

Living In A Rapidly Changing Society: Transition To Maturity

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It is a great pleasure for me to participate in this conference that we all hope will contribute significantly to educational development in Albania. I feel especially honoured to be addressing such a distinguished audience of dedicated educators. During the morning sessions of this conference, two sets of lectures will be presented. The first set, consisting of three lectures, will explore issues related to morality and ethics per se. The second will be concerned with education. It is our hope that the morning lectures will stimulate many questions and that the ideas presented will serve as a context for the afternoon panel discussions.

The first talk on the subject of morality and ethics is intended to be very general in nature. The question I will try to address is why at this moment in history should we feel such an urgent need to look for a new process of moral education. In the case of Albania, why is it not sufficient to go back to programmes of religious instruction that were being offered fifty years ago, adding, perhaps, more modern educational methods and concepts? In trying to answer this question, I will also explore some of the characteristics of the moral person that the process of moral education must help to form. Two colleagues will take this exploration further in lectures to be given tomorrow, one on "Moral Capabilities" and the other on "Spiritual Qualities."

A very striking feature of our times is the accelerating rate at which change occurs. The magnitude and speed of the changes that humankind has undergone in the past century and a half have been unparalleled in our history. In every area of human endeavour a great deal of new knowledge is being generated, and old practices are being rejected one after another. At this point in history, no one can possibly deny that society, in all its aspects—social, economic, political, religious and cultural – is going through a process of fundamental transformation.

In this past century and a half, every country and region of the world has seen old structures swept away through radical reform or revolution. The ideals motivating these deliberate, sometimes violent, attempts to change society have often been extremely noble and laudable.

Yet, it is now an historical fact that these attempts have, by and large, failed to generate this sense of purpose, the values and the standards of behaviour that are essential for the creation of a new society. As a result, for decades humanity has been living in a state of crisis that seems to deepen almost daily. In the midst of all this crisis, of course, we often hear the voices of traditionalists, of those who romanticize the past and urge us to go back to our old ways. The fact is, however, that return to the standards of the past is not possible, for the forces released during this period have set in motion a process of transformation that is clearly irreversible. The unavoidable conclusion we reach when we examine modern history is that old moral codes and belief systems have proven entirely inadequate when faced with the challenges of an age of transformation. So, as we explore elements of the framework for a new process of moral education, some of the first questions we must ask ourselves are: What is the nature of the great transformation that is taking place in human society? What are the basic concepts that can help us to understand the significance of the times in which we live? What are some of the great forces that are operating within society in this crucial stage of human evolution?

Clearly, this is not the occasion to examine in detail a theory of history, but I would like to present a few ideas that will help our explorations in the next few days.

During the cycle of human life, an individual passes through the stages of infancy, childhood and adolescence, before undergoing the transition to adulthood. We achieve great clarity about the meaning of our times if we accept that humanity, in its collective life, also goes through similar stages, and that we live at a time when mankind has emerged from its childhood and stands at the threshold of maturity. The turbulence and the upheavals that prevail in society today can then be seen as characteristic of adolescence, which is the period of transition. The onset of maturity, of course, brings new capacities and presents new demands, for which the attitudes, thoughts and habits of childhood are inadequate. The challenge now facing humanity is to leave behind the ways of youth and to develop those qualities and capabilities that will allow it to respond to the requirements of a new age.

As for the forces that have to be reckoned with at this historical moment, let me suggest that they are associated with two parallel processes. One process is essentially destructive, while the other is integrative. The operation of the destructive process is evident in such phenomena as the upsurge of racial animosity and nationalism, the spread of terrorism and violence, the breakdown of families and the corrosion of human relations, the increasing signs of suspicion and fear, and the unquenchable thirst for vanities and misdirected pleasures. Although negative and often devastating, the forces that accompany this destructive process tend to tear down barriers that block mankind's progress towards maturity. In relation to this point, let me share with you a favourite passage of mine:

"If long-cherished ideals and time-honoured institutions, if certain social assumptions and religious formulae have ceased to promote the welfare of the generality of mankind, if they no longer minister to the needs of a continually evolving humanity, let them be swept away and relegated to the limbo of obsolescent and forgotten doctrines. Why should these, in a world subject to the immutable law of change and decay, be exempt from the deterioration that must needs overtake every human institution? For legal standards, political and economic theories are solely designed to safeguard the interests of humanity as a whole, and not humanity to be crucified for the preservation of the integrity of any particular law or doctrine."

