

KNOWLEDGE, CHARACTER, PIETY: FOUNDATIONAL TENETS OF COMENIUS' MORAL EDUCATION

Jan Hábl

Hradec Králové University

Department of pedagogy and psychology

Rokitanského 62

Hradec Králové 500 03

janhabl@seznam.cz

Abstract: The goal of this paper is to present Comenius' foundational principles of moral education as it is outlined primarily in his didactic writings, and to show their relevance to contemporary pedagogical practice. The mutual inter-relation of knowledge, character and spirituality will be exposed, analyzed and explained. Comenius was a Czech 17th century Brethren bishop, philosopher and educator who is celebrated especially for his timeless didactic principles, which earned him the epithet "the teacher of nations."

Key words: morality, virtue, education, knowledge, humanity

1. Introduction: moral deficit

It seems that morality, resp. immorality has been a pressing issue in Comenius time as well as in ours. "Consider the state of public affairs" Comenius thus begins his famous analysis of the political situation of his time, which from the first glance amazes the reader with its relevancy (compare *Panegersia*, V: 28). Instead of wisdom and virtue Comenius must acknowledge the plethora of "ugly and unworthy excesses," which we as human beings allow in public affairs. According to Comenius "wolves, bears, tigers, snakes and other wild animals live with other members of their kind in unison. [...] But we, the rational creatures [...] behave worse than animals; either we continually push ourselves to governance, or on the contrary we avoid all government and thus present everywhere the attitudes that lead to disorder, and entangle ourselves in endless trouble." (*Panegersia*, V: 28-34).

Similarly, contemporary Western society faces "moral deficit", which call for action. Questions of moral literacy and education are moving from the margins to the center of social and educational attention.¹ A new demand emerged for schools to get involved in the moral education.² The pressing concern is not only about decent

¹ In this study I will work with the English term *morality* although in the Czech language there are three terms for this: *mravnost*, *morálnost* and *etičnost*. The etymology of these terms is different, but in common contemporary usage they are overlapping. Comenius used all three terms. When writing in Latin he often used the term *moralis*, in Czech he used the term *mravnost*, which corresponds to the contemporary use of the terms *morálnost* and *etičnost*. Comenius does not give clear definitions, but from his *Mudus moralis* (6th grade of *Pansofia*) it is evident that he considered ethics – "the wisdom of self-conduct" – to be part of morality.

² This is evident in the vast amount of literature that has been produced on this subject in recent years. Besides classics such as Piaget or Kohlberg, see for example: Lickona (2003), Schaps et al (2001), Berkowitz and Bier

socio-psychological training (habits, communication, cooperation, positive self-image, etc.), which should hopefully make human interaction more pleasant and easier. It involves more: in fact the discussion is about nothing less than a “physical survival of the human race” (compare Vacek, 2008). For the first time in history our planet is being threatened by its own (morally corrupt) inhabitants, and if things continue as they are, the planet will become uninhabitable. Gilles Lipovetsky has put it appositely: “the 21st Century will either be ethical or it will not be at all” (1999, p. 11).

With the revival of moral education however, questions emerge, the answers to which will set the nature and effectiveness of the whole moral education endeavor. On the one hand are questions about methodology, such as how to educate towards morality — by what method, in what form, using what means; on the other hand are questions of content — what to teach, what kind of knowledge, which skills, etc. And further there are teleological questions — what is the goal of moral education, and how should the properly-formed character be? Equally important are questions of philosophy and anthropology, which require a cultural-historical interpretation: where did the moral deficit come from, that drives people „to the brink of self-destruction“³? What are its roots, what is it based on? And also, more fundamentally: how is it that human nature needs nay moral formation in the first place? Why does it suffer de-formatinal tendencies? Why do people behave immorally? Why do human beings do inhuman things?

