



Catholic wisdom and the recovery of the person in elementary education: a response to Rousseau's educational utopianism

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From a philosophical perspective, the debate, broadly speaking, over education for the past several centuries has been between the followers of Aristotle and the disciples of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The reason is that the philosophies of Aristotle and Rousseau offer starkly contrasting visions of the human person which produce significantly different judgments about pedagogical methods and outcomes. For centuries, Aristotle's pedagogy of habit formation and character education was axiomatic in education, including the earliest educational ventures of the Catholic Church. However, some modern educators, in order to differentiate themselves from traditional education, naturally have opposed Aristotle.

In the United States these educators call themselves "progressive educators." They reason that, if Aristotle's principles have been the cornerstone of classical education, one must build a new educational edifice on a different foundation. Rousseau's philosophy supplies this alternative. Some of these educators may not advocate Rousseau explicitly by name. In fact, many of them may have little familiarity with Rousseau's writings. Nonetheless, Rousseau's is their kingdom, whether they realize it or not. The kind of educational philosophy they have imbibed in their professional and personal development, even if under the authority of more familiar names, like John Dewey, is largely Rousseau's.²

Since ideas have consequences, the philosopher can assess the effects of Rousseau's educational policies in today's cultural landscape. I will focus on how Rousseau's philosophy has influenced educators, arguably for the worse, especially elementary educators. I will do so by highlighting and discussing certain problematic attitudes and practices in modern educational culture (mainly American culture, since I am most familiar with it) which are attributable, in my judgment, to errors in Rousseau's philosophy, especially in his philosophy of the human person. I argue that educators, especially Catholic educators, must understand the limitations in Rousseau's philosophy because its influence puts Western Civilization itself at peril.

¹ Comunicación en el Congreso Internacional "¿Una Sociedad Despersonalizada? Propuestas Educativas", de la Universitat Abat Oliba CEU (Barcelona, 13-15 de abril de 2010).

² For an edifying discussion of the alliance of Rousseau and Dewey in American education, see E.D. Hirsch, Jr. (1988). *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*. New York: Random House; also see D. Ravitch (2000). *Left Back: A Century of Battles over School Reform*. New York: Simon & Schuster.



By exposing some of the disturbing cultural and educational applications of Rousseau's philosophy, I will indirectly defend Aristotle's philosophy of the human person as providing a sounder basis for education, especially elementary education. This claim has bearing on Catholic education. The Catholic Church has had a vision of education since ancient times that is congenial with Aristotle's philosophy of the human person. I do not suggest that Catholic educators, even those in ancient times, were explicitly Aristotelian or members of Peripatetic philosophical schools. Rather, I am making the modest claim that Catholic wisdom from its beginnings had a certain affinity with the Greek view of human nature, dignity, and freedom.³ The Greek philosophy of the human person complemented, rather than contradicted, the Gospel message about human life. This conforms, of course, with Catholic teaching that grace perfects nature. So, Aristotle's rationale for pedagogy, relying solely on natural understanding and common experience, can reinforce the Church's teaching on education through grace. This combination of natural and supernatural wisdom has defined the adventure of faith and reason that is Catholic education. Because of this tradition, Catholic educators have the resources to challenge Rousseau's philosophy of education. This is one reason that progressive educators sometimes stridently oppose Catholicism. They recognize that the intellectual tradition in the Catholic Church makes it a formidable adversary.

Let me briefly recall the contrasting educational philosophies of Aristotle and Rousseau. A brief quotation from each thinker is representative and will suffice. Aristotle's pedagogy is summed up tidily in the following passage from the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

Good habits we acquire by first exercising them, just as happens in the arts. Anything that we have to learn to do we learn by the actual doing of it . . . It is a matter of no little importance what sort of habits we form from the earliest age—it makes a vast difference, or rather all the difference in the world.⁴

This concise paragraph asserts the primacy of habit formation. Implicit in this emphasis on habits is a faculty psychology central to Aristotle's philosophy of the human person. The human person perfects his or her life through habits. Habits exercise our powers so that we can employ them with ease. These habits develop our sensory, appetitive, and intellectual faculties. The relationship between appetitive and intellectual habituation is crucial. Without intellectual control of our emotions, we can undermine our own good and the well-being of our communities. Hence, a fundamental task of education is to give moral direction to the youth. Crucial to the aims of education is character-formation, so that the child can become eventually a responsible adult and productive citizen.