The destructive process described above, of course, is quite visible and its effects are seen everywhere, every day. To see clearly the other parallel process, which is constructive in character, does not prove to be as easy. But if we analyze the events of the past century with a mind that is free from the very social, political and economic theories which, in themselves, are destructive, we will become thoroughly convinced of the operation of a vast and powerful process of integration. Earlier stages of this process have successively called into being the family unit, the tribe, the city-state and the nation. The distinguishing feature of the present period of history is that the integrative process will now bear its finest fruit: the unification of the entire human race in a world civilization.

This world civilization is not to stifle the flame of a sane and intelligent patriotism in men's hearts. It will not abolish the system of national autonomy so essential if the evils of excessive centralization are to be avoided. It will not attempt to suppress the diversity of ethnic origins, of climate, of history, of language and tradition, of thought and habit that differentiate the peoples and nations of the world. It will call for a wider loyalty and the subordination of national interests to the claims of a unified world. It will oppose both excessive centralization and all attempts at uniformity. Its most cherished concept will be unity in diversity. To continue with the quotation I read earlier, this principle of the oneness of mankind:

"...is no mere outburst of ignorant emotionalism or an expression of vague and pious hope. Its appeal is not to be merely identified with a reawakening of the spirit of brotherhood and good-will among men, nor does it aim solely at the fostering of harmonious cooperation among individual peoples and nations. Its implications are deeper, its claims greater than any which the Prophets of old were allowed to advance. Its message is applicable not only to the individual, but concerns itself primarily with the nature of those essential relationships that must bind all the states and nations as members of one human family. It does not constitute merely the enunciation of an ideal, but stands inseparably associated with an institution adequate to embody its truth, demonstrate its validity, and perpetuate its influence. It implies an organic

change in the structure of present-day society, a change such as the world has not yet experienced.”

With these ideas in mind, let me express now what we may consider as the first basic concept of the framework of moral education that we are going to explore during the next two days. A new process of moral education must be developed within the context of mankind's passage to maturity and for the emergence of a world civilization that embodies the principle of unity in diversity. The individuals educated by this process will need to develop a clear vision of the requirements of the age of maturity and learn to contribute to the transformation of present-day society. They will have to aim constantly to express more fully the virtues inherent in mankind, and weed out faults, harmful habits and tendencies inherited from their environment. Yet they will have to be conscious of the unique characteristics and contributions of their own nation and people and dedicate themselves to the enrichment and advancement of their own culture. Above all, they will have to lend their strength to processes that counteract the negative forces undermining the foundations of human existence and align themselves with the forces leading mankind to the fulfillment of its destiny.

A second concept, which is basic to a framework for moral education, is that, in order to act effectively during the age of transition, the moral person we are envisioning here must possess a strong sense of purpose. Goodness, defined in passive terms—to mind one's own business and not to harm anyone, a definition that throughout history has only facilitated oppression—simply is not adequate for our times. But neither is it sufficient to say that a moral person has to be purposeful. The nature of this purposefulness will have to be explored carefully in the process of moral education.

To begin with, I would like to suggest that the moral purpose of an active individual must necessarily be twofold, directed simultaneously towards the development of one's vast potentialities, including both those virtues and qualities that distinguish the human race and those talents and characteristics that are an individual's unique endowment. On a social level, it is expressed through dedication to promoting the welfare of the entire human race.

