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“Only that man who governs himself may govern others”: Jan Amos Comenius and his Anthropological Assumptions of Moral Politics



by Jan Hábl

Introduction: “Consider the state of public affairs”

We need “men of virtue” in public affairs (cf. Komenský 1992, 226). We need them in all areas of our lives, no doubt, but I want to focus on politics in this paper. Ever since the time of Plato, Aristotle and Augustine, the demand for morally fit people in politics has been foundational in every

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polis. Unfortunately, there has always been a shortage of such people. The question is, why? Where does this inconsistency come from? Why does the phrase “moral politician” so often sound as a humorous oxymoron? Is it even possible to practice moral politics? Jan Amos Comenius² believed it is. But his theory presupposed a specific notion of humanity. The aim of this paper is to outline Comenius’ (Komenský’s) anthropology³ and to highlight its possible implications for politics that would stand up to the attribute “moral.”

“Consider the state of public affairs”: Comenius thus begins his famous analysis of the political situation of his time, which from the first glance amazes the reader with its relevancy to today (compare *Panegersia*, V: 28)⁴. For Comenius, it is obvious that the task of every “ruler, emperor, king, prince or superior”⁵ is primarily an effort to bring about the “blissful state of private and public affairs” and the “happiness of the nation,” as well as a “moral world.” To do this, he must have a “richness of virtue, steadfastness, honesty and wisdom” (*Mundus moralis*, V: 9). However it is obvious that only one who first governs (controls) himself, and does that “even if nobody is watching,” can govern another (compare *Mundus moralis*, III: 2, iv). And of course it’s here that the problem begins.

Instead of wisdom and virtue, Comenius must

acknowledge the plethora of “ugly and unworthy excesses,” which we as human beings “allow in politics.” According to Comenius, “wolves, bears, tigers, snakes and other wild animals live with other members of their kind in unison. . . . But we, the rational creatures, . . . behave worse than animals; either we continually push ourselves to governance, or on the

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contrary we avoid all government and thus present everywhere the attitudes that lead to disorder, and entangle ourselves in endless trouble” (*Panegersia*, V: 28-34).

It seems that since the time of Comenius not much has changed in public affairs. The moral “deficit,” which current Western society feels, calls for a “massive demand” for “virtuous people.”⁶ Moral issues are coming from the margins to the forefront at all levels of social life.⁷ And the feverish discussion doesn’t arise from a mere whim but from ethical concerns about the “habitability of the planet,” which for the first time in history has been put at risk by its own citizens.⁸ G. Lipovetsky even warns that “the twenty-first century will be either ethical or it won’t be at all.”⁹ It seems that the time is ripe for a discussion about rectifying human affairs. So what is Comenius’ advice?

The anthropology of “nesamosvojnost”

Good people make good politics. What is a good man like, according to Comenius? His anthropology is extremely rich and dynamic. In view of the theme of this paper, I want to focus on just one aspect of his concept of mankind. It is one of the key themes in Comenius’ anthropology, which in a fundamental way determines not only ethics and politics but also pedagogy and virtually every dimension of “human affairs.” It’s the understanding of humankind as being neither self-originating nor

