

# Educating Oneself and Others for Freedom

The duty of a good educator consists in developing pupils' reasoning capacity and making them aware that, although they are free, they are individually responsible for their actions.



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**I**n continuity with the previous reflection on the need for justice and on its intrinsic requirements,<sup>1</sup> I would now like to spend some time on another sensitive topic of perennial interest: *freedom*.

## The setting

The intimate connection between these two pillars on which our life (the only one that has been granted to each of us and which is always a work in progress) rests, and from which our earthly pilgrimage – never forgetting our status as mere guests – receives momentum, will probably not be obvious, at first glance, to most people. On closer analysis, however, we see that justice and freedom are values (goods or ideals?) that are intimately connected. In one sense, they are part of that cluster of concepts comparable to a deep well in front of which one may stop to stare at the reflections on the surface of the water, or decide to lower oneself into it in order to see what is really down at the bottom.

I wish, here, to remain at the surface – not to be superficial, of course – with the awareness that by exploring some very basic truths we may realize that there is much to learn and that we ought to deepen our knowledge about justice, freedom, and

above all the manner in which each one of us translates these concepts into our daily existence. I wish, therefore, to whet your curiosity and I urge you to immerse yourselves in these realities that are so meaningful for each one of us.

I want to begin by recalling the Italian television series *One Teacher*, freely adapted to an Italian setting from a novel published in 2018 by H. Lozano, *Cuando fuimos los peripatéticos. La novela di Merli*. In twelve chapters – each with the title of a philosopher – the novel tells about the vicissitudes of a *sui generis* philosophy teacher in the third year of a Scientific Lyceum in Rome. Thanks to his teaching method, he arouses the interest of his pupils with whom he generously shares the issues typical to their age group. He tries to give special attention to the most problematic students, not wanting any of them to feel abandoned in their troubles which, at that age, are easily experienced as insoluble dramas or as having “final solutions”.

We witness in the story a growing reciprocal bond between them which is based on the pupils' respect and esteem towards the teacher who, notwithstanding his very unconventional and questionable way of relating to them, always properly fulfils

his role as an educator. He even intervenes when necessary in order to correct them – whether believers in the slogan “it is forbidden to forbid” may like it or not – but without ever condemning them or making them feel condemned. Rather, he tries to help them examine and evaluate their own conduct, convinced that “discrimination, arrogance and ignorance” should not exist at school, and that there is no room for an idea of freedom which in fact is none other than the law of the strongest, who succeed in imposing themselves and dominating others in the many ways with which we are familiar.

## Jean-Jacques Rousseau: *freedom and rules*

After a some “mischief” on the part of his pupils, who had secretly organized a nocturnal party in the school, during which one of them nearly died from an overdose of alcohol and drugs, the teacher decides to hold the class at the Colosseum. As they enter the Flavian Amphitheatre, some of the students ask why he has brought them to such a famous place for a routine lesson. The teacher's answer is startling for anyone who is convinced that Christianity is synonymous with ‘repression’: “Because this is the place where



**The Roman Colosseum is an eloquent symbol of true freedom, for there Christians gave their lives in order to be free to love God**

The Colosseum, Rome

innocent people were tortured, and it is here that Christians paid with their lives the price of their liberty!<sup>2</sup> In fact, I have brought you here in order to talk about justice and injustice, but above all about the abuse of freedom and its consequences in the light of what happened at the party. I shall do so by recalling the thought of a philosopher of whom I am very fond, Rousseau. He says that all human beings taken individually are free, but that they must respect the rules. Now I ask: is it possible to be free when there are rules that must be observed? This is the question I put to you in the light of the foolish escapade that took place. Do you consider what you did to be true freedom?"

At this point, the pupils say that this was what they thought at first, but not now, in view of the mess they created and the consequences that they will all be forced to face. Then, the professor reminds them that, based on their reaction, they are all agreed that what they had done was not an act of true freedom, and he insists on wanting to know why it wasn't. Speaking on

behalf of the whole class, especially Giulio (the boy who almost died), one girl gives a significant answer: "Because it didn't do us any good!"

Again, the professor reminds them that according to Rousseau, what they did made them appear as people unable to live peaceably with others because they lack all awareness of the consequences of their actions and are, thus, totally irresponsible. Shocked and soundly humiliated by a correction which had no other aim than that of forcing them to face their mistake, the pupils ask the teacher to help them make amends for the damage they have caused. He then answers: "Young people, freedom does not mean 'doing one stupid thing after another' without a care as to the consequences of what we do to ourselves and to other people. Real freedom consists in self-determination, which is the ability to correct oneself. I cannot give you ready-made answers; you must look for them inside yourselves; you must use your heads and look deeply into your hearts. And only there will you find true freedom."

