

Educating for openness to the Transcendent

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1. Terminology

1.1 The educational concept

We begin with six vague notions about what it means to educate.

To educate is to journey from the surface to the bottom; that is, to believe in the experience of depth. When we educate a person, we instill a deep vision of the world, of himself and of history. We are not satisfied in offering him a superficial and panoramic vision; want him to go to the depths of understanding; we want him to feel the desire to penetrate into the essence of things and in particular, into the depths of his own being.

This is why education is not merely a transmission of knowledge, but a revealing practice, a motivating force that tries to awaken in the student the desire for greater knowledge, for loving more deeply, in short, for “being” more.

To educate is to awaken the consciousness of the “I.” Following the Socrates model, to educate is to awaken the profound “I” of each person, to help the student be what he is called to be. It is not about directing him to pre-established goals. To educate a student is to care for him so that his life goal can be achieved. In order to discover his personal mission, it is necessary for the student to experience silence and prepare himself to be open to the call.

To educate is to strengthen the person’s freedom. According to Edith Stein, to educate is not only to respect the student’s freedom, but to strengthen it to the utmost; making him aware of the fact that human life is a gift and a task, at one and the same time; it is a freely chosen pursuit and needs to be lived with responsibility.

To educate is to develop all of the person’s powers, faculties and abilities. In the student there are latent aspects that will only emerge and develop entirely through the educational practice. The human being is full of possibilities, but they will only become real if he feels welcomed in spheres that have optimum conditions for growth and development. The family and the school are privileged environments to bring this about.

To educate is to nurture bonds of affection.. Education has an emotional and affective aspect. To educate is to transmit knowledge, values, principles, criteria, and skills, but it is also about communicating emotions and skills for handling emotions correctly.

To educate is to prepare the encounter between the student and the inner Teacher. The external teacher has, in this sense, the function of preparing the ground. The aim is for the student to discover the inner Teacher at the center of his being, that he live according to the guidance of his inner being, to discover the truth in the deepest part of himself. Every human being has a mystery inside himself. According to St Augustine, the goal of the external teacher is to enable the student to connect with that inner dimension of himself, experiencing the fundamental bond with the Inner Teacher who educates him from the inside.

1.2 Exploring the idea of transcendence

From a semantic point of view, the word *transcendence* is very rich. It contains many meanings that must be properly distinguished in order to know what we are addressing when we speak of an education for openness to the Transcendent. It is not a word with a single meaning, but it has a wide semantic field. Although traditionally it has strictly religious connotations, the word *transcendence* also has many non-religious meanings.

To educate for openness to transcendence means, that first of all, we must explore these various meanings, and then look for the mechanisms and the pedagogical practices that may awaken the sense of transcendence in the student.

In the dictionary *Instituto de Estudios Catalanes* the words *transcendence*, *transcendent*, *transcend* and *transcendental* are described. *Transcendence*: the transcendent quality. *Transcendent*: something which exceeds the limits of concrete reality. It also means the one who, intellectually or morally, reaches a higher level.

Transcendental: Something very important due to the consequences it can have.

To transcend, to go beyond. Something produced in one domain becomes known and has consequences in another sector. Movement, dynamism, going towards what is not, towards what one does not have, moving towards a greater sphere.

To educate, in this sense, is to transcend, to go further, to expand the student's universe, teaching him to understand the different levels and layers of reality. It is always related to overcoming a limit or a barrier. When we teach a new content or we transmit a new skill to a student, we are leading him to an unknown zone for him and, in this sense, he is moving towards something he does not know.

Afterwards, with experience and familiarity, he will end up knowing that zone; and later, if he continues with his learning, he will feel he needs to go further, to explore new territories; thus, he will transcend his world again. To educate is to awaken the transcendent movement in the student; it is the desire to go further into what he already knows in the here and now; it is to improve himself indefinitely, not to be satisfied with limits.

Transcendence has connections with the word *transgression*, which is the action of transgressing, this is, to break a law, a rule, an order. It is to move from one world to another, to extend one's view and perspective, to exceed "tribalism", the short and narrow view. It also has something to do with the verb *to pass*, which is the action of passing, more or less quickly, from one state to another, from one topic to another, from one idea to another.