In contrast, Rousseau says the following:

The only habit a child should be allowed to acquire is to contract none . . . The child should enjoy the reign of his freedom and the exercise of his powers, by allowing his body its natural habits and accustoming him

³ In *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York 1965, 272-277, E. Gilson argues that this Greek regard for human nature is reinforced by the Christian conviction that human beings are made in the image of God. This Greek and Christian combination forms a worldview, Gilson argues, that has come down to us as "the Western Creed."

⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, W. D. Ross (1052), Translator. Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., Vol. 9, 1103 b 23-27.



always to be his own master and follow the dictates of his will as soon as he has a will of his own.⁵

These remarks are an occasion to make manifest core principles in Rousseau's pedagogy. Implicit in these words is a condemnation of Aristotelian pedagogy as indoctrination. Habit formation is an offense to the child's autonomy, creativity, and free expression, which, according to Rousseau, are the true aims of education. This philosophy inverts will over intellect. Rousseau discredits the Aristotelian idea that mastery of emotions—the dominance of intellect over will—is the hallmark of moral education. For Rousseau, child development must not rely on moral direction from adults. Adults are unreliable educators, Rousseau argues, because their grasp of truth and value is transmitted by institutions, such as Church, family, and schools, which are unenlightened. Such unenlightened instructors ruin the child.⁶

To celebrate the benefits that come from liberating the child from such authorities and institutions, Rousseau wrote his famous novel, *Emile*. Left to his own personal experience, Emile's evolution is the model for humankind's progress. Emile's self-awareness emerges through three stages: (1) the primitive inclinations of the emotional child; (2) the recognition of others in the world and the resultant sympathy and regard for others that comes from this epiphany; (3) the realization of full civic consciousness, when one authenticates oneself as a moral human being by the measure of tolerance (inclusiveness) and compassion which establish a system of progressive social relations. In short, Rousseau's description of Emile's self-education prescribes society's progress toward enlightenment.⁷

Elite educators—teachers who transcend the benighted past—must insure that this progress happens. In other words, as a product of Rousseau's philosophy, progressive education is a continuation of a kind of Gnosticism in modern philosophical culture. This judgment plays on the insight of Eric Vogelin that modern philosophy is Gnostic because its underlying skepticism eliminates speculative knowledge.⁸ In the wake of this, knowledge becomes a consensus of those who monopolize power in the culture. Rousseau himself, contemplating the failure of Cartesianism, maintains that while skepticism has nullified our *speculative* intelligence, we still have recourse to *practical* intelligence. We may know nothing *speculatively*, but we can set about *practically* to improve the human condition. Rousseau's philosophy supplies the terms of this consensus. He cobbles the modernist Gnostic, "social contract," as it were, so that society can overcome its "self-incurred immaturity."⁹ Society can evolve as Emile evolved.

This social evolution requires a strategy. If leaders strive to overcome uncivilized society, they must undermine its foundations. These foundations are Greek civilization, Judeo-

⁵ From Steven Cahn (1970), Editor, "Emile," in *The Philosophical Foundations of Education*. New York: Harper & Row, 158.

⁶ For a textual study of Rousseau on these particulars, see P. Redpath (1994). *The Masquerade of the Dream Walkers*, Amsterdam: Rodopi Editions, Chapter Three, "The Urge to Emerge," 67-99.

⁷ Ibidem

⁸ E. Vogelin (1968). *Science, Gnosticism, and Politics*. Washington D.C.: Regnery.

⁹ This expression is Kant's, another proud disciple of Rousseau. An Answer to the Question "What is Enlightenment?" in Kant: *Political Writings*, Hans Reiss (1992), Editor and H.B. Nisbet, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 54-63.