These aspects of the sense of twofold purpose are fundamentally inseparable, for a person's standards and behaviour shape the environment, and in turn are moulded by social structures and processes. To quote another passage:

“We cannot segregate the human heart from the environment outside us and say that once one of these is reformed everything will be improved. Man is organic with the world. His inner life moulds the environment and is itself also deeply affected by it. The one acts upon the other and every abiding change in the life of man is the result of these mutual reactions.”

It is essential, then, that we should develop a profound awareness of the reciprocal relationship between personal growth and organic change in social structures. We cannot develop virtues and talents in isolation, but only through effort and activity for the benefit of others. Idle worship and prolonged withdrawal from society, advocated by some philosophies of the past, neither promote individual development nor aid the progress of mankind. People whose sense of purpose focuses only on the development of their own potential soon lose objectivity and perspective. With no outside interactions and social goals, how does one judge one's own progress and measure one's development? Morality centered on the self only leads to subtle forms of ego—combinations of guilt, self-righteousness and self-satisfaction.

Conversely, a sense of purpose driven only by the desire to transform society, with no attention to the need for personal growth and transformation, is easily misdirected. The person who blames society for every wrong and ignores the importance of individual responsibility loses respect and compassion for others and is prone to acts of cruelty and oppression. Recent developments in many countries of the world are showing us what a fragile endeavour social transformation can be when divorced from the desire to transform one's own character.

Now, accepting that a new process of moral education must transcend the limitations of unfettered individualism and of suffocating collectivism, and must direct the energies of the individual toward a

complementary and balanced approach to the twofold purpose of personal and collective transformation, we come to the question of how to direct moral purpose and protect it from the distorting influence of the negative forces that abound in this age of transition. For example, we all know how easy it is to veil group or personal interest in the guise of morality. Experience has also taught us that mere idealism and indignation at the sight of suffering are not sufficient bases for moral action. The sense of purpose that is to be developed through a process of moral education, then, must be shaped by forces and convictions that influence moral orientation and protect it from distortion and misdirection.

The basic forces that need to shape an individual's sense of purpose are attraction to beauty and thirst for knowledge. Attraction to beauty gives proper direction to purpose. Beauty and perfection become standards and guiding lights by which one is able to judge one's own behaviour. On one level, this attraction manifests itself in love for the majesty and diversity of nature, in the impulse to fashion beauty through the visual arts, music and crafts, and in the pleasures of beholding the fruits of these creative endeavours. It is also evident in one's response to the beauty of an idea, the elegance of a scientific theory, and the perfection of a good character in one's fellow human beings. On another level, attraction to beauty underlies and individual's search for order and meaning in the universe, which extends itself to a desire for order in social relations.

Our inherent desire for knowledge, on the other hand, impels us toward an understanding of the mysteries of the universe and its infinitely diverse phenomena, both on the visible and on the invisible plane. It also directs us toward an understanding of the mysteries within ourselves. When we are oriented by a vision of beauty and perfection, and motivated by a thirst for knowledge, we become, in our approach to life, investigators of reality and seekers after truth.

Now, if investigation of truth is to guide our twofold purpose it must necessarily be based on an accurate understanding of human nature. It would certainly not be an exaggeration to say that much of the crisis and confusion of our times is caused by mistaken conceptions of human nature that we have inherited from mankind's age of childhood. The absurd concept of original sin, the equally absurd concept that man is perfect and just one step from being God, the concept of man as merely a more highly developed animal, the concept of man as a free agent who should follow the dictates of every basic desire, the concept of man as a piece of the machinery of State: these are all fruits of the imagination of the philosophers and thinkers of the age of childhood and are based on insufficient historical and spiritual evidence. What is certain and easily observable is that human nature has two aspects, the material and the spiritual. Man's material nature is the product of physical evolution, and its basic objective is survival. Although necessary to his existence in this world, if allowed to dominate his consciousness, it leads him to express injustice, cruelty, and egotism. Man's spiritual nature, on the other hand, is characterized by qualities such as love, mercy, kindness, generosity, and justice. The individual attains his true station by strengthening his spiritual nature so that it dominates his existence.

