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On the Right Way to Practice at School and in Life. A Study in Educational Anthropology*

It seems to me that some general reflections on the significance of practice in human life — or, to put it differently, on the anthropological function of practice - might also prove of use in the context of actual school instruction[1].

The status of practising in everyday school routine is nowadays curiously dim. It appears, dull and boring. Where teaching is intended to awaken the interest of the pupils, it must not dwell too long on the same matter, but proceed as soon as possible to something new and unknown. Meanwhile, practising inhibits this pressing-on, as it obliges teachers and pupils to stay with the old familiar material, repeating it numerous times.

It is particularly the progressive education movement of the early 20th century that gave practising its poor reputation. The impression arose that the creative powers of the child were suffocated by practice and drilling as established in traditional teaching methods. This led to a depreciation of practising that is still predominant in school today.

This idealistically motivated break with tradition was not, it is true, able to be fully maintained in the face of the requirements of everyday school life. It soon had to be realised that practice, the patient drilling of knowledge and skills learnt and to be acquired, is indispensable if that which has once been learnt is to be retained with assurance and remain available at any time. Thus it had to be accepted that practice, however [103/104] boring and unpleasant it may be found to be, cannot be done without if matter learned is to be properly mastered.

In the face of this dilemma, it was attempted to make practising and drills easier and more attractive to the children, if it was not possible to do without them altogether. For this, two possibilities presented themselves. On the one hand, the attempt could be made to persuade children of the necessity of practice, explaining to them how they would need what they had acquired with laborious practising in later life. However, this procedure was and remains questionable: for one can hardly hope in fact to convince a child and obtain his acquiescence in practising by holding out such hopes of future reward in this way.

The other way was to attempt to free practising from its disagreeable character by transforming it into a game, to which the children could abandon themselves with uninhibited pleasure, without realising that it involved the drilling of certain skills. Thus the children were to be deceived, as it were, by a clever method.

There is nothing really wrong with all this, and such procedures can be supported by the findings of modern learning psychology. Modern methods can be used to make many things easier, and so should be exploited as far as possible. In his book "Die Übung im Unterricht" (Practice in School Instruction)[2], Karl Odenbach provides a useful survey of results achieved in this direction.

Nevertheless, I hesitate to give my unrestricted concurrence; for it seems to me that this has only postponed the real problem without actually solving it. Indeed, the measures introduced to make

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[1] For a detailed account, I draw attention to my book *Vom Geist des Ubens. Eine Ruckbesinnung aul elementare didaktische Erlahrungen* (On the Spirit of Practice. A Recollection of Elementary Educational Experiences), publ. Herderbiicherei, Freiburg 1978; 2nd ed. publ. Verlag Rolf Kugler, Ober-wil bei Zug 1987.

[2] Karl Odenbach, *Die Ubung im Unterrichl* (Practice in School Instruction), 5th ed. Brunswick 1969.

practice easier are calculated precisely to miss the deeper sense of practising; in particular through the attitude to work as play the very things most important to practising are lost -the surety and precision which it is meant to achieve.

For this reason, it seems to me necessary to reverse the whole approach and make a radically new beginning: instead of only always searching for ways and means to "sweeten" the unavoidable bitter pill of practising, we should rather ask whether practice really has to be something so unpleasant, which one accepts only with reluctance, and whether practice, regarded properly, cannot provide pleasure in itself, so that it is done willingly for [104/105] sheer joy in practising and not because of some goal to be achieved through it.

For this, however, it is necessary to consider the nature of practice in general, and the function it has to fulfil in human life as such. In doing so, it is appropriate not to limit one's attention to practice in school instruction, but to proceed from the way in which grownups carry out their practising, as the situation is much more clearly marked in this case.

In order to see clearly, it is first necessary to make some distinctions to mark off the area in which practice is meaningful and necessary: for a vague use of language will render comprehension more difficult. To delimit the area first from the negative side, practice is not the appropriate mode of behaviour where given data or knowledge is to be acquired, generally in the theoretical field. Something new is learnt (for instance a date or fact in history), a new insight is acquired (into some mathematical relation, say), but in each case the learning process is concluded at that point. One "knows" what one has learnt, one "understands" the connection thus comprehended; and there remains nothing to be improved in this respect. Now the task is rather to retain what has been learnt in one's memory, preserve it from being forgotten, and make it into a secure mental possession available at any time.

