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Original Sin and Education*

Cyril Vollert, S.J.

MOST OF US who try to keep up with educational controversies and discussions have become somewhat surfeited with reiterated assurances that the one hope of salvaging this creaking world, so near the shoals of disaster, is education. We are told that education can save democracy, resolve the class struggle, and confer on man the good life.

The striking thing is, much of this is true.

But to realize these great expectations education must be rightly conceived and rightly directed. It must be true education for man as he actually is; and it must be aimed at the right goal. Most of the arguing about education is futile, and therefore fruitless, because those who contribute the never-ending stream of articles, addresses, and books about education are so often unrealistic in their view of the person who is to be educated or are wrong in their idea of the upshot of the educational process. They are trying to steer a rudderless ship through an uncharted sea to an unknown port.

Unless we are right in our notion of the objective to be attained and of the person who is to be educated, we are scarcely in a position to decide what the educational process ought to be.

In this article I shall not presume to fix the ultimate goal of education. Readers of this periodical know very well what it is: God, whom we are to possess in the eternal happiness of the beatific vision. Nor shall I rashly attempt to outline an educational program. My purpose will be to describe the beneficiary of such a program and to indicate the proximate end to be achieved. The artist cannot produce a masterpiece unless he knows the material he has to work on. Neither can the teacher succeed in transforming an uneducated person into an educated person unless he understands man as he actually is.

*Reprinted from *Review for Religious*, July, 1946. Before reading this article, please refer to Father Kelly's remarks on p. 3.

The raw material of the educational process is a boy or girl born in original sin, and still suffering the results of original sin. This statement is not naive. It is not a bogey of a bygone day. It is true today and will remain true for all time. Such a view is the only realistic view. Any other notion is false, or at least inadequate. But even the truth that the person to be educated began life in original sin and still staggers under the burden of the consequences of original sin may be distorted.

To see the truth, two extremes have to be avoided: a vapid optimism and a groundless pessimism. Clear vision is needed, unobstructed either by rose-colored lenses or by smoked glass.

The optimistic view, credited by romanticists to the philosophy of Jean Jacques Rousseau but actually as old as Pelagius in the fifth century and his intellectual ancestors, is that every man at his origin is wholly good. Let him alone; do not hamper or misdirect the natural play of his thought-processes and appetites; and he is capable of indefinite growth in goodness. Signs of the break-up of the "elective system" point to the gradual abandonment of this view. But many educators still do not know what is to replace this shallow optimism. Rousseau and Eliot are no longer the leaders to the promised land. Nevertheless the typical modern educator remains a Pelagian.

The pessimistic view is also hoary with antiquity. Its crudest form, Manichaeism, regards all matter as evil. Therefore man, so far as he is a corporeal being, is evil. He is hopeless till he gets out of his body. A less irrational variety of this pessimism is the notion, characteristic of uncontaminated early Lutheranism and Protestantism generally, that original sin intrinsically corrupted man, left him forever a sinner incapable of morally good actions, and destroyed his free will. Nothing can really correct the depravity of Lutheran man. His defilement can be covered up by Christ's merits, but he himself stays a sinful wretch, utterly corrupt.

A trace of this idea of man, greatly diluted, is found sometimes among Catholics, even among educated Catholics and religious. They may have a notion, not very precisely formulated, that man's nature, though not wholly corrupted by original sin, was inwardly wounded so that his understanding, considered on the purely natural level, is now intrinsically darkened and his will is intrinsically weakened.

Those who harbor such an idea of man may have been subjected to defective instruction on this point; or they may have failed rightly to grasp what was correctly taught; or they may have had teachers who represented a very small, and practically unimportant, minority opinion that man actually was thus injured by original sin.

But there is no sound theological basis for this persuasion. The truth is that man, considered simply as natural man, is as whole today, in intellect and will, as was man regarded in his purely natural endowment when he came from the creative hand of God. In other words original sin left man in no worse condition, on the purely human level of his mind and will, than he was before Adam cast his momentous decision against God.

