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# Producing or Improving the World and Humans? The Quest for the Ethical Foundations of Education

## ABSTRACT

The article investigates the ethical basis of education by making reference to Aristotle's distinction between *poiesis* and *praxis*, indicating the serious difficulties that arise when this distinction is challenged, and analyzing the cultural, ethical, and educational context of emerging concepts that question the relevance of the distinction between production and improvement.

The starting point of the analysis was the classical concept of natural law and the related question of "first things." The author relates the distinction between *praxis* and *poiesis* to the two types of objectives and then analyzes selected relevant concepts.

First, the notion of progress is invoked. Following Robert Spaemann, the article proposes a classification of types of progress. Then, it shows the relationship between type "A progress"—understood as production—to ideologies and totalitarianism. Following Eric Voegelin, it indicates the Gnostic origins of 20<sup>th</sup>-century intellectual and mass movements. The interpretations of modernism proposed by these authors are complemented by Chantal Delsol's considerations. The article uses her metaphorical distinction between two types of attitudes toward the world. The figures of "the gardener" and "the demiurge" are evoked.

## KEYWORDS

totalitarianism,  
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Übermensch,  
posthuman, education,  
*praxis*, *poiesis*

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The article invokes transhumanism as an example of the demiurgic attitude and presents a polemic against the transhumanists' accusations in the area of pedagogy. It points out that education must take freedom into account, and therefore cannot be understood as *poiesis*.

## Introduction

One of the most important discoveries enabling the development of the classical concept of the natural law includes questions about the first things and related distinction into human products and things that a man found or discovered. Separation of human products from what is not a product of a man is connected with the belief that

things produced by a man only lead to a man who is not a first thing for sure. Products of a human hand seem, in every respect, inferior to or later than things a man had not produced, but found or discovered (Strauss 1969: 85).

Also, the above reflection is related to the Aristotle's distinction of kinds of human actions. In the perspective of these considerations, it is particularly important to distinguish *praxis* from *poiesis*, which is not obvious nowadays. Such differentiation corresponds to two kinds of objectives: "It is because there is an objective for something and there is an objective in something" (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, XII, 7, 1072b). Being unaware of such distinctions often leads to serious ethical and pedagogical problems. The analysis of the above issues will result in formulating the question concerning the ethical foundations of education.

## Progress as an objective

Modern philosophy is dominated by the concept of progress. However, in order not to use this notion in an ideological manner, we should—as Robert Spaemann rightly notes—specify the area in which particular changes can be evaluated as positive or negative, and we should determine a parameter that will make it possible to classify the changes as improvement or degradation of the current status of things. An ideological manner of using this category appears when

progress is treated as an absolute value and the word “progressive” replaces the predicate “good” (Spaemann 1999: 73, 76–77).

This is connected with mistaken identification of two different kinds of progress. The above-mentioned author, referring to Aristotle, distinguishes two kinds, i.e. two “ideal types” of progress. The first one is called type “A progress,” and the other one—type “B progress.” The former includes an action the meaning of which is given by its end. In type “B progress” we can speak about improvement irrespective of its result. Type “A progress” examples include construction of a house, or an attempt to catch a train. If we fail to finish the house or move in, it does not really matter at which stage the construction process was stopped. The failure to complete the construction makes all related activities meaningless. Also, whether we were running faster or slower is not important if we did not make it on time to catch the train at the railway station. In such situations the end gives meaning to the action.

It is different with type “B progress” in which improvement is important even if we have not achieved the final result. Sometimes we do not even know what the result should include. Examples of such actions include learning to play an instrument or activities related to medicine or martial arts. In the first case (“A progress”), an object is produced (a house) or a whole is created; and parts of that whole are only meaningful from the point of view of that future whole. In the second case (“B progress”), a new whole is not produced, but we improve what had already existed. Improvement occurs irrespective of the end.

Distinguishing the types of progress results from two kinds of objectives. An objective may include a house as a whole that had been produced, but a house is built for a man who wants to live in this house, and in this sense the man is the objective of the house which is being created for the man and because of the man. The house is produced because of the man, i.e. someone who is not produced but who already exists. The indirect objective, i.e. producing something, assumes the existence of an ultimate objective. Producing the house is an indirect objective; the man is the ultimate objective.

