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Humanity: Lost and Restored in Comenius's *Consultation*



by Jan Hábl

Abstract: What is the future of humankind? Are we standing on the verge of destruction, or can we cherish bright prospects? The year 2020 gave us an opportunity to reflect on the outlook for humanity, as that was the year of a significant anniversary. When Jan Amos Comenius died 350 years ago, he left unfinished his greatest work, entitled *General Consultation on the Restoration of Human Affairs* (*De rerum humanarum emendatione consultatio catholica*). The goal of this paper is to observe Comenius's notion of human being in the *Consultation*, namely the notion of human "lostness" and "restoration." We will observe, with Comenius, that humanity is contradictory, or ambivalent. His whole remedial effort is based on an anthropological assumption, which may at first seem trivial, but in fact is pro-

found and important: *humanity is not alright, but it is not completely lost*. We will explore the implications of this anthropology for the idea of emendation.

I. "Human Affairs"

We have truly great potential, we know a lot, we can do a lot; but it is precisely this capacity that is our greatest threat. We are also able to misuse everything we have. Whether we are talking about our reason, will, emotions, relationships, creativity, or humor, we can use absolutely all of it well, or badly. We are the only beings that have the potential for self-destruction. The call for discussions about how to realize our human potential is therefore supremely relevant and desirable (cf. Hábl 2015).

Comenius considers "human affairs" in virtually all his works, but he clearly treats them most thoroughly and systematically in his greatest work, *General Consultation concerning Restoration of Human Affairs*. In it, he identifies the causes of human failings while also developing a very detailed plan for renewal. His whole remedial effort is based on an anthropological assumption that may at first seem trivial but in fact is profound and important: *humanity is not alright, but it is not completely lost*.¹ There is a solution, there is hope. But it isn't cheap.

The depth of Comenius's position is revealed by a comparison of possible anthropological alternatives. On one end of the spectrum is the concept that human affairs are completely lost: human beings are evil, animalistic, brutal, completely corrupt, and therefore cannot be helped; the result of such a position is hopeless resignation. At the opposite end of the spectrum, we hear the romanticists

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singing about the perfection, beauty, and goodness of human beings, who—since they're perfect—logically need no correction or education. Comenius's anthropological realism takes a different path.² He understands humans as “the most exalted beings of all creation” (Komensky 1926, 20), beings with a mission: we are here for a reason, we have a task, and it's the highest one possible: *Imago Dei*, to be the image of God, to represent the highest thinkable good (we will get to this concept later). Therefore, every person is *somebody*.

Each has value, meaning, importance, nobility, inalienability, sanctity. You could say, “be proud.” Be proud that you are; being in itself is significant.

On the other hand—and this is where the realism comes in—Comenius recognizes and admits that people often behave like animals or demons. Their potential for good tends to be misused, become warped, corrupted, inhuman. Why people are so contradictory will be explained later, with Comenius's help. For now, it is enough to posit the ambivalence of human nature—we are uniquely good, but we can also be evil. Hence the need for a remedy.

It is necessary to understand that in Comenius's time, Europe found itself on the verge of destruction as a result of war and religious and political rampages (again). People seek their own well-being without regard to that of the whole of society. But the well-being of any individual is not possible without the well-being of the whole (Floss 1970). Therefore, Comenius invites all people, especially the “Lights of Europe,” the rulers, clergy, and scholars (that is, those in his time who had the power to influence others) to the discussion. An emphasis on the entirety, or universality, of the *Consultation* is evident from the prefix *pan-*, which he attaches to the names of all his restorative efforts. Comenius divided the *Consultation* into seven parts:

1. *Panegersia* (Universal Awakening): If any remedy is to come, people must wake up and re-

