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Youth: Values and Freedom[1]

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Abstract

Professor Joan Manuel del Pozo analyses the concept of youth, stressing its enormous elasticity and high social consideration in today's hegemonic culture. He also points to liquid, paternalistic family pedagogy as the ultimate reason for youths' inability to take on responsibility when they reach adulthood. Noting its discredit, Del Pozo suggests that we reconsider the traditional concept of adulthood as an ultimate life goal and instead begin to consider it an unfinished process of personal construction, a process grounded upon freedom as the core, axiomatic principle around which human beings in their maturation can take on their responsibilities, develop their abilities, fulfil their desires and achieve full realisation along the way.

Key words: education, ethics, youth, *adultescence*, values, freedom.

1. Introduction

> *To be born free is the greatest splendor of man, making the humble hermit superior to kings, even to the gods, who are self-sufficient by their power but not by their contempt of it* (Pessoa, 1984: 414).

I sincerely appreciate the honour of having been invited to the celebration of the 30th anniversary of the Societat Catalana de Pedagogia (SCP) and given the chance to do so around such pedagogically crucial, meaningful concepts of *youth*, *values* and *freedom*.

[1] This conference was held on January 28th 2015 at Institut d'Estudis Catalans on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the Societat Catalana de Pedagogia.

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Their centrality and meaningfulness require no proof; however, they do require an expression of epistemological modesty from this speaker, which is also a request for understanding for the boldness of attempting such a difficult public reflection in such an intellectual demanding space such as this one. I would like to thank you in advance for your understanding.

In my opinion, the least risky way of approaching this reflection is precisely to literally follow the title suggested to me, which I accepted. Therefore, I shall devote the bulk of this reflection to examining what the concept of youth means today, first by relating it to a certain hegemonic social culture which is defined by some precisely as “youth-oriented”. “Youth orientation” can be summarised by the fact that children are in a hurry to become young adults, perhaps merely to enjoy mobile phones and WhatsApp, and those that have already been young adults for some time increasingly resist leaving that life stage for a variety of reasons, some of which we can ascertain. Before and after delving into the concepts of values and freedom, we shall examine two other concepts which I believe are necessary – and which, in fact, are implicit in the title – to complement our reflection: the concept of adulthood and the concept of responsibility. Of all of them, I shall try to ensure that the reflection provides us with a pedagogically more refined understanding of what the process of human growth means in today’s society, which increasingly focuses on what we could call the intermediate or young adult phase. Pedagogy, which has always aspired to being useful in all of life’s stages but particularly in the growth stages prior to adulthood, is more necessary than ever today, if in fact – as a reality or only an aspiration or desire – young adulthood stretches out indefinitely. If you allow me to use a play on words which is starting to spread, we could say that pedagogy has always been concerned with childhood and adolescence, but now it is also concerned with adultescence, that confusing stage which is a mix between a theoretically chronologically adult age and a persistent desire and lifestyle that is clearly adolescent.

2. Youth: A concept that is more elastic than ever

Elasticity is the property of bodies that is the opposite of rigidity. A rigid body has boundaries that are always the same, which break before they change shape when subjected to heavy pressure. Elasticity, however, changes, constricts or expands its boundaries without either breaking or changing the nature of the body. This elasticity is applicable as an image of the notion of youth which today, after aeons in which its chronological boundaries were unchanging or shifted very little, is tending to expand both forward and backward: forward because many children are in a hurry to stop being children and to enjoy what they perceive as the prerogatives of young adults, such as more stimulating or risky games, better communication tools, more varied friends and ultimately a noticeable degree of autonomy. Likewise, the very fact that our educational laws have situated the start of secondary school at the age of 12 instead of 14 also seems to reinforce this trend: at the age of twelve, kids can now say “I go to high school!” Yet youth is also moving backwards because we can perceive an attitude of permanent simulation of youth at any age which is obvious in ordinary observations of people at work, on the streets, at parties, everywhere. In fact, a pharmaceutical – or para-pharmaceutical – industry has even sprang up to correct the “flaws” of ageing with a dubious name – anti-ageing – which

