

# The Return to Wonder : Education Among Morality and Immorality

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**Abstract:** In this study I present the topic of education in its essence, away from the two opposites, the two fires between which it usually tends to fall: *amorality* and *immorality*. We tend to confuse such opposites with one another. But what is meant by amorality? And what by immorality? Why is it important to offer a non-tendentious approach to education that takes morality into account? Following Dietrich von Hildebrand's personalist philosophy, I will revisit one of his reflections presented at a Workshop he held in Washington, and which finds its greatest expression in his major work, *Ethics*. In his talk Hildebrand noted how there is "the tendency to eliminate the moral point of view in our approach to life." He made this observation especially considering the attitude of many teachers in public schools and in high schools to oust the fundamental categories of morally good and evil and to interpret the world in an amoral approach. Such an attitude, Hildebrand observes, is not only mistaken but simply impossible, unrealistic. Unrealistic because it flees the "datum of reality," and the issue of good or evil cannot be obviated. I will focus on Hildebrand's concept of the "value response" and the "category of importance," and then I will show that to educate it is necessary to approach reality without censoring its essence.

**Keywords:** Morality, amorality, immorality, phenomenological realism, value response.

## 1 Introduction

In this essay I contribute to the discussion on the philosophical aspects of moral reflection in ethical education and character education. I will try to answer the question of what type of moral thinking and reflection it makes sense to develop in moral education at schools, in the lessons of ethical education, and in general.

The first aspect that needs to be reflected on is that *virtuous circle* between teacher and student that if active can lead to maximum learning. The premise is certainly: 1. that the teacher is prepared; and 2. that there is the good will of the student to learn. Nevertheless, these two aspects are not always sufficient.

The great premise of this contribution lies in its setting, which I derive from the philosopher Dietrich von Hildebrand, is realism, or rather, phenomenological realism. In fact, imagine that you suddenly wake up and find yourself in front of snowy peaks: well,

this beauty, this “wonder” (I will analyze the meaning of this interesting word) raises in you the philosophical question par excellence: what is this world? Why is it there? Who gives it to you? I will accurately show in the following paragraphs, however, that this last question is often obscured by empty dialectics, but it continues to endure over time.

## 2 The Experience of the Wonderfulness

The starting point of the present reflection is the datum of reality as it presents itself. Dietrich von Hildebrand, a pupil of Edmund Husserl and later an exponent, together with Adolf Reinach, of realist phenomenology, in his famous treatise on epistemology *What is Philosophy?* (1960) analyzes the foundations of knowledge and identifies wonder as the constitutive attitude of the philosopher. I want at the beginning of this reflection to quote the following piece in full: from it we can already see clearly the force of Hildebrand’s philosophical approach and the reason for the significance of the concept of wonder and the experience of the wonderfulness that we are about to explore. Hildebrand here reflects on the sensory structure of the human being and especially on the deception. He writes:

First, the semblance of an oar in the water contradicts reality quite differently than does the blue color of the mountain. That an object changes color in a different light is normal. By its very nature color refers to the way a thing looks, and the fact that one and the same thing appears differently colored does not imply a contradiction like that between a broken and an unbroken oar. But there is a still more important difference. The semblance of the broken oar includes no contribution to reality. It does not enrich the world, nor does it form a member in the chain of elements which build up a meaningful aspect of the exterior world and are bearers of its beauty. But this all applies to the blue color of the mountains.

The blue color of mountains seen from afar is great enrichment of the world. It definitely has an important function in the beauty of nature; it contains a “word” full of significance, a message frequently the theme of poets. It fits meaningfully and organically into the general aspect of nature and especially of the landscape. It includes a specific meaningful message, whereas the appearance of the broken oar is a mere deception.

The question now arises. What place has this blue color in reality? It certainly presupposes a human spectator, and does this fact deprive it of all objectivity and validity, and exile it from reality?

Are we not here confronted with a case in which the dependence of something upon man’s mind does not deprive it of its objective validity and its place in reality?

It seems that we must distinguish between two radically different types of dependence upon man’s mind or two different types of subjectivity: the first is due to a limitation of man’s mind and consists in a deformation of reality or in semblances which are completely cut off from reality. The second is an appearance of reality which implies a meaningful message directed to man. We could say of the second type that the object should have this appearance; it belongs to its very meaning. It is meant to look so, to present itself to man in this way. And by that it acquires a full validity and is withdrawn from merely negative subjectivity. (von Hildebrand, 2001, pp. 366–368)

I will therefore now specifically analyze the concept of wonder and the related human experience of it.

