

The Est-hetics of Esthetics: Pedagogy as a Science of Life

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[...] the artist descends within himself, and in that lonely region of stress and strife, if he be deserving and fortunate, he finds the terms of his appeal [...] the artist appeals to that part of our being which is not dependent on wisdom; to that in us which is a gift and not an acquisition—and, therefore, more permanently enduring. He speaks to our capacity for delight and wonder, to the sense of mystery surrounding our lives; to our sense of pity, and beauty, and pain; to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation—and to the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts, to the solidarity in dreams, in joy, in sorrow, in aspirations, in illusions, in hope, in fear, which binds men to each other, which binds together all humanity—the dead to the living and the living to the unborn.

Joseph Conrad, Preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus* (1914)

I. The disciplinary boundaries of esthetics are rather imprecise, but for exactly this reason esthetic theory has become increasingly relevant to Philosophy and Pedagogy. After decades of debate about what a work of art is or should be, we have realised that we cannot define the esthetic dimension of human life solely by reference to art objects, particularly when they have lost their significance. But, at the same time, the new forms of multimedia art have to defend themselves from those who still insist on looking for content in form and do not understand that the esthetic experience goes beyond any material object or representation². Contemporary man has shifted his attention from esthetic ideologies, which made a utilitarian use of objects and theories, to the psychological and philosophical dimension of the relationship between man and his world, which embraces a multitude of forms.

Within this fluid scenario, we cannot however become prisoners of that transformation, which took place during the course of the 18th century, when the ancient philosophy of beauty turned into an even more banal philosophy of taste³. A vast anthropological change has influenced the human being, who – at last – is no longer considered as the demiurge who fashioned the world or as an Absolute capable of transcendent thought, but – more modestly – a li-

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² Cfr. P. Sorlain, *Esthétiques de l'audiovisuel*, Paris, Nathan, 1992.

³ *Aesthetics* (from the Greek *aisthetikos*, or “perceptual”) was first used in 1750 to designate a theory of “sensuous cognition” by the German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten.

ving being in which biology and symbolism are always in a precarious balance. Neurosciences oblige Esthetics and Pedagogy (disciplines which overlap) to take a reductionist approach to “nature”, which, allowing for the limitations of all reductionism, nevertheless has the merit of emphasising the ideological and evolutionary nature of every cultural perspective, and provides an opportunity to shape philosophical and scientific ideas into new forms⁴.

In his influential work written in 1934, *Art as Experience*, John Dewey explains that experience, defined as interaction between organisms and their environment, really finds its highest expression in Art. He explains that the esthetic experience is an “everyday” experience fundamental to human. In art the individual experiences to the fullest the fluidity of human existence, which cannot be understood solely through the psyche or through logic. Education in the arts thus becomes a guiding principle which encompasses the whole of human life. The unity of man cannot exist outside experience, which cannot be reduced to a series of isolated phenomena or facts, and needs an inspirational motor, to replace the old model of a Subject attempting to control it. Even the most important educator of the 20th century, Maria Montessori, understood immediately that a child’s development is determined by the use of his body in space and time “on a child scale” and that “the key to the world” does not lie in spoken words, but rather in the physical and psychological assimilation of those things which nourish the senses of us all: shapes, colours, smells, sounds, temperature and weight...⁵. In fact, life is not only physical existence, but consists of thought and so education in the arts helps us to understand that *educating* is a complex and delicate undertaking which reproduces at every stage the effects of play, and stimulates those processes vital for the preservation of personal identity.

II. In a recent work on the *philosophy of educating*⁶, I attempted to demonstrate that it is possible to return to pedagogical considerations too much educating in all forms of education and that, starting from the great theme of the metamorphosis of forms⁷ (which affected so much of the culture of the 18th and the 19th centuries) it is possible to heal the fracture between content and representation, and between life and values. Rupert Riedl, in *Der Verlust der Morphologie*, published posthumously in 2006, spoke of a dramatic “loss of

⁴ Cfr. F. Desideri- C. Cantelli, *Storia dell'estetica occidentale. Da Omero alle neuroscienze*, Roma, Carocci, 2014; F. Vercellone, A. Bertinetto, G. Garelli, *Storia dell'estetica moderna e contemporanea*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2003.