Christian religion (along with its moral tradition), and regard for national sovereignties. Rousseau's philosophy antagonizes these foundations. Since these traditions constitute the vision of the human person central to Western Civilization, Rousseauian philosophy must deconstruct the human person and the culture that supports it. Human beings are perfectible if social leaders can remove these impediments. Rousseauian elites must take charge of key elements of culture to effect this utopian project. Such Gnosticism plays out in a myriad of ways in the modern educational scene.

I. *The Demand for Government Control of Education.*

One manifestation of Rousseau's program in modern culture is the presumption that education should be a primary responsibility of the State. If civic man is authentic man, then it is the obligation of civic authorities to educate him. Hence, educators must strive to wrest control of education from traditional institutions, such as Church and family. Within a century after Rousseau, political activists succeeded in convincing a bemused public that public schools were essential. Prussia was the most enthusiastic advocate of public education. Johann Fichte declared that "schools must fashion the person, and fashion him in such a way that he simply cannot will otherwise than what you wish him to will."¹⁰ The American Horace Mann traveled to Prussia and imbibed the principles of this educational program. He brought the Prussian paradigm to America. For a century, moderated by traditional American values, public education was a constructive force. But incremental changes engineered by progressive educators, largely under the mentorship of John Dewey, have made it an instrument to deconstruct American society rather than support it.

Public schools have been a fact of social life for so long that most European and North American societies take it for granted. But this presumption has its consequences, which should not be lost on us. Consider, for example, this ironic indictment: Rousseau condemned classical education as indoctrination. But Rousseau's progressive agenda and Gnosticism insures that education reduces to indoctrination as the means to turn the young into trained participants in Rousseau's vision of government.

No reasonable person disputes, of course, that there is a place for public schools as a safety net. If families or communities cannot or will not educate their children, the state must intervene (for the same reason that the state intervenes when parents cannot feed their children). But short of this extreme, public schools should justify their existence and hegemony.

II. *The Marginalization of the Family.*

If one must topple traditional social institutions that keep human beings in a benighted condition, then one must suspect the family. The family, after all, is the crucible of many "unenlightened" opinions. Such an attitude is easily detectible in modern authoritarian societies. Karl Marx, another disciple of Rousseau, argued for the abolition of the bourgeoisie family.¹¹ Perhaps, then, it should not surprise us if sometimes we find school authorities, like authoritarian governments, prone to consider parents their natural enemies or competitors. In the American educational establishment, parents routinely encounter such attitudes and resistance. The educators' behavior often contradicts their rhetoric.

¹⁰ Quoted in J. Gatto (2000). "Our Prussian School System", in *The Underground History of American Education*, New York: The Oxford Village Press.

¹¹ K. Marx and F. Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Samuel Moore (1952), in *Great Books of the Western World*, Vol. 50, Encyclopedia of Britannica Press, Chicago, 427-433.



Studies show that, while teachers and administrators may pacify parents and seek their cooperation, they seldom make the important changes parents request.

To take a current example from American education, sometimes parents are alarmed that teachers let students use calculators as a crutch. A poll by *Public Agenda* found that 86 percent of parents want students first to learn arithmetic without the use of calculators. However, the math-teaching policy for most American public schools today mandates that all children, even in kindergarten, have access to calculators at all times to do math problems.¹²

A common frustration of parents is that they find out often about school policy and practice *post-facto*. Most school districts make important teaching-method or curriculum decisions in secret, indifferently to parents' knowledge or approval. Parental complaints are deferred to such time when parents see the damage to their children.

Thomas Sowell, in his book, *Inside American Education*, observes that too often, school authorities ignore parents' suggestions or complaints because they truly believe they are the experts and parents are just meddling amateurs. Many school officials believe parents should not contribute in significant ways to their children's education, or at least not in ways that influence curriculum or classroom. A stratagem for keeping parents on the margins is for school authorities to hold their committee meetings in secret. This is Gnosticism in practice.¹³

