MORAL TRADITIONS, CRITICAL REFLECTION, AND EDUCATION IN A LIBERAL-DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

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1. POLITICS, THAT IS, ETHICS

> If, then, there is some end of the things we do, which we desire for its own sake [...] clearly this must be the good and the chief good. Will not the knowledge of it, then, have a great influence on life? […] If so, we must try, in outline at least, to determine what it is, and of which of the sciences or capacities it is the object. It would seem to belong to the most authoritative art and that which is most truly the master art. And politics appears to be of this nature.[1]

As the quote illustrates, the very name "ethics" was still unknown to Aristotle, and what has been later named ethics is named by him politics. This is not a detail, neither is to be explained away by such pseudo-Hegelian considerations as that Aristotle has *not yet* reached the genuine concept of the person or the individual and is *still* bound to reasoning in terms of an undivided community.

On the contrary, Aristotle had a clear idea of a *practical* part of philosophy, as opposed to a *purely theoretical* part, the former being the one that not merely satisfies our thirst for knowledge but also helps us in becoming better human beings. He had a clear idea of its subdivision into three levels, which in the Aristotelian tradition have been dubbed *monastica*, *oeconomica*, and *politica*. Note that the threefold division was still alive at Christian Wolff's times, in the eighteenth century. Thus, it was no strange idea that the whole of practical philosophy might be named after the most comprehensive of its three levels, namely politics. But politics as such was, for Aristotle and his followers up to the nineteenth-century discovery of *Realpolitik*, a kind of discourse about the proper goals for human action and the good, and indeed the wider context within which any discourse about goals and the good should be located.

It is no novelty that politics, from the beginning of the eighteenth century on, has been increasingly understood in terms of a technique, more or less as the continuation of war by other means. It is also well-known how, in the aftermath of World War II, a revival of Aristotelian politics as "practical philosophy" has taken place in Germany thanks to

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[1] Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, 1094a 18-1094b 2.

such writers as Joachim Ritter, Hans-Georg Gadamer and others, and in the United States thanks to Leo Strauss and his school. Much of the specific claims advanced by these writers are highly questionable, yet one point is a new/old idea that can be hardly questioned, namely that normative discourse, value judgments, prudential discernment need be exercised firstly about mankind's lot, since no Course of History is out there taking care of it. In a word, the new/old rather obvious idea is that politics is ethics, and any ethic that would be careful in not trespassing into politics would be no ethics at all.

In the real world, and more in detail in the world of educational institutions, such new awareness has produced a couple of distinct phenomena. The first is a number of attempts, perhaps more marked in European countries that have overcome at some point a totalitarian regime, of introducing some kind of political education as a distinct subject in school curricula. Examples of this tendency are the institution in Italy after the fall of Fascism of "civic education," a subject with a somewhat uncertain status, somewhere in between a study of the Constitution and the institutions of the democratic Republic and a kind of education *into* democratic values. In post-Franco Spain an analogous subject was introduced, formerly named "knowledge of the Constitution" and more recently "education to citizenship."

2. THE TEACHING OF "NATURAL MORALITY" IN EARLY MODERN EUROPE

There was a time in European history, from the middle of the fifteenth century to the end of the eighteenth, when the study of "natural morality" was believed to be the focus of a humanistic/secular education. This tradition began in Florence at the times of *Rinascimento* and gradually spread toward Northern Europe.

In the Middle Ages, within the framework of Scholasticism, there was hardly any teaching of ethics as a separate subject. Ethics was basically encapsulated within a theological sub-discipline, namely the doctrine of the virtues, both natural and "theological." Yet, something happened that paved the way to the Renaissance revolution, that is, between the thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries a revival of practical philosophy took place gradually in the "minor" faculty, the faculty of arts, carried out by the mostly laymen *magistri* of this faculty. The revival was a consequence of the rediscovery of a few Greek ethical works, first among them Aristotle's *Nichomachean ethics*.

Aquinas, while working within the framework of theological ethics, made a decisive – and still not fully appreciated – improvement on Aristotelian ethics, and Scotus and William of Ockham amended and developed several points in Aquinas's doctrine. The problem with Aquinas was that, while he was clear enough about the claim of existence of a "natural" morality (as contrasted with "revealed" morality) accessible to every human being thanks to the light of reason, no separate treatment of such morality was deemed necessary, and it was presented as a kind of introduction to the treatment of the natural virtues, to be crowned by the discussion of the theological ones.