Up to now, we have said that attraction to beauty and thirst for knowledge are basic forces that should shape moral purpose. We have also suggested that if properly guided by these forces, our approach to life becomes that of investigators of truth, rather than imitators of others, but that this investigation of truth must be carried out with the correct understanding of human nature. When this is done, one of the first fruits that we harvest from our investigation is the conviction that man has been created noble. When we are truly convinced of this, our powers to transform our own character and contribute to the transformation of society are multiplied. And, what is extremely important, in pursuing our purpose, we avoid unworthy means of achieving goals and overcoming problems, and choose methods and approaches that are consistent with this innate condition of nobility. We do not fall prey to that most harmful concept that the ends justify the means, an idea that has been the cause of immense suffering.

Another fruit of our investigation of truth is a growing consciousness of the organic unity of the human race. Being convinced of the oneness of mankind enables us to recognize that we are each part of an organic whole, and that injury to any part results in injury to all. We remember that our accomplishments are built on the sacrifices and achievements of those who came before us and are supported by the efforts of our fellow human beings. We become convinced that our own fulfillment lies in helping to bring about welfare and happiness of others. We then strive to transcend the conflicts that have characterized relations between individuals and groups in every society throughout history. Our determination to eliminate injustice from society and to oppose cruelty and prejudice will not be shaped by anger and

hatred. Our actions will be infused with the feelings of love, harmony, and kindness that only belief in the unity of mankind can create.

Yet another fruit of unfettered investigation of reality, one which is indispensable for moral integrity, is a vision of human existence that extends beyond the exigencies of day-to-day life. Such a vision enables us to distinguish between superficial and lasting results, and directs our purpose towards that which has permanence. An understanding of the eternal realities of existence helps define the nature of true happiness; we realize that "...the happiness and greatness, the rank and station, the pleasure and peace, of an individual have never consisted in his personal wealth, but rather in his excellent character, his high resolve, the breadth of his learning, and his ability to solve difficult problems."

In trying to understand the nature of this twofold sense of moral purpose, there is at least one more question that I would like to bring to our attention. How does a purpose that is shaped and directed by forces and convictions such as the ones mentioned above express itself? I would like to suggest that the only legitimate channel for the expression of such a purpose is service to others – not ruling over others, not manipulating the lives of others, but serving others. In a process of moral education, then, it is important to develop an understanding that the perfection of one's own character should naturally find expression in efforts to serve others, and that one's desire to serve others should enhance the refinement of one's character. In this way, the motivation to help carry forward an ever-advancing civilization is not imposed from the outside; it rises from within the individual and is bound inextricably with opportunities for personal growth. Helping others and helping oneself become two aspects of one process; service unites the fulfillment of individual potential with the advancement of society and ensures the integrity of one's sense of moral purpose.

In addition to issues concerning the historical context of a new process of moral education, and to questions having to do with the definition of moral purpose and the forces that shape it, our search for the framework for our educational activities must also reexamine relationships between man and nature, among individuals and groups, within the family, and between the individual and social institutions. Observations of the conditions of the world around us can leave no doubt that the way we look at and understand these old conceptions of these relationships, have shattered some, and have rendered others meaningless. Ironically, many of these distortions seem to be the results of material progress, which in itself is desirable. The problem is that material civilization should advance together with spiritual civilization. The past few centuries have seen the advancement of material civilization and the decline of spiritual civilization. The confusion and crisis that exist in essential human relationships today are merely the symptoms of the spiritual bankruptcy of modern society.