## 2.1 On the Concept of the Wonder : Aesthetic and Theoretical Aspects

As I was able to analyze in the recent study entitled “Genesi di un concetto e dinamiche educative” [Genesis of a concept and educational dynamics] (Grimi, 2022, pp. 49–57)<sup>1</sup>, the Latin word *miīrabīlia*, “wonderful things” (pl. neuter of the adjective *mīrābīlis*, “admirable, wonderful”), has different meanings. First of all, “wonder” means “that feeling one gets from seeing, hearing, knowing something extraordinary, strange or otherwise unexpected.” According to this meaning, synonyms of wonder are “astonishment,” “surprise,” and “amazement.” Second, “wonder” can also be said of a person, thing, or situation: to be a “wonder,” that is, to be something that arouses admiration because of its beauty or some other quality. Finally, “wonder” can also mean an herbaceous plant of the nictaginaceae, *mirabilis jalapa* or “night beauty,” a particular plant that has the quality of possessing flowers that open at night.

An observation should first be made: wonder represents the subject’s astonishment at an unthought-of reality, that is, a reality that until the subject’s discovery has no thought for the subject. The discovery of what I call “wonderfulness” here (i.e., of a thing that for the subject is wonderful) gives the object a certain thought. In order to be able to speak of wonder, it is necessary to be able to speak of the “capacity to wonder.” That is, wonder is an expression of the subject’s apprehension; it is a subtle *liaison* between subject and object in the occurrence of knowledge. Or, to put it even better, wonder is the expression, the outcome of the subject’s learning process in knowing a different reality; to echo the well-known Thomist definition of *veritas*, wonder is an expression of the adaptation of the intellect to the thing, *declaratio adaequationis intellectus et rei*. Wonder, thus following the Thomist definition of truth, is part of truth, consisting of truth of a being-in-relation, that is, of an adjustment of two parts, *intellectus* and *res*.

But let us now turn our attention to the ancients. Plato made Socrates tell Theaetetus:

Theodorus seems to be a pretty good guesser about your nature. For this feeling of wonder shows that you are a philosopher, since wonder is the only beginning of philosophy, and he who said that Iris was the child of Thaumatas made a good genealogy. (Theaetetus, 155d)

Iris is the messenger of heaven, and Plato interprets the name of her father as “wonder.” As Enrico Berti recalled (2015), “Iris, messenger of the gods among men, is here identified with philosophy, and she is the daughter of Thaumante, a name that in Greek recalls the verb “to wonder” (*thaumazein*). Later it will be Aristotle who will recognize that the desire for knowledge finds its beginning in the wonder felt in the face of the giving of things in the world:

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<sup>1</sup> In section 2.1 I partly show the contents of the first little chapter “Genesi e sviluppo del meraviglioso” [Genesis and development of wonderfulness], where I already had the opportunity to articulate the meaning of the marvellous from the conception of ancient authors.

[...] It is through wonder that men now begin and originally began to philosophize; wondering in the first place at obvious perplexities, and then by gradual progression raising questions about the greater matters too, e.g. about the changes of the moon and of the sun, about the stars and about the origin of the universe. (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, I, 1, 982b)

Aristotle here also adds the criterion by which the investigation of wonder has evolved over time as man has advanced in the process of knowledge. As Marcello Zanatta points out (2009, footnote 29, p. 367), Aristotle identifies as the objects of wonder first the phenomena of the empirical world, as the realities closest to us, and then the phenomena of the astral world, that is, phenomena on which myth had intervened to provide explanations, also animated by the wonder from which philosophical inquiry is animated. For the ancients, wonder initially represents not so much a dimension of astonishment, although the discovery of the marvelous certainly generates astonishment for them as well, as the fact that something turns out to be wonderful because it is not known. As the subject advances in knowledge, who knows more, the level of possibility of the giving of something wonderful (and thus of having *the experience of wonderfulness*) gets lower. Such a Greek approach thus makes us look at wonder as a cognitive dimension.

As Berti masterfully observes,

[...] the wonder of which Plato and Aristotle speak has nothing aesthetic, it is a purely theoretical attitude, that is, cognitive, it is simple desire to know. But to know what? The “why,” that is, the explanation of what is in front of us and whose cause we do not immediately see. Wonder is essentially a demand for an explanation, for a reason: it arises from experience, from the observation of an object, an event, or an action, of which one wants to know the why, that is, the cause.

