as a teaching in which the word of the teacher has to work alongside or forerun the practical experience. It is a path which is not understandable if it’s not undertaken making a direct experience of it (somehow likewise the Deweyan pedagogical system, which has a pragmatist-progressist, proposes the idea of an active and functional education, in line with the motto of “learning by doing”).

On a cosmological plan, *dao* is the container of the whole existence. All the opposites coexist within it, synthetized by the formulation of *yin* and *yan* as cosmical principles, whose alternation makes the universe move. As Amina Crisma (2016) reminds in her rich critical system which introduces her translation work of the *Neiye*, a piece that has been recently evaluated and formally included in the great Taoist classics’ list, the wise man (*shengren*) is the one who recognizes the flowing of *qi* as the only principle of reality and tries his best to eliminate the obstacles that may divert this kind of natural course.

In the words of the famous sinologist:

We should underline that this kind of attitude doesn’t recall anything magical or supernatural: it is fully human and rational, and discloses, nonetheless, an over-human dimension, which comes from the point of view of totality.

However, to reach this dimension and to get access to this kind of vision, you have to give up partiality: to open yourself and accept within yourself the totality, you have to abandon egoism, letting the passions that bring confusion to the heart (*xin*) and blur its clearness fade. (Crisma, 2016, p. 75)

The removal of limits to the natural circulation of vital flow can only be the result of a constant and coherent exercise of self-control that is both physical and spiritual. The wise man in the Taoist view, such as the man-of-value (*junzi*) in the Confucian theory, is the one who walks the path (*dao*, *do* in Japanese) righteously, giving demonstration of *de* (“virtue”, “human virtue”, “functional virtue”) and relying on it. It is a way of reading the natural macro-cosmos and a way of managing the social-cosmos that gives up violent methods, in a complete acceptation of the natural becoming of things, a paradigm of resolution of human conflicts, free from the desire to prevail, and from arrogance and haughtiness. The ego does not try to rise itself above nature, but becomes one with it: Two (duality, division, counterposition, opposition between subject and object, man and nature) blends with one and conflict, implied by the opposites, fades or gets overtaken. It is what we try to experience in the practice of certain Far-east’s typical disciplines, in

⁴ About this agrees also Alan Watts (1975), one of the greatest western commentators of *zen* philosophy, who, inspired by the works of Laozi and Zhuangzi, metaphorically compares *tao* or *dao* to the stream of flowing water, to letting oneself go and to the correlated communion Man-Nature.

which the serious and continuous repetition of accurate and confident gestures becomes means and aim of the annihilation of ego (the main cause of division).

In the practice of these arts the most human and profound trait of being emerges, the most sensorial and “transactional” at the same time, more or less as the mature Dewey used to define the process of knowledge, when any possible dichotomy disappears between the subject (who knows) and the cognitive object (which is known), so that a cognitive transactional process takes place (Dewey and Bentley, 1949), even though some critical-dialectical traits remain between the parts at stake (Cambi, 2004, p. 23) which instead are missing in oriental practices in which everything flows in an Heraclitean way.

Let’s take a look at the traditional Japanese arts, all directed to purify the being, to perfect it, even with the consciousness of its incompleteness. They are existential practices, for example, the art of arranging flowers (*ikebana*), the tea ceremony (*cha no yu*), the art of calligraphy (*shodō*), the art of folding paper (*origami*), *nō* theatre and *kabuki* theatre, the path of warfare arts directed to peace (*budō*), like the archery (*kyudō*), the path of the sword (*kendō*), the art of drawing the sword (*iaidō*) or *Aikidō* also described as the art of peace (Ueshiba, 1992) or literally, the path that leads to the harmony of *ki*, the vital flow. This art in particular – better defined by the adjective “chivalric” (instead of “martial”) –, *Aikidō*, a well done modernisation of the warfare arts used by the aristocratic caste of *samurai* (whose purpose is not to bring death anymore as during the medieval period, but to bring and elevate life instead), proposes stylistical/relational strategies to reduce or annihilate conflict, transforming it in the harmonisation of the opposites we talked about before: the opponent’s energy (the attacker, called *uke*) is made synergistically circulate along with the energy of the attacked (*tori*) to create unity in the action put in place by the two subjects. The base movement of *Aikidō* is circular, thanks to it the edges symbolising conflict (which is typical of a clash between forces) are rounded: the circle, a symbolic and kinetic element that characterizes this art, turns towards the transformation of the square in order to round its edges, neutralising in this way the conflictual strike of the attack and becoming one with the opponent, who *disappears*. Mostly due to the mental state in which *tori* poses him/herself, that the *zen* monk Takuan Sōhō (1986) wouldn’t have hesitated to define *mushin*, comparable to a state in which mind becomes empty and transparent, immutable and peaceful. The technical dynamism of *tori* absorbs the energy (*ki*) of *uke*, full of aggressiveness and violence (the attack is formally destructive), in order to transform the implicitly negative intention into positive energy. The action in its complex is restoring and creative: there’s an energetic shift from a conflictual condition to one which is projected to build a renovated relational union. Using Fromm’s psychological-existential language, we could state that the implicitly “necrophiliac” or “sadistic” starting element is transformed into a “biophilic” element, and that any possible duality, source of conflict and belligerency is destined to get into the flow of a metamorphic process of unity and harmonization (*ki no nagare*) with the objectual universe.