His whole remedial effort is based on an anthropological assumption that may at first seem trivial but in fact is profound and important: *humanity is not alright, but it is not completely lost.*¹

alize that they have a real, global (in today's language), problem. We are all busy with our own affairs, and we miss the complete picture. Individuals cannot do well if society as a whole is not doing well. That is why Comenius is calling us to wake up and become sensitive to our common problems. First, he explains what “human affairs” are—how persons relate to (a) the things around them, (b) other people, and (c) God. Thus, human affairs include (a) educa-

tion, (b) politics, and (c) religion. Comenius often uses the terms education and philosophy interchangeably, because for him the love of wisdom (philosophy) is the starting point of every kind of education. In this part of the book, Comenius illustrates the violation of these things in the history of humankind and only briefly outlines the possibilities for their reparation.

2. *Panaugia* (Universal Enlightenment): Here Comenius plays with the symbol of light as a tool for overcoming human darkness and confusion. The human mind needs “light” to make clear what is necessary to know, want, and do to correct, or even save, human affairs. People have been given three sources of light or “lamps:” the world, human nature, and the Bible—the Macrocosm, the Microcosm, and the Word. Or we can say (a) the natural world, which still bears traces of the Creator's wisdom; (b) the human spirit, the bearer of God's image; and (c) the Scriptures, explaining God's will for human beings. Comenius sometimes calls these the “three books” from which one can read everything one needs to know for a good life.
3. *Pansofia* (Universal Wisdom): It is a special encyclopedia of all human knowledge and effort. It is not entirely accurate to call it an encyclopedia, though, since Comenius strongly states that is not what he is writing. In his judgment an encyclopedia is like a “pile of wood,” while

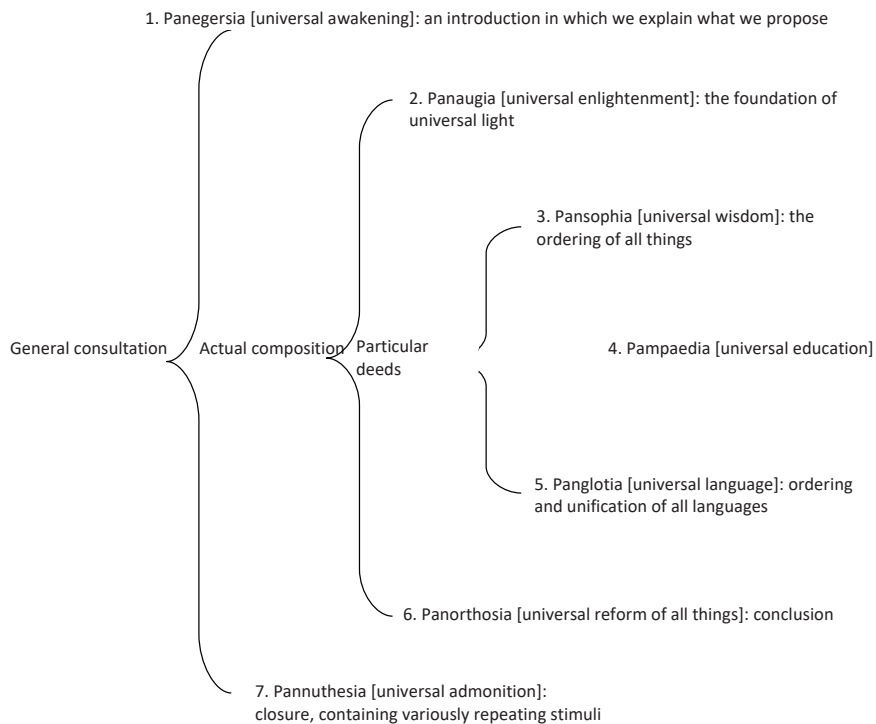
pansofia is like a “living tree.” What does he mean? In itself, knowledge, or information, is dead; wisdom, or more precisely universal wisdom, is life-giving. Universal wisdom has eight parts, which Comenius calls stages or worlds or layers. Seven worlds are conceived as a record of the historical drama of our cosmos—from the creation of a perfect world, to its corruption, the fall of humanity into evil, the material world, the natural world, and from there again ascending to a new spiritual perfection. The “World of the Possible” is both the foundation and the pinnacle of all worlds—the ideal it is necessary to aim for. The understanding of the world and its history as a harmonious whole has a saving purpose, direction, and goal, and it is the foundation of universal wisdom. It is not about knowing absolutely everything, but about knowing everything that it is necessary to know for a good and meaningful life. *Pansofia* is the largest part of the *Consultation*, taking more space than all the other parts combined.