In the fifteenth century, within the framework of a reaction against Scholasticism by lay *literati*, ethics had a fresh start, at once building on medieval practical philosophy and reading the classical works in a new key. The Florentine *literati* started thinking of moral philosophy as a branch of *Studia humanitatis*, that is, a set of sub-disciplines ranging from rhetoric to grammar, philology and law and supposedly aimed at shaping the character of a wise man and a good citizen. This implied that stress was laid not so much on ethics as a philosophical discipline in a technical sense but instead on "moral discourse" as a part of humanities, which in turn were meant to be the path to a "philosophical" (that is, comparatively secular, albeit compatible with the Christian faith, and besides enlightened and virtuous) way of living. Writings by such authors as Xenophon, Isocrates, Lucianus, Plutarcus, Theofrastus, Sallustius, Titus Livius and Tacitus were assumed to belong to moral discourse, and among professional philosophers Cicero and Seneca, that is, those who were closer to the rhetorical tradition, enjoyed the widest popularity. A tension emerged between the early Renaissance *rhetorical* approach to moral discourse and the later Renaissance programs for a reformed *scientific* ethics (as exemplified by Descartes, Mersenne, Spinoza, and Hobbes), but such tension should not be overstressed, since there was a shared understanding of the goals and comparatively secular character of moral discourse.

It is against this background that the immense popularity of Cicero's *De officiis* during three centuries, as well as the drastic demise of such popularity at about 1800, may be fully appreciated. This work in fact became *the* basic reading for future members of the educated elite. It was praised by virtually everybody up to Voltaire, until it started being underrated at the beginning of the nineteenth century as being, at best, not philosophical enough and, at worst, simply shallow. It may be worth reminding that it had been conceived by Cicero as a synthesis of moral

doctrines that he believed to be shared ground for almost all philosophi-
cal schools, Epicureanism excluded, even if Panetius the Stoic was his
main source. In Cicero's strategy a system of normative ethics might be
presented without expatiating on theoretical foundations for two reasons:
the first was his own middle-Academic theory of knowledge, i.e. proba-
bilism, which provided a reason why doctrines should be accepted while
still waiting for a final argument, since we may hope to provide at best
probable proofs, and the second was consensus between major schools
about a number of doctrines.

These were a distinction between absolute duty and relative duty, or
between the right *(kathòrtoma)*, and social duty *(kathékon)*.[2] The distinc-
tion yielded some kind of escape-way for normal people who choose to
live a normal life in human society while avoiding the early Stoics'
choice to retreat from the world. "Social duty" amounts to pursuing the
honestum, or what is convenient and appropriate, including four basic
goods, namely wisdom, or love of knowledge; social feeling, or preserva-
tion of human society implying distributive justice and mutual loyalty;
magnanimity, or strength of mind; self-control.[3] Virtue, consisting in
"nature itself when led to perfection,"[4] or in reason as the distinctive hu-
man faculty,[5] belongs to the domain of *honestum*. Virtue is plural, and in
fact it includes the four basic virtues listed by Plato that were to become
known as the "cardinal" virtues: wisdom, understood in probabilistic
terms, which implies that prudence is a virtue also in theoretical matters,
and accordingly assent to unfounded beliefs should be denied and useless
speculations should be avoided; justice understood as including benevo-
lence and based on the assumptions of natural sociability and equality;
strength of mind; and self-control.[6]

An important change within the Humanistic tradition was the sev-
enteenth-century revival of natural law theory. It implied a less drastic
break than several among its proponents wanted us to believe in so far as,
firstly, the very idea of natural law was an item from the Ciceronian lega-
cy, secondly, the doctrine held by Grotius and Pufendorf owed something
to Spanish baroque Scholasticism. Besides, even if it were true that the
proponents of the new natural law theory were influenced by the above-
mentioned "Cartesian" programs of reforming moral philosophy on the

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[2] Cicero, *De officiis,* 1.1.8.
[3] *Ibid.,* 1.5.15.
[4] *Ibid.,* 2.5.17.
[5] *Ibid.,* 1.15.49.
[6] *Ibid.,* 1.6.18-19; 1.17.53-58; 1.17.29; 1.19.62; 1.27.93.

blueprint of natural philosophy, and notably Pufendorf was Hobbes's critical follower, all this did not imply any drastic break with Ciceronianism. The reason is that Cicero was not just a rhetorician, but was first of all a Middle-Academic philosopher, a proponent of probabilism, a theory of knowledge that was rather compatible, albeit not with Cartesianism, at least with Baconianism, that is, with one among the philosophical programs inspiring the seventeenth-century "new science."