These two kinds of objectives correspond to two types of human actions. Creation of *poiesis* is just an indirect objective; a stage on the path to the fulfillment of the ultimate objective; and it is only

meaningful in a broader perspective of *praxis* aimed at the improvement of the already existing individual or community. The A progress is related to producing and, as an indirect objective, it has its deepest meaning in the perspective of the ultimate objective, and that is why it cannot function as an independent objective. It cannot be separated from an independent objective and from the “B progress,” and in no way should it evoke regress in this area (“B progress”).

Type “A progress” corresponds to the process of producing things; type “B progress” refers to the growth and maturation of a living creature. The object of producing *poiesis* only appears as a whole at the end of the process. It is different with a living creature: it is present as a whole already at the beginning of its maturation and it is an objective in itself. Its maturation serves the creature itself, and not other, external objectives. In the perspective of the ethics of education it is particularly important to note that, as Spaemann rightly notes, “the idea of progress is defined by the idea of maturation, and not the other way round” (Spaemann 1999: 76). A teacher must always know what maturity specific to a man is, and only in this perspective he/she can interpret particular changes as progress or regress. The notion of progress is only meaningful in the perspective of fulfillment of a specific vision of humanity, and it can never be treated as an autotelic objective.

Just like progress, development cannot be an independent objective of education without specifying which aspects of humanity are to be developed and how. According to Allan Bloom, “the statements that each of us should be given the access to development are childish” (Bloom 1997: 402), because, in fact, they mean nothing. First of all, a teacher should ask: what kind of development is important? Which aspects of humanity should be developed? Using the notion of development without providing its predicates may be perceived as deceptive or camouflaging the ideological inspirations and aspirations of the speaker.

## Totalitarianism and progress

The 20<sup>th</sup> century totalitarian systems (Communism and Nazism) were characterised by the failure to see or the ignorance of the difference between producing and improving. This resulted in tragic

events and serious problems in the area of culture, ethics and education. The huge amount of violence resulted in the fact that both of the systems are criticized, but we can say that such criticism is not symmetrical. The idea of Nazism is perceived as absolute evil, but the evaluation of Communism, despite documented murders (Courtois et al. 1999) and equal amount of victims, is not unanimously negative. The symbols of the cruel Nazi totalitarianism appear only in extremist and marginal groups, while Communist symbols have become fully acceptable in popular culture. It is forbidden to wear or present the Nazi or fascist symbols, but the images connected with Communism (e.g. T-shirts with the face of Ernesto “Che” Guevara, with the hammer and sickle, with the CCCP abbreviation, hats with the five-pointed red star) are accepted in the western culture. Such lenient approach to Communism is connected with qualifying it as a movement that expressed progress, because, according to Eric Voegelin, “there is actually no conflict between enlightened progressivism and Communism” (Voegelin 2011: 398). In other words, the above-mentioned asymmetry of evaluations results from the belief that Nazism was a reactionary ideology, and Communism—a progressive ideology.

The Nazi ideology is only promoted today by radical and marginalized groups of extremists. There is an impression that, due to excluding them from the public sphere, we can prevent evil from being reborn. Such optimistic assumption is based on the belief that the only supporters of dangerous ideologies are rightist extremists. There is an increasingly stronger tendency to ascribe hidden dangerous affiliations and fascist views only to those movements which are conservative and traditional, and which emphasize the communal dimension of human life (Holmes 1998: 14–16, 25–32). It is believed that, along with modernization related to progress that results in weaker influence of traditions, religions and national ideas, the threat of totalitarian movements being reborn will disappear.

However, according to Voegelin, the attempts to fulfil the totalitarian ideologies which lead to tragic consequences, are connected with other mass and intellectual movements that shape the modern western thought. The common source of those movements are, in Voegelin’s opinion, Gnostic ideas (Voegelin 1998). He describes modernity as a secularized version of spirituality typical of a sect

(Voegelin 1994: 66), and he enumerates six beliefs which characterise the Gnostic worldview and are a common denominator for such (seemingly different) concepts as positivism, psychoanalysis, progressivism, Communism, fascism, and Nazism. First of all, a supporter of such a vision of the world is not satisfied with his/her life. Obviously, this feeling is not only typical of Gnostics. In a way, all people have some reasons not to be satisfied with certain aspects of their lives. What is crucial for understanding the Gnostic perspective, and what is unique to it, is the second conviction according to which negative aspects of human life result from the wrong structure of the world. According to a Gnostic, “if something is not as it should be, it is the fault of the wickedness of the world” (Voegelin 1998: 37). The third thing typical of Gnosticism is the belief that it is possible to save the world from evil. According to the fourth Gnostic thesis, such salvation will take place in the process of history. This will happen (thesis number five) because, due to a man’s effort, it is possible to change the order of being. The last, sixth thesis, refers to knowledge, i.e. gnosis, which is necessary for changing the world, or, actually, for creating it anew.