self-sustaining. Comenius’ first explicit discussion of this theme is in *Hlubina bezpečnosti (Centrum Securitatis)*, that is, in a work which dates back to his pre-didactic and pre-pansophic period, early 1620s. The Czech word for this—*nesamosvojnost*—is a somewhat older term, but with very deep substance. Inspired by Nicholas Cusanus, Comenius develops the idea of the world as a wheel that, if it is to spin properly, must be well-anchored at its center, which is God the Creator. All the problems of humans and their world are, according to Comenius, the result of the dislocation of the wheel from its center, by which that safe center of being is lost. In order to best convey the lostness of the human position, Comenius introduces this particular notion of “samosvojnost” (self-originating-and-sustaining). He defines it as the situation of mankind having become “fed up with God’s order of things” and “wanting to each be their own being, which is to say their own order, leader, guardian, lord—in sum, their own god” (1927, 36). And this attitude then alienates people not only from their Creator but also from each other, for it causes them “to make themselves their own goal, to love only themselves, to desire only themselves, to care only for themselves” (1927, 36).¹⁰ They forget that it is from God that their life—and even their own breath—flow, and rather attribute everything to their own doing, or blind luck. And this is, according to Comenius, the universal human condition: “Surely not even one who is wholly in God and in whose heart is God’s will, could resist the temptation of self-determination (*svojnosti*) and self-alienation (*jinudosti*): we are all too self-absorbed, one more in one way, another more in another way; we all take care of ourselves more than is necessary; we all listen to ourselves, or even a stranger, more than we need to; and we all like doing this more than we should” (1927, 49-50). Thus the concept of non/samosvojnost has its teleological and existential dimension. Teleologically those who have the concept of themselves as non-self-origination-and-sustaining don’t consider themselves to be the final goal of their own life. Existentially, they know that they don’t belong to themselves but are totally dependent on their Creator. The teleological and existential deformation of human beings has as its consequence every human “confusion” and “perplexity.” We experience these

in the world, and the worse they are, the greater their centrifugal force. In this stage of Comenius's development of thought, he sees only one medicine against this human "wretchedness": "... a return to the center, which is God" (1927, 51).

This fundamental movement, which makes sense of human life, is, in principle, very close to the "return to the paradise of the heart" of the later work called *Labyrinth of the World and Paradise of the Heart*. Comenius called it *resignatio* in *Centrum*. But it's not about resignation in the modern sense of the word—like something negative, hopeless and unwanted—but exactly the opposite. It's when one looks at his futile efforts, stops seeking and groping his way along at that point where nothing is, and with hope turns his life towards that moment that gives his life meaning, peace, and safety in the midst of every hardship. It's about a "resignation from worldliness as it's expressed in the given conditions of the time," as R. Palouš aptly put it.¹¹ In other words, it's about resigning from dependency on things that are earthly, changeable, and temporal.

In the 1630s, when Comenius begins to think more didactically and eventually emendationally, he realizes that the desired state requires action as well as contemplation. For a person, to be "alright" isn't a given. The Czech word means to be "in order," that is, to have one's own agenda fall in line with that of the whole world, while also participating in the happenings of the world and its organization. Human beings are the co-rule-makers, the co-creators of the rules: *mundus artificialis*, *mundus moralis*, *mundus spiritualis*, and so on. By this work they fulfill their mission or calling: putting the world to rights—every human disfigurement, perplexity, confusion, and disorder.¹²

The theme of overcoming human *samosvojnost* is also apparent in Comenius' education, which is one of the principal tools of all remedial efforts. As early as the introductory chapters in his *Didactics*, Comenius identifies that the purpose of his educational efforts is the renewal of the "nexus hypostaticus," that is, the relationship of human beings to their Creator—which is precisely what breaks *samosvojnost*.¹³ Overcoming *samosvojnost* is thus the equivalent of that effort which keeps "one from becoming inhuman," as Comenius clarifies in his later *Pampaedia*.¹⁴

Moral education has a special place in Comenius's philosophy of education. I will briefly sketch it out because morality is directly related to the theme of this essay, and moreover, Comenius himself considers it the key chapter of his pedagogy, as we will see. Morality as such is dealt with in his *Mundus moralis*—6th grade of Pansofia (Comenius 1992), and partial notes can be found in many of his works (*School of infancy*, *Via lucis*, etc.), but the educational aspects of morality are most thoroughly treated in his *Didactics* (both *Great* and *Czech*, briefly also in *Analytical didactic*). In addition to little notes spread throughout the books, Comenius devoted an entire chapter (XXIII in both books) to the question and named it "*Methodus morum in specie*," which M. W. Keating translates into English as "The method of morals."¹⁵