He continues: “To experience wonder is to ask these questions. Generally, today, the person who does this is the scientist, who asks very circumscribed questions about a certain class of phenomena or events, which constitute the object of his research.”

Therefore, a main distinction can now be drawn between the discovery of the wonder, the set of snowy peaks that are hidden on the horizon and visible once the summit is reached, and the wonder as an eternal rush, understood as the landing point of the interest that moves in the quest. The first way of understanding the *wonder* is of an *aesthetic* nature; the second is strictly *theoretical*.

It is also important to point out that an integral part of the experience of the marvelous, that is, the experience made by the astonished subject, is contemplation (see also von Hildebrand, 1993, pp. 149–156), understood as an act. Contemplation is the ultimate stage of the experience of the wonderful, the point at which the aesthetic and theoretical aspects of the experience of the wonderful converge. The subject does not come to terms with the discovery made, and in finding what satisfies his search he now gratefully contemplates the result obtained, almost incredulous that such a perfect combination of what was yearned for, sought after, and concrete, factual reality, could “really” occur, that is, could concern reality, something real, and no longer merely ideal. Not surprisingly, the contemplative aspect of human experience was highly valued during the medieval era,

where awareness of cognitive “ignorance” accompanied the learning process. During modernity, due to a growing scientific mentality, there has often been a tendency on the part of the subject to master the given reality while disallowing its Creator. Such an operation dense with irreligiosity (proper to the religious is instead to recognize the limit of the contingent datum and thus to seek and embrace an ultimate cause beyond oneself) is often a reason for the exclusion of the contemplative aspect from the horizon of the wonderful, as if ecstasy could contain an exhaustive explanatory capacity.

## **2.2 The Anthropological Crisis and the Proposal for a Religious Enlightenment**

The second point I wish to consider is the *anthropological crisis* generated by post-modernism and currently exacerbated by the social mainstream. The new generations are increasingly alienated by technology, easily enclosing themselves in virtual worlds, disinclined to confront adults and even peers. Hildebrand wrote about that:

With the triumph of technology that began in the machine era, beauty was more and more replaced by comfort. If civilization pursues ease in practical life and efficiency in reaching practical ends; and if culture, an impractical superabundance, merely enriches and elevates human life; then civilization has throttled culture (von Hildebrand, 1993, p. 121).

And Hildebrand goes on to observe how during the twentieth century many industries were built heedlessly with respect to the land and nature, and how the general cultural decline was present in architecture, in the fields of music and fine arts:

The replacement of beauty by comfort and efficiency, the de-poetization of man’s life, brings about a dehumanization, a human atrophy, even if the average man is not aware of it. Culture has been throttled by civilization. More and more it is believed that learning is the real sign of culture. The more someone has learned, the more degrees he has, the more is he considered cultured. This is a great error. (von Hildebrand, 1993, p. 123).

The anthropological crisis has been compounded by an ambiguous if seemingly efficient communication through what I ironically like to call “Goodle.” In a kind of apparent god, a person thus foolishly places the goal of his/her “search.” The communication between people that has become ambiguous causes a language that is no longer common: words no longer retain their meaning unchanged, that is, the name no longer designates specifically the essence of the thing. It is the exact inversion of realist phenomenology, that is, the “politically correct.” This factor generates a lot of anxiety: there are more and more episodes of panic attacks and giving up on completing one’s studies. The loss of confidence in a rational criterion in reality, whereby one comes to question the evidence, results in a fragile basis for knowledge and leads the individual to be increasingly subject to the tempers of current fashions. Even one’s own ideas cannot be by definition considered stable and effective: the subject wobbles, and the experience of the marvellous becomes an exclusively individualistic and therefore unshareable thing.