Creating the world is not just a specific feature of totalitarian ideologies, but, according to Chantal Delsol, it is typical of the contemporary post-modernity. According to the philosopher: “Its essence is the idea that a man should create everything that is important; everything that refers to him. Nothing is given anymore; everything is constructed. There is nothing that would precede us; everything is our work” (Delsol 2017: 17).

Utopian ideas of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century ideologies aimed at rejecting the existing, imperfect and disappointing order of the world, and replacing it with a new reality, i.e. with the world made by a human being. According to Delsol, people who think like that do not like the world in which they live.

They want to leave it. They reject the cultural environment in which they were born and in which they grew up. They are ashamed of their parents whom they suspect of supporting various forms of racism, machismo or homophobia. They do not want to defend their history and transfer it to the next generations. These people want to abandon their world (which is manifested in all their attitudes, thoughts and beliefs) because, in a way, they are ashamed of it as they think it is too small for their expectations, too imperfect, and too ridiculous (Delsol 2017: 14).

## Superhuman as a product

Aiming to replace the world (which is given and imperfect) with the own product, i.e. with the reality created by a human being, has to evoke the question concerning the status of a person. Is a man a product of his own? Obviously, he is not, and, just like the rest of the existing world, he should be replaced with a new creature: a superhuman.

Modern mass and intellectual movements aim at changing human nature and producing a superhuman, i.e.

a being created by humankind, who is to take the place of the ridiculous creature of God. This is the great dream the vision of which appeared in the works of Condorcet, Comte, Marx, and Nietzsche, and which, in practice, was later fulfilled by the Communist and Nazi movements (Voegelin 2011: 406).

In the common awareness, the term “superhuman” was only limited to the creature announced and expected by Friedrich Nietzsche, and then—in a vulgarized version—by the Nazis. However, according to Voegelin, the idea of a superhuman had appeared earlier, and it was typical of various kinds of modernism. The term first appeared in the *Faust* by Goethe. Then, it was adopted by Nietzsche and Marx to describe a creature living in the new world that was created by a human being. However, we can also distinguish other types of a superhuman, depending on the trends postulating the creation of a new and perfect world.

The basic models of a superhuman are: the progressivist superhuman of Condorcet (who hopes for eternal life on Earth), the positivist superhuman of Comte, the Communist superhuman of Marx, and the Dionysian superhuman of Nietzsche (Voegelin 1998: 40).

Nevertheless, we cannot treat this list as completed. It is constantly being extended by still valid trends based on progressivism, transhumanism and postmodernism.

The common denominator of such trends is the unchangeable set of eternal human problems which had already been known in the ancient times. These are principal categories that specify the burden of human existence, such as poverty, sickness, death, the necessity of work, and sexual problems. These movements and ideologies differed

from one another in the issues they determined as critical. For example, Communism declared elimination of poverty, and, while promoting work, it promised that work will no longer be necessary, in which it contradicted itself. For psychoanalysis, in turn, the key challenge of human existence was sexuality. It is worth emphasizing, however, that the Communists, especially in the initial period, promoted not only revolution aiming at taking over the means of production, but also sexual revolution.

Irrespective of the differences and varied accents, supporters of such trends believed that human nature may and should be changed, modified, and, actually, created anew. Humanity is to become a creation, and, more precisely, a product.

## Gardeners and demiurges

Using the metaphors of a gardener and a demiurge, Delsol describes two models of a human relationship with the world. The above-mentioned, production-oriented approach to the world and human being, can be specified as “demiurgic.” Delsol places it in the opposition to the approach of a gardener (Delsol 2017; Rutkowski 2021).

A demiurge does not accept the existing world; he is disappointed and dissatisfied with it. He claims that the world is defective and constructed in a wrong manner. He does not want to take responsibility for it, and he manifests it in front of young people, which, according to Hannah Arendt (Delsol’s teacher), should exclude him from the group of educators: “A person who rejects taking shared responsibility for the world should not have children and cannot educate them” (Arendt 1994: 225).

