

Living Education

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“Was it an angel that touched my cheek?”

Pedagogical aspects of slowness

Aristotelian and Platonic elements within Knowledge of Man

by Arve Mathisen

Translated from Norwegian by Bente Katja Bø.

*A secondary intention of this article is to demonstrate how schools can help integrate thinking into the will of children and adolescents. To begin with, I shall discuss the possibilities offered by a slow, practice-oriented educational method. Then I shall see this in the light of Rudolf Steiner's description of the nature of thinking and willing in *The Study of Man*. Steiner's understanding of thinking and will closely corresponds to ideas by Plato and*

*Aristotle: Plato's thesis, that all learning is recognition, and Aristotle's understanding of the ability to do good deeds as being dependent upon practical wisdom, *phronesis*, relate to themes in *The Study of Man*. By way of conclusion, a short description is given of Steiner's understanding of cosmic evolution, where thinking and will change and create each other respectively. Feelings emanate as messengers from this evolution's deep place of origin.*

Slowness and the joy of learning

After many years of teaching, first eurythmy and then as a class teacher for adolescents, I gradually understood the importance of slowness for the pupils' learning process and general development. My teaching would focus more on depth and concentration, rather than attempt to cover large fields of subject matter. An important pedagogical motto came out of it: *Do as little as possible, but do something all the time, and in each lesson let the pupils learn something new.* This pedagogical experience applied as much to eurythmy as to mathematics and history. The way I saw it, my task as a teacher was to bring subject matter - a rhythmical exercise in the eurythmy class or a geometrical problem to solve in mathematics - in such a way that the pupils could slowly get into all it took to master the theme. Through repetition and a methodical, step-by-step introduction of the subject matter required, a feeling of safety was being created in the pupils while at the same time the will was being challenged.

Such structured teaching based upon repetition may easily become routine, undermining motivation and the wish to learn. It may also become predictable and dull. But when time and

again something new evolves out of the learning process, the pupils become more deeply engaged. The newly-achieved understanding throws a light of interest upon the learning process and adds a meaningful perspective to the teaching as a whole. By knowing that every lesson harbours something new, the pupils will have a growing confidence in you as a teacher. This confidence is based upon a sort of gratitude, always evolving where human beings inspire each other to personal growth.

A piece of music will often begin with some simple methodical motifs. During the performance these motifs are being varied in multiple ways. When the motifs possibly appear once more in their original form at the end of the piece, something has happened. The motif has become both old and new. The joy of recognizing it points back to the initial motif. This is a mild and calm kind of joy. To many it seems as if now there is more to the motif, that everything is different this time over. Through the changing repetitions a foundation is made enabling one to listen to what is familiar in a new way. Thus the joy of discovering something new may come about. This kind of joy is more extrovert and expressive.

When a new ability or insight arises out of working with subject matter one is already familiar with, recognition as well as discovery will create a double joy. New information, out of context and with no reference to your own world of experience, does not usually trigger any feelings. But a piece of news evolving out of your own learning process may create both the mild joy of recognition as well as spontaneous exclamations of great intensity emanating from the joy of discovery.

In a teaching situation, a slow and practice-orientated way of working means that the pupils are being given the possibility to make learning run deep, so that they can experience the peaceful joy of recognition as well as the freshness of discovering something new. In slowness lies the possibility of handling time and one's own will forces in a way that forms both

character and habit. Slowness is a kind of willed contemplation. It leads to security and precision, and ultimately virtuosity in mastering the subject at a later stage. Any musician knows that only through rehearsing difficult passages at a slow pace to begin with will it be possible to play them quickly later on. To learn slowly is like a sleep, a sleep in which the will opens to wells it otherwise has no access to.

The combination of slowness and new information in the process of learning carries exactly those inspiring elements of antipathy into the realm of sympathy described by Rudolf Steiner in *The Study of Man*. Slowness takes care of the ripening while the new elements create movement and unrest. Any piece of news is awakening, it wakes you up. The ability to bring news into teaching depends upon the fantasy forces of the teacher.