II. Hostility Toward Traditional Religious and Moral Values.

Just as Rousseau-inspired educators are suspicious of the family, so they are suspicious of religious and moral values. In America, there is systematic effort on the part of certain legal entities, such as the American Civil Liberties Union and the Southern Poverty Law Center, to get rid of religious symbols in the public square, such as displays of crosses, manger scenes at Christmas, and the Ten Commandments in courthouses. Some years ago, Richard John Neuhaus exposed the fallacy in this kind of litigation in his book, *The Naked Public Square*. He called it the myth of secular neutrality. Secularists assume that, if the government removes religious symbols from the public square, it creates a public climate where no religious or "worldview" assumptions appear. This is didingenuous. If secularism itself is arguably a religion—a worldview with certain indemonstrable assumptions about reality, the human person, and morality—then, this legal removal of religious symbols is a sleight of hand to remove one religion (traditional Christianity and Judaism) from the public square and to replace it with another (secularism).¹⁴

Another way educators deconstruct moral and religious values is to create narrations that imply moral lessons different from the ones taught in classical moral instruction. Educators may take a traditional narration and adjust it to convey a political "moral" that insinuates their progressive agenda. Berit Kjos, in his book *Brave New Schools*, cites this example:

A familiar tale told to first graders in Pennsylvania shows what happens when old stories are squeezed into the mold of the new paradigm. We all know the story of the Little Red Hen who wanted some bread to eat. She

¹² J. Turtel (2006). *Public Schools, Public Menace: How Public Schools Lie to Parents and Betray Our Children*. New York: Liberty Books, 38-39.

¹³ T. Sowell (1993). *Inside American Education*. New York: The Free Press.

¹⁴ R. J. Neuhaus (1984). *The Naked Public Square*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company.



asked some of her barnyard friends to help make it. But the cat, the dog, the goat all said no. Finally she did all the work herself. However, when the bread was done, her unwilling friends came to help her eat it. "Won't you share with us?" they begged. "No," she answered. "Since you didn't help, you don't get anything."¹⁵

Traditional pedagogy interprets this fable to teach the importance of a work ethic: you get what you work for. But Kjos found that elementary teachers in Pennsylvania routinely changed the "moral" of the story. Instead of suggesting the importance of a work ethic, they posed questions to their first graders like "Why was the Little Red Hen so stingy? Isn't it only right that everyone gets to eat? Why shouldn't she share what she had with some who had none?"¹⁶

Suggesting a redistribution of property is a sophisticated concept that might have its place for older students. But when it is proposed to first graders, the cynic in us becomes suspicious. These elementary teachers aim to deconstruct traditional American values about work and property. Such instruction makes "children believe that no one has a right to keep what they work for if the group wants it . . . It teaches that it is immoral to oppose the group who wants to loot what you worked for."¹⁷ Many such examples can be multiplied. Are they simply efforts to indoctrinate children with group conformity and sacrifice to the collective? This, by the way, is vintage Rousseau: private property is the root of social evil.

IV. Deception and Lying as Educational Policy.

There is an on-going scandal in American education: falsification of records of student performance. Multiple studies expose that many public schools "dumb-down" the tests students take and inflate students' grades. School administrators are not without a motive for this deception: "the school's goal is to fool parents into believing their children are doing better than they are. If parents think their kids are doing fine, they don't complain to teachers, principals, or their local school board."¹⁸ In the United States, under a law called "the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001," the Department of Education now requires students to pass standardized tests. Failing schools will lose federal funding and other benefits if their students consistently perform badly on tests.¹⁹ Of course, it is not only the parents who are fooled. The students are victims of this deception too. Charles Sykes in his book, *Dumbing Down Our Kids*, reports the following:

More than two-thirds of American eighth-graders say that they get mostly A's and B's. According to the American College Board, the percentage of students reporting that they had an average grade of A rose from 28 percent to 32 percent between 1987 and 1994. At the same time, their average SAT scores fell by 6 to 15 points Giving out ever-increasing

¹⁵ B. Kjos (1995). *Brave New School*. Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers.

¹⁶ J. Turtel, *Public Schools, Public Menace*, 55-56.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ *Ibidem.*, 83.