As we have seen, the more immediate and basic meaning of the word *transcendence* refers to a metaphor of space. To transcend (which comes from *trans*, further, *scando*, to scale) means to go from one field to another, going through the boundary which separates them.

From a philosophical point of view, the concept of *transcendence* also includes the idea of exceeding or superiority, and consequently, of effort. In the Occidental tradition, transcendence means going beyond a point of reference. To transcend is the action of coming out, of going from the inside to the outside of a specific field, exceeding limitations. Thus, for instance, according to St Augustine the platonics transcended the body looking for a God.

Once again, from a philosophical point of view, *transcendence* is the opposite to *immanence*. The transcendent is something which is above something purely immanent. Immanence is the property in which a reality remains enclosed upon itself, consuming itself therein. Therefore, immanence is one of the levels of transcendence, but the dimension of excelling that represents the act of transcending is added.

There are two philosophical notions of transcendence: the one with the knowledge theory nuance and the one with the ontology nuance. The first one questions the possibility of knowing objects the way they are in themselves; the second one questions the possibility of human beings knowing something which is beyond his empirical experience.

According to the philosopher Nicolai Hartmann, knowledge is like a *transcensus* of the person beyond the field of his own consciousness, like a break through of the person into the object of the transcendent and heterogeneous sphere for him. According to this author, even if reality is only accessible when we know it, things are not constituted by knowledge, it just makes them patent. The object's reality does not depend on the person's reality in an anthropological way.

Ontological transcendence refers to all the things that are outside or beyond the world that we perceive through the external senses. It is what is beyond the consciousness. It refers, for instance, to the soul or to God. According to Martin Heidegger, we must understand the human existence as a ongoing and always renewed transcendence, going beyond an essential (*überstieg*), as a projection (*Entwurf*) which looks for the ultimate meaning of things. Karl Jaspers argues that transcendence is seen through limit situations (*Grenzsituationen*): sin, pain, death, guilt, fight, disease and suffering.

The idea of transcendence ultimately evokes the idea of an infinite movement, a desire to advance towards a bigger reality. This wish is expressed by the will to be more, of loving more, of fulfilling oneself completely, of not stopping at any goal or specific boundary. This wish does not prove or demonstrate the existence of a beyond which definitely fulfills the person's thirst, nor denies it. It is reasonable to believe in a transcendence completely gifted with meaning and where the person is able to fulfil this wish to the fullest. This has always been the ultimate core of Christian philosophy.

According to the philosopher Francisco Romero, reality, in and of itself, is transcendent. According to this author, we must state that everything is transcendent, not only spiritual reality. He distinguishes different types of reality and each one has its own level of transcendence, til one reaches pure spirit which is the genuine act of transcending. Transcendence, as Romero defines it, is like an impulse which is expressed in all the senses, which is developed in long periods of time in a continuous way, but which opens up to new realities. According to him, to be is to transcend. *The impulse towards transcendence is to get rid of inbreeding and tribal ways of life.*

Transcendence achieves its pure and perfect state when it opens up definitively to spiritual values.

When all is said and done, all immanence is alienating and we must leave it by proposing new aims and objectives.

This idea of transcending and of transcendence appears in different ways in contemporary thinking. For instance, Karl Jaspers states that to philosophize is, in fact, an orientation to the world, it is a clarification of existence, it is to transcend. To philosophize is, according to the Swiss thinker and doctor, an act of transcendence.

According to his point of view, transcendence is unfathomable, but all of philosophy is directed towards it. According to him, we cannot answer the question of what transcendence is because we only have an indirect knowledge, and this is given by an incomplete explanation of the world, of human imperfection and of universal failure. In short, transcendence is what completes the things that are incomplete; it is what renders meaning. According to the Christian and well-known philosopher Emmanuel Mounier, transcendence evokes the experience of an infinite movement, or at least, an indefinite movement towards “being more”.