Samuel von Pufendorf was the author of *De jure naturae et gentium* (1672),[7] where a modified version of Grotius's natural-law theory was presented, less objectivist and more constructivist in its foundations, being grounded in a kind of (non-strictly theological) voluntarism like Hobbes and Locke. Pufendorf's theory up to the time of the French Revolution was assumed to be the paramount account of modern natural law theory and the doctrinal background for modern political revolutions. Precisely for this reason, after the French Revolution, Pufendorf fell suddenly from his high position into oblivion as an effect of Hegel's, Bentham's, and even Kant's criticism of natural law.

A remarkable circumstance is that Pufendorf, after *De jure*, published a shorter work, *De officio hominis et civis* (1673), which amounted to a simplified version of the former, where precisely the theoretical foundations of the doctrine were given for granted, and normative ethics only was illustrated in a rather detailed way.[8] Pufendorf advances three main theoretical claims. The first, taken from Grotius, is the universal validity of natural law, and this implies that the latter is based on Reason instead of Authority. An implication is that natural law is different from positive laws as well as from moral theology, both requiring acknowledgement of some previous authority. Another is that no distinction on principle exists between ethics and natural law. His second claim is that a science of natural law is made possible by the fact that human capacity to know the natural law, the Original Sin notwithstanding, is still alive, or that "our knowledge of this law, yet, may be named natural in so far as its necessary truth may be proved by mental processes or by natural reason."[9] His third claim is that we can reconstruct the natural law only by an *a priori* way, not by an *a posteriori* or empirical way like Grotius, and even less by tracing the good or bad consequences of human actions like

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[7] Pufendorf, S. von (1998) *De jure naturae et gentium*, 2 vols., ed. by F. Böhling. Berlin: Akademie Verlag.

[8] Pufendorf, S. von (1997) *De officio hominis et civis*, ed. by G. Hartung. Berlin: Akademie Verlag.

[9] *Ibid.*, Book II, chap. III, § 20.

proto-consequentialist Richard Cumberland. We should start with observation of traits shared by human beings in order to single out a core of unchanging normative principles and then from these we should infer more detailed prescriptions.[10]

On the above theoretical basis, Pufendorf bases his claim that a set of prescriptions may be justified. The first is the prescription of sociability. He declares that human beings never lived outside social life, since the state of nature was, unlike Hobbes, an original peaceful condition. There are indeed kinds of human society, like that of American Indians, that are closer to the state of nature, but human beings need a more complex social life because of their weakness.[11] Human beings are marked by both a need for help and an ability to produce rules. Out of this twofold character of human nature the first precept of natural law follows, namely "every human being should have, as far as he can, a friendly attitude towards other human beings."[12] Such a basic prescription provides the logical premise for more detailed ones. There is a rule for deriving prescriptions from the overarching law of sociability, namely, that if we are bound to pursuing some end we are also bound to pursuing means to such end, and thus "everything that necessarily follows from such sociable attitude should be assumed to be prescribed by the law of nature."[13] By this rule an obligation follows to learn a habit of refraining from damaging others, a duty to benefit them, a duty to improve our talents, a duty to give others free access to those things we can give them at no cost. The mentioned prescriptions are dictates of reason established by observation and rational inquiry on human nature. A theological postulate adds normative force to such dictates and makes the phrase "natural laws" appropriate, namely that human beings were created by God with such dispositions in order to make co-operation and social life possible. On the one hand, the postulate makes the shift from *is* to *ought* possible and, on the other, it does not play the function of a starting-point for *deduction* of moral prescriptions from any divine command. This implies that Pufendorf's doctrine may not be fairly deemed to fall under Kant's censure of "heteronomy."