⁵ M. Montessori, *Il metodo della pedagogia scientifica applicato all'educazione infantile nelle case dei bambini*, P. Trabalzini ed., Roma, Opera nazionale Montessori, 2000.

⁶ G. Tognon, *Est-etica. Filosofia dell'educare*, Brescia, La Scuola, 2014.

⁷ A. Pinotti-S. Tedesco (eds.), *Estetica e scienze della vita*, Milano, R. Cortina editore, 2014; F. Desideri, *La percezione riflessa. Estetica e filosofia della mente*, Milano, R. Cortina editore, 2011; *Evolutionary Aesthetics*, ed. by E. Voland and K. Grammer, London, Springer-Verlag, 2003.

morphology” leading to the inability of contemporary culture to make sense of the world⁸. The space vacated by forms is not empty, but it is available for new ideas and, above all, it opens the way for a reconsideration of many of the observations and experiences, already described in the history of ideas, which have been marginalised for so long. From this perspective, there is also room to reconsider the philosophy of pedagogy, taking it beyond past views dominated by the notion of “ought” (*sollen*) that Kant took as the foundation of his anthropology⁹. Man, the German philosopher writes, is «constantly assailed by animal impulses and tempted to contravene the laws of morality thus falling from that level of perfection which he has already reached»¹⁰. Only if he is subject to the laws of discipline will a man understand how to achieve his true nature¹¹. The goal of education is to straighten the ‘warped wood of humanity’¹². According to the modern theory of education, anthropological discourse and philosophical discourse were closely bound together for reasons of moral rather than natural necessity because they had both absorbed, in a religious or anti-religious fashion, the Renaissance idea that man can only realise his full potential if he overcomes the “fault” of moral ambiguity; of being capable of great good and also of great evil. «This problem», Kant writes, «is therefore the most difficult of all, and a perfect solution is not possible. From the warped wood of which a human being is made nothing wholly true can be fashioned»¹³.

Educating raises fundamental questions for contemporary man. Should education be considered as his defining characteristic – his mission in life – or should it be seen only as a process of factual enquiry, a necessity for survival? Is educating a fundamental human need or is it, as we know it, simply a social convention? Is it still possible through the development of an individual’s virtues, to determine the ethical behaviour of humankind as a whole, or is it necessary to work on more potent forms of expression, beauty and love, which are the characteristic products of human evolution? In our daily lives must

⁸ R. Riedl, *Der Verlust der Morphologie*, Wien, Seifert Verlag, 2006.

⁹ In order to keep my distance from the usual rhetoric about the crisis in education, I avoid equating *educating* with *education*, just like *man* cannot be reduced to an anatomical description of his body. I am choosing, in line with the model offered by the Ancient Greek language, to use a verbal noun, *educating*, to denote the continuity of a profound human inclination which is the same for us all although it does not develop in the same way. Just as in grammar the verb is distinct from the subject and the object, supporting them without «concerning itself» with content, so the experience of educating is distinct from the expression of its outcomes, and concerns itself with what it is, and not why.

¹⁰ Cfr. I. Kant, *In che cosa consiste il progresso del genere umano verso il meglio?*, in ID., *Scritti politici e di filosofia della storia e del diritto*, It. transl. G. Solari - G. Vidari, Torino, Utet, 1956, p. 232.

¹¹ I. Kant, *La Pedagogia*, It. transl. Rubitschek, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1975, p. 4.

¹² Cfr. I. Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity. Chapters in the History of Ideas*, Pimlico, London 2003; It. transl. *Il legno storto dell’umanità*, Milano, Adelphi, 1994.

¹³ Cfr. I. Kant, *Idea di una storia universale dal punto di vista cosmopolitico*, in ID., *Scritti politici e di filosofia della storia e del diritto*, It. transl. G. Solari - G. Vidari, Torino, Utet, 1956, p. 130.

we remain attached to the *meanings* of those things which have a conventional force based on habit and the need for a sense of security, or is it perhaps necessary to develop an active approach which breaks through the entropy of conventional social theory and aims at grasping the sense of what it means to be human in the complex mixture of biology and symbolism which is life?