4. *Pampaedia* (Universal Education): This section plays a key role in the whole *Consultation* because the purpose of education is the transmission of the above-mentioned universal wisdom. It is Comenius’s original, complete philosophy of education, that is, his philosophy of the lifelong formation of each person. The goal of that formation is to bring all people to the appropriation of a pansophic knowledge naturally, without violence or coercion, because violence is contrary to the essence of the Creator and creation. Comenius expresses his educational theory with the motto *omnes, omnia, omnino*—everything, to everyone, in every way. It is the answer to the three fundamental pedagogical questions: what to teach, to whom, and how? We are to teach everything needed for a good life, to everyone, using all possible natural means.
5. *Panglottia* (Universal Language): As the aim of the consultative work is a society-wide remedy, Comenius proposes a pragmatic unification of all peoples in one language, which would make communication and understanding easier. He

advises that everyone learn the universal language, yet he doesn’t mean for it to replace native languages; he recommends the development of native languages to be able to express all the wisdom available to humankind. His *panglottic* plan is interwoven with a theological dimension—Comenius is convinced that the disunity among human beings (not only in speech) is the result of sin, an evil of its own kind, and as such it deserves to be overcome. The pursuit of unity and harmony among people is itself corrective, humanizing and bringing salvation to all who participate.

6. *Panorthosia* (Universal Reform of All Things): In this section Comenius presents a concrete procedure for reparation. It begins with an individual, myself—by repentance—by acknowledging the truth that I myself am guilty of wrongdoing; moreover, this correction must spread through families, schools, churches and countries to society as a whole. The timeless insight of Comenius is the institutional anchoring of his restorative effort: if correction is to take place, it necessitates cooperation with key local, national, and international administrative and scientific (educational) institutions. The goal is to establish understanding and peace among individuals and nations.
7. *Pannuthesia* (Universal Admonition): As the first book of the *Consultation* looked to the past for the source of the problems of humanity, this last book looks to the future—to the future possibilities of humankind. The book is unfinished, but even so, one can feel the intensity and urgency with which Comenius appeals to all people without exception to join in the restorative effort.

Comenius gave education the key role, and one of the ways he made that clear was how he structured the content of the work—the *Pampaedia* is at the center of the whole treatise, which is triadic, with a three-part introduction and a three-part conclusion. Comenius’s schematic layout looks like this:³



In the original:

SYNOPSIS OPERIS CONSULTATORII.			
Consulta- tio catho- lica habet.	<i>Introitum</i> : in quo, quid proponamus exponitur: dicitur PANEGERSIA. h.e. <i>Excitatorium</i> , Lib.I.		
	<i>Fundamentum</i> : Lucem vniuersalem: PANAVGIA, Lib.II.		
	<i>Corpus</i> ipsum: pro- ponens e- mendatio- nis vni- uersalis.	<i>Tentamina</i> <i>particula-</i> <i>ria</i> : redi- gendi scil. in ordi- nem,	RES omnes, eatenus confusissimas : PAN- SOPHIA, Lib.III.
			MENTES omnes, eate- nus implicatissimas : PAMPAEDIA, Lib.IV.
			LINGVAS omnes, eate- n ⁹ intricatissimas PAN- GLOTTIA, Lib.V.
		<i>actū completum</i> , PANORTHOSIA, VI.	
	<i>Clausula</i> , continentem ad res tam desideratas, & quarum tam clare detectas videmus vias, varie iteratos stimulos. Dicitur PANNVTHESIA, <i>Exhortatorium vniuersale</i> , Lib.VII.		