seems set to attack (because of the “anti”) such a natural process as simply getting older. Of course, the physical dimension or corporal appearance, with additional clothing and accessories, is perceivable at first glance, but a more careful observation of the behaviours and mental and social attitudes confirm that the spirit is also waging an “anti-age” fight: perhaps the most obvious guise of this mental and social attitude is expressed in a permanent avoidance of responsibility, which is a characteristic that many sociologists detect in our society. People live believing – quite sincerely! – that our society always has to have a solution ready – be it political, technical, professional or otherwise – for any need or problem, with the view that appealing to personal responsibility is an exaggeration common to authoritarian, underdeveloped societies. This postmodernity has led us to believe, and we have comfortably nestled into this belief, that even if we have to pay a lot, “someone else” should be able to solve our problems. And not too much time had to elapse before the belief included the expectation that everything should be free of charge. This is an attitude that not only evokes the cliché of the blithe irresponsibility of youth but also the ingenuous, though real, dependency of childhood. If we analyse it carefully, it is an attitude which translates into a persistence of childish egocentrism and adolescent narcissism, resulting in a weak self which is self-obsessed, always waiting for “someone else” to solve everything. The causes of the phenomenon no doubt include resoundingly poor family childrearing: the abuse of paternalism, with the excuse of a purportedly “pedagogical” interest in caring for children, combined with the trust and enthusiasm over technology progress in all senses, which provides unlimited protection and assistance to children and young adults, rendering them incapable of coping with the challenges of life with their own means and responsible efforts as they grow up.

3. Adulthood as an unfinished process. Adolescence and *adultescence*

Adulthood, meaning that set of characteristics that express a peak, a full realization of human capacities and considerable psychological and social stability, has been questioned by this intense, widespread “youth orientation” mentioned above. Indeed, the very etymology of the words we are using illustrates the provisional nature of youth and the final stage – not as the end but as the fulfilment – of human capacities. In Latin, *adolescens* means ‘that which is growing’, while *adultus* means ‘that which has grown’. The former is working its way towards a goal, while the latter has reached it. So, it seems that the cultural and social liquidity of our era has diluted this difference and that the stage in which one attains full realisation, or adulthood, is never reached. One continues indefinitely on the road, in progress, without ever reaching a point which can be regarded as the goal. For this reason, a term has been invented to capture this new reality: *adultescence*, in which the Latin term for the past, which expresses completion or fulfilment, -*ultus*, is merged with the term for the present, -*escens*, which expresses an unfinished process. In short, *adultescence* is the chronologically adult stage according to the traditional paradigm, in which one still lives an adolescent life according to the new paradigm. The traditional paradigm would view the ages of life as autonomous, distinct and compact stages, whereas the modern paradigm views the ages of life as a single, open-ended process with no precise time boundaries, which because

of the aforementioned process is more associated with youth – that which is always in the process of taking shape – than with adult life or adulthood.

This, then, leads us to analyse the notion of adulthood. I define it in the title of this section as an "unfinished process", that is, I am situating us outside the old paradigm and denying what seemed to be a sacred feature of adulthood, stability or quietude, to instead highlight the movement or instability, even though seems contradictory. Perhaps the way to overcome this contradiction is by ceasing to talk about adulthood and talking instead about maturation: adulthood seeks to express a stability which seems to have been discredited, while maturation expresses a process that allows one to view oneself as a "youth in progress". The concept of maturation already existed, but it only encompassed the road to adulthood, while in its new meaning the road would be the goal in itself and adulthood would consist of a maturation that is constantly in progress. However, we can legitimately ask: A road leading where? Is there a "place" to go to, a place that expresses that supposed full realisation of human capacities?

A negative answer would be tantamount to total anthropological pessimism: it would mean taking a step in the opposite direction from Kant's invocation (1784) that called us to adulthood. In fact, it would mean encouraging a perpetual, culpable "minority of age" and therefore ultimately a denial of what paradoxically seems to be a need that is keenly felt by young people, a denial of autonomy or freedom, and therefore a move to perpetual dependency.

This is a key point in our reflection: human maturation, the constant fieri which we are as open beings – not predetermined, at least not absolutely – has identifiable milestones, some "place to go", which permits a kind of anthropological optimism. There are many theories on human maturation, and most of them are possibly overly descriptive and minute. At a time like now, a theory formulated by Allport (1961) in the mid-20th century might be more apt precisely because it is not minute and detailed and instead allows us to understand it as a perspective on a broad and perhaps perennially unfinished road.