However, a demiurge wants to exert an influence on future generations. He wants to create a new world and a being that would live in it. Due to the ultimate solution of old human existential problems, this new creature is to be someone different and better than the previous people. And it does not matter if we call the creature a superhuman, a transhuman or a posthuman.

A demiurgic approach to the world does not accept any restrictions in the radical quest for emancipation understood, first of all, as questioning the natural limitations. According to Delsol:



Demiurgy is self-defined as overcoming limitations and abolishing all borders. Such an attitude is related to the assumption of omnipotence, which is trying to permeate through all aspects of life and all trends in human thought (Delsol 2017: 293).

It is different with the gardeners. They affirm the world in which they live. They treat the world as their heritage which should be protected. A gardener does not produce plants, but cultivates, protects and develops them. Although a garden needs cultivation, it exists independently of the gardener who does not create the world, but looks after it and tries to improve it. A gardener is never sure if his work will be successful. Sometimes his effort is futile, and sometimes he is surprised at unexpectedly good results. This lack of certainty helps him maintain reasonable humility and avoid snootiness. The gardener's source of pride is the belief that he contributes to "maintaining the order of the world which he had not created and which, to a great degree, surpasses him" (Delsol 2017: 6). He is not frustrated by the fact that his knowledge and ability to act are not unlimited. He is happy that he can improve the world which was given to him in an embryonic form.

A gardener's behaviour is sometimes criticized by demiurges as a conservative attitude that is anti-developmental and reinforces stagnation. However, this objection is unjustified. A gardener does not aim at obstructing development and preserving the world in the current form; he is not against a change as such. He constantly searches for new methods of cultivating, growing, farming, and caring about the plants. However, he always bears in mind that the world has a structure and laws that should be learnt and respected. He acknowledges that there is a reality which is independent of a man and prior to him. The world, just like humanity, is not a human product.

## Ideologies and reality

A demiurge does not want to understand or accept it. What is crucial to him is his will which aims at ruling over the reality. However, such willingness to rule the world results in "selectiveness" in the reception of the surrounding reality. A demiurge only takes into account those aspects of it that match his projects and, at the same

time, he is very short-sighted, or even blind, to those elements that fail to comply with his imagination. Developing the thought of Voegelin, we may say that a demiurgic “thinker, while rejecting an important element of reality, enables himself to construct such a model of a man, society or history, that will match his desires” (Voegelin 1998: 43). Thus, the will to rule the reality triumphs over his discernment and obedience to the constitution of being. Nevertheless, the very constitution of being is beyond the demiurge’s power. This is the main reason why demiurgic projects always fail to succeed, as they do not take into account the whole complexity of the world and they reject its uncomfortable and “odd” elements. Demiurgic projects become ideologies that sooner or later collapse.

We can say that this is the basis for Delsol’s optimistic belief that although gardeners are in the minority nowadays and although they do not rule the world, in future the situation will change because “the common sense has more future than madness which destroys a lot, but never triumphs in the end” (Delsol 2017: 8). Reducing this optimism a little, we can add that a failure of discredited ideologies does not have to cause the renaissance of the common sense. New ideologies usually replace the old ones, the power of the previous demiurges is taken over by new demiurges rather than gardeners, and the price that has to be paid for the mistakes of further ideologies is always high.

However, before an ideology collapses, it aims at capturing the whole reality which is complex and ambiguous. It promises its own triumph and related, final and irreversible, solution to a man’s everlasting problems (“So comrades, come rally, and the last fight let us face, the Internationale unites the human race”). This promise is to be fulfilled in an unspecified future, but the ideological correctness demands people to behave as if it has already been fulfilled. “People live in a fiction as they constantly have to behave as if the expected world has already come” (Delsol 2017: 175). This results in an increasingly deeper gap between the ideology and the reality. The attempt to protect the ideology results in the escalation of various forms of violence (which, at the moment, is usually symbolic) in various areas of culture, language, education, family relationships, and sexuality. An ideology feels indignant when someone calls it an ideology, because, in its own opinion, it is the only possible, scientific

and universal truth. It can only be challenged by ignorants or villains. It is different with the truth of a human being: the common sense and empirical facts are discredited as an ideology. “Just like in the times of Communism, a description of the reality is called an ideology [...] while the dominant ideology pretends that it describes the reality” (Delsol 2017: 279).