Educators have been seeking answers to these questions from time immemorial, and a wide variety of answers have unfolded out of the diverse points of view of the seekers. In this study I’m not making a claim to any kind of definitive or exhaustive answer to all these questions. But for pedagogical inspiration I want to restore the source of Jan Amos Comenius, and for a very good reason. Comenius, in his works (not only didactic), thoroughly dealt with the theme of education towards morality (and piety), and even regarded it as the key element of his pedagogical work — as we shall see. Furthermore, Comenius is known as a man of thoughtful vision, with which he foresaw many moral and educational problems and unceasingly wrote about them. Therefore in the following paragraphs I will attempt to analyze Comenius’ concept of moral education as it is outlined in his didactic and pansophic works, and to show its relevance for current educational and moral discourse. At the same time, I will try to explain why modern Czech Comeniological research biased by communist ideology has neglected precisely this aspect of his pedagogy.

2. *Methodus morum in specie*

How significant was moral education for Comenius is evident in the frequency he thematized it, explicitly emphasized, and repeated it in his various works. Morality as such is dealt with in his *Mundus moralis* – 6th grade of Pansofia (Comenius, 1992), and partial notes can be found in number of his works (*School of infancy*, *Via lucis*, etc.), but the educational aspects of morality are most thoroughly treated in his *Didactics* (both *Great* and *Czech*, briefly also in *Analytical didactic*). In addition to little notes spread throughout the books, Comenius devoted an entire chapter (XXIII in both books) to the question and named it “*Methodus morum in specie*”,

(2005), Hoge (2002), Čapek (2008), Lorenzová (2010), Olivar (1992), Vacek (2008), Erikson (1968), Fuchs (2003), Kohák (1993), Lipovetsky (1999), Perry (1970).

³ This problem is well treated from various points of view by Machovec (2006) and Palouš (1991) for example.

which M. W. Keating translates into English as “The method of morals.”⁴

Comenius begins the preface to this chapter by explaining that everything he had written to that point was only the “preparation“ or “beginning“ and not the main work. And it’s necessary to emphasize here that in the previous twenty two chapters he dealt with nothing less than the entire system of pedagogical goals, principles and methodology for the teaching of “science, art and language.” But the main work, according to Comenius, is the “study of wisdom, which elevates us and makes us steadfast and noble-minded – the study to which we have given the name of morality and of piety, and by means by which we are exalted above all creatures, and draw nigh to God himself.” These three purposes of the study of wisdom correspond to the triad of fundamental pedagogical goals the author introduced at the very beginning of his *Didactics*. There in the introduction Comenius clarifies that the teleological demand for knowledge, morals and godliness arises from an *a priori* anthropological nature, which means that to humankind it has been given 1) to be knowledgeable of things, 2) to have power over things and one’s self, and 3) to turn to God, the source of everything.⁵

All three areas belong inseparably together and would be “unhallowed” if they were separated.⁶ “For what is literary skill without virtue?” Comenius floats this rhetorical question and immediately answers it with a reference to the old proverb “He who makes progress in knowledge but not in morality ... retreats rather than advances. And thus what Solomon said about the beautiful but foolish woman holds good for the learned man who possesses no virtue: *As a jewel of gold in a swine’s snout, so is a fair woman who is without discretion*” (Comenius, 1926, ch. X, p. 17). Hence an education that wasn’t held together with morality and the “firm bond” of piety, would be a “miserable” education. A good education would instead develop humanity in all three of the above-mentioned dimensions. For “the whole excellence (*essence* in *Czech didactic*) of man,” Comenius explains elsewhere (Comenius 1905, ch. IV, p. 7), is situated in these three things, “for they alone are the foundation of the present and of the future life. All other things (health, strength, beauty, riches, honour, friendship, good-fortune, long life) are as nothing, if God grant them to any, but extrinsic ornaments of life, and if a man greedily gape after them, engross himself in their pursuit, occupy and overwhelm himself with them to the neglect of those more important matters, then they become superfluous vanities and harmful obstructions.”

The ultimate aims of moral education in Comenius’ *Didactic* are the so-called “key” or cardinal virtues of “wisdom, moderation, courage and justice” (*prudentia, temperantia, fortitudo, iustitia*), without which the structure of pedagogy would be “unfounded.” Comenius first briefly clarifies the individual virtue, and subsequently posits the method of its acquisition; together, these then form the crux of his methodology of moral education. Interestingly, he identifies six principles in *Czech Didactic*, and later in the *Great Didactic*

⁴ In most citations I will rely on Keating’s translation; my own translations from *Czech Didactic* will be indicated. Most of the citations I will make in this paper come from this 23rd chapter, therefore I won’t burden the reader with excessive references. I will only cite the reference when it comes from a different chapter in *Didactic* or from a different book.

