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**Education and the
Human Quest:
The Correlation of
Existence and History**



Pro mundis

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Education and the Human Quest: The Correlation of Existence and History

Thomas K. Johnson

The following lecture on the philosophy of education was given in a secular university for a pedagogical conference. The contents of the lecture arise directly from the understanding of general revelation which is an organic part of the classical Protestant faith.¹ The lecture was intended to function on two levels in light of the biblical distinction between general revelation and special revelation; general revelation is given by God to all people through existence, whereas redemptive, special revelation is given in history, partly as an answer to the questions and needs of which people become conscious because of general revelation. On the level of general revelation and common grace, lectures like this can serve to preserve humanness by means of encouraging people to consider the deep questions raised by God, as well as the anxieties aroused by the condemnation of the natural moral law. Conscious consideration of the truths and questions which people know only because of God's general revelation can serve as a means of common grace which contributes to a more humane way of life. But this consideration should also serve a pre-evangelistic purpose, to prepare people to consider the answers,

explanations, and the gospel which are found only in special revelation. Before God promised Adam and Eve that the offspring of a woman would crush the head of the serpent (special revelation), he asked them the self-revealing question, "Where are you?" (general revelation). It is suitable, perhaps even important, for Christians to be leading the discussion of such questions which only receive proper answers in God's special revelation.

My Original Lecture

My first philosophy professor, D. Ivan Dykstra, had a slogan, phrased as a question, which he used to stimulate students to deeper reflection on the purpose of their education. "What do we mean by what we say when we talk about what we do?"² In English it is just ear-catching enough that some students used it as a humorous little chant. Though his slogan may have arisen from a good sense of humor, his intent was quite serious. He thought that a key to truly humane education, as opposed to mere technical training, was to enable people to clarify the meaning of what

we say in the various areas of life. He wanted us to think carefully and clearly about all that we mean, say, and write. This is certainly a valuable step which I would heartily recommend. But many will hear in the background of his slogan a good amount of Anglo-American analytical philosophy which can, too easily, reduce thought to clarity of communication, using clearly defined terms connected by means of careful logic, while accidentally assuming empirical information is the *only* matter worthy of serious thought and clear communication. I am surely not the only person to wonder if this approach to philosophy, learning, and humanness might be used by some to hide from the big questions of life, and if this philosophical method might even echo the metaphysical despair which characterized so much of the twentieth century.

Professor Dykstra's exhortations to students did not end with clarity of thought and communication. He also said that at the beginning of their education students should say to their professors, "Here I am as a human being. Now teach me how to be human." This was not an ear-catching slogan, but this small step takes us one giant leap toward the purpose of education: making human beings into human beings, obviously in a manner that includes clarity of thought and communication, and also obviously in light of a broad understanding of human experience and achievement. Though Dykstra sounded like an analytic philosopher, in his heart he was a soul mate of Socrates,

encouraging students to actively engage in the human quest as the center of their education, while he also echoed Aristotle's perception that being human means receiving potential we must actualize.

I am convinced that for university education in the twenty-first century to reach its proper calling, it needs to go far beyond high level training in skills and information, though these are truly essential and may need improvement, both for individual careers and for societal well-being.³ High level skills and brilliant mastery of information, *on their own*, do not lead to a humane way of life. They can also be used for brutality, for repression, or for turning ourselves into mere machines of consumption and entertainment in mass society. To reach its proper *telos*, education needs to consciously initiate students into the Socratic Quest, which means teaching them how to think and feel deeply about the whole range of human questions and experiences, following Socrates in looking for real answers. And there is a way to do this that avoids the twin extremes of authoritarianism, which tells students what to think but not how to think, and the late modern metaphysical despair I mentioned, which envisions an endless quest without the hope of transcendental truth.

The Socratic Quest, into which students should be initiated, has to do with an open, authentic analysis of the questions and anxieties of existence in correlation with the answers offered by history, which means religions, philosophies, and cultures. This can be done

in a manner that, contrary to some approaches to education, enhances the students' subjectivity, moral development, and independent thinking skills, while also allowing lecturers and professors to be their authentic selves, without an undue need to either hide behind an impersonal or false academic objectivity or else to fall into an overly ideological method of education.