Taking into account what we have said, it seems very difficult to find a common conception of transcendence that is valid for all cases, beyond a general view of transcendence as a “going beyond a certain limit”. This is why, as the Catalan thinker Josep Ferrater Mora remarks, it seems that it is best to specify what it is that we are transcending each time that we use the word *transcendence* or the verb *to transcend*, what are the limits we are trying to be gone beyond and what is the relation that the transcendent has to the immanent.

1.2.1 To transcend the I

To begin with, to transcend is to open up to oneself and to others. This movement is innate to the person because, as a social being, one feels the desire and also the need to interact, to go outside one’s conscious domain and to open up to others. We cannot grow enclosed in our world; we must develop open spaces, to share and to integrate, to transfer emotions, knowledge and sensations, and in short, the flow of vitality.

Transcendence, understood in its first meaning, consists in overcoming the tendency to think about oneself, to calculate one’s own interests, on forgetting about oneself, on knowing how to place oneself at the edge, on reducing the importance of

oneself, on knowing how to be a servant and not the central figure. To discover the value of transcendence is to understand that there is something greater than ourselves, that beyond you and me, beyond us, there are others. In the end, to transcend the “I” means to overcome individualistic and egocentric tendencies of an immature person and to enter deeply into the world of others. It is an act of growth.

1.2.2 To transcend the present

To transcend is also to ask about the future and the past. We are historical beings, coming from a past and desiring a future. We are not always able to face the past and, even less, to look at the future head on; however, to educate a person is also to make him conscious of his historical nature.

The present is the result of a prior history; it is also the platform for building the future. To transcend means to open oneself to future perspectives, to go beyond the here and now and to foretell what it may become. It also means to remember, to look back in order to value what we have done, what the journey has been and to learn the corresponding lessons. This means being responsible, calculating one’s acts and decisions, measuring the pain we can cause to others and to act prudently.

To educate in the meaning of transcendence, understood in this way, is to make the student conscious of his past, of the collective history to which he belongs. And at the same time, it consists in making him aware of the fact that the future is not written, nor is a cosmic fate, but that it depends mainly on him.

1.2.3 To transcend material values

To transcend is to be open to immaterial values. In contexts deeply influenced by materialism and consumerism, we must recover the spiritual values that open a person up to a completely new universe. Values are like the horizon, goals or desires that we never completely reach, but that we can gradually know and love, and have them as road marks in our journey. Thus, values are not acts, but they are what make existence valuable and important, in and of itself.

To transcend material values does not mean to forget the importance of things, objects, the body or money. It means to discover that, beyond this order of things, there is a constellation that we can also cultivate and love. Values such as silence, contemplation, leisure, conversation, taking a walk, meditation are not material values

because they are not a physical object, but they are fundamental to the person's emotional and mental balance.

To educate a person is to open him up to a greater world, it is to help him discover these other values that are not always present in social life, but they are as important as material objects and things in order to live more humanely.

1.2.4. To transcend the limit of death

To transcend is to radically consider the question about the afterlife. It is to ask oneself the following question: What can I expect? What can I hope for? Though it is not politically correct to introduce this question in the framework of educational institutions, any true educational practice cannot avoid this question. It cannot avoid the topic of death. When we introduce the fundamental notion of death, the student is obliged to think, to question himself about the real meaning of life, about what makes life valuable and important.

When the student accepts the irreversible limit of his existence, he cannot but seriously question himself on the meaning of his life. It is to transcend the predictable and comfortable questions. To educate also means to challenge the student, to make him think, to prompt his reflection and later give him the instruments to find appropriate solutions to the problems of the soul.

1.2.5. To transcend passions

We are not against an education of the emotions, on the contrary. We believe that it is fundamental to achieving the proper development of the person and of all his powers; however, there is the need to transcend the passions and this means to go beyond them. The human being has the faculty to dominate his passions, to control them and manage them rationally. He has the capacity to go beyond the desires he feels here and now and to be loyal to the commitments that he has freely taken on.

There is no freedom without self-control. There is no freedom without the capacity to go beyond the immediate desire that comes from the flesh. To transcend the body does not mean to deny it, but rather, it means to control it and to direct it; it means not to be its slave, but the master of everything that occurs in it.

