

JUSTICE IN EDUCATION

Focus on the Student

VINCENT HUNT

IN ALBERT CAMUS' novel, *The Outsider*, Meursault, the title character, goes to the vigil and funeral of his mother in a rest-home. But while physically present he is totally detached from and indifferent to the occasion. Then we find that while all the formalities of such an event are well observed under the director of the rest-home, it remains the obsequies of a rest-home resident; there is no indication that it is specifically the funeral of Meursault's mother. She has in effect been ignored. Camus' great principle is that nothing makes a difference, and he illustrates how our social forms often suffer from a depersonalised emptiness as in the case of the funeral, in support of this principle.

This seems to me to have an important bearing on at least one form of justice and through this, on religious education.

Justice can be seen in a number of ways. It can, for instance, be seen as the equitable distribution of benefits and burdens among the members of a particular society. But there is another question that is more basic than this and deserves prior attention. For one can focus on the individual human being as such, and ask how justice can and should be done to the unique human person. Mere distribution does not adequately deal with this issue.

Granted that we can speak of justice being done to the dead, we can say that the Director of Camus' rest-home was irreproachable in going through the procedure appropriate for a resident of the rest-home, but showed no regard for the particular woman whose obsequies were being celebrated. The due recognition of the unique person is a basic demand of justice, and this is of crucial importance in education.

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The Two Dimensions

There are two dimensions of the human being and of human life. These can and should be distinguished but cannot be separated; they combine and interact in a pervasive way in our lives. The first is that which is shared with all other human beings; this has its basis in reason and in the fruits of reason; for reason is the guiding, integrating factor which we have in common and which makes common life possible. The factors produced by reason, or which are dependent on it, include organisation and system, law and order, security, skills of all kinds, competition and career, justice understood as the equitable distribution of burdens and benefits, the massive achievement of science and technology, and our world-wide economic system. And we look to it for ever-increasing control over our environment and over our lives. Because it may seem to embrace everything that is important or interesting in life, it will be important to show that this is not so, in the interests of education. For the method and content of the prevailing system of education at the secondary level support this impression.

There is another dimension which involves the human person at a deeper level and makes a still bigger difference to our lives. This is the distinctively personal sphere based on knowledge of self and of others as persons. Since awareness of self is activated and mediated through dealings with others, a person's existence is closely bound up with that of other people. Personal life and social life are inextricably intertwined. This dimension of the personal has to do with self-possession, self-commitment and self-giving. Inherent in it is an existential concern with origin and with destiny; with origin, because this holds the key to a person's identity; with destiny as the goal

of existence.

I shall contend that a priority must be accorded to the personal dimension, since this is the dimension at which human dignity is centrally at stake; it is the dimension in which one is aware of self, enters into relationships and makes decisions. I hope to show briefly how the shared dimension gained undue strength, but also to show that the tide is turning, so that we can lend support to an active movement which is already correcting the bias in favour of the former. Reason has been lauded as the universally recognised justification for our judgments and basis for our actions. It is this claim that is under discussion. For reason is beyond its depth in the sphere of the distinctively personal.

The Greek Contribution

As is well known, we are indebted to the classical Greeks for the ability to think in a systematic way, to make reason our general guide in life. For our purpose, and without prejudice to the complexity of the topic, we can say that reason consists in relating together concepts so as to reach a reliable conclusion or outcome. A consequence of accepting conceptual reason as our only guide—it is this that is the problem—is that it treats a particular thing or person as a member of a type and not as this particular in its own right. (Here I am dealing with what comes within our human range without appeal to Divine Revelation.) It is not surprising that what, over the centuries, has promised so wide a range of knowledge and such control over our lives and environment, should enthral peoples' minds. The above is the version of reason that has dominated in the West in both Church and civil society. It has to be remembered that the classical Greek philosophers knew nothing of the concept of person or of the difficulties it presents for their method, and though St. Thomas gave his mind to the topic his contribution had little subsequent influence. A good indication of how tenacious the tradition has been can be gathered



Vincent Hunt is a priest of the Auckland diocese. After a period in parish ministry he spent a longer time in seminary work, teaching philosophy and moral theology. At present he enjoys the privileges of the elderly with other elderly priests.

from a short quotation from the early Karl Rahner, who saw himself as faithful to St. Thomas. 'We can,' he says, 'comprehend a particular thing by bringing it under a concept.'¹ And he proceeds to contrast this grasp with seeing particulars 'in their unrelated, dead 'thisness''² The reference to 'dead thisness' makes clear that it is regarded as below the level of knowledge.