Existence: questions and anxieties

There are a few very big questions that occur to most thoughtful people. It seems like these questions are asked of us by the universe, but only humans seem to consider these questions. My children raised these questions already when they were small; my dog never discusses these matters with me. What are some of these questions?⁴

1. What has always existed? Is it one or many? Is it spirit or matter? Is it God or the gods? Is it time and chance? Is it dialectical matter? Is it energy?
2. What does it mean that we are human?
3. Why do we know so much about right and wrong? How can it be that people in so many times and places have somewhat similar ideas about right and wrong?
4. How do we know we can usually trust our five senses, even before we have asked if we can trust our senses?

5. How do we know that truth is unified, so that the truths of chemistry do not contradict the truths of biology or mathematics, even before we consider the question?

6. How do we know that other people have minds, even though most of us have never seen a proof of the existence of the minds of other people?

7. Is there something terribly wrong with the world or with human nature? What?

8. Why do we find ourselves alienated from ourselves and each other? Is there a solution?

9. Is being male and female more than an accident of anatomy?

10. Does history have a meaning, direction, or shape? Is it a line, a circle, or something else?

These big questions, which I might call the "Universal Questions," are closely connected with the deepest of human anxieties, but there is, I think, heuristic value in distinguishing questions from anxieties. The very fact of human existence forces us to answer the big questions and *also* to look for courage in the face of unavoidable anxieties. What are these anxieties? I would follow Paul Tillich in thinking that anxiety (*Angst*) is different from a fear because anxiety does not have a specific object; because anxiety does not have a specific object it can be experienced at multiple levels, from a relative level to an ultimate level.⁵

There are multiple types of anxiety, any or all of which can control the thoughts and actions of individuals and collectives:

1. Moral Anxiety: The sense that I am guilty, shameful, or worthy of condemnation, and that each person needs to find a way to face this anxiety.
2. Ontological Anxiety: We all know that bad things may happen to us and that we will die; how will we find courage in the face of tragedy, suffering, and death?
3. Existential Anxiety: Life often seems empty, boring, and meaningless; how will we find meaning or significance in the face of emptiness?

In order to enhance authentic humanness and deeper subjectivity, we must not be afraid to openly consider the big questions and the deepest anxieties with our students, and to do so in an orderly, planned manner. Lest I be misunderstood, it is possible to teach classes on philosophy, literature, and religion in a manner that avoids honestly considering the big issues of life; I took some such classes as a university student. Maybe I am guilty of having taught some such classes as a young university lecturer. To enable our students to become more deeply human, we have to prompt them to honestly consider the big questions and to feel the authentic anxieties, and to do that within our lectures and seminars.

History: Possible Answers

Part of the huge difference between quality education and a silly TV talk show or bar room discussion is the depth and sensitivity with which we present the range of responses to the human predicament. In the various eras and regions in human history, we see a vast array of ways in which different peoples have answered the big questions and found courage to face the full range of anxieties. For our students to grow more deeply human, they need to be introduced to some of the possible answers proposed by various serious people. Though this might surprise some, I am very grateful for a sensitive and serious introduction to the writings of Karl Marx that I received as a student. And as an adult I have tried to get a little way inside the minds of our Muslim neighbors, though I am afraid I have not yet been able look at the world through their glasses.

I have used these two examples, Marxism and Islam, because they are two of the major ways in which people have tried to answer the big questions and face our deepest anxieties. And it is profoundly humanizing for our students to try, at least for a moment, to put on the alternate answers to the human quest. And there are several alternate answers on offer, both in history and in the present.

