



Religious and Moral Education in the Light of Spiritual Science

Rudolf Steiner

The following is excerpted from a lecture given by Rudolf Steiner at the Hague on November 4, 1922. It appears for the first time in English translation as part of a collection entitled Education, Teaching, and the Practical Life (available from AWSNA Publications).

An artistic element, I might call it a mood of piety toward the human essence, belongs in education, in teaching. This is particularly the case if we direct our gaze at the religious and moral education we want to bestow on the child. And here anthroposophical spiritual science shows us that especially when it comes to the religious and moral element, there is something in the human time-body that is of great significance for the life span on earth of the entire human being. If one can recognize the small child's mood as that of an essentially imitative being imitating the outer world, and if we can put ourselves in this mood, the only way to characterize it is this—the child is completely open to the outer world; the child gets lost in the outer world. Just as the eye loses itself in the outer world of color, the outer world of light, so too the child loses itself in the outer world. The inner world dawns in the child only gradually. Specific mental representations emerge little by little out of dreams, which still completely live and weave in the outer world.

Now, dear listeners, do you know what it means to revere this mood in the child? It is in truth the pious mood, the religious mood lying in the middle of the sense or physical world. No matter how wild a child may be, when it comes to its relationship with the sense world, its devotion to the world of the senses, this childlike mood is a religious one. The child longs to identify completely with the things it sees in its surroundings. This mood is not yet religion proper. But this mood, so

present in the small child before the change of teeth, gradually begins to fade away; it disappears altogether when the self-evident sense of authority appears with the change of teeth—yet, for the insightful teacher, this mood reappears in a remarkable way.

The insightful teacher and educator faces perhaps his greatest task when the child reaches the ninth or tenth year. Teachers will notice then that most of the children in their care come to them and need them quite specially; the form it takes is that they come to teachers with questions—not always expressly formulated, often unspoken, merely living in feelings. The thing that matters then is much less that one give the children a particular answer (we may answer in one or another way, the content does not matter all that much). What greatly matters is that one releases the right kind of trust in the child, that one is able to meet the child with the right feeling at the right moment; and these moments always occur around the ninth and tenth year.

What greatly matters is that one releases the right kind of trust in the child, that one is able to meet the child with the right feeling at the right moment.

I can characterize this moment in a variety of ways. When we teach a child, we may note that before this point children do not fully distinguish themselves from their surroundings; children do not yet experience themselves really as an ego, even though they have long been referring to themselves as “I”. At that point in life, children learn to feel distinct from their environment. We now can no longer expect to act upon the children purely through fairy tales, or through all kinds of teaching stories in

which we animate the outer physical world. So let's start with the observation that the child distinguishes itself from the outer world as an "I".

But something else plays an essential role, which is connected deeply with moral development. The following happens: at the beginning of the stage during which children completely trust authority, they accept this authoritative individual just as he or she is. Between the ninth and the tenth year, something happens—it doesn't have to be conscious, it may happen deep in the realm of feeling, we might say in the subconscious realm, but it is unquestionably there—children find themselves, so to say, forced by their development to look through the authoritative person to what it is that that person represents. The authoritative person says: this is true, this is good, this is beautiful. And now, the child would like to sense where the source in the authoritative person lies, which gives that person knowledge of the good, the true, the beautiful; and where the will resides for the true, the good, and the beautiful. This is due to the fact that something which during the change of teeth, and still afterwards, was resting—I would like to say—in the underground of the soul, something that still was in early childhood—if I may use this unusual term—a physical, "sensibly-pious" [*sinnlich-frommes*] devotion to the outer world; it has disappeared from the underground of the soul and now seems to emerge from the depths of the human entity. Something that in the nursing child and up to the change of teeth was physical, a physical element that constitutes the core of all later religious feeling toward the world, now rises to the surface between the ninth and tenth year as a psychological need.

To know that, to count on the fact that just as one lovingly nurtures the seed in order for it to become a plant, so in the same way something—a physical seed—that at one time was being prepared in the child now stands before us, demanding to be nurtured psychologically; knowing this gives one a special relationship to the child. And, in this way, one plants the seed of religion into the child.