He begins the preface to this chapter by explaining that everything he had written to that point was only the "preparation" or "beginning" and not the main work. And it's necessary to emphasize here that in the previous twenty-two chapters he dealt with nothing less than the entire system of pedagogical goals, principles, and methodology for the teaching of "science, art and language." But the main work, according to Comenius, is the "study of wisdom, which elevates us and makes us steadfast and noble-minded—the study to which we have given the name of morality and of piety, and by means by which we are exalted above all creatures, and draw nigh to God himself." These three purposes of the study of wisdom correspond to the triad of fundamental pedagogical goals the author introduced at the very beginning of his *Didactic*. There in the introduction Comenius clarifies that the teleological demand for knowledge, morals, and godliness arises from an *a priori* anthropological nature, which means that to humankind it has been given (1) to be knowledgeable of things, (2) to have power over things and himself, and (3) to turn to God, the source of everything.¹⁶

All three areas belong inseparably together and would be "unhallowed" if they were separated.¹⁷ "For what is literary skill without virtue?" Comenius floats this rhetorical question and immediately answers it with a reference to the old proverb "He who makes progress in knowledge but not in morality ... retreats rather than advances. And thus what

Solomon said about the beautiful but foolish woman holds good for the learned man who possesses no virtue: *As a jewel of gold in a swine's snout, so is a fair woman who is without discretion*" (Comenius 1926, X: 17). Hence an education that wasn't held together with morality and the "firm bond" of piety would be a "miserable" education. A good education would instead develop humanity in all three of the above-mentioned dimensions. For "the whole excellence (*essence* in *Czech didactics*) of man," Comenius explains elsewhere (Comenius 1905, IV: 7), is situated in these three things, "for they alone are the foundation of the present and of the future life. All other things (health, strength, beauty, riches, honour, friendship, good-fortune, long life) are as nothing, if God grant them to any, but extrinsic ornaments of life, and if a man greedily gapes after them, engrosses himself in their pursuit, occupies and overwhelms himself with them to the neglect of those more important matters, then they become 'superfluous vanities and harmful obstructions.'"

The proper aims of moral education in Comenius's *Didactic* are the so-called "key" or cardinal virtues of "wisdom, moderation, courage and justice" (*prudentia, temperantia, fortitudo, iustitia*), without which the structure of pedagogy would be "unfounded." Comenius first briefly clarifies the individual virtue and subsequently posits the method of its acquisition; together, these then form the crux of his methodology of character formation. He identifies six principles in *Czech Didactic*, and later in the *Great Didactic* he supplements and expands them to ten.¹⁸ For the sake of clarity I will only briefly summarize them here:

- I. Virtue is cultivated by actions, not by talk. For man is given life "to spend it in communication with people and in action." Without virtuous actions man isn't anything more than a meaningless burden on the earth.
- II. Virtue is in part gained by interactions with virtuous people. An example is the education Alexander received from Aristotle.
- III. Virtuous conduct is cultivated by active perseverance. A properly gentle and constant occupation of the spirit and body turns into diligence, so that idleness becomes unbearable for such a man.

- IV. At the heart of every virtue is service to others. Inherent in fallen human nature is enormous self-love, which has the effect that "everyone wants most of the attention." Thus it is necessary to carefully instill the understanding that "we are not born only for ourselves, but for God and our neighbor."
- V. Cultivation of the virtues must begin at the earliest age, before "ill manners and vice begin to nest." In the same way that it's easy to mold wax and gypsum when they're soft, but once they've hardened it's impossible to re-shape them, so also with men: most of one's character is based on the first "skills" that are instilled in early childhood.
- VI. Honor is learned by virtuous action. As he learns to "walk by walking, to speak by speaking, to read by reading" etc., so a man learns "to obey by obedience, forbearance by delays, veracity by speaking truth" and so on.