“experience of something great !”

I remember an example from the teaching of mathematics to adolescents. The class had been working for a long time with different algebraic formulas, and eventually they mastered the theme fairly well. In the lesson in question the pupils sat working quietly with concentration. Only subdued talking was to be heard while the pupils were busy finding the solution to a demanding question. Class 8 (class 9 in Norway) had just learned some simple mathematical programming for the computer and made their own little programs to calculate mathematical formulas. Thus they based their work on what was already known, yet they were working in a new way: in this case, the class was busy trying to calculate a formula that would pinpoint the date of Easter Sunday in a given year. Suddenly there is a violent outcry from one of the boys in the class. He waves his arms wildly, repeating loudly: ‘No, no, no, how is that possible?!’ The boy skipped ecstatically round the classroom, rejoicing in his discovery. The boundless cosmos and the logical world

of mathematics had touched each other for one split second within this boy. A grand feeling of elevation was awakened.

The teaching process that brought about this moment had only gradually become increasingly elaborate. It arose from some simple mathematical motifs weaving through a variety of repetitions towards a steadily growing complexity, almost like a piece of music. The calculation of the Easter date was the finale. In the course of this slow and practise-orientated learning process the pupils experienced moments of insight time and again. For many of them, the complicated formula for the calculation of Easter Sunday awakened a notion of the grandness of the human mind and the possibilities of mathematics. Having conquered this particular summit, and achieved new abilities and insight, they could now acknowledge the value of what another human being could do, and they could appreciate the subtle consistencies of the world as



it appears through mathematical formulae.

All in all, it may be said that a slowly recuperating way of learning constitutes solid ground in one's will. It instils within the pupils the belief that they can learn on their own and that they can participate actively in their own development. The challenges of what is self-attained appeals to their self-confidence, while at the same time giving them the possibility to realize the grandness of other human beings and the world outside as such. Thus slowness is also connected to a deep and basic form of love for the world and an altruistic self-respect alike.



Experiencing what it is like to discover something new, with one's own work as the point of departure, makes the pupils believe in themselves and their own abilities. The light of discovery is thrown back upon the pupils themselves. That experience inspires further creativity; they feel proud and ready to do more and learn more. The subject is fun in itself, and the joy of discovery is self-experience at the same time.

It recalls the words of the Norwegian poet Henrik Wergeland and his description of the first flight of the eagle: 'Initial flight / most precious is. / Though not so high, / the flight is his. / It may go wrong, / but makes him feel / his eagle nature is but real.'

Plato and Aristotle in 'The Study of Man'

These two motifs, slow repetition and new discovery, may be seen in the light of the second lecture of *The Study of Man*. Steiner describes how thinking stems from time before birth and how will may be understood as a seedling orientated towards existence after death. To Steiner it is important to put forth a methodical conclusion in view of this. As thinking represents the child's individual past, any educational setting must treat thinking with the utmost respect. Education to freedom will consequently mean letting the pupils themselves develop their own thinking. When it comes to the will it is altogether different, Steiner claimed. In the child this is a realm of freedom, a field fit for education to help the child on its individual path of development. A will-orientated teaching process will inspire the child to discover its own thinking through recognition and thereby its own individual character. According to Steiner, a repetitive and practice-orientated method of teaching will connect the child to its own past, helping it further in life's great drama of development.

This idea is strikingly similar to Plato's statement that all learning is remembering. In the dialogue *Meno* Socrates lets a slave himself

discover how a geometrical problem can be solved. By posing the right questions to the slave, Socrates calls forth understanding. Plato concludes that in a similar way all learning is remembering. To him this is one of the evidences of an eternal soul. The same motif is being dealt with in the dialogue *Phaidros* as well. There Plato very vividly describes how the soul's experiences in the spiritual world prepare the ground for a loving understanding and recognition in life on earth. Here Plato relates the ability to understand to the ability to love, thereby setting forth one of the first arguments in the history of philosophy against distanced and non-committed science. To Plato the ability to love conveys a message that relates to experiences made in an existence before birth.