II. Education as the Key to Restoration

The centrality of education in Comenius's concept of restoration is obvious—once the question “*what*” is true wisdom or *pan-sophia* is clarified, the next question is “*how*” to pass it on to succeeding generations. The age to come will be defined by the education of its citizens, he believed, and therefore schools should serve the children as “workshops” or “forging-places” of “humanity” (1992, Vol. III, p. 367). That is why Comenius places education very close to philosophy, i.e., the seeking and loving of wisdom.

As the way out of the “scholastic labyrinth,” Comenius untiringly repeats the three terms *omnes*, *omnia*, *omnino* (1992, Vol. III, p. 60): (1) It is necessary that “every person” be educated (*omnes*), because everyone—men and women, rich and poor, quick and slow—is created in the image of God and has the potential to reflect Him with dignity. (2) In order to fulfill that potential, everyone must be educated “in everything” (*omnia*) that is needed, which concretely means: to be knowledgeable about things, to be able to do things, to use things properly, i.e., piously. This concept—in current pedagogical terminology—corresponds to the cognitive, volitional, and spiritual components of education. (3) The term *omnino* indicates that all education must be done “by every possible appropriate means” that *natura*, i.e., the nature of the world, as well as the nature of human beings, provides. The world itself is a school. There is harmony between nature (the world) and character (people); the world is the macrocosm; each person is a microcosm. If a teacher carefully listens to nature, she will discover everything necessary for an effective education (Cf. Čapková, 1977).

Sometimes Comenius sounds as if the only remedy is knowledge, but we must read the “whole” of Comenius. It is true that he often speaks of the need for schools to be the instrument to lead us to “true” knowledge, because humans are simply faulty (Comenius himself was wrong in many things). At the same time, however, he is aware that break-down in humanity is not only in the area of reason but also in correctly knowing, willing, and having power (*scire, velle, posse*). In today's terms, the rectification of human affairs must be holistic, including every component of humanity, in both

an individual and social context (Cf. Lorenzová, 2004).

Comenius also often talks about education as an art (*ars*). It is the specific and subtle skill to handle things according to their natural character, and not to distort them, violate their essence, or abuse them (*abusus*). For example, speech should be used to convey truth, not to deceive one's neighbor; fire is to warm the home, not to be an instrument of war; singing is to glorify God, not to glorify a pagan idol, etc. This motif has profound implications for the educational treatment of people. It rests on the fundamental assumption that being has an order, and that order is harmonious. The “art” (in the sense of skillful) work of the educator is in leading the person (child) into this order. Of course, it cannot and must not happen in a violent way, even though each of us suffers from a self-absorbed tendency to “annoyingly deviate from the order of being;” that is, to be depraved. From this concept comes the famous motto that Comenius wrote on the title page of one of his works: *Omnia sponte fluant, absit violentia rebus* (Let everything flow naturally and without violent action).⁴

Comenius is known for the fact that in his early didactic writings, he was already developing his educational system—from nursery school through high school—and it is still being used today. In the *Consultation* are four basic stages (from the early “Didactic,” completed by another four stages: “the school of youth,” “the school of adulthood,” “the school of old age,” and “the school of death.” Many consider him to be the founder of the concept of *lifelong learning*. But as the names of the “schools” make clear, Comenius is not thinking about any kind of retraining for better employment in the labor market. He observes that we all always have something to learn, something in which to grow, things to improve until the very last day of our lives. For example, about the school of death he says, “A person could have died any time before, but now he must” and thus has the opportunity to turn away from ephemeral things, give thanks for the life he had, and prepare for “embracing death and entering into the new eternal life.” Comenius admits that of all terrible things, death is the worst. But in faith and reliance on God, there is no reason to fear: “You were not afraid to be born, why would

you be afraid to die? In both cases the decisions are not in your hands, but in God's." The whole of our daily life is a time of sowing, in preparation for the "eternal academy" (1992, Vol. III., p. 367).