1.2.6. To transcend superficiality

To transcend is to go deeper, to explore the nucleus of things, not to stay in the periphery, on the surface of problems. In the superficial culture in which we presently live, there is a tendency to stay simply on an anecdotal level, not penetrating into the depth of things.

The mass audiovisual culture is a paradigmatic example of how superficiality spreads with staggering speed in every area. Only those who really work to isolate and cultivate their spirit may resist the culture of superficiality. Our mass culture is directly challenged with everything that involves thinking, transcending, going deeper, reflecting.

This is the culture of “*fast think*” and “*fast love*.” Going beyond this generalized tendency, we must emphasize that both the process of thinking and the art of loving need time and in both the act of transcending is necessary: there is the need to go towards those things that have not come to mind at first glance, but that after some consideration, take us from the “I” to the “you.” This is only possible if we transcend the “I” culture.

To transcend superficiality is a requirement for any religious experience. Only the one who goes deeply, experiences the meeting with the You, Infinite God. The oneness with the cosmic “All” also requires transcending superficiality. In the surface “I” there is no possibility for an experience, there is only room for diversion, for seeking a pleasant place and a nice experience for the senses.

1.2.7. To transcend our images of God

To transcend is to go beyond one’s images of God and be aware that God is always beyond our ideas and understanding. In actuality, there is always an infinite distance between human representations of God and God. We can never forget this *great difference*. We must transcend our own representations, and the students must not idolize their images. They must understand that images are paths, itineraries, symbols that evoke something greater that never fits into human concepts.

1.2.8. To transcend is to abandon oneself in God

To transcend is to be conscious of the irrelevance of the finite being and to abandon oneself completely to God. As we can see, this is the deeper religious significance of the

word transcendence. To express it in the language of the Saints, it is to put one in God's hands, to deny oneself and be freely conform to the will of God.

2. To awaken the desire for transcendence

According to our point of view, there are different ways to awaken the meaning of transcendence in the student. Among these different ways we must point out: dialogue, silence, symbol, ritual, contemplation, limit situations, beauty, goodness and unity. We will briefly consider them.

2.1. The dialogue

Dialogue is of itself a transcendent movement and an act of hospitality. By definition, in dialogue there is an opening up to the other, and at the same time, an acceptance of his words and of all the bodily non-verbal elements, as well as the silences. Dialogue is a movement towards the other, a way out of oneself, and at the same time, awakening the transcendent movement towards new realities, towards unknown horizons.

Through dialogue, the speakers share their experiences and in doing so they are mutually enriched. The "other" is an opportunity to journey to unknown worlds, to initiate new experiences, to embark on adventures that we know not how they will end.

2.2. Silence

Interior silence is an optimum condition for transcendence, to go beyond appearances and penetrate into the most intimate structure of the world and of oneself. All the important thinkers and mystics recommend this experience as an introductory path to placing oneself naked before the world, with no masks or protections.

The problem with our liturgy and our ecclesiastic world is that we have emptied it of its meaning; we have placed it in a corner, filling the world, institutions, and churches with noise. Consequently, it is very hard to find a silent space in which to enter the more private dimensions of ourselves. To promote this experience in the student, as strange as it may be, is a great opportunity to arouse within him the movement to transcend, to journey towards what we do not know, what only appears when silence is present in our own life.

In 1965, the theologian Hans Urs von Baltasar published the book, What is a Christian? He reflects on the consequences of the loss of silence in ritual and liturgy: “What do we miss?: the spiritual ambience of silence with which we envelop the mystery. Does not something happen here that is incomprehensible? (...) There is constant noise: when prayers are not recited, or the Scriptures are not read and explained, we have to sing and reply; even the canon is recited and frequently publicly paraphrased through the microphone. We cannot forget that those who assist have no time or opportunity during the week to reflect deeply, that during Sunday’s Mass their spirit must be re-nurtured and they must also regain personal spiritual energy, that God talks to them above all in the silence; that the liturgy Word revolves around God’s Words –as a message or as a prayer-, but that it is received and personally embraced in a silence that is completely essential if we do not want the seed to fall into the rocks and brambles”¹

2.3. The symbol

Using Paul Ricoeur’s expression, we must say that the symbol, in fact, any symbol, offers us something to think about (*le symbole donne à penser*). A symbol is an object which makes reference to a reality which is beyond the object itself, directing us to something which is alluded to in the object, but only suggesting it.