Both Islam and Marxism are what we would call classical metanarratives: comprehensive stories that attempt to interpret all of life, the world, and

human experience within one story. And as residents of the post-modern era, we know we are supposed to practice incredulity toward all metanarratives, or so Lyotard has taught us. But I have to say I do not think this is a human possibility. It is often true that people do not know what to think and that some fall into despair of all ultimate knowledge and truth, similar to some of the sophists against whom Socrates apparently argued. And in our age this is sometimes regarded as true incredulity. But a deeper analysis of human consciousness will show us that it is only possible to seriously doubt a truth claim if we assume certainty about an opposing truth claim, even if that assumption is unconscious. In the many years in which I taught hundreds of students from many nations and cultures, I heard expressions of doubt about everything beyond simple everyday truths. Some wondered if $2 + 2$ might become 5 tomorrow. But most of those students were naively unaware of the way in which their doubts were so frequently based on certainty about another metanarrative, and many were unaware that there is no majority metanarrative which we can regard as the “standard” way of answering the big questions and facing our ultimate anxieties. Students can easily be naively unconscious of the metanarrative that is controlling their own consciousness; a common mistake is taking a partial narrative, such as that offered by the natural sciences, and accidentally thinking it is a whole, without perceiving that the narratives

given by natural science are themselves in need of metanarrative interpretation and validation.

Perhaps we cannot tell our students how to evaluate the competing metanarratives, partly because those evaluations themselves tend to depend on an assumed metanarrative. But it seems to me that we can tell our students that any serious metanarrative must explain the complex riddle of our humanness: that we are bearers of tremendous dignity and tremendous depravity, that we find ourselves under an obligation to practice both love and justice, and that part of our unique humanness is that we cannot avoid telling narratives and metanarratives to interpret our universe and our existence in a manner that both answers the big questions and also seeks to provide hope in our deepest anxieties. If our students are effectively invited to seriously correlate the needs of existence with the answers of history in thoughtful dialogue with each other and our communities, then we will have taken huge steps toward making education fit for humans. And as educators, we can invite our students to think with us, while we think authentically, instead of merely telling our students what to think. Then we will help humans to become human.

Annotation Anmerkungen

¹“The Humanization of Education,” was a conference held by the pedagogical faculty of the University of Hradec Kralove, Czech Republic, April 1, 2010. The conference papers were published as *Humanize v výchově a vzdělávání*, (The Humanization of Education and Learning), edited by Jan Habl and Jana Doležalová, (Hradec Kralove: Gaudeameus, 2010).

²Lectures at Hope College, Spring Semester 1975, Holland, Michigan, USA.

³These comments are inspired by one of my educational heroes, Prof. Anatoli Michailov, Rector of the dissident European Humanities University, late of Minsk, Belarus, now in exile in Lithuania. He has argued at length and for

many years that teaching students how to think, and thereby to enhance their subjectivity, is a key step to overcome totalitarianism, which reduces people to objects, and to move toward a more humane society.

⁴Two very good sources on this theme are James Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, and Ronald Nash, *Life's Ultimate Questions*.

⁵There is much to learn from Paul Tillich's study on *The Courage to Be*.

The Author Über den Autor



Thomas K. Johnson received his Ph.D. in ethics from the University of Iowa (1987) after being a research scholar at Eberhard Karls Universität (Tübingen). He has an ACPE from Missouri Baptist Hospital (St. Louis, 1981), a Master of Divinity (*Magna Cum Laude*) from Covenant Theological Seminary (St. Louis, 1981), and a BA (*Cum Laude*) from Hope College (Michigan, 1977). He is a pastor of the Presbyterian Church in America. Since 1994 he has served the International Institute for Christian Studies and is now IICS Professor of Theology, Philosophy, and Public Policy. He was a visiting professor at the European Humanities University in Minsk, Belarus, 1994–1996. (UHU is a dissident, anti-Communist university, forced into exile by the Belarusian dictator in 2004.) Since 1996 he and his wife have lived in Prague, where he taught philosophy at Anglo-American University (4 years) and at Charles University (8 ½ years). He is MBS Professor of Apologetics and Ethics (2003) and Vice President for Research (2007). His wife, Leslie P. Johnson, is director of the Christian International School of Prague.

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