This theory suggests understanding human maturation as the construction of three personal characters which are as simple yet profound as the following: first, an extension of the self, that is, a perennially ongoing process in which each person bonds or forms ties with many others, in different registers and at differing levels of intensity, but always breaking the child's egocentric inertia and adolescent narcissism. Secondly, a unifying thinking about life, a mental factor involving the desire and ability to interpret the world and existence autonomously and coherently, and to gradually achieve autonomous status in reality, without depending on other interpretations or conceptions of the world (the way children depend on families' explanations of the meaning of things when they ask "why?" questions incessantly). And thirdly, a capacity for self-objectification, which entails the ability to gain distance from oneself to see oneself with perspective, a kind of self-critical sense which is best expressed in a good sense of humour, essentially the ability to laugh at oneself. This, in turn, assumes that in the maturational process we learn what we have and particularly that we have to accept our limitations, a characteristic that is usually lacking in children and adolescents, who are too self-involved to accept

what they are and the fact that they can do considerably less than they think and want.

With regard to these "milestones", we can state that if we accept that the supposed stability of the old paradigm is never attained and therefore that it is gradual and imperfect at all times, sound human maturation has places to go to or. In other words, these are orientations which bring meaning to the effort of self-construction which pedagogy, the education of life itself, calls us to do.

4. Freedom and values

We have found the freedom factor as a fundamental ingredient of human life, much more than a right (which it is and should be) or a political slogan (which it is and should be). It is the core component of humanisation, seen in both the species perspective – in that as humans we are freed, albeit partially and slowly, from the biological determinism of our evolutionary ancestors – and the individual perspective of the person of our time, who does not conceive of existence without the ability to choose and take intimate, inalienable decisions on their own life.

The philosophical understanding of the idea of freedom is complex and allows for a multitude of perspectives, but from the ethical and pedagogical standpoints – which share so many points of convergence – the best way we can understand it is within the framework of the theory of values. Specifically, we can understand freedom as a core value in human life: core in two senses: as a "priority" on the one hand, but also as a "source" of other values. It is a priority compared to other values for a reason: because it is necessary in order to live a human life and therefore one cannot live a life of values if it is not a life of "values in freedom". A being that tries to live values without freedom would almost be a contradiction *in terminis* given that there are only values in the world when a being takes free decisions which, precisely because they are free, "bring values" to each choice. A choice made by a machine, no matter how "intelligent" it is, would never be "values-driven", even if it might be very "logical" or "right" because values comes only from the possibility – which a machine can never have – of having been able to choose another option and not having done it. A machine can only "choose" – and actually it does not choose but automatically "shows" – the best option depending on its programming rules. It could be said that behind each human choice or selection is an implicit "evaluation" mechanism of the choices, and the evaluation comes from values. When we choose A instead of B, even if we are wrong from the standpoint of interest or rational performance, this means that we have "evaluated" A as better than B for our life. That is, we have "given value" to A and denied value to B or deemed its value is lower. And the course of human life is the course of the constant production, change or destruction of values. Precisely for this reason there is another sense of the core of freedom, understood as "the source" of all values. Failing to understand it in this way would be equivalent to a, idealistic theory of autonomous value, legitimate, but I think unfounded, or value that exists in itself, ultimately value that predated human life itself, as a Platonic idea. In fact, the supreme Platonic idea was what we call a value today, even a prime value: the idea of good. The major difference between Plato's and our conceptions is that we consider good as a value to be the outcome of a historical development of human freedom. In other words, we have freely and primarily

repeated good choices as more desirable than their alternative, evil. We have done the same with love versus hate or bravery versus cowardliness. And even more interestingly: these choices, made by the majority, do not preclude some human groups and especially many individuals from having “other values”. This is precisely the most genuine sense of human freedom: that we can even disagree on the values held by many as basic or general. To put it one way, this is a tribute to the fact that ethics makes freedom, the conviction that there cannot be a single, homogenous or closed system. From this vantage point, ethics would be the effort of human – philosophical – reflection to develop values-driven criteria that guide life, accepting that the point of departure cannot be anything other than free reflection, free debate, free consensus which, by definition, excludes homogeneity and dogma. Taking this even further, we can say that the idea of an ethics without freedom is an oxymoron.