What is true in all that we hear about the disastrous effects of Adam's sin is this: the first man deliberately renounced God and thereby lost the supernatural endowments which God had conferred on him for the whole human race. Adam was created not only in a state of natural perfection, but was elevated to the sonship of God by sanctifying grace. Moreover, to complement this divine gift and to enable Adam to preserve it for himself and the entire human family, God added other remarkable gifts, notably the gift of integrity whereby all his powers and faculties were perfectly subordinated to his reason and will, and the gift of immortality whereby his body was subjected to his soul so that it was liberated from the necessity of falling into corruption and death. These inconceivably great bounties, all of them beyond the capacities of human nature, Adam received for himself and for all his descendants.

By sinning Adam lost them all. He lost original justice for himself and for his posterity. His children and his children's children down to the end of time (with the unique exception of the Blessed Virgin Mary) were begotten in a state of estrangement from God. Instead of being born sons and daughters of God in sanctifying grace, they were born without that relation to God, the only right relation to God once God had elevated mankind (in Adam) to the supernatural level. They were born in the state of original sin.

With the sin inherited from Adam go the effects of the sin: loss of the other accompanying gifts, integrity and immortality.

Therefore Adam's children are worse off than he was. For they all come into the world without the grace of divine sonship, without integrity, without immortality. Adam's sin changed mankind for the worse, in soul and in body.

But Adam's sin did not wreck his human nature as such. We are no worse off now than we would have been if God had never elevated Adam to be His adopted son, with this exception: we *ought* to be born with sanctifying grace, and we are not; and so we are born in a state displeasing to God, a state of sin.

True, if we compare ourselves with Adam as he actually was in Paradise, we are far inferior. We are deprived of the supernatural and preternatural prerogatives that made him so extraordinarily perfect a man. Prior to baptism we lack the divine sonship he had; and so we come into the world as sinners. And even though we recover the grace of divine sonship in baptism, we lack the gift of integrity, and so we find in ourselves an unruly mass of conflicting powers, the lower at odds with the higher, the body unsubservient to the soul. We lack the gift of immortality, and so we succumb to illness, wounds, gradual corruption, and death.

But if we regard only Adam's nature itself unperfected by any of these gifts, our own natures are just the same. Adam's nature, left to itself, had the same elements and equipment as ours. If he had not had the gift of integrity he too would, even without any sin, have experienced the same conflict among his faculties. His senses would have sought their own proper objects just as stubbornly as ours do, against the will's consent. His body would have been exposed to illness, decay, and death.

All this appears quite reasonable. Our first parents, as they actually were, with God's supernatural and preternatural gifts added to their natural make-up, were clearly superior to us. But if we disregard whatever is preternatural and supernatural, we readily see that they had the same nature as we their children have.

Only one thought, nagging at our memories of what we have heard and read, keeps thrusting forward an objection; we have been taught that, as a result of original sin, our intellects have been darkened and our wills have been weakened. This is the very

statement in the elementary catechism most of us have studied: "Our nature was corrupted by the sin of our first parents, which darkened our understanding, weakened our will, and left in us a strong inclination to evil."

This brings us to the heart of our discussion: just what this statement means. It means that *without* the gifts of original justice, particularly integrity and immortality, our minds are less able to acquire truth and our wills are less firm in pursuing good than if we *had* those gifts. It does not mean that original sin has intrinsically harmed our minds and wills so that their *natural* power to know and will has been destroyed or impaired.

The doctrine taught by the familiar catechism of our childhood is of course true. But the truth admits of better wording; and the recent revision of this catechism puts the matter more clearly: "The chief punishments of Adam which we inherit through original sin are: death, suffering, ignorance, and a strong inclination to sin."

Whatever is taught by the Church about the darkening of the intellect and the weakening of the will can be understood, and actually is understood by all great theologians, in the sense of a deterioration as compared with the mind and will of man in the state of original justice.

This is easily perceived in the case of the will. God enriched Adam's nature with the gift of integrity, which lined up all his powers and passions under the control of his reason and will so that his animal appetites could not take the initiative in attracting him toward evil and could not prevail against the command of his will. In punishment for his sin, Adam lost this marvelous gift for himself and for all of us. We do not possess the gift of integrity, and so there is lacking in us the perfect order among our various powers and appetites which that gift would have procured. In other words, we are subject to unruly concupiscence, which means simply that each of our appetites seeks its own good heedless of the good of the whole person.