To this end special repetition is required, especially in school instruction. The proper organisation of this repetition is one of the important tasks of educational planning, to which learning psychology has made an essential contribution. This repetition, however, is not practice in the strict sense, inasmuch as nothing is gradually brought to perfection in them by constant practice, but something once learnt is memorised.

Practising, by contrast, has to do with the development of practical skills. It is not a question of knowledge, but of ability that it is to develop; and this requires quite a different kind of procedure, namely patient practice.

Practice of this kind runs throughout human life; for, in contrast to animals, human beings have from birth only a few of the skills necessary for living, and must learn the others by continual practice. This begins with the control of bodily and sense functions, learning to walk and speak, etc., and continues on into later life with the practising of more and more skills requisite for living. [105/106]

In school, too, practice has an important, indeed indispensable, part to play. Even for children beginning school, this includes the simple techniques of civilisation, reading, writing and arithmetic, which must be practised indefatigably. In later years these are augmented by continually new forms of practice: in the control of expression in language, translation from foreign tongues, gymnastic exercises, etc. These are exercises taken out of the progressive course of instruction that do not involve the acquisition of new knowledge, but the consolidation of skills that are not yet perfectly mastered.

But before we go on, a further delimitation is necessary, inasmuch as two basically different forms of practice are also to be distinguished within the narrower sense referring to the acquisition of skills. One of these is the learning effect that occurs automatically, and mostly unperceived by the learner, in the course of the repeated carrying out of an activity; here I would speak of an unconscious practising. This happens, moreover, largely without conscious planning

on the part of a teacher.

To be distinguished from this is the practising, or exercises, consciously carried out with a view to the ability to be acquired, or arranged by the teacher: this I would describe as exercises in the narrow sense. They require a particular kind of attention, for it is precisely these that the charge of being boring and burdensome is directed against. I shall only be referring below to this kind of practice in the narrow sense. Let us approach this once more by attempting a precise analysis.

All practice, as we have noted, has to do with the acquisition of some ability. All practice involves the will to be able to do something. However, the question of ability, and thus the whole of the practical side of human existence, has hitherto been sorely neglected at the expense of theoretical achievements. There is no theory of ability corresponding to epistemology, the theory of knowledge. We shall therefore have to begin with a few quite simple, obvious-seeming observations. In contrast to knowledge, which can be acquired by means of an isolated act of information, ability to perform a given skill can only be acquired by frequent repetition. But this repetition, essential to the nature of practice, is of a quite different nature from that of the above-: mentioned repetition, by means of which data are to be imprinted on the memory.

Each skill — each art, if we employ this term in a broad sense, [106/107] contrasting it with science - contains a yardstick of its own perfection, the attaining of which is being striven for. As, however, every ability attained in life is imperfect, and always also contains a state of not-yet-being-able within itself, the desire arises for a constant improvement of ability. Every act of willing to be able is the will to constantly improve one's ability.

From this arises the peculiar ethos of practice, which is clearly distinguished by its rigour from the ease of play. Whereas play is dominated by its own uninhibited process, and glosses over minor faults, as far as possible, for the sake of the whole, practice is subject to the inexorable demands of the perfection which is its goal. It must be repeated again and again until the skill involved is perfectly mastered. This means inexorable demands on the execution of the skill concerned. This has, then, nothing to do with play, with being content with anything indefinite or approximate, with anything that comes to a person easily or without effort. The spirit of practice is an inexorable earnestness that does not relax until the skill has been completely mastered. Incessant practice demands self-discipline. One must force oneself not to give up if at first one does not succeed. It is from this that the widespread aversion to practising can easily result.