⁵ Comenius (1926) submitted his pedagogical teleology in the 4th chapter.

⁶ Comenius (1905, ch.X) clarifies the theme of the inseparability of the individual areas of education in another chapter, explaining the so-called “universality” of education.

supplements and expands them to ten.⁷ For the sake of clarity I will only briefly summarize them here:

- I. Virtue is cultivated by actions, not by talk. For man is given life “to spend it in communication with people and in action.” Without virtuous actions man isn’t anything more than a meaningless burden on the earth.
- II. Virtue is in part gained by interactions with virtuous people. An example is the education Alexander received from Aristotle.
- III. Virtuous conduct is cultivated by active perseverance. A properly gentle and constant occupation of the spirit and body turns into diligence, so that idleness becomes unbearable for such a man.
- IV. At the heart of every virtue is service to others. Inherent in fallen human nature is enormous self-love, which has the effect that “everyone wants most of the attention.” Thus it is necessary to carefully instill the understanding that “we are not born only for ourselves, but for God and our neighbor.”
- V. Cultivation of the virtues must begin at the earliest age, before “ill manners and vice begin to nest.” In the same way that it’s easy to mold wax and gypsum when they’re soft, but once they’ve hardened it’s impossible to re-shape them, so also with men: most of one’s character is based on the first “skills” that are instilled in early childhood.
- VI. Honor is learned by virtuous action. As he learns to “walk by walking, to speak by speaking, to read by reading” etc., so a man learns “to obey by obedience, forbearance by delays, veracity by speaking truth” and so on.
- VII. Virtue is learned by example. “For children are like monkeys: everything they see, whether good or bad, they immediately want to imitate, even when they’re told not to, and thus they learn to imitate before they learn how to learn.” Therefore they need “living examples” as instructors.
- VIII. Virtue is also learned by instruction, which has to accompany example. Instructing means clarifying the meaning of the given rule of moral behavior, so as to understand why they should do it, what they should do, and why they should do it that way. Similarly, as “by a thorn a beast is pushed to move or to run, so a successful mind is not only told but also urged by gentle words to run to virtue.”
- IX. It’s necessary to protect children from bad people and influences. Inasmuch as a child’s mind is easily infected, it is necessary on the one hand to retreat from “evil society” and on the other hand to avoid lazy people. For the man who is idle “learns to do evil, because a mind cannot be empty, if it isn’t carrying something useful, it fills itself with empty, useless and vile things.”
- X. Virtue requires discipline. Inasmuch as fallen human nature reveals itself to be constantly “here and there,” it’s necessary to systematically discipline it.⁸

It is worth mentioning that Comenius is aware of the principle that a young age is well fitting for any kind of education or formation. In chapter VII, paragraph 4, he speaks almost like a developmental psychologist: “It is the nature of everything that comes into being, that while tender, it is easily *bent* and *formed* (emphasis mine).

⁷ There is a question as to whether the expanded version in the *Great Didactics* is actually clearer. The careful reader can’t escape the fact that some of the principles in the “great” version overlap each other.

⁸ Comenius presents a more detailed analysis of the method of discipline in chapter XXVI.

... It is evident that the same holds good with man himself,” continues Comenius in the following paragraph, and infers: “If piety is to take root in any man’s heart, it must be engrafted while he is still young; if we wish anyone to be virtuous, we must train (chisel, *otesat* in Czech Didactic) him in early youth; if we wish him to make great progress in wisdom, we must direct his faculties towards it in infancy...”