When an attractive object confronts any of our senses, that sense can immediately reach out for the object quite independently of the will's consent, and even against the will's command. By

that very fact our will is weakened. Concupiscence pulls us toward the tempting object even though we realize that taking it involves sin. We may already have reached out to seize it before the mind adverts to what we are doing. And even after the mind does take notice, the enticement still persists, the tug is still felt. We are much less able to resist the allurements than if the senses were fully under our control. The will may say, "No!" Sense appetite says, "Yes!" And both will and sense appetites are mine. I am being torn between a higher and a lower good. I *can* resist, because my will is still in charge. But often I give up; especially if the battle is a long one. My will does not resist; I surrender, satisfy my lower craving at the expense of moral good, and so I sin.

Adam in the state of original justice would have undergone no such struggle. His will could simply have said, "No!" The sense appetite would have straightway obeyed. Indeed, the sense appetite could not have been attracted to the object in the first place without the assent of the will. Therefore my will is weaker than his; but only because of the pull of concupiscence. My will, as a natural faculty just in itself, is in no way weakened by original sin.

The same is the case with our intellect. Adam had a preternatural gift of infused knowledge. We have not. Therefore our understanding is dark as compared with his, for his was bathed with divine light. If Adam had not sinned, he would not have handed on his special, infused gift of knowledge to his descendants. For this knowledge was a personal gift with which God equipped the first man, created as he was in adulthood in intimate communion with God and with a special office as teacher of the children he was to beget.

Adam had yet other endowments perfecting his intellect. Along with the sanctifying grace that elevated him to supernatural heights went the infused virtues, theological and moral. Among these are faith and prudence, which resided in his intellect. These he would have transmitted. But he sinned, and so could not transmit sanctifying grace and all the accompanying gifts. We, born without sanctifying grace, begin life deprived of the infused virtues, including those which would have equipped our minds with a habitual aptitude for higher truths. In this respect, too, our minds are defective as compared with his before the Fall.

But here we must consider another factor, which is seldom well brought out. In sinning, Adam lost, besides sanctifying grace with its cortege of infused virtues, the preternatural gifts of integrity and immortality. Along with the loss of immortality went the loss of impassibility, or immunity to suffering, disease, and death. His body was no longer perfectly subject to his soul.

From Adam we inherit bodies bereft of these gifts. Not only are we subject to concupiscence, but we have bodies unprotected from harm by the gifts of immortality and impassibility. Our souls are immortal, but they have not the power to impart immortality to our bodies. Thus left in their natural weakness, our bodies easily give in to fatigue, to a thousand different diseases, to the decrepitude of advancing age, and to dissolution. All this has weighty consequences for our knowledge and our capacity to learn.

Obviously, the pull of concupiscence is a tremendous obstacle to the acquisition of knowledge. We have a kinship for the concrete, the sensible. Higher truths, especially the truths of theology, religion, and metaphysics, have little charm for most people. They want to know and experience what is pleasant and easy. Whatever has a surface interest excites them. The clang of the fire-engine bell upsets the class; not only children in third grade but university students, and the professor himself, feel the urge to rush to the window. Philosophy is hard put to it to resist the seduction of the radio. Mathematics runs a poor second to movies. A game of ball in the nearby playground is more fun than geography or arithmetic. Shakespeare and Thackeray have less appeal than the funnies.

Another important consideration is the fatigue that goes with thinking. Continuity is essential to study. But the brain soon wearies and seeks distraction. Even under the most favorable circumstances, such as absolute quiet, freedom from interruption, and robust health, mental concentration is extremely hard work. We know how right Aristotle was when he remarked, "Learning is accompanied by pain." The experience of students is well formulated in a wise man's saying that has passed into a proverb: "Knowledge maketh a bloody entrance."

But ideal circumstances are rarely granted to us. Leisure for thinking is a luxury. The very necessity of caring for the body's

needs takes up the most valuable portion of our time and energies. The majority of mankind must spend half or more of each working day in sheer toil for bread. What leisure is left is without the freshness of mind required for active thought.

