

Education, “Bildung” and Mindfulness
On education and human nature
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Education & our view of humanity

The way we think about the character of education is closely related to the way we think about human beings. In particular, when we extend our concept of education to include “Bildung” – Von Humboldt’s term that refers to the shaping of the human being with regard to his/her own humanity as well as his/her innate intellectual skills – we need to reflect on our own view on the nature of humans and human society. For our own view and expectations of human beings, which is so much shaped – often unconsciously – by our surrounding culture, we carry with us when we think about education in the broad sense of Von Humboldt (1767-1835). So, I like to review briefly some common notions that seem to prevail in our western culture about human nature and contrast them with some nonwestern views on human nature.

A biologically based view of basic goodness

The view of Frans de Waal

Let us start our exploration, however, by drawing our attention to the modern biological view as expressed by the primatologist Frans de Waal a Dutch/American biologist who has been named among Time magazine’s 100 Most Influential People. His famous book ‘*Good Natured*’ (Harvard University Press, 1996) discusses how social animals like primates as well as some other social mammals maintain harmony in their group by developing and maintaining strategies to regulate aggression and greed among its members. These strategies also imply that as a member of the group one cannot afford to turn a blind eye on the needs, desires and anger of other members. Each member needs to be *mindful* of all that. Protecting this harmony and educating the younger ones accordingly enhances the ability of primates to survive as a species. That is their form of ‘Bildung’. This good nature, however, is not based on preconceived ethics or morality or religion. It is more basic than our humanistic or religious concepts of moral goodness. It precedes them. In his

recent book *The Bonobo and the Atheist: In Search of Humanism among the Primates* (Norton, 2013) De Waal asks, based on his extensive research a fundamental question : Do we need religion in order to be good? His answer: “However close they might be to us as a species, a church has never been set up in a bonobo society. They have no need for that. In the atheist universe of the bonobo or chimpanzee compassion, care and justice positively exist in their society”(De Waal, 2013, back cover)

Mother and baby child

Sakyong Mipham in his book *The Shambhala Principle. Discovering Humanity’s Hidden Treasure* (Harmony books, 2013) draws our attention to another biologically based fact: the nature of the smallest and most basic society that we all grew up in: the society consisting of mother and baby child. This small society exemplifies, from the moment of birth spontaneous mutual affection, kindness or charity.

Basic goodness

These qualities are genetic and older than the appearance of the human species. We could call it *basic goodness*. This term denotes a natural innate quality that is not governed or shaped by any moral thought of good or bad. The term therefore does not imply a moral judgment on the nature of primates – or humans for that matter. It is on the basis of this quality that any society can exist. Maintaining, cultivating and strengthening this quality form the heart is the essence of what we call *Bildung* or *character education*.

Bildung in Asian traditions

This human quality of basic goodness has been acknowledged in all great humanistic traditions, in particular in the nontheistic traditions of India and China, that is in Buddhism and Confucianism. In these traditions character education means

- 1) reconnecting with and maintaining our experiencing of our own basic goodness, strengthening it and
- 2) developing trust and confidence in it.

This will make us strong and brave people, who are able to approach difficulties and challenges with fearless gentleness and selfconfidence, that is with confidence in our own human nature. Let’s briefly look at these traditions.

Character education in Confucianism, the Analects

Confucius (551–479 BCE) goals for education were to produce *Junzi*, which is often translated as "gentleman" or “noble man” - not in the aristocratic sense of the word. His main educational goal was *the cultivation of character*, through

- 1) observation of people that show us the Way to humaneness,
- 2) study of texts that teach us how to behave in a human or decent way,
- 3) selfreflection, soul searching, looking at our own mind.

Ren

The ultimate aim of education is to cultivate one's benevolence, called *Ren* in Chinese. The traditional Chinese character for *Ren* consists of a character consisting of two hearts. Confucius invented another way of writing *Ren*: he combined the character for 'human' with the character for 'two'. Therefore some people translate *Ren* as *co-humanity*. Confucius said, "*Ren* is not far off; he who seeks it has already found it. *Ren* is close to human being and never leaves him". It is the good feeling a human being experiences when being benevolent, altruistic, caring. It is exemplified by a normal adult's protective feelings for children. Another meaning of *ren* is "not to do to others as you would not wish done to yourself"(Analects 12:2). It is what we have called basic goodness.