The inter-relationship of morality and piety can hardly be overlooked. It is evident throughout the book, but in chapter XXIII and XXIV Comenius makes it explicit. To stress his point, he accompanies the chapter on moral education with a brief chapter called *Methodus pietatis* dealing with “instilling piety” (XXIV). Here he acknowledges that piety is a special “gift of God,” but adds that God uses also the “natural agencies” of his grace and he therefore wants parents, teachers and ministers to be his “assistants”. This, then, leads to the conclusion that piety ought to be an integral part of family education as well as school education. Comenius repeats that by piety is meant the ability to “seek God everywhere, ... to follow him everywhere ... and to enjoy him always”⁹ and explains that the first happens through reason, the second through will, and the third through the joy of knowing him. There are three sources of piety given to people: God’s word, the world, and human beings (*Scriptura, natura, providentia particularis*); we are to read, observe and meditate carefully in order to draw from them (*Great didactic*, XXIV, 3-5). The growth in piety takes place through *contemplation, prayer* and *trials*, which make a believer to be a “true Christian”, (*Great didactic*, XXIV, 6-9). But piety must not be merely “a matter of words,” explains Comenius, but must be based on a “living faith” which is authenticated by adequate deeds (*Great Didactic*, XXIV, 19, 26, compare also *Czech Didactic*, XXIV, 14). Similarly, in *Mundus moralis* Comenius says that one of the key aspects of proper moral wisdom (*prudentia*) is pursuance, for “to know what ought to be done is not as difficult as doing it” (*Mundus moralis*, II, 5).

Since one of the key sources of piety is the Scripture, Comenius presents a strong case for its role in education (in chapter XXV). Rather than using pagan books (antique classics) in schools, he encourages using the Scriptures and argues for its superiority. That does not mean he would reject the classics as such, but he is concerned about the primary influence to which “young souls” are to be exposed. There is much wisdom in the pagan literature consistent with the Scriptures, which might be collected and used, and which Comenius frequently does in all his writings. But at the same time there is much “immorality,” “godlessness,” and “blindness” (*Czech Didactic*, XXIV, 8), which only a trained spirit can distinguish, and which is therefore not suitable for a youth. Some of Comenius’ statements concerning the classics such as Ovid, Lucianus, Diogenes and Aristotle led some interpreters (e.g. F. X. Šalda, 1987) to the conclusion that he was an “enemy of the antique” as such. That however is a very artificial reading of Comenius, for throughout all his work there are virtually hundreds of quotations from the classics used as validations of his arguments. The same attitude can be

⁹ This quotation comes from *Czech Didactics*. Sometimes the formulations in *Czech Didactic* are better, because Comenius wrote it for simple, non-highly-educated people. Compare this formulation with the one in *Great Didactic* (in Keating’s English): “We have already explained what we mean by piety, namely, that (after we had thoroughly grasped the conceptions of faith and of religion) our hearts should seek God everywhere (since He has concealed himself with his works as with a curtain, and, invisibly present in all visible things, directs all, though unseen), and that when we have found Him, we should follow him, and when we have attained him we should enjoy Him.”

observed also in Comenius' late *Věječka moudrosti* (Ventilabrum), where in paragraph 38 he shows in contemporary examples how pagan literature turned a number of people, including the Swedish queen Christina, away from the truth.

3. Comenius: not modern, yet modern

Can a contemporary teacher make any sense of this “old-fashioned” material? Is there a way in which Comenius' “method of morals” could enrich today's discussion about moral education? Clearly, his method is not a didactic methodology in the modern sense, it is not a description of a teaching techniques or strategies a teacher could follow in the classroom. Rather it is a set of principles or general rules, so a contemporary teacher-practitioner might be disappointed after the first reading. Nevertheless, the principles, as general as they are, contain an admirable amount of pedagogical, psychological and sociological intuition. It's fascinating that long before the possibility of experimental verification of his principles existed, Comenius saw and named such patterns inherent in moral education as: learning through practice, the influence of peer pressure, the principle of active participation, the principle of systematics, the principle of appropriateness, the principle of imitation, the significance of moral examples, and so on. Despite his archaic language, Comenius again and again amazes us with his timelessness and, as it were, “astonishingly prophetic” foresight, in the words of Jean Piaget (1993, p. 9). Comenius' ability to work out these educational principles surely earns him great admiration, because he arrived at them without the instruments of modern empirical science.