The *Esthetics of educating* is not therefore a new “special field” in philosophy, but an attempt to move away from the pedagogic experience towards a philosophy of experience that surpasses the limitations of a *paideia* entirely centred on the tenet of what man *ought to be*. The study of the concept of beauty, from the *kalokagatia* of the ancient Greeks, through the Enlightenment of 18th century, to the crisis of esthetic formalism in the 20th century, help us to understand that, to make pedagogy a science of life, it is necessary to move away from the disconnect between form and content and think again about the dialectic between critical thinking and that *awareness of reality* which is as much a part of our daily life as breathing.

The question of the significance of experience was much debated by philosophers in the 19th century, who sought to complete the biological concept of morphology which had emerged in the 18th century and was developed by various thinkers, primarily Goethe. He rejects the separation of *esthesis* (perception) and *noesis* (the activity of the mind) and maintains that morphology is not intended to explain, *erklären*, but merely to present, *darstellen*, in such a way that its significance is revealed. In the 20th century, Arnold Gehlen and other anthropologists attempt to explain typically human phenomena, such as language and morality, as cultural responses to early contact with the natural world. Man is not a specialised being, but to the contrary, he specialises after birth. Jacob von Uexküll elaborates in an exhaustive manner the theories of an “environment-world” (*Umwelt*) and of man’s fundamental openness to the natural world (*Welttoffenheit*). Sensory and motor organs are the twin pillars of animal life and form a closed unit, a living sphere which encapsulates the interaction between perception and action. For Uexküll, every animal forever carries its environment within it, but only man is truly open to the world, to all objects and not only to those which are biologically necessary for survival. His is really a true *Welt*. Max Scheler, following Hegel, sees man as “a window onto the Absolute” and considers his capacity for spirituality as his defining characteristic.

The claim of anthropological philosophy to construct an objective human identity was criticised by Heidegger and by hermeneutic philosophy which seeks to emphasise the subjective element. Moreover, the theory of pedagogy takes a step beyond that attempted by the approach of anthropological philosophy. A morphology of educating cannot content itself either with the idea of moral laws nor with the laws of nature which govern animals. So what and how many forms may education take? Every man is a unique being and hence no single principle will ever suffice to convey the experience of life. It is not a question of producing a set of binding rules, but - rather - of presenting, describing, accompanying the life of each individual.

III. Educating requires the sensitive application of theory and practice. At the root of the crisis in the philosophy of education lies, in fact, a pedagogical prejudice based on a dogmatic, abstract theory of ethics. Today it is possible to counter-balance the binary oppositions elaborated by modern philosophy (e.g. mind/body, materialism/spirituality, nature/culture...) with an educational strategy that works around the dynamic of love and time, of internal fulfilment and external space. If we consider education not only as a social necessity, but as the only complete way of life, then we will be able to try and recreate a morphology of education in which beauty and esthetics accomplish an essential task: the realisation of goodness in beauty. Certainly, the morphology of educating is not a solution to the problems of humanity, but it is a flexible interpretative tool which keeps open a useful scientific pluralism. The *est-hetical* perspective is designed to take account of the complexity of the experience of life, putting it beyond the purely material, but without detracting from that biological sensibility which unites all the various aspects of life, and that has in beauty a powerful expressive tool. Hence, *est-hetics* may be defined as an ethical system which aspires to be (*est*) comprehensive and complete.

This perspective differs from the dominant tendency in modern anthropology to place bodies and ideas at the centre of distinct or replica worlds, so that the natural is *as if it were* a reproduction and, conversely, the artificial is *as if it were* natural. The secular attempt to separate body and mind, sensibility and rationality, emotions and ideas, has increased the distance of the individual from that personal dimension that does not lie in the physical universe, but in intimacy, in his own inner space, where absolute subjectivity or objective abstract alterity are of no consequence with respect to the familiarity and the warmth of being, and of the body.