The *De officio* became an immensely popular work, the text-book for virtually any educated European teenager for 150 years. In fact, from

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[10] Pufendorf, S. von (1996) "An Hohan Christian von Boineburg 13.1.1677," in *Briefwechsel*, ed. by D. Döring. Berlin: Akademie Verlag: 24-27.

[11] Pufendorf, *De officio hominis et civis*, Book II, chap. II, § 14.

[12] *Ibid.*, Book II, chap. III, § 15.

[13] *Ibid.*

its original language, Latin, it was translated into French, Italian, Danish, Spanish, and Russian. Yet, after 1800 it was soon forgotten, firstly because it had acquired the image of a dangerous work, a Jacobin manual, secondly because Kant forced it into the pigeonhole containing "heteronymous" natural law theories, thirdly because Hegel labelled natural law theory as anti-historical nonsense, and last of all because natural law theory was defined by Bentham as "nonsense upon stilts."

The third and final step in the story of the teaching of natural morality is an unwritten work by Kant, namely his "moral catechism." This Kantian project is, on the one hand, an example of what a popular version of natural morality would have been. On the other hand, the circumstance that the project was abandoned as soon as it was formulated by Kant, that nobody ever tried to write primary-school handbooks of morality, and that no government or – as far as I know – no independent educational institution ever tried to bring Kant's project into practice, illustrates well how far the path undertaken between the fifteenth and the eighteenth centuries was dramatically interrupted at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

The mentioned moral catechism was not one of Kant's unpublished works. It was instead one of his "unwritten doctrines." The moral catechism was in fact a work Kant himself never set out to write but just a subject he wanted to be introduced into basic education. Kant's "pure" moral philosophy, that is Kantian ethics as presented in the *Groundwork* and the *Critique of Practical Reason*, was meant to cover just one half of practical philosophy, the other half being "empirical moral philosophy" or "moral anthropology." This discipline was meant to carry out an empirical study of man not from a theoretical but from a "practical" point of view. Its subject matter is "the subjective conditions in human nature that may help or hinder compliance with the moral law."[14] Kant urges that morality cannot really exist "without anthropology,"[15] for you have to "know first the moral agent in order to realize whether he is able to do what he is expected to do,"[16] and any morality that would try to ignore anthropology would be "just an idea, or a purely speculative subject."[17]

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[14] Kant, I. (1902) *Metaphysik der Sitten* (1797,) in *Kant's gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by the Berlin-Brandenburgischen Akademie der Wissenschaften. Berlin : Meiner & de Gruyter, (abbr. Ak), vol. VI: 217.

[15] *Ibid.*

[16] Kant, I. *Moralphilosophie Collins*, in Ak, vol. XXVII\1: 244.

[17] *Ibid*.

A presentation of Kant's anthropology is offered in the *Anthropology in a Pragmatic Outlook*. The title reveals that Kant intends to present it not directly as an auxiliary discipline of ethics, but instead as a part of that "knowledge of the world" which is required as a means to happiness. But, since the quest for happiness carries the growth of civilization as an unintended outcome, and since *civilization* is a pre-condition to *moralization*, the discipline's true goal is the formation of character, understood as a "transformation of one's own way of thinking." The later is the decisive aspect of the "doctrine of method" of practical reason, that is the doctrine of the "way" (Greek: *odos*) to virtue.[18] Kant assumes that virtue can be taught, but also that such a teaching does not consist in information about duties and even less in exhortation to their practice. He adds that teaching virtue implies exercise through a never-ending fight against the "inner enemy," but also that such exercise would be meaningless without a former decision for virtue and against vice.[19] Such a teaching may not be given through lectures but should be carried out through dialogue between the teacher and the pupil, aimed at helping the pupil's own discovery of moral truths.[20] And yet the dialogical method cannot be displayed in a void, without any previous notion; a preliminary step is provided by some basic learning, not acquired in an *"acromatic"* way, that is, by lecturing, but instead in an *"erotematic"* one, that is, through questioning, but still addressing the pupil's memory, not yet his reason as the dialogical method will do.