In reference to the anthropological crisis and distrust of reason, in an interview given on the occasion of the awarding of the “Jannone Prize. On Europe and its Identity,” the French

philosopher Rémi Brague speaks about “Christian enlightenment.” The proposal is thought-provoking:

The history of Europe is a history of crises but also a history of overcoming those crises through new renaissances. It may be true that Christianity is disappearing in the European space. Christianity is sick. But we have to ask: Is there such a thing as good health of secular European society? It may be that it is disappearing faster, faster secular culture than Christian culture. The so-called secular people – as the word itself says – do not think more than a century, 100 years, and the secular attitude necessarily leads, in the long run, to this impossibility of survival of a civilization. I do not speak willingly of roots, but rather of sources or points of reference, and for this the only way to survive would be in my opinion to rediscover the assets that constitute our cultural heritage, inseparably ancient, medieval, Christian, and also illuministic. There has been a Christian Enlightenment; we need to destroy that myth that the Enlightenment is only anti-Christian. We need an authentic enlightenment rooted in the Christian faith. The pope who has said the most decisive things about Europe is Pope Benedict XVI. This pope thought of Europe as the concretization, the consequence of classical and also Christian sources. It was impossible to think of this social and cultural structure without a reference to Christianity. So to recover and rediscover this dimension, this original source of Christianity, there is the school, there is teaching. We do not receive Christianity, we do not receive classical culture from heaven, it does not fall from heaven. Appropriating all this heritage is the result of effort. This takes time and a will, I would say a political will. Without this effort, nothing would be possible (interview to Brague R., on 25/11/2021)<sup>2</sup>.

I wanted to quote this interview, which raises numerous questions, in full: in the reflection I am developing, it is sufficient to recognize how the philosopher recovers the dimension of reason within Christian culture and rejects the reading by which the Enlightenment has only an anti-Christian nature. It is truly symptomatic that in a society that brags about rights but then ideologically fears others' questions, *the freedom to ask* is increasingly being lost. The ability to question the reasons, as an example, for the choices embraced by governments, the criterion for ethical proposals; we need to question such matters.

In education it happens, for example, that in response to what has been taught questions arise in students. There is no need to abandon the criterion that it is possible, indeed permissible, to ask the teacher questions, that is, to question what has been taught. Some questions may seemingly be inappropriate, and the move that students often make in the face of complex topics is to put their reasoning away in a drawer by virtue of quiet life, accepting what is *politically correct* to ask or not to ask. Such an ideological mindset is a major obstacle to the attainment of the wonder, which is instead a fully free experience, in which the subject breathes and enjoys the newly learned discovery (often costing him or her much effort).

In the younger generation, however, we increasingly witness the absence of questioning. The natural instinct of questioning is often repressed by virtue of uniformity of thought: such repression generates a profound boredom. Therefore, it no longer turns out to be

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<sup>2</sup> See also: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tIx\\_IRoSlek](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tIx_IRoSlek). Website accessed on 06/06/2023.

legitimate to wonder: everything is equal and boring, “school is boring.” Thus, political correctness is inevitably connected with the distorted need to erase parts of history. Only one part turns out to be “correct” and worthy of survival. Emblematic of this mentality is the recent *cancel culture* whereby the different, as parts of history, must be cancelled. The spokesman of wonder at the discovery of the new world, in the same new world, has been “demolished”<sup>3</sup>. Here I refer to the demolition of the statue of Christopher Columbus that happened in the United States of America, in Minneapolis, in spring 2021.

The hypothesis of an Enlightenment that is not anti-Christian but leads the subject to reconsider the role of reason in common feeling, is a response to the problems, increasingly rampant in society, of the *politically correct* and *cancel culture*. These two tendencies, in fact, sidestep the issue of truth in argumentation, as if the latter could be effective even in the absence of a truth principle. And so also the concept of good and evil blur into each other or can be shaped at will according to the specific circumstance.

### 3 Moral Hypocrisy : a Right Hildebrandian Observation

We have pointed out how the “experience of wonderfulness” is a constitutive experience of being. However, this integral experience that contains within itself a regenerative force clashes with the post-modern tendency that attempts to reduce it to mere emotion<sup>4</sup>. That is, the tendency of annihilation that contemporary society is concerned with tends to reduce the power of this experience that is pervasive for the subject, that is, enlarges in the subject the inner dimension leading him or her to turn to the Creator. As Hildebrand points out, the reasons for this reduction are first of all to be found in the pervasive relativism and atheism: political power brings the subject’s mind into a kind of fog. Advertising, for example, hyper-stimulates the subject with idols of different kinds<sup>5</sup>, often fueling the propositions thus imposed on him.

Before we question the role of education, we want in this section to reflect on the behavior assumed by the subject. Why do our actions go in one direction? Why and how can we speak of good and evil? Hildebrand observes that the bewilderment of the heart that leads the subject to deprive himself of what we have christened “the experience of the wonderful” also leads to a kind of moral hypocrisy. We now therefore enter into a reflection on morality.