If this is the state of affairs, it seems that we can establish that the human maturation process is primarily a process of growth “in freedom” and “of freedom”. Otherwise, we would be ignoring that centrality of freedom which we claimed above. Pedagogy and education have not always given growth “in freedom” and “of freedom” the priority it deserves. Many educators, especially in politically or simply culturally authoritarian settings, have viewed the component of the risk of freedom, which is, in fact, quite real. Freedom can unquestionably lead us to make mistakes, even errors that are destructive to life itself, one’s integral personality and society. It would be unrealistic to deny the existence of risk in freedom, just as it would be unrealistic to believe that because there is a real risk we should restrict or eliminate freedom simply because the final effects of the cautious path are radically incompatible with the ultimate goal that we find desirable, the full realisation of human life. And obviously, a human life without freedom – no matter how risk-free it might be, although it will never be totally risk-free – would be a non-human life and therefore inhuman. Thus, the cost of safety is literally too high: it is as absurd to deny freedom because of a fear or risk as it would be for someone to tear down their house for fear it might catch fire.

The maturation of each human life, the aspiration to a fully realized life course, has profound ties with growth in and from freedom, respectively. And freedom has profound ties with the values that it inevitably generates, as we have just seen. Therefore, the question is whether we can propose values that are simultaneously compatible with the maximum freedom and whether freedom and values together help to achieve the sound maturation desired.

The answer is that a position could be defended that renders the notions of maturation, freedom and values compatible, and that will be our goal today. Even if they never want to give up their youth – despite or even counter to the lessons learned by age and the passage and weight of the years – young people aspire to, and should aspire to, positive maturation. This is especially because, as we have discussed, maturation does not mean stagnation but instead means full realisation, and the satisfaction with and pleasure of life as the very expression of this realisation. As the highest result of the capacity to be free, it also means the production of values that make this full realisation, this possible maturation, meaningful.

5. Sources and pathways of values in the new society

From the pedagogical standpoint, within the almost infinite range of possible values, we must try to choose those which are considered core or fundamental and accept that the aim of universality associated with this goal is nothing other than debatable for the reasons expressed so far. Probably the best way to condense the core values that matter to humanity into an acceptable number is by analysing our human condition and our needs and aspirations, which we could summarise in the four strands that constitute human beings: the rational strand, the ethical strand, the social strand and the aesthetic strand. This assumes a kind of anthropology that goes beyond the classical "rational animal" of tradition, which quite logically channelled the entire interest of human education into the cultivation of rationality, that is, into the strictest theoreticism or cognitivism. Even today, the majority of people believe that the most valuable asset that education should convey is knowledge, and the more knowledge the better. So it seems that, without ignoring knowledge – instead perhaps even improving it – we must encourage children and youth to grow towards an acceptance of the values that make the other three strands meaningful and give them content.

If knowledge is obviously the value that fills the strand of rational needs and aspirations, we should wonder what values fill the other three strands. And I think that we can summarise them in this way: the ethical strand, or the human need to do good and be done good, would have a radical value to cultivate, which is dignity, meant as the self-perception and hetero-perception of natural beings with a right to freedom and therefore inhabitants of the kingdom of purposes – as holding values and rights. They are the holders of a nature which, as Kant wished (1785), must always be seen and treated as a legitimate purpose in itself and never as an instrument for other purposes. The social strand, or the need and aspiration to live with others similar to oneself, without whose cooperation it would literally be impossible to fulfil our nature, would be filled with the value of goodness, or the willingness to give others what they need to together create a cooperative network that leads to the improvement of the whole and the wellbeing of the individuals within it. And finally the aesthetic strand – perhaps the one that has received the least credit traditionally and even today – which is nothing other than the expression of the need to feel emotions and experience feelings, primarily comes through the value of beauty, in all its dimensions, especially the natural and artistic dimensions, but also the personal and group dimensions.