[T]he child completely trusts authority, it accepts this authoritative individual just as he or she is.

By the same token, educators will note that among adolescents, around their seventeenth or eighteenth year, something that took the form of a soul disposition, a religious feeling in the elementary school child now appears in the spirit, and is poured into the will, so that young adults at this age build up their religious ideals.

You see, if one wants to educate in a meaningful, truthful, and realistic way, it is of the utmost importance to penetrate these things. Nature, after all, has taken care of the human physical organism, or else we would never be sure—especially when dealing with modern, futuristic painters—whether people might not have a sudden impulse to stick the ear in the wrong place. These kinds of thing would happen if nature had not taken care of the entire organization of the human body. In the same way, educators must take care of the time-body.

We should not attempt to cultivate the child's religious sense before the moment I just described; at best we should simply care for it in a preparatory way. We must hold the time-body of the child with a sure hand. We must tell ourselves: whatever you gave the child earlier in the way of religious feelings and concepts, it all remains external, taken on authority. But between the ninth and the tenth year, something awakens in the child. If we perceive that, if we guide the feelings that wish to spring almost of themselves from the soul in a religious sense, then we make of the child a religious true person. There is so little psychology of time nowadays, or else people would know the origin of the false religious perceptions and feelings we find in contemporary society—they go back to the fact that people believe one can develop all manner of things at each and every age, to the fact that one doesn't know what precisely must be drawn out of the child's soul between the ninth and the tenth year.

If we arrange all instruction in such a way that, by the twelfth year, the child has learnt enough science—completely in agreement with the prescriptions of elementary school education—to survey many physical facts, many botanical concepts, and so forth, not yet in a scientific sense but in a child's sense, then around the twelfth year, we can attend to the conflict that arises when one

looks up, on one hand, to divine world guidance (to which the child could be directed between the ninth and tenth year) and, on the other, to the consequences of learning about the natural phenomena revealed to us in external ways—unrelated to the unfolding of moral or divine-spiritual forces. After all, these natural phenomena appear to us without giving the impression that moral principles brought them about, and without our perceiving in them the immanent presence of the divine.

It is precisely this that created for modern humanity the conflict that leads our sensibility to the religious wellsprings of existence, on one hand, and to natural science, on the other hand. Around the twelfth year, real knowledge of the human being allows us to note that we can quietly touch upon these conflicts with the maturing child, but also that we are in the position—because religious feelings are still so strong, so fresh, so lively, so youthful, as they can only be in the twelve-year old—to guide children in the right manner so that later in life they will not need to see nature emptied of the divine, but will be able instead to find the harmony between nature and the divine-spiritual Cosmic Being.

In the end it means allowing the conflict to come out into the open, always considering the right development of the human time-body, because this conflict is most effectively bridged by the very forces already resident in the human soul. To those who are able to observe contemporary social life—with empathy, with a true psychology—such an art of education offers the realization that many human beings never get past the conflict I just mentioned, because they were not, at the right age, led to experience the conflict and to be taken beyond it. The main thing is that teacher and educator should know human life as a whole, so that they can recognize the right thing at the right time as they encounter it, in each child, each young person, and find their bearings at the right time.

Religious experience also resides in the human being. It can't be stuffed into the soul, we must

draw it out of the soul. Just as little as we can eat with our nose, but must use our mouth, so too we must know that we cannot teach religion just at any time, but only at the appropriate age. True spiritual knowledge is the primary way we learn to bring the right thing to the child at the right age. Then the child takes whatever matches its capacities.

And if we look at the child's development and rightly know that between the change of teeth and puberty everything is determined by the personal relationship between teacher and child, and that there must be something fully artistic in this personal interrelationship, then the child's relationship to the self-evident authority develops out of imponderable elements, involving pleasure and displeasure, sympathy and antipathy.

Teachers speak to children in stories, in parables—there are hundreds of possible ways—about what is morally good, what they find morally bad. If a teacher is really able to develop an artistic education, then the artistic element between educator and child results in the child learning to consider the Good with sympathy, Evil with antipathy, so that out of pleasure and displeasure,

moral feeling and ethical sensibility develop in the child between the ages of seven and fourteen.