> The first and necessary doctrinal tool by which a still uneducated pupil can be taught the doctrine of virtue is a moral catechism. This should come before religious catechism and should not be included, as a purely accidental item, among other items of religious instruction, but should be taught instead separately and as a self-standing whole; for only by means of purely moral principles the shift from the doctrine of virtue to religion can be made[21].

Contents can be derived "from reason, as it is shared by every human being,"[22] and the catechism should cover all virtues and vices and should be compiled in such a way as to suggest constantly the idea that the motivating force of duty is never grounded in advantages or disadvantages for

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[18] Kant, I. *Anthropologie in Pragmatischer Sicht* (1798,), in Ak, vol. VII: 291-295; see also the "Methodenlehre der reinen praktischen Vernunft," in *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* (1788,) in Ak, vol. V: 149-163 ; and the "Ethische Methodenlehre," in *Metaphysik der Sitten*: 477-485.

[19] Kant, *Metaphysik der Sitten*: 477.

[20] *Ibid.*: 478.

[21] *Ibid.*

[22] *Ibid.*: 479.

the agent, and even for other people, but solely in the pure moral principle.

Virtue may be learned and practiced not so much through intellectual learning as by imitation. The latter depends on sensibility, not on the intellect, and its force lies in the force of example as standard *(Exempel)* as distinguished from example as anecdote *(Beispiel)*. Such a motivating force, yet, goes beyond basic imitation mechanisms, since a living *Exempel* gives us a proof "of the possibility of acting according to duty."[23] Accordingly, it does not consist in comparison with any other human being (as he actually is), but just in comparison with the idea of humankind, or with the idea of how a human being should be. The final goal is neither that of teaching a theory, not to say a "technical doctrine" for problem-solving, nor that of improving habits, but instead producing a radical transformation in the individual's "way of thinking."[24] This is the reason why moral education, instead of just fighting vices, should start with a "conversion in the way of thinking, the building of a character."[25] This is why moral theory is no more than a kind of "geometry" of morality while real-world or morality is a matter of judgment, moral motivation depends on the force of Example, and the good moral agent is not an agent trained to *applying* rules but instead an agent who has learned to *interpret* situations, that is to "see" the one salient moral characteristic in a state of affairs, or to answer the question: "what is really going on?"

3. AFTER THE ENLIGHTENMENT: RELIGION *INSTEAD OF* ETHICS

In nineteenth-century Europe a few processes started, both at the level of the history of ideas and at the level of social history, and they influenced each other and mutually reinforced each other's effects.

Firstly, a climate of suspicion against eighteenth-century ideas and ideals established itself. It went with Romanticism, Idealism, and Historicism, not to mention cruder kinds of Traditionalism, all of which tended to deny any validity to universal claims and to attack allegedly a-historical doctrines. The rights of man, natural law, rational or natural morality became targets for opprobrium. Strangely enough, also Utilitarianism and Kantian Ethics, that were in different ways the heirs of the Enlightenment tradition, contributed to this campaign against such au-

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[23] *Ibid.*: 480; on the role of *Exempel* in Kantian ethics, or better, in Kant's "unwritten ethical doctrines," see Ferrara, A. (2008) *The Force of the Example. Explorations in the Paradigm of Judgment*. New York: Columbia University Press, ch. I.

[24] *Ibid.*: 411; see also *Anthropologie*: 294-5.

[25] Kant, I. *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft* (1793,) in Ak, vol. VI: 55.

thors as Pufendorf, albeit for reasons opposite to those endorsed by the counter-Enlightenment camp. The combined effect was nonetheless oblivions of the natural morality tradition.

Secondly, apart from the Austrian Empire and Scotland, where a universal education system, either state-based or run by local municipal governments or "parishes," had been established in the second half of the eighteenth century, in most European countries a general primary education system was established during the nineteenth century. One of the basic questions for which a solution was sought from the very beginning was that of the place for religious instruction in such a system.

In Britain, a country where an awareness of religious pluralism could less easily be denied than elsewhere, the most enlightened minds tended to converge on a compromise, namely inter-confessional Christian education. This was the proposal endorsed by so different proponents as Richard Whately, an Anglican Bishop, and Sarah Porter née Ricardo, a sister of the economist David Ricardo, a novelist and essayist who was a member of the Liberal elite. Such a solution was commendable for being an attempt to overcome the identification between the Church of England and the State, but it strikingly left out of sight non-Christian minorities including the Jewish community whence Sarah Ricardo herself came.