But it is precisely here that the point is to be found at which the reluctance to practice can be overcome; for a skill that has been completely mastered yields a profound satisfaction that makes practice in itself an act causing human happiness - the greater the effort, the greater the satisfaction. It is the pure and splendid feeling of "mastery". In sports, for example, this joy is to be felt from the mastery of movements. But it applies just as much to any other skill, from the mastery of a certain manipulation in the context of a handicraft to that of the means of expression in a foreign language.

However, for successful practising a particular mental attitude is necessary, i. e. the concentration on the skill to be mastered. This difficulty, though, fortunately solves itself by reason of the paradoxical mutuality by which the practice, once begun, itself creates the conditions requisite for its own success. Fritz Loser[3] pointed out that practice in itself produces the concentration rendered possible by its succeeding, and he adds that [107/108] concentration, once acquired, promotes the ability to concentrate in general, over and above the particular case involved, thus bringing about a change in the whole person. So the individual practice acquires a significance going far beyond the individual skill it seeks to inculcate.

At this point it seems to me useful to cast a glance at the forms of practice developed within

[3] Fritz Loser, "Die Ubung im Unterricht" {Practice in School Instruction), in *Zeitschrift fiir Pädagogik,* 14th yr. (1968), p. 145 et seq.

Japanese culture, which are still regarded there today with a respect clearly marked off from the disparagement usually accorded practice in ours. This includes calligraphy and ink drawing, ikebana, archery, sword-fighting, and a number of other exercises. It may be hoped to grasp more acutely through these practices, which have developed in the course of a long tradition, that which in our country is merely a vague potential.

A vivid picture is provided by Eugen Herrigel's book, now no longer very new, but the outcome of years of personal experience, *Zen und die Kunst des Bogenschiessens* (Zen and the Art of Archery)[4]. The essential, and to us a first surprising, thing seems to be to be the fact that it is not at all the particular skill to be acquired that is involved here, but the mental state necessary for the acquisition of this skill. Thus, in the case of archery, the pupil has for a long time to shoot at a bundle of straw suspended close in front of him that he cannot possibly miss. This shows how the skill concerned is not to be achieved directly, but only by way of a more profound transformation in the person himself. To begin with the most simple aspect, he must first learn to relax his muscles and arrive at complete control of his movements. But this can succeed only with a corresponding change in his mental attitude. The person who practises must learn to liberate himself from his usual everyday self, with its restlessness, susceptibility to diversion, and erratic tendencies, and lose and fuse himself, self-forgetful, in his activity. Herrigel states the aim as "to free oneself from oneself", to become "free of intentions" and "ego-less". Thus the archer no longer really shoots; "it" shoots within him, and the arrow fires itself, to hit the target with infallible certainty.

The objective of practice is, then, no longer the skill to be acquired, but, more profoundly considered, the transfomation of the person through which the deeper self within him, which [108/109] is merely masked by everyday life, becomes free. And this experience produces a profound feeling of happiness, which proves to be the result of the practice.

If, however, the real objective of the practice is not the particular skill but the elevation of the person that it brings about to a state of mind purified from the restlessness of ordinary living, this state is again not to be achieved directly, but only via the taut and attentive application to a particular art, which is the necessary condition for the transformation aimed at and the resultant feeling of happiness.

Thus considered, the practice is not merely a preliminary stage that has served its purpose as soon as the skill being practised has been attained. The skill is retained only by practice, and is at once lost if a person ceases practising; it must be continually re-acquired by constant practice. It demands constant repetition.

These brief indications are only intended to lead up to the question what we can learn from the Japanese model. Its direct adoption is not possible, for the arts concerned have developed within the especial context of the Japanese culture and in particular the Buddhist religion. In different cultures, it would remain a foreign body, interesting at most by reason of the seductive charm of the exotic. Nevertheless, the principle of practice should emerge in it with particular clarity.

I shall not go into further detail here about the significance that practice, so considered, can have in the life of an adult person, but merely intimate that it puts one into a state of mind that is described in the accounts referred to as ego-lessness. This concept, which is easy to misunderstand, is intended to mean that the cares and desires of the all too self-oriented everyday personality fall away from a person, so that his true nature is freed within him. We can perhaps describe the mental state acquired here best with the term "gelassen", i. e. calm - literally 'abandoned' - a state in which a person has abandoned his own self-will and abandoned it to a higher instance - in mystic language, the Will of God. We can also designate this state as one of

[4] Eugen Herrigel, *Zen und die Kunst des Bogenschiessens* (Zen and the Art of Archery), 4th ed. Munich 1954; 20th ed. Weilheim/Obb. 1981.

inner peace.