¹⁹ *Ibidem.*, 88.



grades for evermore mediocre work reflects the collapse of standards throughout the educational system.²⁰

Consider the experience of John Jacob Cannell, a West Virginia doctor, who was puzzled about some of his teenage patients. He witnessed a procession of teenage pregnancy, depression, criminal behavior, and drug addiction. Compared to their peers, many of these troubled teenagers seemed to suffer deficiencies in reading and other basic academic skills. But when Dr. Cannell asked about these students, local school administrators assured him that these troubled teenagers had scored well on the school's standardized tests. Yet, independent tests found that, while these teenagers were sitting in seventh-grade classrooms, they had only third-grade academic skills. Dr. Cannell suspected that something was amiss with the public-school grading system. He carefully and thoroughly investigated testing procedures throughout the country. Here is what he found:

- Not a single one of the fifty states reported that its students scored below average at the elementary level on their total battery of scores. More than two-thirds of American students—70 percent—were being told that they were “above average” based on the test scores.
- More than 90 percent of American school districts claimed to be performing above average. Cannell's study found that some of the poorest, most desperate school districts in the nation are able to pacify the press, parents, and school boards by testing “above the national norm” on one of these commercial “Lake Wobegon” [dumbed-down] achievement tests. Among those claiming to be “above average,” he [Cannell] found, were Trenton and East Orange, New Jersey, Boston, St. Louis, Kansas City, East St. Louis, and New York City—all districts notorious for the breakdown in their schools. In many of those cities, years of misleading claims of academic superiority had staved off critics, accountability, and reform, while many of the schools themselves went from wretched to hopeless.²¹

Of course, this strikes a reasonable person as wholesale deception or lying. But once one relies on Rousseau's principles to deconstruct customary morality as “uncivilized,” one can interpret customary condemnation of deception and lying as antiquated. From the vantage point of traditional morality, deception and lying are bourgeoisie vices. Truth and value, after all, for Rousseau's descendants are cultural constructions, because truth and value are political goals for social betterment, not standards that apply in judging individual conduct that defines one's character. Moral virtues, like truth telling, have to do with one's political allegiance. If one's politics are sincere—that is to say, if one has the right utopian intentions—one is absolved from being judged by standards of customary virtue and vice. This must be why in Rousseauian politics and education “lying” is commonly and shamelessly practiced. In short, there is nothing wrong with falsifying data for political purposes. The end justifies the means.

V. Scientific Reductionism.

Another earmark of Rousseau's progressive education is the conviction that, if there is knowledge, it is measurable in the physical sciences. Progressive educators cannot

²⁰ C. J. Sykes (1995). *Dumbing Down Our Kids*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

²¹ J. Turtel, *Public Schools, Public Menace*, 83-85. See J. Jacob Cannell (1989). *How Public Educators Cheat on Standardized Achievement Tests: the Lake Wobegon Report, from Albuquerque: Friends for Education*, cited in Sykes, *Dumbing Down Our Kids*, 143-145.



demonstrate this claim, but they accept it enthusiastically because it serves their political agenda. If one reduces all knowledge to physical science, one eliminates in one fell swoop, theology and philosophy, especially, moral theology and moral philosophy, as ways of knowing. To the extent that morality remains, it is utilitarian, which suits the reduction of the person to an agent in a social machine. Bentham combines with Rousseau nicely. Bentham sought to eliminate from ethics rights, rules, and religion. To eliminate these principles requires the kind of deconstruction progressive education prescribes.

One of the most sinister effects of this scientific materialism in the schools is the use of drugs to control students.

Public schools across America now pressure many parents to give their children mind-altering drugs to control their children's behavior in class. The exact number of students taking drugs like Ritalin is not precisely known. Dr. Lawrence Diller, behavioral pediatrician and author of *Running on Ritalin: A Physician Reflects on Children, Society, and Performance in a Pill*, estimated that in the year 2000, about four million children took daily doses of Ritalin. He noted that nearly all the Ritalin was used to treat an alleged disease called ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), and that Ritalin use had jumped 700 percent since the 1990's.