In most European countries, except France, the obvious solution was believed to be religious instruction in the prevailing Christian Confession. Among them the most liberal version of such a solution was gradually introduced in the Austrian Empire, as far as, at least at the eve of World War I in Austro-Hungarian Gymnasiums two hours a week instruction in the "Mosaic Faith" were scheduled for Jewish students. In France in 1905 an absolute separation of State and Church was established and the teaching of religion as such was banned from public education.

In the course of the above process, no mention of any teaching of morality as distinguished from religious education in Kant's sense was ever made. A need for religious instruction was assumed as a matter of fact, with the modest amendments of the British early solution of inter-Confessional instruction, the Austrian late solution of confessional pluralism, and the striking French "republican" exception. The vague idea was still cherished here and there by some radical Democrat that education should include some teaching of the "duties of man," but it was never taken too seriously. The ruling elites, increasingly secularized and indeed in overt conflict with the Christian Churches, tended everywhere – with the remarkable exception of France – to think that, facing the social issue,

tendencies to Durkheimian "anomie" as a result of urbanization, and diffusion of socialist ideas, the local prevailing religion was the easiest means of "educating" the masses to decent behaviour.

A different parallel discussion would deserve a remarkable amount of space about the way of conceiving subjects as history, literature and, in higher education, philosophy. The fact that in virtually all countries in Continental Europe the school was conceived in terms of State school implies, in the historical context, that history was conceived as culminating with National History. On the other hand, literature was National Literature, aimed at cultivating the myth of a National spiritual heritage, and understood as a means of imbibing pupils with supposedly peculiar (Italian, German…) feelings, moral traits, and virtues.

In short, my suggestion is that the result of the compromise between the ruling elites and the Churches was religion as a vehicle of values and models of behaviour for the uneducated masses, and the bulk of education as a means of manipulating the masses into a supposedly shared legacy of national values.

One word may be added on the teaching of philosophy in Gymnasiums and equivalent kinds of high schools. With the remarkable exception of France, where the systematic teaching of philosophy by subdisciplines survived, the German model of Philosophy as the History of Philosophy prevailed, and the subtle message this teaching suggested to future elites was that the course of history, both intellectual and political, was tantamount to the *Coming of Reason* and the only Morality and Religion of the educated (male) man was adhesion to this course, or faith in an identity of freedom and necessity.

As a result of a story of fight and compromise between the ruling elites and the leadership of Christian Churches, three parallel processes took place.

1. Normative ethics, or natural morality, that had been a distinct subject in the education of European elites from the Renaissance times to the end of the eighteenth century, disappeared as such, being partly allotted to the Churches via the teaching of religion in State School, and partly absorbed by the study of history and literature, assumed to be channels for imbibing younger generations with the shared values of the State, the Nation, or the People. Normative ethics as an academic subject became either a battlefield for ideological wars (like the utilitarian campaign for the New Morality, the religious conservative campaign against the modern demise of moral values) or somewhat of a taboo (like the historicist neo-Idealist

view of Philosophy, that is the History of Philosophy, as the educated man's Religion and Morality).

2. Religion, or better the prevailing religion or, in most countries, the "State Religion," became a compulsory subject in the State school. Both the *State* school and *Religion* as a discipline were indeed novelties. The framework, its apparent similarity notwithstanding, was rather the opposite of the Medieval one within which schools were almost invariably Church-based institutions and Religion was not a subject or a discipline but a practice (what was a discipline was instead theology, taught to those who reached the top level in education).

One invisible implication was a division of labour between the lay ruling elite and the Churches, namely a tacit agreement according to which Homer belonged to the secular ruling class and the Bible was the clergy's private property, which would never be made the subject of a critical-historical study as the former instead was expected to be.

3. A result of the mentioned tacit pact between two ruling groups was that the canon of European culture was transformed into something less consistent and less comprehensive than its previous post-Renaissance version had been. In more detail, the tradition to be transmitted to younger generations was construed around a fable, or better a lie, namely that the modern European is the ancient Greek's grandson, and the ancient Hebrew had nothing to bequest to the Modern European. Besides, the canon was reduced to a bark without a kernel, in so far as *literature* and *history* took the place that used to belong to "philosophy" or to *Studia Humanitatis*.