The other contribution of the Greeks which I should like to mention briefly is a key one of Plato. Plato, in sketching the form of the ideal republic, sees intelligence as the key to its governance. He places the rule in the hands of the supremely-intelligent philosopher-king, who sits, as it were, atop the social pyramid and directs the whole life and functioning of the society. The ruler assigns each person a role and form of work in keeping with their ability. He insists on each one minding exclusively his, or her, own business. Again, Plato did not have the concept of person. For him the individual is identified with the function. He is clear that the citizen serves the state, not the other way about. That the person might be greater than the role that he or she fills, or indeed any role, is not considered. And there is no room for dialogue. A weakness of the philosopher-ruler is that he is a social isolate, he has no one with whom to converse; he is beyond dialogue, and, like his subjects, is imprisoned in his own world. The whole modern emphasis on communication is foreign to Plato. A little over two thousand years later we find Adam Smith making his great 'discovery', thus founding modern economics. He

held that if people looked after their own interests exclusively, the welfare of all would be better served. For Smith, those who engage in altruism and take an interest in their neighbour do more harm than good. If we see Smith's mechanism as replacing the intelligence of the philosopher-king there is a remarkable similarity between Smith's system and that of Plato. In both there is a basic individualism and a restricted recognition of human relatedness and conscious cooperation.

Levinas and the Epiphany of the Face

The strongest challenge to these and to Rahner, and indeed to the whole tradition, comes from a Lithuanian Jewish scholar,³ Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas distinguishes between the spontaneous approach and the authentic approach to social reality. He would see Plato and Smith as representing the spontaneous approach; they are guilty of social imperialism at the intellectual level, on a par with the *Pax Romana* at the political level imposed by the Roman emperor; in doing this they misrepresent human reality. For Levinas on the other hand we enter the world of reality when we take seriously the other and enter into a respectful relationship with them. An authentic relationship with the other grows out of contemplation of the other's face where the person is manifested beyond any outside control, shines through and expresses self. The face overflows all concepts and mental schemes. Through it the moral call comes to us. Far from thinking of ourselves as monarchs of all we survey, we are to enter into respectful dialogue with the other, engage in a shared life in a shared world. Levinas contrasts this approach with the 'I think the world' approach of philosopher after philosopher in the West. The primary demand inscribed on the face of the other is for hospitality in the wider sense of the word, for neediness as well as dignity is to be found there. The priority accorded to the guest in our contemporary world is an indication that the spirit of hospitality is not quite

dead.

It may be true that in our present existence we shall remain far from implementing fully the vision of Levinas, that it is much too early to dispense with the carrot and the stick. Yet it opens up an horizon which we cannot ignore, especially in the communion of the Church. That communion arises from our oneness in Christ; it calls for the mutual respect, interest in one another's welfare, shared responsibility and is implemented by dialogue.

The Distinctively Personal

A man to whom it was suggested that he join Alcoholics Anonymous replied, 'I may be an alcoholic, but I am not anonymous'. He was not being disparaging towards that fine organisation, but was affirming the tight bond between his personal name and his dignity. For the Christian, the personal name is given in Baptism to mark the person's Christian-human identity, particularly within the communion of the Church. To use the Christian name is to acknowledge that identity, to show respect for it, and to encourage its development; it is the most direct and obvious way of doing this. The historical fact is that the use of personal names of any kind has been very restricted up to our own time; until recently, it was confined mainly to family situations. This shows the limited appreciation of the Christian name in the Church. Indeed, in some Catholic colleges, staff members were forbidden to address students by their Christian names, an extraordinary anomaly in the name of Christian education. However, there has been a significant development in civil society and in the Church in regard to personal names in recent decades. They are now commonplace in business and education and in professional relationships. Their use represents a triumph for personal dignity; it means that the person does not get lost in the role.

A comparable development has taken place within the Church where the understanding of conscience is concerned. Conscience is the

innate guide we must trust in all our moral decisions. It derives from the person's deepest sense of identity and indicates the way of truth and love that is to be followed by the person in the particular situation. So it not only relates exclusively to the particular person, but relates the person to a unique concrete situation. The Catholic tradition has insisted on the special role of reason in our decision-making; it is essential for objectivity in an area which is especially open to subjective influences. However this has often resulted in a depersonalisation of conscience through a one-sided appeal to general principles. For instance, the text-book on ethics used in our national seminary in the 1970's assured the reader that a judgment of conscience is on a par with the conclusion of a syllogism, the only difference being that the judgment of conscience prescribes something to be done⁴. The whole personal dimension is ignored; there is nothing as impersonal as a syllogism and nothing so closely related to the person as conscience. That a person must often struggle to overcome personal bias and to discern the way in difficult situations is not recognised. Further, the simple clarity of a syllogism leaves little room for an appeal of conscience against the undue pretensions of authority.

Vatican II gives a very different account of conscience. There the conscience is a function of the heart where the person is alone with God. The heart is, of course, the centre of the person in Sacred Scripture. The law which guides the heart is the law of love, which draws us to God and to others in all the situations of life. Love is more subtle and more challenging than any principle in the traditional sense.