Li

This *Ren* has to be maintained, protected and cultivated by decency or propriety, in Chinese: *li*. Initially this term referred to how to behave in formal situations, like rituals, But as Yu Dan explains in her Chinese bestseller *Confucius from the heart* (Pan Books, 2006) its meaning has widened to the notion of knowing the right or appropriate course of action in any situation. That is the heart of this concept. Therefore, knowledge of *li* is directly tied to the accumulation of character and goodness. *Ren* and *li* are the key characteristics of the *Junzi*. Cultivating those two is Confucius' aim of education. They are the basis for a good human society on every level – family, friends, work, and government. *The Analects* place great importance on learning but this learning is not education in the formal sense; it is character building. Even though Confucius considered formal education to be valuable, he did not regard the continued pursuit of knowledge as a means of bettering oneself. In fact Confucius fulminated against the assumption that acquiring knowledge is a means of character building. Confucius is recorded as making several statements on the importance of learning in the above sense and how a love of learning is one of the hallmark characteristics of the "gentleman".

Mencius was a fourth-century BCE Chinese thinker whose importance in the Confucian tradition is second only to that of Confucius himself. He interpreted the thought of the master for subsequent ages while simultaneously impressing Confucius' ideas with his own philosophical stamp. He is most famous for his theory of human nature, according to which *all human beings*

share an innate goodness that either can be cultivated through education and self-discipline or squandered through neglect and negative influences, but never lost altogether, as it is our human heart (Chinese: *Xin*) itself.

Character education in Buddhism

From the time of the Buddha himself, his followers have contemplated how to create a good human society, and some of them attempted to actually create such a society. Well known, even in the West, is the society created by the Indian emperor Ashoka of the Maurya dynasty in the third century BC. This society was *based on the acknowledgment of the human quality of basic goodness*. Another society particularly legendary in the Asian and Indian worlds is the kingdom of Shambhala. The first king, Suchandra, is said to have been a student of the Buddha. The key societal task these rulers saw for themselves was to create and maintain social structures that would support and strengthen the experience of basic goodness in their subjects. In Mahayana Buddhism it is called *buddhanature*. It is said that all human beings possess this *Buddha nature* and experience it at times.

Nowadays people often think that Buddhism is simply about mindfulness and compassion. Buddhist thought, however, has a lot more to offer, in particular to Western sociology and education. In the words of the *Dalai Lama*:
“Many of the problems we face are man-made, which isn’t to say that women aren’t responsible for some of them. Perhaps I should say human created problems, for which incomplete education is responsible. In addition to basic education, we need to encourage warm-heartedness, concern for others and compassion. Otherwise, when our marvellous intelligence is led by powerful negative emotions, it invites disaster. The real source of trouble is in our mind and emotions.”

This means that in terms of *Bildung* we also have to explore

- 1) *our own way of thinking about ourselves and others* and
- 2) *the ego centered emotions that we hold onto*.

The way to do this is to look at the stream of thought, to use William James’ phrase, how we are almost constantly drowning in it. How we hold it for reality itself. And how, in that way, we live in the world as we think it to be. Briefly put, this self created ‘world’ revolves around the notion of ‘me’ and how to maintain this ‘me’. As such it triggers our ego centered emotions; that is emotions geared to self-preservation. Waking up from this is the aim of Buddhist meditation. And that means reconnecting with our basic state of benevolence. According to Buddhism we can do that because we have this Buddha nature, this good human nature that urges us to wake up and by doing so reconnects us with basic goodness.

In brief what Confucian and Buddhist education share is their trust in human nature. They both recognize the need to cultivate that nature. And they both offer methods of character education that fulfill that need. So their approach is different from Jean-Jacques Rousseau who said: “La nature a fait l'homme heureux et bon, mais la société le déprave et le rend misérable”. Lastly, according to Confucian thought and Buddhism (see e.g. the *Cakkavatti Sihananda Sutta* and the *Kutadanta Sutta*) a good human society both supports and is supported by the basic goodness of its members.

A view based on distrust of basic goodness

It is actually fascinating and revealing that for many of us the well documented biological view of De Waal and others seems often hard to accept when we look at the nature of the human species. The intellectual grip that Thomas Hobbes (1588 -1679) has had for many generations seems to still hold many human minds captive. If we would turn back to our ‘natural condition’ Hobbes wrote in *Leviathan* (1651), human life would be ‘solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short’. And Hobbes is not alone in his distrust.

Causes of our distrust

According to Calvinism it is only because there is a God who revealed to us how to live our lives that we know how to subdue our nasty, brutish human condition. In particular in northern Europe our view of human nature is shaped by this view. The Heidelberg Catechism, 1563, Question 8 expresses this distrust in human nature as follows:

Q. But are we so corrupt that we are totally unable to do any good and inclined toward all evil?

A. Yes, unless we are born again, by the Spirit of God.

One does not need to be a Calvinist, however, in order to have such a gloomy view. The atheist Sigmund Freud had an equally negative opinion. The difference being that according to Freud it is not God but human civilization that has the function and power of keeping our ‘natural condition’ under some kind of control.