4. MORAL TRADITIONS, RELIGIONS, POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS, AND CRITICAL REFLECTION

The morale of my story is the following:

A study of the history of moral (and religious and political) ideas combined with critical reflection on social practices should provide the core or the leading subject in education. The large-scale Spanish experiment, and the small-scale Belgian one, in teaching ethics as a subject alternative to the teaching of the Catholic or Protestant religion are not bad examples for possible future developments. The Swedish experiment that made room for comparative religious studies as a subject substituting religious instruction is another interesting example. Yet, both are just interesting starting points, not viable general answers to the question I have asked. The problem with both experiments is being the result of piecemeal social engineering. In the Spanish case ethics is an alternative to religion as if those who want to learn about one religion did not need

to learn about ethics and could go on ignoring the existence of more than one religion, and those who want to learn about ethics would better ignore the existence of religions. In the Swedish case the study of religions in a comparative outlook is one half of the right answer but it leaves the other half, *i.e.* morality, aside.

The open questions are: (i) why should *ethics* be an alternative to *religion*? Do those who are educated *into* one religion – which I assume should be done *outside* a public educational system – need not to learn anything about ethics?; (ii) why should children of Protestants, Jews, and Atheists learn about religions and not about morality?; (iii) why should the study of religions be a separate subject, unless it is so just because of historical reasons, that is, the fact of having taken the place of confessional religious instruction? Wouldn't the study of history gain from becoming less a study of political history and more a study of social history as well as of the history of religious/moral/political movements from Buddhism and Judaism to Cynicism, Epicureanism and so on?

My practical recommendations are:

1. Abolishing the teaching of religion in schools where it still exists; this may happen hopefully without ideological wars, as the result of a dialogue between the civil society and the Churches, where the latter may understand that they may forfeit various kinds of control over public education while winning the more valuable promise of a society where citizens will learn in a critical way about the Bible, the Qurān, the Buddhist canon, and Confucius.

2. Abolishing any kind of political education as a separate subject, that is, subjects like the Italian *educazione civica* or the Spanish *educación para la ciudadanía* should go under the heading "ethics."

3. Establishing one subject named "ethics," compulsory for *all*, that is, for children of Islamic no less than of Atheist parents, with a syllabus including: a) critical reflection on values, norms, and institutions regulating private/social lives in our society as well as in other societies starting with examples from everyday life, the media, literature, and history and reaching the study of sources from Confucius and Homer to Cicero, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Voltaire... up to Peter Singer; b) critical reflection on the structure and normative justification of national and international political institutions and legal codes.

4. Revising the syllabus of the subject "history" in such a way as to cut down the room assigned to political history and give the spare room to social history and history of religions *and* moralities. This should start with critical reflection on religious beliefs and practices followed by var-

ious communities in our societies (plus rituals, customs, symbolic prac-
tices with an apparently non-religious character) compared with those of
different societies, reaching a study of sources such as the Bible, the
Talmud, the Qurān, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Voltaire, Marx, Nietzsche,
etc.

5. Revising the syllabus of the subject "literature" in order to transform it
into comparative literature, that is: (i) abolishing the dominating notion of
"Classics" (that is Hellenic and Roman religious or mythological texts
plus some profane poetry which have been falsely believed to be *the*
source of secular modern civilization); (ii) establishing the study, besides
national and modern European literature, of basic texts from the various
world civilizations, Chinese, Indian, Egyptian, and Hebrew, Hellenic,
Roman, Christian, Islamic; this would carry a study of the Egyptian *Book
of the Dead*, the Indian *Bhagavad Gītā*, the Babylonian *Epic of Gilga-
mesh* and *Qoheleht* as texts with an equal status to *Ilyad*, *Odyssey*, and
Aeneids, as well as a study of the latter as *serious* texts, not just as either
literature for fun or tools for philological torture.

The rationale of my practical recommendations is that education in
a liberal-democratic society may not be socialization *into* the given set of
values of a national community but should be just training *to* critical
thinking.