Unfortunately, common sense resists the attempt to establish a new esthetic pedagogy. Talking of beauty when discussing education is still perceived as strange, counter-intuitive. It is said, for example, that many individuals do not possess any esthetic sense and yet they are principled and perfectly able to carry out their work. Beauty can be taught, just as we can be taught how to control our emotions, but we are generally led to believe that esthetic education has little to do with ethics, which is considered far more exacting and demanding; a system (of values and actions and the means by which to give effect to them) to strive against human weakness. In fact, an ethical system unsupported by beauty, is less effective. It is not possible to see moral values for what they are, a human creation, without having in some way understood that they are not separate, but correspond in a way that compels us to seek perfection in objects and in nature, in a way beyond normal sensory perception, and inexplicable simply as sensation. What we perceive as the intrinsic beauty of things, or words, originates from a multitude of examples to which we are witness, and which tell us that someone has already felt what we feel ourselves. The cacophony of words which come out of our mouths is a repetition going far back into the past, and the act of remembering this generates the esthetic pleasure of certainty. Educating consists in teaching how to repeat

the same gestures, until they slowly approach the perfection of an «acquired naturalness», resulting in pleasure that not only excites the mind, but also the senses. The rhythm of the voice, the precision of the gesture, the timing of the surprise, the unfolding landscape of visual perception, sounds interrupted even by silence¹⁴, lead to an “educational condensation” which is metonymic: the author is replaced by the work, cause by effect, content by container, concrete by abstract, and all effortlessly.

Although personal and societal morality are always dynamic, yet is noteworthy that in the field of Education Sciences, we struggle to find space for the metonymy which results from the productive exchange between ethics and esthetics. They survive as applied ethics or deontology, dependent on the skill of the teacher and the professionalism of the pedagogue, or as applied esthetics, the study of the theory of perception and creativity, or in the search for a harmonious environment. Once we put the spontaneity of the individual to one side, and the claim of our cultural system to «recognize» it to the other, ethics and esthetic education should be able to find their own space amongst the great debates on the reform of school systems, on parenthood, on family relationships etc. All too often, the absence of a human metaphysics is to blame for the fact that education is not able to fulfil its true function as the handmaid of morality. However, each *ought to be* alienates the object in question from its love to be. In short, it perpetuates the modern fracture between bodies and ideas thus destroying much of the *poietic* character of educating because it places it at the level of an overarching morality which demands that all must follow a prescribed path.

IV. We have not yet succeeded in bringing beauty into ethics. For too long have we included the latter rather than both in the educational matrix. We consider education as something between art and science, the result of a predetermined *moral system*. The methods and materials of education are constructed through the lens of its objectives and consequently it is ruled by practical considerations so that, even when it acts on the most noble of intentions, such as enquiring into what constitutes a «good life», precious little can be seen of the esthetics of the emotions, or of beauty. Support for this can be found in the fact that, in the face of a strenuous defence of ethics as the foundation of education, contemporary bourgeois society has adopted the practice of the ritualisation of art, an impulse that at one time was expressed in religious spirituality. The various forms of art perform an almost religious function becoming objects of devotion and reverence, even when they run counter to common sense; they legitimise an unexpressed need for transgression and exercise a compensatory function for those things which the modern world has destroyed. As Thomas Nipperdey puts it, moral education is the labour of the working days, but art is «the spirit of Sundays»: the seats of culture

¹⁴ Cfr. Pablo D’Ors, *Biografía del silencio*, Madrid, ediciones Siruela, 2014.

- museums, art galleries, art spaces, individual or collective performances...
- become the new «churches of esthetics»¹⁵.

Beauty, since Plato, has always been associated with Harmony, Proportion (see *Timaeus* and *Filebo*) and Radiance (see *Phaedrus*). Beauty is what is pleasing to the eye and can also be found in objects. As Umberto Eco points out, a beautiful object is something that, because of its form, satisfies the senses, particularly our eyes and ears. But it is not only those aspects perceptible to the senses that explain the beauty of the thing perceived; the qualities of the spirit and of character are more important in the case of the human being and come to be seen more with the eyes of the soul than those of the body¹⁶.