#### 3.1 The Distinction between Amoralism and Immorality

Significant is the approach to the subject of education considered by Hildebrand. During a workshop he gave in Washington, after surviving the Nazi threat and making his way to safety in the New World, he strongly denounced the tendency to eliminate the moral point of view in the approach to life. On that time, this tendency was inherent in most of the teaching transmitted in American public schools. As an aggravating factor, moreover, he

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<sup>3</sup> About the issue of *cancel culture* read the reflection by Brague R. (2021), *La verità*, Tempi.it.

<sup>4</sup> See D. Von Hildebrand (1967) and D. von Hildebrand (1960), ch. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Very significant in this regard is the publication by von Hildebrand, D. (1976).

rebuked the constant conceptual overlapping of amorality and immorality, as if refraining from judgment on right and wrong, good and evil, were interchangeable with distinguishing these different realities. He writes:

We can observe in our epoch a trend toward amorality, which must be clearly distinguished from immorality. What I have in mind is a tendency to eliminate the moral point of view in our approach to life. Whether we think of the relations between the two sexes, or of a great part of contemporary literature, the attitude of many teachers in public schools and in high schools, when dealing with history or literature, we encounter the attempt to oust the fundamental categories of morally good and evil, to interpret the world in amoral approach. Instead of grasping the tremendous reality of the categories of morally good and evil, and understanding that they have a similar function in the spiritual realm and in human life, as do light and darkness in the exterior world, one believes it to be more objective and realistic to strip the world of its moral significance. One does not understand that in doing to one necessarily falsifies the nature of all most important things, and deprives them of their significance, of their capacity to bestow happiness on us. In a word, one reduces the world to a laboratory, and condemns oneself to endless boredom (von Hildebrand, "Workshop Washington," Archive, unpublished text, p. 1).

In Hildebrand's talk, one can thus identify the terms "morality," "amorality," and "immorality," all three of which are distinct. There is morality, an absence of morality, and an opposing moral attitude. If immorality leads to behaviour against being, a passive living dominated by social fashions leads easily to the generation of a confusion between good and evil, the consequence of which is the total annihilation of the individual with almost no possibility of return to a fullness of life. Amorality thus turns out to be an excellent ally of that political power that wants to enslave man. Again in the unpublished Washington paper, Hildebrand thus urges "an imperative call for a rehabilitation of morality, an awakening to the all-important fundamental significance of the categories of good and evil, to the splendor of moral value" (p. 2).

Hildebrand devotes ample space in his reflection to ethical issues. Among his most significant works is *Ethics*, in which he analyses the link between reasonableness and morality. He states:

It is certainly true that morality is the highest fulfillment of reasonability, if we take reasonability to include the call of values and obedience to this call. But never can we deduce from the notion of reasonability the notion of morality. Once we have grasped the nature of morality, we understand that it also implies a new and higher form of reasonability. This reasonability presupposes morality and not vice versa (von Hildebrand, 2022, p. 194).

According to Hildebrand, therefore, it is not possible to deduce morality from reasonableness: the specific sources of morality must be found, and only then can it be understood that it is reasonable to act morally. In this chapter of *Ethics* devoted precisely to the topic of morality and reasonableness, Hildebrand also delves into the topic of "moral goodness"; he states: "But clearly, we must first know moral goodness in order to know that man in his very meaning and nature is destined to be morally good" (p. 196). It is not necessary to analyze the nature of man to know that one act is good and another



mean: quite the contrary, “in order to understand the nature of man and its most specific mark, its transcendence, in order to grasp the truth that man is destined to be morally good and that this is not a merely factual trend but also an objective relation of “oughtness,” we must first of all know moral values” (p. 196). And more: “An analysis of man’s nature that prescind from moral goodness could never lead us to understand why justice is *secundum naturam*; but the insight into the goodness of justice reveals to us that man is destined to partake of this goodness” (p. 196). Moral goodness, then, is criterion for understanding actions, that is, for understanding whether something is accomplished according to nature, whether the action is in the direction of the true and full realization of the subject. Hildebrand will devote numerous pages in *Ethics* to delving into the meaning of values and in particular will focus on “the response to value,” as if to say that there is an act proper to man – responding – that looks to the essence of the act itself. Goodness also expresses a further Goodness, the response to value brings man to his fullest realization. He writes: “The basis of man’s moral values can be found only in a cosmos pregnant with values; it implies man’s response to goods endowed with values, and at least in an implicit, indirect way, man’s response to God, the Infinite Goodness” (p. 196).

