

## Chapter I

# BETWEEN THE CLASSICAL AND POST-MODERN: MILESTONES AND CENTRAL APPROACHES IN HUMANISTIC EDUCATION

*To you is granted the power of degrading yourself into the lower forms of life, the beasts, and to you is granted the power, contained in your intellect and judgment to be reborn into the higher forms, the divine.*

Pico Della Mirandola

*Every individual man carries in disposition and determination a pure ideal man within himself, with whose unalterable unity it is the great task of his existence, throughout all his vicissitudes, to harmonize.*

Schiller

*In man creature and creator are united.*

Nietzsche

## 1. THE INITIAL QUESTION: HOW TO BE A HUMAN BEING

Like a shark that is born a shark and a dolphin born a dolphin, human beings are born human beings. But unlike the shark whose life embodies its shark-like nature and the dolphin whose life manifests its dolphin-like nature (and it appears that this is true of all other animals), human beings live wondering about their nature, seeking in vain to characterize and define it, and do not know (in the words of Ecclesiastes) “what was that good for the sons of men, which they should do under the heaven all the days of their lives.” In other words, from the time humans are capable of thinking, they are aware of their own reality and life in the world next to other creatures: but how to live their lives, what content and meaning to give it, and what character or ethos they will adopt in their relationships with their natural and human environment – these are no longer facts, but weighty and challenging questions that compel the individual, day in, day out, to choose and decide.

The attempt to follow the developmental process of human individuals reveals that they are also natural beings, whose development and formation

the biological level, for example, the genetic heredity with which a person is born (and as of now, also dies) plays a most significant role in defining the individual's character. To a great extent the genes in our body's cells determine our physical appearance, mental potential, temperament, life expectancy and talents for various human occupations. Moreover, numerous physical attributes have a far-reaching effect on the directions our lives take, our social status and self-image. Many opportunities for promotion and success are open to the "the bold and the beautiful" and remain inaccessible to the majority. This is also true of those who have outstanding talents for sports, music or scholastic studies. Another example is the implications that a person's skin color or gender has on his or her life. It is indubitable that until recently, the fact that people were born dark skinned doomed them, in many parts of the world, to a life of bondage to the white man; the very fact that a person was born female – a woman – made her part of her husband's – a man's – property, and deprived her of the right to fully develop and realize her human skills.

As to the rules governing the development and activity of the psyche, we can also deal on the psychological level with the causal relationships that act in forming human character and behavior. As early as the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E., Aristotle maintained that the way in which we are formed in early childhood has a cardinal effect on our character as adults; Jean Jacques Rousseau redeveloped this understanding in the early days of the New Era. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this notion was substantiated and broadened in the theoretical frameworks of Freud (with a psycho-sexual emphasis), Erikson (with a psycho-social emphasis), Piaget (with a cognitive emphasis), and others. A great deal of evidence regarding this insight on causal relationships in the psychological sphere is demonstrated in ordinary life and does not necessarily require scientific formulation. As a rule, human beings' thinking, modes of expression, artistic sensitivity and characteristics stem to a great extent from the relations and interactions they have within the family and in the social surroundings; and in extreme cases, we know that events such as sexual abuse or exploitation, loss of a dear one, or traumatic encounters with animals have long-term implications on the individual's life and often leave a deep mark on his or her personality.

Man is also a social creature and reflects his environment. Like a sapling that grows and develops within the factuality of the surrounding earth and climate, so humans breathe and absorb the landscapes of their culture: their mother tongue, the religious beliefs prevalent in their culture, their ethnic and national singularity and perception of human purpose. When they are very young, human beings do not realize their individual freedom or make rational and critical decisions regarding cultural and social alternatives. During their socialization process, children internalize the culture's values

and customs and rapidly become an integral part of it – a product that represents a well-defined and differentiated social culture. Moreover, the social sciences put predictive (at a fairly high level of probability) tools at our disposal for ascertaining the worldview, occupation and social status of a specific person during his or her adult life. This is based on the cultural and socio-economic characteristics of the individual while he or she was young (for example, in the case of a group of infants from the communist and atheistic community of the Israeli kibbutzim in comparison with infants from community of the ultra-orthodox Jews of Jerusalem; or black children from New York's Harlem ghetto in comparison with their white counterparts who live ten blocks south on Fifth Avenue).

To these three perspectives – biological, psychological and sociological – we could add various conceptions claiming the existence of a set of rules that dominate human life and affect their content and direction: from divine plans and personal destiny, through materialistic, historical or socio-biological determinism. Yet there is nothing in any of them that can invalidate or desensitize our most basic human experience regarding freedom and responsibility for our character and our relationships with our environment. Whether we prefer the religious description, “everything is foreseen, yet freedom of choice is given,”<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche's philosophical description that “in man *creature* and *creator* are united,”<sup>2</sup> or a biological description, which claims that man has a very flexible nature and “relatively very few innate or inborn patterns of behavior”<sup>3</sup> – we will arrive at the same conclusion that human beings are to a great extent free vis-à-vis the reality of their lives, and through their self-awareness are capable of perceiving themselves as their very own project. We care a great deal about how we and our actions appear; in many and varied moments in our lives we examine and evaluate our personal character or social order through intellectual mirrors (truth and falsehood, correct or erroneous), moral mirrors (good and evil, just or unjust) and esthetical mirrors (beautiful and ugly, refined or coarse) – and are often totally dissatisfied with what we see. At times (particularly during adolescence) we defy our parents and say that we are tired of being what they planned us to be, and from now on we are on our own and only we will decide on our way. At times, we point an accusing finger at society's wrongs and demand that they be rectified; at times, we change our religious belief, become pious or turn our backs on religion; and often, we modify our positions and pave new ways for ourselves.

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<sup>1</sup> *Ethics of the Fathers*, 3:19.

<sup>2</sup> *Beyond Good and Evil*, sec. 225.

<sup>3</sup> Neumann, *The preeminence of Man*, p. 46.



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