## Education as cultivation of the soul

The above-discussed distinction is particularly important in the perspective of asking about the ethical foundations of education, and it enables us to refer to the classical pedagogical metaphor of teaching as cultivating the human soul. Comparing education to a garden and cultivation of soil is not a new figure, and it has its roots in the Biblical description of creation and in the ancient Rome. Experience tells gardeners that if the soil is to give fruit, it needs care, cultivation and support. However, first they have to learn about the properties of the soil and treat it according to its nature. Proper care depends on the correct evaluation of the existing reality. Originally, the term *cultura* meant “agriculture: cultivation of the soil and its products, taking care of the soil and improving the quality of the soil in accordance with its nature” (Strauss 2005: 217).

A fundamental discovery of ancient pedagogy is noticing the analogy between a human soul and the soil that is being cultivated. Just like the soil, the human soul needs care, protection and development according to its nature. We may say that this idea properly characterizes both the perspective of the classical philosophy, and the Biblical perspective. As Leo Strauss notices:

despite huge difference, and even antagonisms, between the classical philosophy and the Bible; between the Athens and Jerusalem; they agree as to the crucial issue. According to the Bible, a man was created in the image of God and he was given power over the earthly creatures. However, he was not given power over everything and he was placed in a garden so that he can develop and protect it. God ascribed him a specific place. Righteousness is compliance with the order established by God, just like in the classical thought righteousness is complying with the natural order (Strauss 2007: IV–V).

## Transhumanism

Challenging the natural order is connected with rejecting the distinction into production and improvement. A typical example of such way of thinking is transhumanism, i.e. a trend which develops and radicalizes a demiurgic approach to the world and human being. One of the most important representatives of this movement, Max More, confirms the possibility and need to fundamentally improve human condition, especially through development and provision of available technologies that can prevent us from getting old and significantly improve human intellectual, physical and psychological abilities (More 2022). At first, we could think that this is an attitude of a gardener who wants to improve what already exists. The postulated objective includes the elimination of diseases, old age and death through the replacement of particular body organs, and, in future, the whole body, with technological devices that are better than nature. Moreover, the use of new technologies is to make a man constantly happy and it is to help him achieve infinite and ultimate excitement (Klichowski 2014: 105). Solving the basic problems of a man will make him a transhuman, i.e. a creature in a transitional form that will make it possible to create a new, higher being in future. This will be a posthuman—a new being to replace a man who is an imperfect work of nature or God.

Transhumanists do not see the difference between improving and producing; or perhaps they believe this difference is not important (Bostrom 2003). In such an approach, distinguishing the kinds of progress and objectives is meaningless. Everything is a product, and each aim is indirect. For transhumanists education, which, in their opinion, aims at producing a certain kind of a man, is *poiesis*.

## Essence of education

However, if education was production, it would be type “A progress” in which the end (achievement of the result) determines its meaningfulness. Despite the purposeful-rational organization of education at schools, i.e. education aiming at “A type progress” in which objectives and their fulfilment are important, teachers know that equally important is whether “B type progress” occurred while

achieving those aims; whether, while learning specific contents, a young person developed his/her humanity, or became emotionally and ethically degraded (Spaemann 1999: 75–76).

If we assume that there is no difference between improvement and production, or if we assume that the difference is not important, we come to the conclusion that education is simply to “produce” a specific kind of a human being. At the same time, objections are formulated (not only by transhumanists) that pedagogy is not very effective in fulfilling its aims; that its objectives would be better and more efficiently achieved by technology, biotechnology, genetic engineering, etc.

The objection of ineffectiveness may seem disqualifying for a given activity if the purposeful-rational perspective is perceived as the most important (also, the objection should be the basis for considerations to those teachers who want to see the efficiency of their educational actions as the crucial criterion of their assessment). However, in a slightly provocative manner, we can state that the lack of total effectiveness and the lack of certainty of achievement of adopted educational objectives are natural for pedagogy that must take into account the freedom of a student. Nevertheless, that freedom results in the fact that it is impossible to treat education as production (*poiesis*). Failure to take into account the student’s freedom results in the fact that education is degraded to training (Hessen 1997: 101–102).

Thus, the ethical aspect of pedagogy would be, first of all, connected with the fact that education, just like ethics, depends and is founded on the idea of human freedom. Questioning freedom—as an illusion or deception—and making a man subject to historical, biological (Bielicki 1997) or ideological necessities, makes ethics something absurd, and changes education into dark manipulation and demiurgic attempt to rule over a man and the world. And this is the only kind of situation in which efficient technology could be replaced with inefficient pedagogy.

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