This has a direct bearing on education in the faith. Firstly, there is a problem in making education in the faith part of the standard curriculum. This reduces the sense of Church as the environment in which education in the faith necessarily takes place. It is uncongenial for the sense of faith and reverence which the subject matter demands; for these reasons it increases significantly the challenge to the

teacher. Religious education engages the conscience of the student. Conscience is a function of the heart, an exercise of the whole integrated person. What reaches the conscience of the student must come from the same level in the teacher. There will be, indeed, a use of reason, but of reason conscious of its limitations. The atmosphere generated by the teacher and the style of teaching will be of quite crucial importance. Of its nature the teaching is Christian witness. Since conscience is guided by the student's sense of identity, this will be in play the whole of the process. The old question, 'What must teacher know in order to teach Johnny French?' is very much to the point. The teacher must know the student. The heart-to-heart level is the strictly interpersonal one and the one that is normal in the communion of the Church.

The parable of the Good Samaritan throws further light on this. Jesus tells the parable in response to the lawyer's question, 'Who is my neighbour?' This aims at distinguishing those who are neighbours from those who are not. It remains at the theoretical level. But this is not the question that Jesus was concerned with and puts to the lawyer. That question asked who proved himself to be a neighbour in the concrete situation. It was obviously the Samaritan. Jesus tells the lawyer to go and do likewise. Jesus puts before him a concrete instance which serves as a concrete universal to be followed. The good deed of one person becomes a guide and inspiration for others in dealing with a particular type of situation. But because it emerges from a person and not merely from a mind, and is of significance for that person, it has his emotional stamp on it. The emotional element is both inevitable and necessary; it would be out of place in a purely rational education. The Samaritan's pity led him to care for the injured man. This positive role of emotion contrasts with the generally negative attitude to it in writing on moral theology and spirituality in the past when the emphasis was on the way in which it could cloud reason.

As well, the parable can function as a con-

crete universal only with the use of imagination, another faculty which has received less than its due in our tradition. When Jesus told the lawyer to do likewise, he did not intend that he should stand on the road from Jericho to Jerusalem, waiting for people to be beaten up. Each person spends each day travelling along the highway of life; the use of metaphors is essential to present the matter. The parable calls us to notice and attend to those who are maltreated along the road in a vast variety of ways. The more agile the person's imagination, the more of such people will come to their attention; an active imagination is part of the disposition of the would-be Good Samaritan. Again, reason as usually understood is transcended. The general principles of natural law are important; they outline aspects of human conduct important to preserve. But in themselves they do not dispose people to follow them, or to see beyond the fixed range which they indicate. Here we have another limitation of the pure reasoning approach.

One outcome of what has been said is that the individual person as such is the subject of education and it is the individual who is the focus of attention even when it is not only necessary but desirable to work with groups. This becomes very clear when one remembers the importance of memory in a person's life. It is memory that holds an individual's experience together, and enables a person to discern and follow key threads in life. Only through it can a sense of personal identity be achieved or maintained. Every move in education is a move in the development of that sense; it is being constantly appealed to and challenged in religious education. It is essential that both teacher and student have a shared awareness of how it has developed and where it is directed, and of the relevance of what they are engaged in together.

Only the most unorthodox scientist would venture to suggest that our physical world will be governed by different laws in the future from those by which it has been governed in the past. Some of those laws may need to be discovered or refined, but the general principle remains. So when the alert young students in our culture wonder why unusual phenomena present themselves, they know that it is a question of finding the relevant causes at work. When these are found the wonder disappears. This wonder is a very valid preliminary to progress in science. But there is another form of wonder that is essential for the reception of Christian revelation. It is wonder sparked by the sheer existence of the world, and more striking still, by one's own existence. The sheer fact that we appear on the scene at a particular time and place and shall depart from here in due time, together with our direct experience of the human situation, opens us to the doctrines of Creation and Redemption. It is very important that this second kind of wonder grows in the student's mind, and with it a sense of the mystery that surrounds our existence. It can grow alongside the other form of wonder, but must not be overwhelmed by it. Again we are distinguishing what remains within the sphere of reason from what leads us beyond that.

Conclusion

Finally, we may note how the parable of the prodigal relates to our topic. The older son sees an ethics of obedience as the only relevant one, an ethics that not only permits but invites comparisons. In accordance with this he refuses to take part in the welcoming celebration. But the love of the father for the younger son leaves far behind all rational estimation and all comparison. The father expected the older son to understand this.

NOTES

1. *Hearers of the Word*, translated by Ronald Walls; London: Sheed and Ward, 1959, p.59
2. *Ibid.*
3. Emmanuel Levinas, 1906-1995: Born in Kaunas,

- Lithuania; a phenomenologist and Talmudic scholar, his academic career was spent in France.
4. *Right and Reason*, by Austin Fagothey S.J. St. Louis: C. V. Mosby Co. 1966, p.41