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- VII. Virtue is learned by example. "For children are like monkeys: everything they see, whether good or bad, they immediately want to imitate, even when they're told not to, and thus they learn to imitate before they learn how to learn." Therefore they need "living examples" as instructors.
- VIII. Virtue is also learned by instruction, which has to accompany example. Instructing means clarifying the meaning of the given rule of moral behavior, so as to understand why they should do it, what they should do, and why they should do it that way. Similarly, as "by a thorn a beast is pushed to move or to run, so a successful mind is not only told but also urged by gentle words to run to virtue."

- IX. It's necessary to protect children from bad people and influences. Inasmuch as a child's mind is easily infected, it is necessary on the one hand to retreat from "evil society" and on the other hand to avoid lazy people. For the man who is idle "learns to do evil, because a mind cannot be empty[;] if it isn't carrying something useful, it fills itself with empty, useless and vile things."
- X. Virtue requires discipline. Inasmuch as fallen human nature reveals itself to be constantly "here and there," it's necessary to systematically discipline it.¹⁹

It is worth mentioning that Comenius is aware of the principle that a young age is well fitting for any kind of education or formation. In chapter VII, paragraph 4, he speaks almost like a developmental psychologist: "It is the nature of everything that comes into being, that while tender, it is easily *bent* and *formed* (emphasis mine) It is evident that the same holds good with man himself," continues Comenius in the following paragraph, and he infers: "If piety is to take root in any man's heart, it must be engrafted while he is still young; if we wish anyone to be virtuous, we must train (chisel, *otesat* in *Czech Didactics*) him in early youth; if we wish him to make great progress in wisdom, we must direct his faculties towards it in infancy. . . ."

A closer inspection of his various principles reveals an impressive array of pedagogical, psychological, and sociological intuition – as we have become accustomed to with Comenius. It's fascinating that long before the possibility of experimental verification of his principles existed, Comenius saw and named such patterns inherent in moral education as the following: learning through practice, the influence of peer pressure, the principle of active participation, the principle of systematics, the principle of appropriateness, the principle of imitation, the significance of moral examples, and so on. Despite his archaic language, Comenius again and again amazes us with his timelessness and, as it were, "astonishingly prophetic" foresight, in the words of Jean Piaget.²⁰

Of all the principals mentioned above, I would like to emphasize just one, and that is the one Comenius himself emphasizes as the key to the "bliss-

ful state of private and public affairs" and which, by its very nature, creates the core of all morality. It's the fourth principal. Comenius presents it by way of an anthropological explanation: Human nature is "spoiled," suffering from the "loathsome vice" of self-love, which manifests itself in such a way that "everyone desires that care be devoted practically only to themselves ...[;] everyone cares only about his own things" and cares nothing about others or the common good. The medicine that Comenius prescribes for this disease of humanity is identical with the previously mentioned principal of *nesamosvojnost*. Young people should be carefully taught that "we are not born into this world only for ourselves, but for God and our neighbor, that is to say for human race. Thus they will become seriously persuaded of this truth, and will learn from their childhood to imitate God" as does the whole of creation, which from its foundation exists not only for itself but for others.

Conclusion

Comenius's anthropology is at first glance subordinate to radically different assumptions and instances than those of today. His theology is alien to contemporary readers, his metaphysics is static, and his terminology is archaic. For questions of morality in political practice, however, his anthropology offers surprising potential.

The human tendency towards *samosvojnost* is revealed to be harmful, depraved, and immoral because humans weren't created for themselves and don't belong only to themselves. The more one is occupied with oneself, the less human one becomes; the more one wants to belong only to oneself, the more of oneself one loses. On the other hand, those who manage to forget or lose themselves discover their true humanity. Such is the order of creation. Human beings aren't and shouldn't be the measure of their own things, let alone the measure of all things, as the modern slogan *homo mensura* says. Comenius' education (and later emendation) aims at putting human beings back in order (*ordo*). The purpose of all education and emendation is to lead humans up out of the harmful inclination towards self and away from disorder. Of course it is a difficult process, even life-long,²¹ but necessary. If one is not only to know what is good but also to do good

and to want the good, and to do that even when nobody is watching, it has to be a lifelong journey towards order – that is, putting one’s humanity in order, in right relationship to oneself, to others, and to the pre-ordained instance, which transcends everyone.²² I believe that only in this way is a person, according to Comenius, qualified for political work—in his day as well as the present.