And from what sources and along which pathways can we achieve them? The source and the pathways in primitive eras were quite simple: direct, constant contact between the children and youth and the adults in the family and tribe, where what we today call education or teaching was not even institutionalised because it was simply "upbringing", a "climate", a "narrative" and "practices" experienced as "natural" and as "producers of affective identification and spontaneous integration" into the group. This became somewhat more complex in the West when the polis became the proper and ideal backdrop for the education –the *paideia* – of youth in classical Greece. The old poet Simonides formulated the apothegm *polis ándra didáskei* – 'the city teaches men' – which situates the scenarios, or the source and the pathways of learning values, right in the heart of the city. This is no longer the modest, controlled inter-family setting of the tribe but the space of diverse social classes,

of jobs with differing skill levels, of legal and political conflicts, and even of war, pacts and confederations, of production and trade, of sport, of theatre and music, and of initial educational settings like the gymnasium. In the words of the poet, an educational ideal was synthesised which challenges us even today: everyone – the entire city, everyone in it – has the responsibility for education, as the current idea of "educating city" aims to remind us. First, because the goal of education cannot be restricted to formal learning which is primarily theoretical or cognitive and is reserved for somewhat or extremely elite minorities. And secondly because personal realisation clearly needs to capture and experience values that no institution alone can give: life extends beyond the gymnasium, beyond the school, beyond any public or private institution. And since life should unfold in wholeness and diversity, the most varied authorities in the city become the key to producing and conveying the values needed to live.

In the contemporary world, after the democratic and industrial revolutions in recent centuries and today's globalisation, the formal institution of schools seems to have been given an exclusive hold on education: we are far from the Greek idea of the "city that educates". However, this does not invalidate the fact that new realities, such as the multiple advanced communication technologies, are prime "educational" operators in the new society. Yet they are educational operators that do not "feel" responsible for educating; they simply produce information and entertainment in order to win over an audience and raise consumption, and their criteria are far from and often contradictory with a minimal pedagogical sense. And yet – go figure! – they produce much more education than we might assume. Education as the transmission of values, of course. What values, we might wonder? Well, a few positive ones like the sense of freedom, but also supposed "values" like individualism and competitiveness, spectacularisation and exhibitionism, violence, a disdain for weakness or disability, frivolousness, sexism, rudeness and poor taste, simplification and the crudest stereotypes when referring to any issue. This is a veritable catalogue of negative values or, to situate ourselves within our line of analysis, a constant pedagogy of immaturity. And even though it is not true that the media are the only source that conveys values apart from formal educational institutions, we can say that they act as a mirror of the plurality of sources that transmit them because today everything is reflected in that immense communicative galaxy in which we live. What is more, they are a mirror that not only reflects all kinds of values but also pushes them and promotes them owing to the vastly effective transmission capabilities that technological progress and the communication skills of many professionals have achieved.

Why do we say *pedagogy of immaturity*? Precisely because the vectors of sound maturation – the extension of the self, a unified thinking about life, the capacity for self-objectification – require, as we shall see, values that are the opposite of the ones mentioned above. We could claim that most of the "environmental" values of our liquid culture – which flow from many sources, not only from the media, although they are also channelled through them – tend to keep young people in a permanent adolescence; that is, they work towards adultescence more than towards gradual maturation.

However, we need a more precise approach. Let us attempt it: if on the one hand, we can establish those four core values as "content" values or objectives to be reached – knowledge, dignity, goodness and beauty – then we

must reflect on the "procedural values" or the ways those objectives are achieved. We cannot posit a simple or a mechanical relationship between each pathway and each objective, primarily because each pathway exists unto itself. If not, it would not be a value and would not lead us to the other values because each pathway leads to more than one of the desired objectives. Therefore, we could talk about how the value of knowledge has procedural value, or such a basic – and yet multifaceted – pathway as critical dialogue, without which knowledge would be in danger of being constructed very imperfectly and of being reduced to the sheer accumulation of information. Or to attain, sustain and universalize the value of dignity, we have a procedural value of pathway of extraordinary "ethical performance" – if you allow me this expression – which is nothing other than respect, or the ability to recognise and consequently put into real practice that core of value inherent to each person. Regarding the value of goodness, the procedural value or pathway which should be cultivated and disseminated to achieve it is empathy, or an intimate willingness to understand the other, their circumstances and their needs. And finally, to achieve the value of beauty, the pathway is none other than the cultivation of the sensibility, a disinterested sensibility filled with emotions that can be expressed and shared.