Plato's disciple Aristotle, on the other hand, was not interested in explaining learning in terms of pre-birth existence. His philosophy points ahead, emerging from the sense experiences of a human being and the ability to acknowledge something there and then. For Aristotle, the future predominates. An important characteristic of his thinking is the concept *potentiality*. This means that a human being harbours possibilities and capabilities which shall only appear at a later

stage. To be more precise, *actuality* comes before *potentiality*. This may be compared to a statement in Book Three of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where Aristotle says that a human being gives birth to her deeds in the same way as she gives birth to her children. The consequence of an action then is that something lives on. A potential has been made which is irreversibly connected to the one responsible for the deed. From this point of view any action will result in a new individualized potential. This idea is surprisingly similar to Steiner's statement that the quality of will is seed-like. More generally, the seedling or the seed are images for potentiality used by Aristotle. In the fourth lecture of *The Study of Man* Steiner describes how will appears in a preparatory way on all stages of human nature. According to Steiner the will is actual to the full only after death.



Within the Waldorf school one of the most important aspects of education is slowly incorporating the will into the realm of thinking. This is an ethical challenge. How can we understand this cooperation of will and thinking? As far as I understand, Aristotle's concept of a practical, active knowledge is an important contribution to our comprehension of this challenge.

Ethical Philosophy Aristotle

In his ethical philosophy, Aristotle is occupied with how good deeds come about. A basic principle is that every deed will influence the constitution and character of the human being. By acting virtuously the human being will be able to do good deeds. The ability to do good is a virtue which partly may be learned through education and through demonstrating standards worthy of imitation. But a fully developed capacity for good deeds also presupposes that the deed is penetrated with thinking activity. The good deed must arise from truthful insight, but equally decisive is the constitutional ground of the human being.¹ To Aristotle, good deeds cannot be derived exclusively from scientific thinking, *episteme*, as Plato thought. Therefore Aristotle describes the necessity of an ability to obtain insight by focusing upon the concrete and changing reality where human actions unfold. This action-orientated knowledge Aristotle calls *phronesis*.

In Book Six of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle in detail describes how *phronesis* is connected to the ability to do good deeds. *Phronesis* diverges from pure theoretical knowledge by being incorporated in the deed as such. Similar to how Steiner describes the different aspects of the will in the fourth lecture of *The Study of Man*,

Aristotle describes *phronesis* as pluralistic and complex. *Phronesis* is connected to man's elemental faculties, it is embedded within sense experiences, habits, character, in the ability to discuss and converse and use clear thinking. *Phronesis* is not one or the other of these elements, but just this encompassing consonance of all human capacities when focused upon good deeds. For Aristotle *phronesis* is also related to how the human being is living within a community, in the family, among friends and in the state. *Phronesis* is active knowledge combining all inner capabilities with the challenges of living in a society. Thus *phronesis* may also be regarded as courage for truth.

Phronesis' relationship to time is not linear. It slowly develops and its coming about is not straightforward but rather complex. Even so, *phronesis* can set to work spontaneously and intuitively in the actual situation. What is slow prepares the ground for something new. In many ways Aristotle's visualization of *phronesis* is similar to Steiner's description of will in human life. Both Steiner and Aristotle have a concern in how will illuminated by thinking will create a potential in the human being doing the deed. Pure will does not interest any of them, but intentional will does. Like a personal signature

deeds imprint themselves on the world, while at the same time creating an inner potential in man himself. According to Aristotle the consequence of this is that only at the end of life a fully developed *phronesis* is possible. Aristotle does not want, or cannot go, further than that, but according to Steiner the ability to act is connected with the metamorphosis of the will which might take place after death, only connected on a deeper level.



Cosmic transformation

Like Plato, who sees knowledge achieved through thinking to be founded in a spiritual pre-existential dimension, Steiner relates the reality of the will to a spiritual existence after death. In a larger evolutionary perspective, including karma and reincarnation, Steiner gives the deeds of a human being renewed importance after death. Islam describes how the archangel Michael is posted in front of the gates of Heaven, demanding that all newcomers show their hands and feet. To Michael, the judge of souls, the deeds will decide what each and every one have done in their lives. Deeds done are like a point of departure for the existence beyond death. In anthroposophy Steiner correspondingly describes how the will constitutes the basis of the further development of a human being, seen in a spiritual perspective.