What we have, in the end, is an invitation to act with an informed conscience, with everything that this implies,<sup>3</sup> something very different from acting on mere instincts, momentary feelings or sentimentalism.

### *A lesson for everybody*

I think that we all can learn something from this, basing ourselves on the few simple remarks of this unusual professor. What can we pick up even remaining at water level from the above story about justice and freedom? Notwithstanding the frequency with which, especially these days, judgements are confused and values are distorted, it seems to me that it is still possible to identify some common-sense truths. I will try simply to indicate them for the sole purpose mentioned above, of whetting a certain legitimate curiosity, which in this case St. Thomas Aquinas would more precisely call *studiositas*.<sup>4</sup>

The first truth is the need for good sound educators on all levels, starting with parents, who understand clearly their tasks or roles and who are able



to act as true guides, and not merely spectators (camouflaging themselves as “friends”) offering the lame excuse that each person must “create himself or herself”. There is a grain of truth in this excuse or assertion, but it is so only after the person has been educated to this end. Let us remember the etymology of the term itself: *educere* which means “to draw out from” or “raise up”. To educate means, then, to assist someone in bringing out the best of what is already potentially inside, not by force of inertia or by magic, but by daily effort, which owes much to those who are close to us to help us mature, especially during childhood and adolescence.

The task of an educator is then, essentially, to stimulate, or “to impose upon”, if possible by good example, which does not mean pretending to be without faults, but simply being honest and not fearing to show one’s limits or contradictions; helping the other person to understand that the goodness or rightness of what is being taught is often distinct from the personal goodness or rightness of the one who is doing the teaching. For example, respect for private property is a value that cannot be doubted even if the person presenting it is a thief; it is an immutable truth no matter who proposes it!<sup>5</sup> Every educator has the task – which defines and gives meaning to the work at hand – to encourage the reasoning ability of those receiving formation, to make them aware that in the end each choice ought to be something well thought-out rather than the result of instinctive reactions, for it always comes with conse-

quences for oneself and for others. This leaves no room for the “unthinkingness” for which the teacher often reproached his pupils. This is genuine authority which has no need to be imposed, but which imposes itself because it is perceived for that which it really is, and its rationale is obvious: to cause the person to grow (*auctoritas*, from *augere*, to make grow).

The second truth about freedom, considered in itself and in its intrinsic relationship with justice, concerns us all and for our entire lives. Each one of us must remember that education for freedom is a daily duty in the sense that good and evil exist and we are called constantly to choose one or the other (Dt 30:15; Am 5:14-15), that there is always the danger of making a mistake regarding them (Is 5:20) and that for this reason we must understand clearly in what they consist (Lk 6:9 “Then Jesus said to them: I ask you; is it licit on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, save a life or lose one?”); and, notwithstanding all this, experiencing what St. Paul constantly experienced: “When I want to do right, evil lies close at hand” (Rm 7:21) and

doing the latter despite all one’s best intentions. In fact, freedom does not mean always doing what one feels like doing under the guise of consistency.

True freedom does not consist in mere free will, in the possibility of simply choosing between various alternatives, but above all in choosing the true good in the light of which it becomes reasonable and even necessary to refuse that which is the contrary (see Gal 5:1; 1 Pt 2:16). Therefore, true freedom is freedom for the good and freedom from all that which is not good. We thus discover that in reality we can only be really free – as our professor reminded his pupils, citing Rousseau (who was himself extremely inconsistent by abandoning his own children, in violation of all the rules!) – when we observe the rules which are necessary for reaching our full human maturity and not mere extrinsic impositions.<sup>6</sup>

Some examples from daily life might help us to better understand that there is no freedom without rules. Let us consider someone who wants to drive a car or who wants to be a sea diver. The former knows quite well that he must have gas in the car in order to drive it; the latter who loves to explore the deep sea knows that he must eventually come up for air if he wants to continue swimming in its depths. Both of them will surely not consider putting gas in the car and coming back up for air as restrictions on their freedom. They remain free to travel by car or on bicycle, to go under water or to stay on the beach in the sun; however, I believe and



**Whoever wants to explore the depths of the sea must observe the guidelines of diving; in the same way, there is no freedom in society without rules**

A school of Anthias Fish - Red Sea (Egypt)

Kris Mikael Krister (CC by-sa 3.0)

hope that neither one nor the other will feel that he was unjustly coerced to follow the rules which are implicit in driving a car or in diving: getting gas or coming up for air.