For the Ancients, beauty was always an objective quality. They located it in the object itself or in the natural qualities which made it beautiful. Nowadays, we believe that beauty may have two origins: the coming together of those material conditions which determine a perceived harmony between the parts (number, weight, shape, balance, *claritas*, *integritas*, *proportio*...) or the coming together of those moral conditions that make us seek beatitude beyond sensations, in something higher, in the clarity of ideas and/or in receiving God into our life, which are both the result of a critical and rational form of knowledge. To the Ancients, a work of art was a microcosm which reproduced in miniature the macrocosm, where the universal and substantial property of Beauty was located. The Moderns introduced the idea of the subjective, that is the ability of the individual to recognise the properties by virtue of which something may be called beautiful; whilst accepting that, if substantive properties of beauty do exist, it may not be possible to recognise them, making them beyond human comprehension. Finally, for the Contemporaries, the subjective is no longer something certain, but also a limitation, and this has opened the way to the relativism of Taste and Beauty: we no longer accept the belief that goodness and beauty are realities rather than the result of our projections, and instead we believe that beauty is the form taken by the expression of our taste. Unlike our predecessors, at least until the end of the Middle Ages, we are not shocked by any artistic precept or art form, not even the most conceptual or banally material, provided that there is somebody who advocates it and someone else who plays along. It is enough that there is an explanation from the artist, or someone claiming to be one, and sufficient external cues for us to recognise that we are faced with art or that we are in an artistic context (museums, galleries, exhibitions, art criticism). The contemporaries live in a state of constant artistic excitement which leads them no longer to consider the principles of art in objects, but only the movement of things, discourses, sensations and emotions from the art-maker to the art spectator, who in this way takes part in the world of the arts.

¹⁵ Cfr. Th. Nipperdey, *Come la borghesia ha inventato il moderno*, Roma, Donzelli, 1994.

¹⁶ See U. Eco, *Storia della bellezza*, Milano, Bompiani, 2004; ID., *On Beauty: a History of a Western Idea*, Secker & Warburg, London 2010; D. Konstant, *Beauty: the Fortune of an Ancient Greek Idea*, New York Oxford, U. Press, 2014.

V. The transformation of the ancient philosophy of beauty into a matter of taste led to the emergence, as Luc Ferry explains¹⁷, of three questions fundamental to the understanding of modern culture: the irrationality of beauty, the birth of art criticism – which called into question every artistic tradition – and the question of *sensus communis* and the interdisciplinary discourse around the subject of beauty. The problem of reconciling beauty with goodness (a surplus of the ethical over the esthetic) was made even more complicated by the attempt of Thomas of Aquinas to formulate a clear anthropological synthesis. The great medieval philosopher asserted that «Beauty identifies itself with goodness but they are logically different»¹⁸ and declined to consider beauty as one of the «transcendentals» (*unum, bonum, verum*: the One, the Good and the True), something absolute in itself, preferring to think of it as something that completed them and required the involvement of man¹⁹. The theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, author of a monumental work on the relationship between form and truth, describes to great effect the mediating character of Beauty and demonstrates that it is through «*pulchrum* that the glory of God's *bonum* is bequeathed on man who recognises it as *verum*»²⁰.

Looking back, we see that this problem had already arisen in the Aristotelian world-view which theorises that men are esthetic animals because they have the ability to learn and therefore they come to prefer that which gives them more satisfaction as they seek the greatest possible satisfaction in their endeavours. As Aristotle writes, «all men by nature desire to know»: they are born to learn. For Aristotle, who was the primary source of Scholasticism in the Middle Ages, education should not possess a specifically esthetic quality, but should encounter beauty as a support, as an introduction to goodness and moral freedom which are the true and only objectives of education²¹.

Both the Neoplatonic and Aristotelian-Thomistic views overlooked something which is actually typically modern: self-expression as the exercise of freedom. Without beauty, no freedom is possible: the deprivation of beauty is directly proportional to the deprivation of freedom because no human being can be compelled to appreciate something or made to suffer with no reason or force himself to learn from others or to become something he does not want to be. The individual's freedom to use his own body and ideas (freedom to be and freedom to think and communicate) has been the prerequisite for all education, particularly moral education, well before it was recognised as a fundamental human right. It follows that beauty is not merely a banal adjunct

¹⁷ L. Ferry, *Homo estheticus. L'invention du goût à l'âge démocratique*, Paris, LGV, 2008, pp. 34-43.