Therefore, both the content and procedural values have ties, a kind of "chemical valence", with the maturation process or the desired human realisation. These ties are not univocal or exact; rather they are multifaceted and approximate, as we said of the relationship between content values and the procedural values. Precisely because we are not nor do we want to be robots, everything that follows is flexible, porous and largely transversal. Nonetheless, we could say that the three milestones of maturation, which are always open and subject to improvement yet also identifiable and clear, are precisely linked to the values in the following way: the extension of the self or the ability to overcome egocentrism and individualism is attained very specifically by practising the social value of goodness, which is great and essential, whose pathway is the kind of empathy that encourages us to make the connection with the mind and heart of the other. Naturally, the extended self is primarily built upon this foundation, which by definition practices links or articulations and weaves the social fabric. At the same time, empathy is one of the values that is acquired the most clearly through osmosis, contagion or the direct transfer from the immediate environs: children and young people of empathetic parents are themselves much likelier to be empathetic of other people.

Unified thinking, or one's own judgement to guide oneself through the complexity of the world, obviously has a clear link to the content value of knowledge, but not just any knowledge, especially not purely accumulative and informative knowledge but instead the kind of knowledge that stems from the constant practice of critical thinking, of understanding and analytical, methodical, contextual and self-corrective rationality. This practice over the years since childhood is the safest way to develop a personality with its own criteria which, also because of the practice induced from both the family and the school, should include a sincere willingness to examine oneself, to practice epistemological modesty, the kind of assertiveness that affirms without imposing which is always poised to evolve when faced with sound arguments, no matter where they come from.

Thirdly, the capacity for self-objectification, which is primarily expressed in self-irony and a sense of humour about oneself, is associated directly with

both critical knowledge – which is essential to self-knowledge – and an empathetic attitude of goodness that allows one to mentally enter and leave oneself, and with the sensibility associated with the value of beauty, which helps to capture all kinds of nuances and contrasts in our existence.

And, in fact, an analysis of the environmental values which are primarily reflected and reinforced in the media tells us that they run counter to or at least diverge from both the core values and the procedural values mentioned as the objectives of maturation. Indeed, individualism and competitiveness directly threaten respect for the other and their dignity, and of course it neglects and denies the cooperation inherent in relationships based on goodness and, incidentally but importantly, the extension of the self. Spectacularisation and exhibitionism, as well as rudeness and poor taste, ignore and destroy sensibility; they incapacitate it to enjoy beauty and thus deprive the emotions. Violence, a disdain for weakness or disability and sexism directly attack goodness and respect and therefore run counter to the extension of the self. And frivolousness, simplification and stereotypes are incompatible with knowledge, especially with critical knowledge and therefore with a kind of thinking or judgement of one's own, as well as with self-knowledge and self-objectification. Therefore, we can claim that the values climate in which the lives of our young people are developing is truly a "pedagogy of immaturity".

6. Responsibility: The core that articulates the greatest freedom and the best values

Transferring responsibility, as Berlin (1969) and others have warned us, has been a mechanism that is an easy fix for many human beings throughout the ages, but particularly in our age, and very especially among younger people who have enjoyed conditions of safety on the one hand and the best technology in all senses in the other, leading them to believe that everything should always be resolved for them by someone else. This passive activity, on the lookout for familiar social or technological solutions, is a safe form of incapacitation to implement the freedom which, as mentioned before, is the core, basic value of our existence. The lack of responsibility radically incapacitates one for freedom; "external" freedom does not depend on responsibility but on the social and legal framework, which is neither authoritarian nor restrictive. However, within a democratic framework, where external freedom is guaranteed, each person is faced with the fundamental challenge of constructing their own "internal" freedom. Philosophy has focused a great deal on this distinction with different terms: external freedom has also been conceptualised as "freedom from" or "negative freedom" or "freedom of choice", while internal freedom has been conceptualised as "freedom to" or "positive freedom" or "freedom of commitment". The underlying idea is clear: one is an elementary freedom – which is necessary but not sufficient – while the other is a higher-order freedom, or the culmination of the best freedom that we humans have been able to conceptualise and practise.