According to Steiner a working through of the consequences of the deeds occur after death. Thus a kind of cosmic learning takes place which in the following incarnation will appear as an individualized predisposition to knowledge on the one hand and as karma on the other. In accordance with Steiner's descriptions the transformed will comes towards a human being in two ways in a following life. From within it appears as certain capacities for thinking, remembering, and conceptualizing. From the periphery comes the second motif of the transformed will, dressed as karmic interlacing and happenings. In his book *Theosophy* Steiner describes how a human being can incorporate in his spiritual self everything which is good, beautiful and true. All other experiences will then, in accordance with anthroposophy, have to be transformed by higher spiritual beings into

karma, the life situation a human being is being born into.

Many people have wondered whether anthroposophy thereby advocates that human beings with a bad fate get what they deserve. Such a conclusion though cannot be drawn in view of Steiner's understanding of karma. In the first place Steiner's view is that karma to a certain extent is in a state of disorder, and that life generally is open to coincidences and incidents without any individual precedent. A fatal blow striking somebody may originate from the situation of all mankind, to mention but one example. Secondly, karma cannot in principle be judged from outside. A human being can only himself be the judge of whether a painful experience is of a positive nature to him and his fate. As soon as something like that is said from the outside, one is moralising on a superficial level with little or no understanding for spiritual contexts.

With this important reservation in mind the ideas from the second chapter of *The Study of Man* may be summarised thus: thinking and will are comprised within a greater human drama of evolution including life itself as well as existence before birth and after death. The transformation of the experiences of the will into impulses in the next life may consequently be understood as a deeply spiritual motif of evolution. According to Steiner, it is within this transformation that hierarchical beings will work educatively into human lives. When school education picks up the same theme it will continue this work, but the direction is different. Now it is not a matter of transforming the accomplished will qualities, rather the newly

born pure will is to be made ready for thinking to enter. In the realm of the will Steiner agreed with John Locke that here the little child is a *tabula rasa*. By letting the child himself discover the laws of the world, the school is taking part in preparing the ground for an education to freedom and a responsible life. The self-produced thinking activity is what can bring meaning into the life of a human being. When this thinking is combined with the will's world of possibilities, education can create the basis for good and



meaningful actions. Full circle has come. The task of cosmos after death is transforming the will into the ability to understand. Life's task on earth is letting this knowledge penetrate and transform the will. This interrelation between will and thinking also contains an integration of Plato's and Aristotle's thinking. Such a grand understanding of education may awaken a feeling for inner responsibility in the teacher, Steiner claims.

Between will and thinking feeling

Between will and thinking, feeling lives and works. To Steiner feeling is embedded in both; it carries characteristics of both will and thinking. It is the transmitter creating life and meaning. When a pupil recognizes the truth of something by way of thinking activity, feeling appears. When thinking illuminates the will, it fires the enthusiasm. Regarded in this way feeling may be seen as a possible evidence of experiences being the origin of understanding. Feeling is the messenger from the deep and secret transformation of the will.

When the will is awakened slowly through thinking activity, what is pre-earthly in the human being will incarnate into an active life on earth; furthermore, the actions become meaningful. Signs of this incarnation process are the child's moments of joyful recognition and discovery. When the teacher has the courage to let the teaching be slow, and to give room for plenty of exercise in a tempo where the pupils themselves can be creative and go ahead with an understanding on an inner

level, feelings emerge that proclaim something great is about to happen. Joyful recognition points to the past and the wise laws of life. The joy of discovering something connects the child with its own life and future tasks. The teacher can also experience joy in relation to the child's learning development. Such feelings may in this respect be evidence of a whispered message: 'Was it an angel that touched my cheek, or was it just a breath of wind?'



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