In summary, a truly humane education develops "the whole person." The task for the schools is not only to prepare for future employment, but above all to develop humanity and all components of human character. The educated person is learned, moral, and pious. An education without morals is dangerous for society. And education without piety is dangerous—even deadly—in terms of eternity. Schooling helps persons to become what they should be—the *Imago Dei*. It fully develops all aspects of humanity—cognitive, moral, and spiritual. It brings us out of our self-centered self-worship and into harmony with the whole—with nature, with people, and with God. The educated person is one who knows, wants, and does what is good, "even if no one is looking" (1992, Vol. II., p. 210).

It is worth pointing out the close connection between knowledge, morality, and piety implied by Comenius's system. Remember Comenius's rhetorical question: What is education without morality? Or morality without the piety? This emphasis is where Comenius most differs from the concepts of Enlightenment (and post-Enlightenment) modernity (Cf. Wright, 2004). She (modernity), overwhelmed by success in the field of science, began to believe in automatic advancement in the field of morality. The more people know, the more human they will be—in the sense of humaneness. After all, the one who "rightly" knows will "rightly" act. Comenius doesn't believe that education by itself would lead to morality (or piety). It is just the opposite.⁵ It is precisely because knowledge cannot guarantee morality that it must be accompanied with moral education. When this does not happen, the result is contrary to human nature, an "unhallowed separation," because to people it is given not only to be knowledgeable about things but also to use that knowledge well, which also glorifies the Creator

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(1905, p. 74). Without it, people are not truly educated; they can be taught, but without morality they are "unnecessary burdens on the earth," even a "misfortune" to themselves and to others, for the more knowledge, the worse it is when misused for evil. That is why Comenius thinks that a humanity which is knowledgeable but immoral goes backwards instead of forwards; it degenerates. In contrast, his "school as forging-place of humanity" consciously strives for regeneration, that is, the rebirth of every dimension of humanity—intellectual, character and spiritual (i.e., knowledge, morals, and piety).⁶

III. Critical Conclusion

Comenius's emendation-work is a truly great dream for the human world—for a world that would be a fit place to live, harmonious, in today's language sustainable, and not only for the present but also for eternity.

In many ways he is certainly naïve or fanciful, as Jan Patočka says—"and yet he has a place in our world," he adds in one of his *Comeniological Studies* (1998, p. 282).

Comenius is often called "teacher of nations," and in the Czech Republic we honor him, recognize him, build statues and busts of him, name streets after him. That is why we—who love Comenius, especially Czech readers and interpreters—run the risk of dangerous, uncritical admiration. This must be avoided, preferably by a careful reading from an exegetical distance and by asking critical questions: How did Comenius come up with such a project—that of writing a weighty tome of a thousand pages that people would read and say "aha" and use to restore themselves? Is it possible for any book or text to change the world? To change people's thinking, and above all, their behavior?⁷

Moreover, many of Comenius's facts are hopelessly unscientific or prescientific—all of his physics and cosmology are in many ways erroneous, his universe geocentric, his biology charmingly nonempirical. Comenius loved the "science" of his time, read a lot, was very interested in the news, corresponded

with scholars, wanted to know how things really were—but sometimes he was just wrong.

His “social engineering” proposals seem difficult to put into practice (Lichewski 2014, p. 15ff). In the *Panorthosia*, for example, Comenius asks that all sensual stories and secular literature be removed from the country, as well as all pubs, taverns, dives, and drinking houses. This does not seem like a “consultation.” And he goes on to enumerate, in the *Panorthosia*: “Let extortioners, profiteers and others like them, leeches and parasites of others be removed. At least the gamblers, conjurers, comedians, tightrope artists, and other tricksters and useless money-wasters” (1992, Vol. III., p. 408).