Morihei Ueshiba, founder of *Aikidō*, loved underlining the importance of circular movements during the *Aikidō* practice, to unite with the others and with the cosmos. As Morihiro Saito (1975, pp. 13 and 14) direct scholar of Morihei Ueshiba remembers, *Aikidō* «represents harmonious circular movements without conflicting with your partner». So remarks Kisshomaru Ueshiba, son of the founder of *Aikidō*:

Aikido is the art of assimilation and unification with Nature. There is no duality, no struggle, no opponent. There is only a harmonious action of our own spirit with the spirit of the universe. The techniques of Aikido are the bodily realization of this Harmony.

Aikido is the way of reconciliation. It is the bodily realization of the principle of the oneness of all beings (K. Ueshiba, 1985, p. 14).

Another direct scholar of Morihei Ueshiba, Nobuyashi Tamura (who spread the practice of *Aikidō* in France) specifies:

Le principe de l'aïkido appliqué au travers de irimi-tenkan, ki, kokyū, de la dualité apparente Moi-Adversaire, du travail un contre plusieurs, enseigne le sens de l'unité, de l'harmonie, de l'amour et de la paix.

L'aïkido exprime au moyen du corps, l'ordre de l'univers est correctement appliqué au corps, la technique et la santé s'épanouissent naturellement. Si l'ordre de l'univers est correctement appliqué à la vie quotidienne, l'éducation, le travail et la personnalité s'épanouissent naturellement. Si l'ordre de l'univers est correctement appliqué à la société, l'harmonie sociale et la relation entre soi et les autres s'épanouissent naturellement. L'humanité, comme une seule famille, œuvrera alors pour le rétablissement du monde dont l'harmonie est aujourd'hui troublée (Tamura, 1991, p. 21).

We cannot state that conflict does not exist, since, at least at the starting point of the execution of the technique (*waza*), the parts are two and one of them assumes an offensive attitude, ready to unleash a destructive attack: who receives it, on the contrary, as long as he/she assumes a certain mental and bodily attitude, puts a technical and bodily-kinesthetical strategy in place, intended to cancel the attack's effect and modify its nature from negative to positive.

This is a clear example of a reality before which we can't help to observe that the presence of dualism and of separation in any dual or plural relation is the foundation of an inescapable human conflict which is considered by some contemporary pedagogical schools as an unavoidable element of any educational space, especially if complex (Contini and Genovese, 1997; Contini, 1992), as for example school is (Nigris, 2002). The educator should be adequately formed to learn how to deal with such a conflicting reality, how to analyse the implied context, prevent any possible harmful effects, to manage them productively with the proper pedagogical strategy, heading towards a (maybe utopian) *pedagogy of conflict and unity* as an “integrating” reality: the love-for-life Fromm speaks about, the goodness laying in the primary humanity of societies, the universal humanity with revolutionary potentials Heller speaks about should rethink society in terms of a new regained humanism, pervading with humanity the universe of relationships, any human relationship, also the educational ones, virtuously transforming them into a mutual and continuous source of welfare, harmony and, in general, in «a creative approach to life» (Lowen, 1970).

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