It is false to give children commands during these years. Either we enslave them, or else we make them mean, obstinate, rebellious against all commands. They do not understand why they should obey commands. But what a self-evident authority finds to be right or not-right, good or evil, this the children learn to follow with sympathy or antipathy. And this sympathy and antipathy become self-evident content of the soul.

Whatever develops through schooling at that age, whatever moral feeling has been established between the seventh and the fourteen years, takes the form of will impulses only in the seventeenth-eighteenth year, provided there has been present in the child's life an individual whose own enthusiasm for moral ideals, for beautiful human ideals, served as a guiding light.

Just as the seed is not yet the plant and yet must be there by necessity for the plant to appear,

[B]etween the change of teeth and puberty everything is determined by the personal relationship between teacher and child.

so the “moral-will” can become with full force the ripe, healthy fruit in the moral human being at the age of sixteen or seventeen if moral feeling develops between the seventh and the fourteenth year out of the emulation of a self-evident authority.

What is the surest way to develop this moral feeling? It is so to guide the entire instruction, the entire education, that the child learns one feeling above all. Perhaps the small child’s education can already ensure it long before the change of teeth, if we guide the child to experience a sense of gratitude toward all that it receives from life. People nowadays underestimate the feeling of gratitude. This feeling of gratitude links a person with the world, allows a person to know himself or herself as a part of the world. If the child is guided to develop a feeling of gratitude toward even the smallest things, the child does not isolate itself in egoism; rather the child becomes altruistic and is connected with its surroundings. Then, also, with school-age children, teaching can be organized so that little by little the child learns to perceive that it owes its physical existence, its soul existence, its mental existence to the spiritual powers of the world, the physical, the soul, the spiritual powers of the world, so that this gratitude expands to a sense of thankfulness toward the whole world from whose womb it was born. Thus a sense of gratitude to parents and educators, to all its surroundings, can guide the child to an expansive feeling of thankfulness to the divine rulers of the world.

This gratitude must always precede knowledge, which can only be acquired. Any knowledge, no matter how logically justified, which does not open to a feeling of gratitude toward the world, serves only to hamper the person’s development, to cripple soul and spirit.

Spiritual science shows that all knowledge, no matter how exalted, even the most exact, can lead to feelings, first and foremost feelings of gratitude. And if one has implanted gratitude in the

If the child is guided to develop a feeling of gratitude toward even the smallest things, the child does not isolate itself in egoism; rather the child becomes altruistic and is connected with its surroundings.

child, one will see that one has prepared the soil for ethical education. For if we cultivate this gratitude, and if this feeling of thankfulness is seen to be compatible with all knowledge, then the child’s feeling easily turns into a flooding of universal love through its entire being, love for all other humans and ultimately for all creatures. The best way to cultivate love is out of a sense of gratitude.

In particular, it will become possible to let authority gradually become an authority completely permeated with love. The teacher’s entire behavior must be so directed that this authority, which at first was, so to say, neutral toward love, which called forth self-evident following, unquestioning obedience, now calls forth free obedience, when the child is nine or ten, so that the child’s soul now obeys the self-evident authority in a love which it has awakened unto itself, a love that it already understands.

If one has thus developed in the soul the right kind of gratitude and love, it will be possible later to guide the child or young person’s moral feeling so that the person really can recognize in moral life that upon which human dignity is founded in the highest measure: I can now see what raises me above the mere sense-world, above the merely physical world, what transports me to truly spiritual existence.

I have attempted to describe the spiritual world out of supersensible knowledge. The spiritual researcher can acquire knowledge of this spiritual world. But if we can perceive morality with the necessary strength, with the necessary purity, we shall find that in our inner moral life, even in our ordinary life, we stand within a spiritual life. We achieve this if we bring to the child a particular knowledge of the human being. And actually we should never graduate any child from school—the general school of life—without some knowledge of the human being. We should release children from school only when to some extent they are imbued with a sense of the saying: “Know Thyself.”

Naturally the mandate to “Know Thyself” can be brought to an ever higher level with all manner of knowledge and wisdom. But every elementary school should release the child with some measure of acquired self-knowledge. Up to a certain point, human beings need to know themselves as body, soul, and spirit. This knowledge—following as it does from real spiritual knowledge—posits a true connection between the human being and goodness.