The symbol is in fact, a way to transcend because it expresses something that is beyond the material object. It makes reference to it, never exhausting it. When a man loves a woman and he gives her a flower, the flower becomes a small earthly symbol because it expresses the love that he feels for her, but it is not exhausted, in that love cannot be measured in objects. The rose expresses the link but love is, in itself, inexhaustible.

2.4. Ritual

Ritual has a very prominent place in human life. We are not only referring to religious instances, but also and particularly to social and cultural instances that are periodically repeated in secularized societies.

Religious rituals are not well accepted by our students. They tire of its rhythm and language. They think everything is strange and distant from their world. In a way,

¹ H. URS VON BALTASAR, *What is a Christian?*, Christianity, Madrid 1967, pp. 48-49.

this is true. In spite of the efforts that are made in many ambits to bring them closer to the mentality of young people, to make them attractive and tempting for their aesthetic taste, success is scarce.

But religious ritual, in its slow and deliberate nature and as a non-verbal component, is an opportunity to break the weekly habitual pace of life and to transcend, to go beyond, to establish contact with the mystery, to be touched by it and to momentarily free oneself from the worries of everyday life. To initiate students in religious rituals is also a way of educating them for transcendence. We do not know when, or how, but a day may come when certain words and gestures, silences and music will induce in them an encounter, a question that up now did not have a place.

2.5. Contemplation

The total insertion of the student in a life of overwhelming activity makes it impossible to enjoy the contemplative life. Only the one who is able to view the world attentively may look at something new in himself, can admire what he sees and ask basic questions. Life's accelerated speed and the unhealthy pace of today's world necessarily leads us to a kind of mechanical existence, almost inhuman, where it is impossible to transcend. In order to educate in transcendence, we must educate in the art of contemplation. Only if our students truly admire their world, will they ask questions which will go beyond functionality and practicality.

2.6. Limit Situations

Limit situations are those instances when the human being loses control and dominion in his own life, he experiences something that overwhelms him and which significantly alters his way of life. We are referring to pain, illness, failure, death of a beloved relative, the proximity of death.

Life is not an undisturbed *continuum*; unforeseeable situations take place which produce a real seismic movement within the person's core. In these limit situations, one asks himself what has meaning, what in life is worth living. They are situations in which the person is faced with nothingness or with God.

2.7. Beauty

The experience of beauty is an opportunity to transcend, to go beyond, and to ask oneself about God. When in a mediocre world we experience beauty, we feel a deep

longing for the origin of this experience. Beauty is, in fact, a way to journey towards God.

2.8. Goodness

Goodness, exercised freely and unconditionally, in a discreet way and with no loudspeakers, is an occasion to transcend. In a world ruled by egocentric interests the presence of people who make goodness the centre of their lives is an occasion to transcend, to ask oneself about one's way of life and to ask if it really has meaning. We must introduce the figures of goodness to our students; they must see them and see their own reflection in them. They have to see that, in spite of everything, it is possible to exercise goodness in this world.

1.9. Unity

The experience of unity is an occasion to transcend. It is not easy to live this experience in a world so deeply fragmented, culturally, socially and politically. However, when the student experiences unity, the harmony of everything, he inquires about the cause of this unity, and this leads him to transcend, to look beyond the mere framework of reality.

3. To evoke an encounter with Your Infinite

Faith presupposes an education for transcendence because faith is the invisible bond between God's infinite "You" and the specific "I", historical and determined by the person of flesh and blood. To educate the religious dimension of a person means to prepare this encounter, to give the student all the tools to discover in himself the God who lives in the most intimate and deepest dimensions of his being.

With the eyes of faith, the world is the expression of the mystery of the You Infinite. To seek God in the midst of the world, to intuitively perceive God in daily life, in the total experience of the present moment, is a gift offered to us.

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