However, contemporary theory of education already knows all these principles. Comenius could never have imagined to what extent or how thoroughly his systematic questions about the formation of character have been examined and debated.¹⁰ Nor does Comenius bring anything new from the perspective of content: his program for cultivating the cardinal virtues goes back to the antique tradition, and thus has been dealt with many times, both before and after Comenius. In fact, I believe the main contribution of his work lies elsewhere.

I contend that the real challenge of his “method” is in his specific understanding of the relationship between the cognitive, moral and spiritual capacity of human beings. Comenius' theory implies the very close union of knowledge, morality and piety, but not, however, that they are an identity. Herein lies the greatest difference with the modern understanding of his ideas. The belief of the Enlightenment philosophers in the nearly omnipotent ability of reason altered the traditional relationship between *scientia* and *conscientia* (knowledge and conscience) to the extent that it began to be assumed that science and knowledge would become the automatic humanizing factor in the process of ennobling humanity (compare Bauman, 2004, p. 59). For only he who knows, has power.¹¹ And the one who “rightly” knows, will have the power to “rightly” act.¹² The experience of

¹⁰ As an indication of the massive research, see for example Čapek (2008), Vacínová and Langová (1994), Petty (1996), Vágnerová (1997), Fontana (1997), Vacek (2008), and Olivar (1992).

¹¹ Francis Bacon more than once repeats the idea that *scientia potentia est* (knowledge is power) in his then revolutionary reflections, whose specific methods also inspired Comenius. See for example Bacon (1974, p. 89, 186).

¹² Bauman in this context reminds us of Comte's dictum “to know, in order to have the power to act.” See Bauman (2004, p. 153).

history, however, shows that with humans it's more complicated than that. Once again Bauman (2004, p. 159) addresses the problem: "If we recall the perversity of the 20th Century in which science took an active part, the automatically-humanizing assumption of modern times will seem ridiculous and perhaps even criminally naive. Instead of gratefully giving ourselves over to the care of the bearers of knowledge, we tend rather to carefully watch their hands with ever increasing suspicion and fear."

The brilliance of Comenius' concept is revealed in the way he's able to sort out and explain the epistemological, moral and spiritual complexity of human beings. In contrast to the modern interpretation, Comenius never thought that knowledge-education could, in and of itself, lead to morality (and piety). In fact, it's exactly the opposite.¹³ It's precisely because knowledge cannot guarantee morality, that it's necessary to accompany it with moral education. When it isn't handled this way it goes against human nature — it's a "ripping apart" of the person, for it's given to humankind not only to be knowledgeable of things, but also to use that knowledge well (and by this, honor the Creator).

It should be mentioned that humanity is, in Comenius' understanding, thoroughly (and unquestionably) anchored metaphysically and theologically. Comenius takes for granted, for example, that a human being wasn't made "only for himself, but for God and his fellow man." Likewise, human nature isn't defined (even by an excellent observer) empirically, but theologically: man is the most perfect and excellent of all creation because he was made in the image of God, but he is also a sinner because he has denied that image. Out of this arises the need for a pedagogical formation of character — one's character is broken and cannot by its own efforts become good; on the contrary, it has a tendency "to become obstructed by empty, fruitless and vile things." Education is thus *educatio* in the original sense of the word: *e-ducare*, a leading out of, or away from, the hindrances of one's sinful self.¹⁴ Without any exaggeration, for Comenius education plays a soteriological¹⁵ role: it is a God-given means of the salvation of mankind. The ultimate goal is restoration of the *nexus hypostaticus* (personal relationship) between the human being and the Creator (*Great didactics*, I, 3).

4. Conclusion: practical educational implications

There is much thought-provoking material in Comenius' notion of moral education. In the conclusion I want to stress three practical inspirations which emerge from his *Methodus morum in specie*.

¹³ Here I argue with the interpretation of P. Menck, who in his essay on the formation of conscience (Menck, 2001) indicates that Comenius believed in a moral "automatism by which conscience follows knowledge - provided the knowledge is true." Menck extrapolates this conclusion from his interpretation of Comenius's illustrations in *Orbis pictus*. However I believe that's a hasty conclusion which doesn't take into account the other didactic works of Comenius. If Comenius really believed that morality appeared automatically with correct knowledge, he would logically have focused his *Didactics* only on the cognitive level of learning. But the fact that, next to rational education Comenius insists on the learning of morals and posits systematic principles, speaks against Menck's assumptions. For further details of Menck's argument see pp. 261-275.