¹⁸ Thomas of Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae I-II*, q. 27 a 1.

¹⁹ Cf. U. Eco, *Il problema estetico in Tommaso d'Aquino*, Milano, Bompiani, 1970.

²⁰ H. U. von Balthasar, *Gloria, I, La percezione della forma*, G. Ruggieri (ed.), Milano, Jaka Book, 2012, p. 5.

²¹ U. Curi, *L'apparire del bello. Nascita di un'idea*, Milano, Bollati Boringhieri, 2013, pp. 33-34.

or simply a way to approach goodness, but is part of the full meaning of the common good.

The protection of the environment, the search for harmony between man and creation and between men, are not only critical to the survival of the human species, but also to the survival of freedom. It is a meeting of ideas which requires the rejection of any concept of educating which denies the *pre-education* beauty of man, that is, his beauty before he was civilised, or which denies the possibility of beauty in ethics, whose model is not a *perfect world* (which can be smashed and shattered like a mirror), but the ever-changing world as we experience it. This is not about proclaiming the purity of nature or some banal concept of human innocence – something attempted repeatedly in Romantic ideology – but is to seek a consensus around the idea that everything which can be said is also inexpressible, and carries within itself an echo of the beauty of something that never corresponds to a formal model and can always be conceived and expressed in another way.

VI. An esthetic pedagogy also has a valuable role in the “political” battle against attempts to divide mankind and place it in conflict with itself, reigniting the myth of war or the sense of guilt simply for being alive. A new idea of esthetic pedagogy, therefore combats the gnostic idea that true beauty is a secret to be shared by a select few and which divides men between those who consume and those who do not consume art which is a falsification of life, in favour of a new esthetic gnosis which supports Western culture in developing a full esthetic sensibility aimed at distinguishing between an age of artistic proliferation and full esthetic understanding. The true est-hetic mission of education is to recreate and preserve the value of concrete experience and of that feeling of being alive which is at the bottom of the question that life asks of itself. The great care that contemporary affluent societies take in order to «hide» – behind a purely utilitarian assessment of beauty – the radical and “subversive” nature of life, is in itself evidence of a «prohibition on wonder» before the mundane and the imperfect character of our actions. Instead, faced with the estheticism of consumerism and technological or biological transhumanism, it is worthwhile remembering that all true progress requires a taste for risk and, above all, a defence of the principle of imperfection in human affairs on which history is founded.

A contemporary sceptical philosopher, Odo Marquard, considers the proliferation of contemporary art, which insinuates itself into every aspect of life, as a choice determined by the need to compensate for the scarcity of *pathos* contained in our idea of experience, which is impoverished and disembodied, and which has lost its true nature in part also because of pedagogic scholasticism which presumes to replace real-life experience with descriptions and words, with a notion. In as much as we are suffering from a lack of patience, a “crisis of waiting” (*Krise der Erwartung*), from the human esthetic perspective – and are now forced to deal with too many things and too many useless

ambitions – our way of interpreting a work of art, or more generally, the reality in which we are immersed, no longer meets the human need for love or the need to understand something, to make it become part of us. Living as art or living as if everything were art, becomes a superficial compensation, even in an obsessive form, for the loss of the impact of real experience and for the impossibility of really putting ourselves to the test²². The horizons of our expectations contract and, with this loss of intensity, so does our capacity to become adults and to strengthen ourselves. Marquard observes that the arts play, on the one hand, a positive role in the expectation of reality, but on the other they substitute for it and place it somewhere between wonder and disenchantment; It is a way of becoming adult without actually experiencing it directly, a remedy against estrangement from the world. If the «prohibition on wonder» and on suffering for our failure to comprehend is not lifted, and if esthetics does not return to a loving tension with ethics, with est-hetics, there is the risk that art, like politics or economics, will become the executioner of empathy and of all ethics based on an understanding of human morphology.

²² O. Marquard, *Antropologia ed estetica*, Roma, Armando, 2007, p. 120.