That monopolies and oligopolies should be removed is, from an economic standpoint, far-sighted and rational, but Comenius doesn’t say how to do it. Quite seriously, Comenius also recommends that all people “return to original simplicity in everything, especially diet, clothing, titles, etc.” (1992, Vol. III., p. 414). Even when we try to understand Comenius’s social solidarity, love of simplicity, and order he apparently acquired in the Unity of Brethren, some of his suggestions border on a totalitarian organization of society—Comenius would like the government to control birth, married life, and order within the family. He actually talks about “marriage wardens,” uniforms for various age groups, and official “censors of morals,” who would conduct visitations of families, schools, churches, and even individuals (1992, Vol. III., p. 415). This is something like socialism, but all who have experienced the care of the supervisory committees of a totalitarian regime cannot help feeling negative emotions about it.

Questions are also raised by the unprecedented breadth and imbalance in the topics Comenius discusses in his *Consultation*. On the one hand, he deals with the truly great, in fact the greatest, questions of humanity—he examines the meaning of all being and all human action. He considers the metaphysical principles of the basis of things, substances, cosmic bodies, and humans, and he draws conclusions from them for the preservation of life, even eternal life. Yet on the other hand, he gets bogged down in unbelievable, almost inappropriate, details: he holds forth on the duties of farmers on their farms, proper instructions for a healthy

life, and hygienic recommendations for getting up in the morning.

And yet J. Patočka is right that Comenius’s desire for a better world still applies even today. We don’t have to identify with all his thought processes and answers, but we can let him confront us with questions that lead to self-reflection and self-understanding. J. Pešková, an excellent Comenius expert, said it well: in her opinion, Jan Amos Comenius is great not only because of his answers to questions of his day but also and primarily “for his own questions, which were able to express the key issues of the day” (1992, p. 5): Who are we? What makes a person human? How is humanity formed educationally? How do we harmonize the well-being of the individual and the well-being of the whole? How do we care for the whole? How do we cultivate peace among the nations? What and how do we believe? Where are we going as humanity? Comenius’s answers will sound archaic to the modern or post-modern ear, but not everything that is old is necessarily outdated.⁸

Endnotes

1. It is a paraphrase; the actual wording is as follows: “Though human affairs are corrupt, they have not fallen into complete depravity,” Vol. I, p. 102 (1992).
2. The issues of anthropological pessimism, optimism, realism, and their implications for education are discussed elsewhere. See Hábl (2015a, 2015b).
3. Compare Comenius (1992), Vol. I., p. 69.
4. The collective work *Opera didactica omnia*, published 1657.
5. Here I argue with Menck’s interpretation in his treatise on the formation of conscience, where he suggests that Comenius believed in a moral “automatism by which conscience follows knowledge—provided the knowledge was true.” Menck derives this conclusion from his interpretation of Comenius’s illustrations in the *Orbis pictus*. But I think this is a rash conclusion that does not take into account the other didactic works of Comenius. If Comenius believed that morality came automatically with knowledge, it would be logical for his *Didactics* to focus only on the cognitive level of education. But in fact, he speaks

against Menck's supposition by insisting on the education of morals and contriving the most important methodological principles, in addition to educating the intellect. For more information, see Menck (2001).

6. Palouš notes that Comenius was a scientist, but not of science in the sense of "a science of the world, how it lies and stands, but of the world as a common event, the world in a good and bad state; human knowing must understand this state: if something is out of order, it is essential for the components of true science to fix it." See Palouš (1992, p. 65).
7. Compare D. Murphy's excellent critical assessment of Comenius's life and work (1995) or A. Lichewski's critical treatise (2014).
8. This attitude was perfectly described by C.S. Lewis, using the term *chronological snobbery*. It is defined as follows: "The uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate common to our own age, and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that account discredited." See his autobiography *Surprised by Joy* (1955).

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