Why is it that what is acknowledged today as modern science does not come to recognize this connection? Because it doesn't fully recognize the human being. But just as a person would not be fully

human if one organ were not irrigated by blood—the organ would atrophy without blood circulation—so one learns when one really sees the full human being in body, soul, and spirit, that the Good is what first makes the human being fully human, and Evil is something that arises from a human being that has remained incomplete.

A child who is thoroughly familiar with gratitude, with love, will also learn to understand that human beings are complete only when they see themselves as executants of the divine world order, of the good in the world, the good in earthly existence. If moral education is rooted in gratitude and egotism overcome—not through mystical moralistic or sentimental harangues—if healthy gratitude leads to unsentimental love it will be possible to convince the young world-loving person that the not-good person who fails to be the bearer of the Good is crippled in body, soul, and spirit just as a person is crippled who is missing a leg. In our imagination, in etheric spiritual knowledge, we learn to recognize the Good as the fully human person.

Whenever we take a cursory look at a drawing of the nervous system or the circulatory system we can see what looks like the shadow of a full human being; so too, for imaginative knowledge, imagining the Good is like glimpsing the exemplar of a whole human being.

But here moral education unites with religious education. For only now does it make sense to think of God as the wellspring of the Good and of the human being as made in God's image. Here,

Only the morally good person is a true and complete human being

religious and moral education lead to the person feeling that we are only truly human when we are moral human beings, that those who do not want to live morally are not complete human beings. Only if we learn to educate human beings so that they truly and honestly feel robbed of their humanity when they do not act ethically, will they have received the right religious and moral education.

Let no one say that talk is easy and that this must remain a pure ideal since nothing in this world can ever be perfect. Anyone speaking out of spiritual science knows full well that the outer world cannot be perfect.

But one conviction can permeate us when we teach and educate; this conviction can fill us with ever fresh enthusiasm and will be accompanied by the sense that the child's soul can understand us in a sensitive way, and we shall find our way to the child's will; this conviction is rooted in a true knowledge of the human being, culminating in the statement: Only the morally good person is a true and complete human being, and religious impulses permeate the morally good human being.

Thus all education can culminate in religious and moral education. But we must also know that human beings carry in themselves a time-body and that a spiritually informed knowledge of the human being involves learning to observe this time-body at every hour, every week, every year of our teaching, and lovingly understanding it in all its details...

And so also the fruitfulness of these religious and moral impulses in education become evident in bodily education, guided from the soul and spiritual side, for instance, in the application of eurhythmics in a school. I mention this only because it has been shown that the children find themselves as spontaneously in the art of eurhythmics, as at an earlier age they find their way into the speaking of sounds; I also meant to show you that anyone who wants to see religious and moral feelings cultivated in the way I explained today should in no way neglect bodily education. Quite the contrary, those who behold the child's life with reverence and spirit-filled activity cannot neglect physical education, for they know that the

soul and spirit express themselves in the body, right down to the individual blood vessels, and that to neglect them means to some extent to push the spirit back, out of the sense-world in which it wants to reveal itself.

The child is first and foremost a unity of body, soul, and spirit, and the only true educators and teachers are those who understand how to educate the child in this totality, as a unity, out of true observation... Children will be educated in the right fashion when the teacher already sees the whole person in the child, and in some sense

prophetically, clairvoyantly, can see ahead to what will become of every educational deed on which the fortune and destiny of an entire life depends. For all life, including education, that plays itself out between human beings must rest on the principle that everything that takes place between human beings can happen rightly only if one full human being can devote himself or herself to another full human being, in true love.

Engendering Coherence and Resilience

Waldorf education is in alignment with the findings of salutogenetic research, which has determined that the foundation for human health is found primarily not in the biological realm, but in a person's faculties of soul and spirit necessary for meeting life's challenges. Coherence (the soul-connection with the world) is one of the most important of these faculties, as is resilience (the power to accept and master obstacles). These aspects are not hereditary gifts, but rather abilities for which education first creates a disposition and later in life the adult person can further develop through self-education.

extracted from
Developmental Signatures
AWSNA Publications