While there is no need at this general level of exploration to discuss in detail the changes that should occur in the conception of essential human relationships, a few examples may be useful. The growing environmental crisis proves beyond any doubt that man cannot continue to act as a predator in relation to the natural environment. We must become rational users and conservers of the resources of the planet. We must understand that nature exists in a dynamic balance and that interconnectedness, reciprocity, and cooperation are laws that govern the universe. We must come to a comprehension of the fact that, within this endless web of relationships, diversity is most essential, and we must learn to appreciate the beauty of diversity. Man's attitude towards life should cease to be one of exploitation, whether of people or of nature. Our relationship with nature cannot be shaped by greed, whether this greed is individual or the trait of an entire people or nation. Man needs to abandon the attitude of arrogance that in these decades of rapid industrialization has characterized the interactions of society with nature, and approach progress with much more humility and care. Seen in this light, there can be no doubt that profound change in the relationship between man and nature is fundamentally a moral matter, and that the issues surrounding it must be examined within the framework of a new process of moral education.

Another profound change that has to occur as humanity passes from childhood to maturity is in the relationship among individuals and groups. Societies in every part of the world are pervaded by relations of dominance: dominance of one individual over another, of one race over another, of one nation over another, or of one sex over another. These relations of dominance are, of course, highly violent in nature, whether this violence is shown in physical ways or is clothed in the robes of legality and custom. The

violence inherent in dominance makes these relations harmful to both the perpetrator and the victim. In a sense, both the subject and the object of such relations are victims of violence.

Our relation of dominance that is not limited to any class, race or nation, is that which exists between men and women. Most people do not escape the effects of this relation for they are initiated into it from infancy. The growing child, living in an atmosphere of prejudice against women in the family itself, learns the habits of domination and carries these habits into education, the workplace, political and economic activities, and eventually into all social structures.

A conception of individual and group relationships that belongs to the age of maturity of humanity, then, must reject dominance. A process of moral education that is to help humanity reach adulthood should foster in every individual the desire to seek fulfillment—not by seeking power over others, but by serving them. Satisfaction needs to come from seeing everyone's potentials and talents blossom and develop, and not from the imposition of one's personal tastes and desires on others.

Yet another profound change needs to occur in the family structures of every society in the world. One of the most devastating effects of the forces of disintegration in our times has been the weakening of family bonds. The family is a fundamental institution of human civilization. It is the first environment within which every child begins to build moral structures and form patterns of behavior. But here again, the need is for a new conception of family relationships that responds to the demands and dictates of the age of maturity. It is not desirable, for example, to perpetuate a model of the family in which man dominates woman. Conceptions that place family loyalty above everything else, and thus impede the development of loyalty to the entire human race, cannot be accepted either. Strong and healthy family bonds are needed to make the family a vital unit of society. As a building block of society, the family needs to be educated according to the rules of sanctity, so that it becomes the first environment where nobility, integrity, respect, generosity, love, unity and justice are learned by every human being.

Finally, the relationships between the individual and social institutions must be conceptualized in a totally different way than has been customary throughout the childhood of humanity. Traditionally, individuals and institutions have lived in an unhealthy state of tension, the individual always trying to achieve greater and greater freedom, and the institutions trying to achieve greater degrees of control, always, of course, in the name of the common good. This tension must now be replaced by reciprocity and the desire to serve. The institutions of a new age cannot be built as instruments of the selfish desires of a group of people or as mechanisms for the control of the population. The mission of every institution should be conceived, somehow, as that of a channel through which the talents, abilities and collective energies of the people can be expressed in service to society.

This profound change in the mission of social institutions implies, of course, a corresponding change in the attitudes of individuals towards society and its institutions. Of special importance is a true understanding of the concept of freedom. Desire for freedom is undoubtedly one of the most powerful forces operating within individuals and within societies, and surely, the passage from childhood to maturity means the building of a society that embodies the principle of freedom. But freedom cannot be simply dealt with through slogans and empty promises. What is the nature of true freedom? What should we be free of? What are the chains that tie us down and take away our freedom? What are the sources of those forces that enslave us? What are the sources of those forces that can move us towards lasting freedom?

Once again, it becomes clear that many of the fundamental questions that we face in organizing the institutions of a new society, whether these institutions and structures are political, economic, social, or cultural, are basically moral questions. This brings us back to the fact that the moral purpose we defined at the beginning must indeed be twofold. The framework we are seeking for our moral education is a framework for the parallel transformation of the individual character and of social structures.