Having thus highlighted the importance of moral action, as acting in accordance with moral goodness as the fulfillment of man, and having thus also highlighted how amorality is a feigned move on the part of the subject that deprives him or her of a response toward being, and thus ultimately of the possibility of “responding,” i.e., fulfilling oneself, I now will deal more specifically with the meaning of “value response,” with reference to a concept uniquely proposed by Hildebrand, namely, the concept of “importance.”

### **3.2 The Value Response and the Concept of Importance**

In the unpublished manuscript already mentioned, we read what Hildebrand means by “phenomenology”: “In speaking of phenomenology, I have in mind the immediate intuitive contact with the intelligible data of experience, the analysis of their essences in contradistinction to all kinds of exploration of their genesis or hypotheses and abstract explanatory constructions” (p. 22). Hildebrand, embracing phenomenological realism, is clear about the importance of the perception of immediate data in the cognitive process. Also in the paper presented in Washington he stated:

It belongs to the very nature of value to possess its importance in itself and thus the question whence it derives its importance is as nonsensical as the question “How do I know that something evident is evident, which criterion do we possess for evidence?” In reality the evidence of an importance in itself is much more intelligible in a much deeper sense of the term intelligible than the plausibility offered by the notion of something being important *for* something else (p. 8).

One finds the same keen observation in the thought of the twenty-first century theologian Servant of God Fr. Luigi Giussani:

Let us assume before us the usual notes of the example already given. If someone came up next to us and said seriously, “Are you sure it’s a block of notes? What if it isn’t?” our reaction would be one of astonishment tinged with fear, like someone confronted by an eccentric. Aristotle wittily said that it is foolish to ask the reasons for what the evidence shows as fact (Aristotle, *Topics*, I, 11, 105a 3–7). No one could live long and healthily on the path of those absurd questions. Well, this kind of evidence is an aspect of what I have called elementary experience (Giussani, 1997, p. 9).

This observation leads one to reflect on some recent philosophical approaches in analytic philosophy (with particular attention to Virtue Ethics), as well as on some educational proposals that question the first factor of cognitive learning traced here in the evidence (or “elementary experience”), and which Hildebrand himself locates in the “immediate datum” (see von Hildebrand, 2001).

In education, the importance of the datum of reality comes immediately to notice. For the highest level of understanding, it is necessary to go deeper into the elements that are given, to know all aspects of them, to leave nothing as superfluous. Superficial knowledge will never lead to a full and thorough understanding of the object. As Hildebrand himself recounts, it was in front of a store window that one day he understood that there can be things that are truly important to the subject, and others that are only partially so. He came more specifically to distinguish what he calls “important in itself” and what he calls “subjectively satisfying” instead. What is important invites the subject to a “response,” and this is precisely where he will arrive at the definition of “response to value,” and life as a “response.”

Looking now more specifically at the educational field and imagining ourselves in a classroom of a school with students intent on understanding a problem, we can then well observe the distinction between “important in itself” and what he defines “subjectively satisfying.” Hildebrand underlines the importance of “responding” to value. In a learning process this means that the search in the world of knowledge must correspond to a desire for understanding for “the important in itself” and not for what he calls “subjectively satisfying”. The interest aroused by the teacher, that is to say, in a specific subject matter, appears to the subject as an interest because it is responsive to a specific problem, to a given reality. When the student first learns the meaning of what an atom is, he is dealing with, “taking an interest in” a specific reality. This is “the important in itself,” that is, a genuine reality characterized by a specific interest on the part of the subject. What is “subjectively satisfying” touches on instantaneous pleasure, which does not last in time; what is “important in itself” has to do with the vocation of the subject and the ontology of the object.

This is why the response to value can for Hildebrand only concern morality. In the learning process, the “reality of value” is always taken for granted. In fact, referring to Aristippus of Cyrene, Hildebrand states that even those who deny morality tacitly presuppose the reality of value. A *prise de conscience* of the given reality is needed. This is why in the discovery of the wonder, that is, in the experience of wonderfulness, even contemplation cannot be excluded, because it is a part related to the authenticity of the

given reality, the essence (that is, that invitation of phenomenology “to return to things themselves”) of the discovery.

The student, in order to *experience wonderfulness*, will therefore have to place himself in a humble attitude, proper to the researcher, eager to make new discoveries. For the *experience of wonderfulness*, it is therefore necessary to *return as children*: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 18,3). Only with that disposition of mind is it possible to enjoy that wonder to which all creation tends and in which the Greeks had already traced the origin of all knowledge.

