

On Desire, Discipline, and Becoming Human

Fernando M. Murillo
University of British Columbia

“And if I distribute all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may be burned, and do not have love, I am profited nothing.”

(1 Corinthians 13:6¹)

Suggesting a return to ascetic practice in higher education today would be a bold move. And this is precisely what Brett Bertucio invites us to in his article entitled “Monastic Asceticism as Formation for a Distracted, ‘Disciplinary’ Age.”

Framing the discussion around the distractions - technological or otherwise - that plague education in our time, Bertucio sets out to propose a different response to the problem of student attention, one that would bring back to education the principles of ascetic practice of monastic communities. Seen as practices directed at the integral formation of a student, Bertucio declares the importance of examining the underlying philosophical anthropologies in diverse visions of asceticism, in order to evaluate their possibilities for university students.

While Christian and Buddhist forms of asceticism are grounded on differing theological principles, he tells us, they both share a “common anthropology-in-practice,” that is, the fashioning of the self through particular disciplines that restrict pleasures and comforts. As a discipline mainly consistent on the deferment of pleasure and gratification, no wonder ascetic discipline can be regarded as something “repugnant,” an insolent nuisance to a culture that celebrates the demands of the here and now.

In this context, Bertucio tells us that his is a *radically* different response to the issue of attention and formation. I would suggest, however, that his radicalness - the going deeper into the roots - can be taken a step further. This would imply moving deeper into the tensions of the anthropologies at stake in

the practices of formation of the self, and away from the anecdotal “success stories” from the classroom, like those that report a 200 percent increase in their awareness.

The author is right in declaring that the essential task in evaluating a potentially educational practice lies in the examination of its philosophical anthropology. This becomes apparent in Kant when, in posing three fundamental questions for philosophy—what can I know, what should I do, what may I hope—he makes it clear that all three can be answered through a fourth one: what is man.²

My response, then, will focus on the anthropological tension in the relation between self and world in regard to the process of formation, a process we can confidently refer to at this point as *Bildung*. This term will help us emphasize the distinction between educational experience as formation from practices of schooling, such as instruction. This demarcation proves to be crucial in Bertucio’s project, as the search for possibilities of application always risk falling into the trap of instrumentalism, means to an end mindset, and ameliorative compulsions.

The notion of a need for self-cultivation, which the article shows as a shared aspect in both Eastern and Western forms of asceticism, points to a primordial anthropological understanding: that as human beings we are born in a state of incompleteness. Although this basic premise for educational activity became famous in Kant’s dictum that “man can only become man by education,”³ the idea is already present and more fully developed in Comenius’ 1657 *Didactica Magna*. Building on the principle that “if a man is to be formed, it is necessary that he be formed by education,”⁴ Comenius lays down two conditions for a good education: “to know oneself (and with one self all things)” and “to rule oneself.”⁵ These two conditions, and the latter in particular, imply to an important extent the inherent place of ascetic discipline in education, one that is willing to sacrifice the present for a higher good in the future. We must not forget, however, that these conditions are predicated on a particular vision of what it means to be human. For Comenius, a human being is not merely a biological fact, but “a creature which is the image and the joy of its Creator.”⁶ As

an anthropological position, it implies particular understandings of the relation between the self with itself and with the world, which in turn have implications for what it means to be *formed* or cultivated.

Bertucio announces that for his analysis it is necessary to “examine the implicit anthropologies underlying ascetic practices in order to discern whether they have pedagogical value” and goes on to provide an informative description of understandings of such practices both in Christianity and Buddhism. Examining anthropologies and determining pedagogical value are two different tasks, though closely interrelated. The examination of anthropologies requires more than a description of practices. If we are to look at what is implicit about these practices, it demands a consideration of the substantial dimensions that constitute the subject as such and the dynamics of said dimensions in the process of formation. The German Idealist tradition of *Bildung* provides us here with helpful categories to consider. One of them is the notion of human *substance*. Another is the distinction between inner world (*Innenwelt*) and external world (*Umwelt*). For Wilhelm von Humboldt, “it is the ultimate task of our existence to achieve as much substance as possible for our concept of humanity in our person.”⁷ This statement of having to achieve substance speaks of an anthropology on incompleteness, but also one that does not start from a clean slate. It resonates with Kant’s in the position that becoming human is predicated on expanding the dispositions that are already present in us (placed there by Providence, in Kant’s terms). It is at this point that the relation of the self with itself (*Innenwelt*) and with the world (*Umwelt*) become a tension. For some, like Humboldt, linking the self to the world is the basic necessary condition for the expansion of our human powers and substance. The very possibility of an inner self is formed as a response to the connections it establishes with the outer world. For others, like Kierkegaard or even Heidegger, the world of the “they” is seen with suspicion, a source of inauthenticity that precludes the possibility of singularity, highlighting instead the need to return to grasping the self in itself. Bertucio tells us that an essential aspect of the ascetic project is the integration of mind and body, but if the project is to be evaluated in anthropological terms, then it necessarily has to take into account the question

of ontology and the way in which it deals with the relation between inner and outer, the unity of mind and body and its being-in-the-world. The relation of the I with the not-I.

It is at this point that Bertucio's article takes an interesting turn. Beyond issues of mind/body integration or attention, we learn that monastic asceticism is also involved in the "rehabilitation of desire" or the "uncovering of true desires". With this turn, the anthropological examination of ascetic discipline recovers an aspect of universality, one that in the psychoanalytic tradition, is not only the drive behind all human endeavours, but also what draws things (and us) together. For Jacques Lacan, it is desire that connects the self with the other, since in his definition, desire is always the desire of and for the other.

In his article, Bertucio points out that in the renewal of the self we see an authentic practice of education as *educere*. Since this practice is one that is taught and communicated through prescriptive texts, it comes about through the other known Latin word for education: *educare*. By bringing in the aspect of desire, however, the Eros that drives both *educare* and *educere* allows us perhaps to imagine Bertucio's ascetic formation as a practice of *Seducere*, an education that beckons and seduces.

Taken together, the attention to self and other, mind and body, intellectual work, and spiritual orientation, the disciplines at the heart of ascetic practice that Brett Bertucio has compellingly invited us to consider are revealed as practices that begin and end in love. As such, monastic disciplines find their home in the formative and spiritually enhancing practice of study. It is in study, the site of education, where we can judge their true pedagogical value.

1 David Bentley Hart, *The New Testament* (New York: Yale University Press, 2017).

2 Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Logic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 538.

3 Immanuel Kant, *On Education* (Boston: D.C. Heath & Co. Publishers, 1900), 6.

4 Johan Amos Comenius, *The Great Didactic* (New York & London: McGraw-Hill Education Classics, 1931), 33.

5 Ibid., 23.

6 Ibid., 23.

7 Wilhelm von Humboldt, "Theory of Bildung," in *Teaching as a Reflective Practice: The German Didaktik Tradition*, eds. Ian Westbury, Stefan Hopmann, and Kurt Riquarts (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), 58.