A second cause of distrust in human nature is the traumatic experience of the second world war: In a poem written in 1946 by the famous Dutch poet, Lucebert, he looks back at what this war has done with humankind and society. It starts with the line:

“Now we are all touched
And adorned with the most malicious evil of all evil”

Moreover, we nowadays know that the trauma of wars, famine and deprivation shapes our mind and our image of the human being for more than one generation. In many ways it is still our reference point for how to assess human nature.

Also, our information technology has made it possible and almost unavoidable to take notice day after day of wars and human conflicts from all over the world. That again seems to justify our distrust in our basic nature.

All this shapes consciously or unconsciously our western view of mankind. When we turn to education we therefore have to deeply search ourselves how we ourselves think and feel about human nature. Because, as parents or professional teachers, these thoughts and feelings determine what we will teach the younger generation in terms of *Bildung* or character education. If we do not see, acknowledge or trust this basic goodness in ourselves and others, what do we then consciously or unconsciously transmit in terms of *Bildung*?

Principles of the heart

Fortunately there have been and there always will be human beings who are in touch with this deep sense of basic goodness, this natural longing to create a human society and culture of kindness that lies beyond (or better: below) ethical notions of good and bad. As we discussed, they developed methods and principles for cultivating and strengthening our basic goodness. We find this in all cultures. For this longing is the heart of humanity – being it often, because of all the harshness in the world, in the form of a bleeding heart. Such principles are not based on a moral code, a social theory or political ideology, but on a deeply personal and equally universal human experience; they are principles of the heart.

Our deep longing

We all have the personal experience that fundamentally, basically, we are benevolent, good-natured beings; we long to make the best of our lives and of our social relationships, in our family, at school, in our work situation and up through all the aspects of society at large. We have this deep longing that it goes well with us, with those close to us, and in fact with the whole world. This experience is of all times and all cultures; it is the fundament of our humanity.

Proof of deep longing

Well, is that true? Do we all have this deep longing? Let's turn this question around; isn't the sorrow, the anger, the frustration, that we often feel when we see suffering and cruelty around us the indisputable proof that this longing resides in us? If this longing would not be part of our being, then seeing the suffering and injustice around us would not affect us. We would be indifferent to it. It would neither trigger frustration and anger nor compassion. And we would not feel good when this deep longing is fulfilled. But the fact is that it makes us, in the most profound sense of the word happy. At these moments we are at our best. We experience our basic goodness, the vitality of ourselves and our culture. And isn't it even present when out of frustration and anger that this longing cannot be fulfilled we do all kinds of stupid, possibly even cruel things?

Realism

Acknowledging this longing as part of human nature is an act of realism, not of wishful thinking. Those who hold this view are not naïve. They are well aware of the fact that this quality not only needs to be (re)discovered and acknowledged, but also *needs to be nurtured*. Any *Bildung* should be based on this. For it is the binding factor of any healthy society.

Strength and fearlessness

When it gets obscured human society – not withstanding its technological sophistication – will disintegrate. If society is shaped by distrust and doubt toward the benevolent nature of its members, does it have a future? Trust binds, distrust disbands society. Distrust goes against the fact that we human beings do have this deep longing, even though we might feel it only feebly at times. In the intimate space of our mind we know, almost secretly, that we mean well. But even then we soon think that it is probably different for other people; and they might well think that about us! Otherwise, where does all this misery, aggression, heartlessness and cruelty we see around us, come from? If the devil does not exist, then mustn't it be that devilish forces roam in human beings themselves? It sounds so logical. But, as we said, the fact that we are not indifferent and often deeply upset about the evil that we see around us proves that we, just as all other primates are *good natured*.

Being in touch with the experience of basic goodness makes human beings strong and their confidence in this experience will make brave people'. Such people are able to approach misery, aggression and cruelty with the fearless gentleness of inner strength.

What does this all imply about education in our time?

First of all, just like king Asoka, king Suchandra, Confucius and many others looked for elements and qualities in their own society, we can look for those aspects of our society that *resonate with our own experience of basic goodness*. And highlight those in schools and in our education system.

Second, we can only do so, if we ourselves cultivate the experience of basic goodness and learn to trust it. And, simultaneously, we need to cultivate clarity of mind, in order to see what needs to be accepted and what need to be rejected. That is the practice of meditation as we can find it Buddhism and in the great nontheistic humanistic traditions from Asia.

We can do this neither from a sense of duty, nor from fear of punishment or retaliation—let alone out of some preconceived ideology. We can do this based on our personal experience that acting upon our basic goodness uplifts and humanizes our culture. In that way we bring about a more enlightened way of living together—in our family, with our friends, at our work and in society at large.

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