Endnotes

1. This quotation comes from Comenius’ (Komenský’s) *Mundus moralis* III (2), iv, which is part of the *General Consultation concerning Restoration of Human Affairs* (Komenský 1992).
2. Jan Amos Comenius (John Amos Komenský) was a Czech (Moravian) 17th-century Brethren bishop, philosopher, and educator who is celebrated especially for his timeless didactic principles, which earned him the epithet “the teacher of nations.” For more details on Comenius see, for example, Hábl 2015.
3. For further discussion of Comenius’s anthropology, see Hábl 2011 or Hábl 2010.
4. *Panegersia* (Awakening) is the introductory book opening Comenius’ magnum opus *Obecná porada o nápravě věcí lidských* [General Consultation Concerning the Restoration of Human Affairs].
5. It is to all those “politicians” that the introductory proclamations are addressed in Comenius’ magnum opus *Obecná porada o nápravě věcí lidských* [General Consultation Concerning the Restoration of Human Affairs]. See the publication from the year 1992, 225.
6. Jan Sokol and Zdeněk Pinc, *Anthropologic a Etica. (Anthropology and Ethics)*. (Tritan, 2003), 8.
7. See for example Fobel 2002, Rich 1994, Jonas 1997, Honneth 1996, and Furger 1996.
8. Compare Kohák 1993 and Kreeft 1990.
9. Giles Lipovetsky, *Soumrak Povinnosti* (Praha: Proster, 1999), 11.
10. Compare also Kožmín and Kožmínová 2007, 60.
11. Radim Palouš, *Komenskeho bozsi svet (Comenius’ God’s World)* (Praha, 1992), 10.
12. Compare Palouš 1992, 75.
13. Human beings are the strangest creatures of all because only in them do “heaven and earth, the seen and the unseen, and death and immortality converge, so that a rational, immortal, eternal soul

dwells in a piece of clay, which is a great sign of the Creator’s wisdom ...” (*Czech Didactic* I, 3). Only with human beings does God cultivate a personal relationship (*nexus hypostaticus*) and thus joins His nature with human nature (*Great Didactic* I, 3).

14. Comenius repeated this idea many times in different places. See for example *Pampaedia*, II:8.
15. In most citations I will rely on Keating’s translation; my own translations from *Czech Didactic* will be indicated. Most of the citations I will make in this paper come from this 23rd chapter; therefore I won’t burden the reader with excessive references. I will only cite the reference when it comes from a different chapter in *Didactic* or from a different book.
16. Comenius (1926) submitted his pedagogical teleology in the 4th chapter.
17. Comenius (1905, ch. X) clarifies the theme of the inseparability of the individual areas of education in another chapter, explaining the so-called “universality” of education.
18. There is a question as to whether the expanded version in the *Great Didactics* is actually clearer. The careful reader can’t escape the fact that some of the principles in the “great” version overlap each other.
19. Comenius presents a more detailed analysis of the method of discipline in chapter XXVI.
20. Jean Piaget, “Jan Amos Comenius,” *Prospects* (UNESCO, International Bureau of Education XXIII [1/2], 1993), 9.
21. Comenius realized the need for lifelong formation of humanity only in the emendation phase of his work, as seen for example in *Pampaedia*, where, unlike in the *Didactics*, he supplements individual “schools” with “the school of adulthood, the school of old-age and the school of death,” because in the General Meeting he already knew that “all life is a school” (see *Pampaedia*, XIII 1).
22. On the issue of pre-ordination and subordination see Palouš 1991.

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