Besides these obvious examples, we can intuit that true freedom is realized by scrupulously respecting the necessities of human nature in ourselves and others, recognizing what rightly belongs to our neighbour and, thus, instantiating that justice upon which we harmoniously live (Is 32:17). Giving, then, “to each his own”, which is the classic definition of justice, as the measure with which we must think, speak and act in order to bring about that charity which is nothing but the *super-measure* which in its turn presupposes the full existence of the ordinary measure (see the Italian philosopher of the law S. Cotta).

### “Space and time”

It is true, therefore, that man is born free – and, for Christians who maintain that he has been created so by

God, an unimaginable gift in view of the possibility of refusing God’s love – and that we can do almost anything, but still not everything we do is necessarily good for me and for others or contributes to my dignity as a person (see 1 Cor 10:23). For this reason, to be educated or to educate ourselves in order to live as free persons is not an option but a necessity. That is, if we do not wish to waste the gift we have received, convincing ourselves that doing whatever we want to do will make us happy, only to discover, usually too late, that we have done wrong to ourselves or to others, and that in reality we have become slaves, as happens in the case of those who become addicted to drugs or to something or to someone else (see 2 Pt. 2:19). It is an exciting adventure that we are called upon to live, experiencing the space and time – according to the song that was chosen as the soundtrack for the series “One Teacher” – which have been given to us as a one-time opportunity, despite all our difficulties and the fail-

ings because: “In the confusion. Billions of people. Here below, only one chance. Between the blue sky and the hole in the ozone layer. Between John Lennon, Paul and Yoko Ono. The past doesn’t forget. The future performs gymnastics. It prepares itself every day for you”.

It is a future that begins, however, in that adventure which has its starting point an uphill struggle every day, and which despite everything and everyone is fantastic and fascinating, as A. Vendittisang in 2003: “Sometimes I think that it is finished. But then the climb begins. What a fantastic story life is. What a fantastic story life is.”

Clearly, educating others and educating oneself for *right freedom* changes the quality of daily life and lays the ground for a better future – a future that is not, however, magical but one that must be prepared with the contribution of everybody, beginning with ourselves today, not tomorrow. ✧

<sup>1</sup> Cf. ESPOSITO, OP. Bruno. For consultation see: “There Is Still a Judge in Berlin!”, in <http://www.padrebruno.com/there-is-still-a-judge-in-berlin/>, 27-1-2022.

<sup>2</sup> This brings to mind what is contained in the *Letter to Diognetus* written in the second half of the second century: “V.I. Christians are not distinguished from other people regarding their country, or their language, or their customs. 2. In fact, they do not live in private cities, nor do they use a particular jargon, nor do they follow an unusual way of life. 3. Their doctrine is not the fruit of human discovery, nor do they adhere to any human philosophy as others do. 4. Living in Greek or foreign cities, as the case may be, and conforming to all the local in dress and diet and in all other things, they testify to a

way of life that is simply admirable and undoubtedly paradoxical. 5. They live in their own country, but as strangers; they participate in everything as good citizens, but remain detached as though they were foreigners. Every country is their own, and every country is foreign to them. 6. They get married like everyone else and have children, but they do not expose them. 7. They share meals with each other, but not the bedroom. 8. They live in the flesh, but not according to the flesh. 9. They live on the earth, but they are citizens of heaven. 10. They obey the established laws, and by their mode of living they transcend the laws. 11. They love everybody, and they are persecuted by everybody. 12. They are unknown, and they are condemned. They are killed, and they come back

to life. 13. They are poor, and they enrich many; they lack everything, yet possess everything. 14. They are despised, and they glory in it. They are held in contempt and proclaimed blessed. 15. They are injured and they bless others; they are mistreated and they honour others. 16. Doing good they are punished like criminals; condemned, they rejoice as if they had received life. 17. They are resisted by the Jews, persecuted by the Greeks, but those who hate them are unable to give a reason for their hatred” (chap. V).

<sup>3</sup> On this topic I refer readers to the following numbers of the Catechism of the Catholic Church: 33; 1706; 1749; 1776; 1778; 1783-1784; 1860; 1962.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. ST. THOMAS AQUINAS. *Summa Theologiae*. II-II, q.106, a.2.

<sup>5</sup> “... omne verum a quocumque dicatur a Spiritu Sancto est” [Every truth by whomsoever spoken is from the Holy Spirit] (ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, 109, 1 ad 1).

<sup>6</sup> It is interesting what the Romans said about Jewish laws: “A rule is that which briefly explains a thing as it is, not so that the law be derived from the rule, but that the rule may arise from the law, as it is (Paulus, 1. 16, ad Plaut.). St. Thomas, speaking about what characterizes human action, affirms: “As, in fact, we see in artificial things that every work is called good and right if it is done according to the existing rules, in the same way we recognize what is right and virtuous in human action when it is performed according to the rule of divine charity” (*Opuscoli Theologici*, II, 1137).