What distinguishes the elementary from the higher-order sense of freedom is precisely responsibility. Responsibility is not needed for negative freedom, which is limited to thinking that one can choose anything because there is no norm or authority constraining this choice: because one will end up choosing nothing – and thus falling into inaction – or choosing any which way,

that is, poorly for one's own interest. Meanwhile if we think of freedom as a way to construct a project with an ultimate meaning – "for" something – or positive freedom with the desire to commit to some valuable objective, then one must develop a responsible pathway which ensures coherence between what one thinks, what one decides and what one ultimately does. This is a good way to understand responsibility. And in terms of the importance of coherence, it is good to remember that the psychologist Erik Erikson claimed that the crisis of youth was nothing more than the crisis of coherence of adult society, not only because he centres the crisis on coherence but also because he incidentally illustrates to us an extremely important point for our purposes today: what we might think about youth we should think about ourselves as adults. The differences are less than what we might think, today even less than when he formulated the idea in 1968.

Other ways of understanding responsibility are certainly fine and necessary for our youth to know. For example, the most well-known way is the notion, primarily captured in the field of law, that responsibility has two essential features: the first is enough intellectual capacity to take responsibility for the value and the consequences of one's choices, while the second is the ability to accept in practice – and not merely be aware of – the costs of all sorts that we may incur from the consequences of our own actions. We need this notion, which is the most widely accepted, as a kind of legal or juridical regulation of social life; however, we believe that for the purposes at hand, which are pedagogical in nature, it is not enough. Being aware of the consequences of our actions and accepting the costs of them is fine, but it is even better to be aware *of the meaning of our choices* even before we think about the consequences. We could say that being aware of and accepting consequences has a purpose that we could call *utilitarian* – it is useful for us and for society as well, while being aware of the meaning and value of our actions – before the consequences, but not regardless of them, obviously – is much better because it means that *we know we are free*, or even better, we know that we voluntarily channel our freedom to serve a given personal, ethical and social project.

This conception of responsibility can be better understood within the framework of the theory of values which we have discussed today. First, we must start with the idea that there are multiple possible human values and that none are absolute. If they were, this absolute would be the only one by definition. If none are absolute, then we somehow need to make compatible or properly coordinate the attainment of the maximum values, which by definition are the ones that fill human aspirations and needs with content. This can entail an effort at hierarchisation – the famous "scales of values" – or, if we do not want to fall into closed schemes, prioritisation criteria in the event of conflict. And here is where responsibility kicks in: given that no one seems to be prepared to establish a fixed, close scale of values – unless they aim to limit people's freedom – then each individual needs some skill or ability or competence that allows them to articulate, combine, coordinate and optimise them both quantitatively and qualitatively. And even more importantly, each individual needs to articulate a wide variety of values, not only among themselves but with the value that we view as the core, albeit not absolute: freedom. If we recognise freedom as a value, as we have, then we also recognise that it resides in the kingdom of the other values – some of the main ones

already discussed – and that therefore it must also “coexist” and “be articulated” with them. There are times in life when the value of freedom should be limited in order to serve the value of love, for example. In the name of loving a person, we limit our freedom to choose many other things – which are also valuable, but less so – and what should guide us in this “articulation” of the value of freedom with the value of love is responsibility. We will have understood that “responsibly” we cannot make supposedly free choices that might harm, abandon or neglect the person we love.

Educating in responsibility, therefore, means educating in values, and especially educating in the use of responsibility as not the absolute core but as one that can be adapted to the complex interplay with the other values of life. Educating in responsibility, therefore, means educating in life itself in its fullness and diversity of values, including most importantly the value of freedom.

Thus, we could say that responsibility gives our young people, or gives all of us at any age, the opportunity to optimally combine the greatest freedom with the best values of existence.

This is an expression of the full realisation of life, associated with sound human maturation, which we can and should offer our youth with the conviction that we are presenting them with a much more substantial, much more interesting, much more joyful and felicitous life proposal than those debatable “values” that a certain climate of pervasive liquid culture primarily imposes upon young people under the guise of the maximum freedom.

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