Even when a person has leisure and opportunity for learning, his bodily condition is often a deterrent to efficient study. The eye too soon grows dim and reading has to be rationed. Hayfever, sinus infection, a cold in the head, the hundred ills that plague mankind, all militate against the attention, correlation, and penetration required for sustained thinking and for the mastery of but a single province of human knowledge.

If to such bodily distresses we add the emotional bias that stems from concupiscence and impedes the disinterested pursuit of truth, if we take account of the environmental restrictions that, as in Soviet Russia, block access to the sources of truth, and if with all this we mix in the lying propaganda, rooted in selfishness or in bigotry, that not only closes off truth but teaches error, we can go very far in explaining the darkening of our understanding that is a result of original sin. Truly, our ability to gain knowledge is grievously inferior to that of Adam when, before he rejected God's grace, he was shielded from all these evils by his preternatural gifts of immunity to concupiscence, suffering, and bodily dissolution.

But our natural faculty of intellect was in no way *intrinsically* injured by original sin. Our intellect and our will are the same now, considered as purely natural perfections, as they would have been if Adam had handed down to us original justice instead of original sin. Our intellectual and volitional inferiority results from our lack of the preternatural gifts that would have removed all obstacles to their perfect functioning.

Such is the teaching of all front-rank theologians, a teaching based on their study of revelation. The punishment of original sin, St. Thomas notes, is restricted to the withholding of the supernatural goods granted by God to our first father for transmission to his posterity.¹ Suarez agrees with Aquinas:

The common and true doctrine is that the powers of man or of his free will, regarded from the standpoint of the perfection they would

¹ *Compendium Theologiae*, 195.

have had in the state of pure nature, were not diminished in fallen nature by original sin; they are inferior only when compared with the strength and integrity conferred on them by original justice.²

St. Robert Bellarmine teaches the same doctrine:

The corruption of nature resulted not from the lack of any natural gift, nor from the presence of any evil quality, but from the sole loss, owing to Adam's sin, of the supernatural endowment.³

Thus the raw material of our educational endeavors is the boy or girl, the young man or woman, with intellect and will essentially unimpaired on the natural plane.

Our aim in education should be to develop this good natural equipment and to transfigure it with all the supernatural goods Christ has given to the Church for the benefit of His brethren. Revelation, the Church, the sacraments, sanctifying grace, the infused virtues and actual graces and all that the Church disposes of for building up the body of Christ must raise and perfect the souls of men together with their faculties, especially their powers of intellect and will. The proximate purpose of our educational work must be to train the youth entrusted to us so to master themselves that, within the supernatural sphere to which they have been re-elevated by Christ, they may pursue the Truth which is God, and embrace the Good, which is also God. The closest possible approximation to the original integrity must be the goal to which we lead our limping students. This is no mean ambition for those whose life-long vocation lies in the classroom and on the campus.

The same goal is the one we religious propose to reach in our own self-education. But in addition to the bottomless treasury of graces open to all Catholics, we enjoy, in our ascetical strivings, certain freedoms that can bring us much closer to the original freedom Adam had. Our privilege is brought home to us by the matchless champion who upheld the greatness of the religious state against petty attackers of his day:

The exercise of perfection requires that a person do away with whatever can impede him from directing his affections wholly to God; for in this consists the perfection of charity. There are three obstacles of this sort. The first is the desire for external goods. This is removed by the vow of poverty. The second is the proclivity for pleasures of

² *De gratia*, prol. 4, c. 8, n. 5.

³ *De gratia primi hominis*, c. 5.

sense, among which lustful delight is the keenest. This is surmounted by the vow of chastity. The third obstacle is the deordination of the human will. And this is corrected by the vow of obedience.⁴

Thus with intellect and will intrinsically good and unspoiled in their natural soundness by original sin, we can with God's grace overcome all hindrances and eventually make our own, in limited degree, the perfection of the second Adam, Jesus Christ. We cannot, indeed, ever in this life attain to the integrity of original justice; Christ did not restore that extraordinary privilege to redeemed man. But as brothers and sisters of the God-man, or truer still, as living members of His body, we can get closer to the second Adam, and therefore closer to God, than the first Adam was in his primeval innocence. And so our last state can be better than the first.

⁴ St. Thomas, *Summa*, II-IIae, q. 186, a. 7.