Leonard Sax, a physician, psychologist, and author of "Ritalin, Better Living Through Chemistry," estimated that in the year 2000, about six million American children, or about one child in every eight, were taking Ritalin. He also noted that the United States consumes nearly 86 percent of the world's consumption of the drug.²²

Of course, there can be genuinely sound clinical reason to give people drugs for psychological purposes. Such drugs sometimes genuinely help people cope with depression and anxiety, and perhaps, hypothetically, with hyperactivity. But one has to be suspicious when educators lobby to put millions of children on drugs. One has to wonder whether behind this casual and apparently promiscuous prescribing of mind-altering drugs is an impoverished philosophy of the human person.²³

VI. The Abandonment of Character Education.

After the horrifying school shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado in 1999, a national conversation ensued. The American public was stunned by the enormity of the event. How could two boys, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebolt, from apparently stable families in an affluent community commit mass murder? Part of the conversation involved moral philosophers, such as Christina Sommers, who dared to argue that some fault lay with progressive educators and the theorists who support them.²⁴ Society paid a price because these ideologues convinced teachers, administrators, and even parents that we should replace the traditional mission of teaching children moral habits with the romantic pedagogy of Rousseau. Speaking on this matter, Christina Sommers says the following:

²² J. Turtel, *Public Schools, Public Menace*, 127.

²³ For an interesting perspective on drug use in America, see Stanton Peele (1989). *The Disease of America: Addiction Treatment Out of Control*. Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin Company.

²⁴ C. Sommers (2002). *How Moral Education Is Finding Its Way Back into America's Schools, in Character Education*, William Damon, Editor. Stanford, California: Hoover Institution Press, 23-41.



Teachers and parents who embraced this view badly underestimated the potential barbarism of children who are not given a directive moral education. It is not likely that a single ethics course would have been enough to stop boys like Harris and Klebold from murdering classmates. On the other hand, a K-12 curriculum infused with moral content might have created a climate that would make a massacre unthinkable. For such a depraved and immoral act was indeed unthinkable in the simpleminded days before the schools cast aside their mission of moral edification.²⁵

Had moral instruction been part of the daily duties of teachers at Littleton schools, it would have been impossible to overlook the sociopathic behaviors of Klebold and Harris, even years before the massacre. They often wore T-Shirts with the words “Serial Killer” printed on them. They sported swastikas and made violent videos using school equipment. By indulging these modes of self-expression, the adults at Columbine High School planted a seed of doubt in their disturbed minds. The boys were left to contemplate why nobody challenged them directly that serial or mass murder is wrong. They were abandoned to think that perhaps, since nobody checked their attitudes or corrected their behaviors, mass murder is not wrong; perhaps nothing is wrong.

One English teacher at Columbine told *Education Week* that both boys had written short stories about death and killing “that were horribly, graphically, violent.” She was alarmed upon reading them and notified school officials. She reported that they took no action because nothing the boys wrote violated school policy. Like good Rousseauians, they championed the boys’ right to free expression. Speaking with painful irony, the frustrated teacher explained, “In a free society, you can’t take action until they’ve committed some horrific crime because they are guaranteed freedom of speech.” In many high schools, students are confident that they have a legal license to express anything they want. “Counselors and administrators, fearful of challenges by litigious parents who would be backed by the ACLU and other zealous guardians of students’ rights, rarely take action.”²⁶

Society risks these kinds of behaviors when educators abandon their ancestral responsibility to transmit virtues to the next generation. Christina Hoff-Sommers makes this closing observation:

The love affair with Rousseau’s romantic idealization of the child in American education has made it inevitable that our public schools fail to do their part in civilizing the young. Many schools no longer see themselves having a primary role in moral edification. The style is not to interfere with the child’s self-expression and autonomy. Leaving children to discover their own values is a little like putting them in a chemistry lab full of volatile substances and saying, “Discover your own compounds, kids.” We should not be surprised when some blow themselves up and destroy those around them.²⁷

Conclusion

²⁵ *Ibidem.*, 504-505.

²⁶ *Ibidem.*

²⁷ *Ibidem.*



The lesson from all this is that Catholic educators have work to do. Catholic education can serve the modern world by showing it has the resources, especially as they are grounded in its comprehensive philosophy of the human person, to address all the essentials for genuine education, including a child's (and an adult's for that matter) moral education. In this way, it can challenge the destructive influence of progressive education.²⁸

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