#### **4 A scholastic spark: aim for wonder and you will create wonders**

As Hildebrand recalls, in order to speak about the human being, it is necessary to consider the dimensions of work, of affectivity, of character, and of strengths and weaknesses. In education, if the subject is to be brought to full flowering, it is therefore necessary to take into consideration all the characteristics that distinguish him. To educate to wonderfulness means to educate by giving full notion of the contents and identifying their unlimited character: knowledge, in fact, is in the process of becoming, as are the discoveries that the subject will be able to make once he or she has acquired the knowledge transmitted.

In the cognitive process, the “discovery” made by the learner plays a key role: it makes the learner increasingly aware of the knowledge he has acquired and in turn leads him to pass on what he has learned. Education for the wonderful leads to the discovery of the wonder and the joy of that discovery. The experience of the wonderful in this sense is contagious; it wants to be communicated.

The cognitive mechanism identified by Hildebrand, “*taking cognizance*-important in itself-value response” has consequences. In the chapter 19 of *Ethics* Hildebrand raises the question of what the sources are of moral value (positive or negative), actions, inner responses and habitual dispositions of the person, and lists some of them, the first being the response to the value of morally relevant goods. As Paola Premoli de Marchi recalls in her introduction to the recent Italian edition of *Ethics*, Hildebrand inserts an important footnote (the footnote is in fact absent in the pre-1974 editions) in which he speaks of an additional source of moral value – which he then takes up in his writings on love (see von Hildebrand, 1971, ch. VII) – namely, “interest in the objective good of another person,” which can be a source of moral goodness in our actions, even if the good is not morally relevant: “this interest that something arouses because it represents an objective good for the other [...] is essentially connected with all love and contributes to the unique moral value of love”<sup>6</sup>. This is altruism which, paraphrased with what we outlined with respect to the student who learns, is contained in the discovery of the joy of the wonderful. Hildebrand goes on in the note to say that this source of moral value cannot be separated

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<sup>6</sup> Footnote at the end of chapter 19 of the German edition of *Ethics* (1980). My translation.

from the response to value, indeed it presupposes it in several respects: such an intention of love he points to as the super response to value. He concludes the long note by mentioning the fulfillment of formal obligations, such as those arising from the promise and thus evokes the link between ethics and jurisprudence. Finally, he mentions a fourth source of moral goodness, namely, man's metaphysical situation, and recalls "the unprecedented arrogance on the part of man to behave as if he were the master of life and death," with an explicit reference to euthanasia. Many of these content statements would later be taken up in a forthcoming text entitled *The Sources of Moral Obligations and Prohibitions*, which intuitively, by comparison, is the content later published in the posthumous work *Moralia* (1980).

Let us now delve into some characteristics proper to a subject in research, the scholar, and those methods and tools in education aimed at fostering knowledge in the discovery of the "contagious experience of wonderfulness."

#### **4.1 Who is the Student?**

If method is (almost) everything, it is worth giving a brief mention to Howard Gardner, a professor at Harvard University, who in his *Theory of Multiple Intelligences* reports an interesting observation. He challenges the traditional concept of intelligence and states that several basic types of intelligence can be distinguished in people. He identifies the following intellectual macro-groups: 1. linguistic intelligence; 2. logical-mathematical intelligence; 3. spatial intelligence; 4. bodily-kinesthetic intelligence; 5. musical intelligence; 6. interpersonal intelligence; 7. intrapersonal intelligence; 8. naturalistic intelligence. Thus, it is necessary to keep in mind that the student's predispositions are not accidental, that being more inclined to one disciplinary subject than to another has a specific reason. This awareness goes hand in hand with a greater awareness and antecedent to any analysis, namely the *uniqueness of each single student*. In considering the learning student, it is therefore necessary to identify his propensity toward one type of study rather than another. Identifying the school that best conforms to him is the first step in successful educational completion.

A second element that needs to be considered when looking at the student is emotional intelligence. I wish to mention the emotional intelligence of the person that should not be overlooked. According to the well-known study by Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*, each person has the ability to understand and consciously reason about their own and others' emotions. For Goleman, emotional intelligence includes self-awareness, objective self-assessment of one's abilities and limitations, self-esteem and recognition of negative emotions, self-control and the ability to manage emotions, the ability to motivate oneself when things are not going well, and a certain percentage of optimism and initiative. Through emotional intelligence, therefore, the student will be able to achieve, within his or her learning process, an awareness with respect to what he or she knows and does not know, to what still needs to be deepened by him or her. Structuralism has made a major contribution to situational philosophy. However, I will not deal with that in this study. What is certain is that emotional development is something that must be taken

into consideration while dealing with education. I pass on this provocation to the psychologists.