Seen thus, the practice also acquires a decisive importance in the life of the adult, because in it he purifies himself from his being caught up in everyday life, and is able to return to his deeper being. Where - as is usually the case nowadays - one's [109/110] daily work does not offer this possibility of practice, people should develop particular leisure activities in which they can carry out this deliberate practice. Any activity is suitable, as long as it carried out as an art in the spirit of deliberate practice.

These somewhat broader considerations appeared to me necessary to arrive at a deeped understanding of practice, which is also important for practising in the context of school instruction. Here it is decisive that it is fundamentally against a religious background that this kind of practice can only be properly understood. I venture no conclusive judgment as to the extent to which the experiences described here are also accessible to children. But even in the simplest school exercises, there should be something of this "pious" spirit of practice.

There is one important witness to the fact that such a transference is possible to the childish existence at all, namely Maria Montessori. She was long misunderstood as a positivist, because the fundamentally religious background to her method was not seen. Continuous work at her "material", often seemingly fatiguing, must remain misunderstood as long as all that is seen in it is the training of certain manual or mental skills, without noticing that the point is basically something quite different, a profound transformation of the child in the deeply satisfying experience of abilities achieved by indefatigable repetition. Maria Montessori speaks of a "polarisation of attention". I should like to quote a representative passage verbatim: "Every time such a polarisation of attention took place, the child began to change completely. It became calmer, almost more intelligent, and more communicative. It showed unusual inner qualities reminiscent of the highest phenomena of consciousness, such as those of conversion."[5] It is not by chance that we find here the religious concept of conversion. It is indeed a radical transformation that takes place here in the child. Maria Montessori speaks of a "true life" that is liberated here over against a state of inattention and distraction.

This brings me back to my beginning. I should like to sum up the points of view that seem to me important for application briefly once again:

1. So that practice does not appear a difficult burden, it is im- [110/111] portant to arrange it in such a way that it creates pleasure in iself, independent of the objective to be reached.

2. This pleasure results from the experience of success in a perfected skill attained by the practice. Here the striving for the uttermost precision in the carrying out of the practice is decisive.

3. It is this spirit of rigour that distinguishes the practice from mere play. It demands self-discipline, and cannot thus be dissolved in play.

4. The perfection of the achievement can succeed only with a corresponding mental attitude, that may be characterised as calm and 'abandonment' ("Gelassenheit"). The spirit in which the practice is carried out is decisive.

5. It is in this mental attitude, in the liberation of the individual from the restlessness and distraction of everyday life, that, beyond the particular skill involved, fthe profit of the practice lies. But this inner calm cannot be attained directly (either by resolution or demand), but only via the perfection of the skill being practised.

Practice, seen properly, thus acquires an importance that cannot be overestimated in school instruction too. On the other hand, not all instruction can be carried out in terms of practice. The different nature of the laws applying to knowledge and theoretical achievements has already

[5] Maria Montessori, *Schule des Kindes* (School for the Child), ed. Paul Oswald and Giinter Schulz-Benesch, Freiburg 1976, p. 70.

been noted. These are not to be attained by means of practice. But the more school instruction is "scientificized" and the development of the intellectual faculties occupies the forefront (a process that must be recognised as a necessary and irreversible), the more important it becomes for certain areas, as it were oases of practice, to be developed and consciously cultivated.

These areas can, in contrast to the theoretical disciplines, be termed arts, in the broadest sense of the word. Only those involved can adequately judge where such areas of practice are to be developed.

One final hint: because these exercises must be performed in a state of inner composure, they must not be carried out in time and to an external word of command. Any competition in the speed with which an objective is to be achieved is also against the spirit of practice. On the contrary, the individual must carry out the exercises in solitude and quiet, according to his own inner law.