¹⁴ Cf. R. Paluoš's notion of *educatio* in Paluoš (1991, p. 63ff) or Wright (2004, p. 130-131).

¹⁵ Soteriology is a theological discipline which deals with questions of salvation.

First, educating in knowledge without morality is dangerous. For knowledge – as well as anything else – might be both used and abused. A person who is well *informed*, but not morally *formed* is merely a “useless encumbrance on the earth”, according to Comenius, even a “misery” — to oneself as well as to others. For the greater the knowledge, the worse it is when it’s used for evil. Therefore Comenius contended that an educated but immoral humanity goes backwards rather than forwards, degenerating. On the other hand, his “workshop of humanity”¹⁶ deliberately aims for regeneration, that is, for the restoration of every dimension of humanity — reason, character and spirit which is to say, knowledge, morality and piety.

Second, educating in morality without piety is incomplete. There is no doubt one can be led to behave morally without any reference to any metaphysical instance or authority. Moreover, moral behavior in itself brings a special kind joy and fulfillment to its agent. But if Comenius is right in his anthropology, that is – let me remind the reader – if human beings are endowed with the 1) rational, 2) moral and 3) spiritual capacities, an education which would neglect any of these dimensions suffers incompleteness. If the *nexus hypostaticus* – the personal relationship to the Creator – is an essential part of human nature, it has to be part of human education. Without the spiritual, knowledge becomes pointless, morality becomes moralization and education becomes spiritless. A personal relationship to the Creator, on the contrary, is what makes morality meaningful “even if no one is watching,” according to Comenius.¹⁷

Third, morality (as well as piety) is both teachable and learnable. This is obviously closely related to the previous point and has been already alluded to above, but let me emphasize it as I conclude. What was implicit in *Didactics* is made explicit in *Pampaedia* (Comenius, 1992). Here in chapter III, paragraph 46 Comenius presents again the argument for the necessity of leading towards morality and courtesy, and the following paragraph – dealing with “instilling piety” – begins with the words: “For it is evident ... that also piety is teachable...” (III, 47). Comenius of course recognizes that spiritual regeneration is the necessary starting point given by the grace of God. But grace does not “abolish” human nature, on the contrary, grace “restores” and “perfects” it.¹⁸ Therefore, it is legitimate to use the natural instruments when leading towards morality and piety. And to Comenius it is evident that nature teaches that morality and piety will be best instilled by:

- 1) Providing a good and living example to children, for imitation is one of the key elements of human learning.
- 2) Providing an adequate explanation of every rule or principle that is to be obeyed, for it is good for human action to know and understand why we do what we do.
- 3) Providing an opportunity for everyday practice, because morality and piety are not only a matter of knowing, but also of doing.¹⁹

The whole process must never be “violent” or “coarse,” on the contrary, it must be “gentle,” “free” and “smooth” (cf. III, 46, 47). For that is the way God himself relates to people, he brings no one to himself violently, against his or her will (cf. *Mundus spiritualis*, VII, 2). To make the pedagogical application as clear as

¹⁶ Comenius often uses this expression (*humanitatis officinae*) to describe his idea of school. Keating (Comenius, 1896) translates it as the “forging-place of men.” See also Comenius (1905, XI, 1).

¹⁷ See *Mundus moralis*, III, a sub-chapter on dealing with ambition (*ambitio*), paragraph 4.

¹⁸ For more details on the subject of regeneration see chapter VII in *Mundus spiritualis*.

¹⁹ Notice that in both paragraphs (on morality and on piety) Comenius follows the same threefold structure of instruction – example, understanding, practice.

possible, let me rephrase Comenius' words: Teachers, parents, educators, it is possible to raise good and godly children. This is how to do it: 1) be good and godly yourself, 2) let them see or understand the beauty of the good and the godly, 3) let them do or experience what is good and godly.

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