Finally, I want to recall the heart of the matter here. As is well known, the word “personality” comes from the Latin word “persona” (from the late Latin *personalitas-atris*, der. of *personalis* “personal,” der. in turn of *persōna* “person”). Personality implies something absolutely unrepeatable in a unique subject. Indeed, as the American psychologist Gordon Allport stated, personality means a set of traits and behavioral patterns that determine a person’s particular abilities and activities accrued in the environment in which he or she is embedded.

## 4.2 Methods and Tools

To lead the student to the discovery of wonder, method is central. As already noted with Hildebrand, it is necessary to start from the datum of reality: it is phenomenology therefore that represents the philosophical method. In order to be able to make the discovery of wonder in teaching there must first be a commitment on the part of the teacher to introduce the relevant subject matter in the most complete and comprehensive way. It is then necessary to teach the student the method of study, of approaching the problem in order to bring him or her to the resolution of the problem, to the full learning of the subject at hand. In particular, it is good to identify two delicate elements in the life of the student who is in an educational setting nowadays: 1. the school organization of pupils’ lives; 2. the teaching activity of the teacher.

Concerning the first point, nowadays we are facing an increasing emphasis on the skills to be learned rather than on the subject who strives to learn them, the pressure for staying with the rhythm of the program rather than devoting lessons open to confrontation, the proliferation of labels to define the limitations of the most fragile subjects, and the relative homogenization that results from this. These are some of the elements that lead to a homologation of students rather than emphasizing their individual and unique qualities.

About teaching activities, on the other hand, we should note: the numerous work tasks, the large volume of deliveries, the nagging reminder of the need to complete the development of the imposed program, the increase in requests for summaries that can adapt to the new electronic instrumentation available, the number of assessments to be collected, and the increase in administrative and bureaucratic tasks (forms, meetings, documentation to be produced, etc.). These are all elements that make a teacher’s life full of unnecessary distractions. Attention to the individual in all his or her uniqueness must be maintained, however, since it forms the foundational basis for the full flowering of the individual.

In addition to soliciting the student to engage in studies following the indicated method, to ask when he or she feels the need, the teacher’s task is also to educate the learner to practice and then to engage with the teacher as well as with peers. In keeping with the theory of the “Mozart of psychology,” the Soviet cognitive psychologist and pedagogue Lev

Semyonovich Vygotsky, it is essential for the teacher to create a cooperative climate: in fact, the classroom climate is crucial for good learning.

## 5 Conclusion : A Virtuous Wonderful Circle

A. J. Heschel, in his book *God in Search of Man. A Philosophy of Judaism* (1955), affirms that “Modern man fell into the trap of believing that everything can be explained, that reality is a simple affair which has only to be organized in order to be mastered” (p. 43).

This approach is the greatest obstacle, he continues, to an awareness of the divine that begins precisely with wonder. Heschel again writes about wonder (or “radical amazement”):

Radical amazement has a wider scope than any other act of man. While any act of perception or cognition has as its object a selected segment of reality, radical amazement refers to all of reality; not only to what we see, but also to the very act of seeing as well as to our own selves, to the selves that see and are amazed at their ability to see (Heschel, 1955, p. 46).

In education it is necessary to consider the entire reality in all its factors. This triggers a true virtuous circle between teacher and student.

We started from a phenomenological approach to conduct an analysis of wonderfulness. It was shown how astonishment at the discovery of an unthought-of reality in the educational phenomenon is a knowledge-generating element. It was seen how the cognitive phenomenon (man in knowing is limited) culminates in contemplation.

The anthropological crisis that has occurred throughout the history of peoples was then examined, whereby a reduction in the dimension of the marvelous takes place with the consequent loss of the contemplative horizon, that is, the origin (Creator). It was then noted that phenomena such as political correctness and cancel culture are outcomes of an amoral dimension.

The dimension of wonder and contemplation inevitably lead to reflection on the category of “difference,” that space in which the subject experiences the marvelous and which increasingly leads him or her to an increasing increase in knowledge for the good.

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