

# CREATING A TURNING POINT IN EDUCATION

Translation by Alberto Gabba

## Conversation at the “GoodWill Center” in Darjeeling (India)

«If the Eastern method can awaken us from our sleep, the Western one can avoid that, in the meantime, it turns into a nightmare.» Ken Wilber

The fundamental purpose of this contribution is to present an *ontology* (a discourse on the nature or fundamental essence) of the *turning point in education*. This article is based on some ideas related to the theme of the “nature of the turning point”, shared in my report at the last National Congress organized by the Centre of Varese, applied to education.<sup>(1)</sup> The article comes from the working out of notes, transcripts and annotations of a meeting event that took place at the “GoodWill Center” of Darjeeling (India) on March 7, 2018, between a group of Italian educators, which I belonged to, and a group of local teachers and professors.

I had been invited to participate in this journey on the “*Education for the Nascent Humanity*” in August 2017 by Marina Bernardi, president of the Community of Living Ethics founded by Sergio Bartoli (Assagioli’s pupil). The purpose of the journey was to bring together a group of young educators in order to visit some areas of India (the new educational schools of Auroville, the work of the GoodWill Center in Darjeeling, the teachings on education of Agni Yoga at Crookety House, etc.) and to lay the foundations of a work on the *education for the nascent humanity*.

This article relates about small part of the journey that concerns the event at the GoodWill Center, opened by the Community, inspired by the principles of Assagioli’s psychosynthesis and, in particular, aimed at creating

opportunities for letting know and developing its *educational* and *transpersonal* aspects in Himalayan India. The meeting, organized in this centre with local teachers and professors, aimed at creating the opportunity to start a *meaningful conversation* that could identify some thematic groups about the education of the future, trying to identify and isolate a *common denominator* between East and West. In fact, as written by prof. Margaret Wheatley:

«There is no power equal to that of a community that converses with itself about what it wants. *Meaningful conversations* generate the power to change, create, or transform institutions, values and points of view about the world. If we want to bring about change, we need to reunite the community, find out what’s important for it, and then connect all this to similar conversations.»<sup>(2)</sup>

The part reported here (slightly revised in form, but faithful in content) is the recording of a moment of interaction I had with a local teacher, Ava Rai, from which emerged some very important ideas, which will be the based for the next considerations and observations in the present work:

«*MV*: [...] I think that today, here, we have a profound opportunity to start something really meaningful regarding the mission of our time (giving birth to a new form of humanity) and to the theme of our journey: *education for the future*.

We are in this Centre because each of us has taken a position for the future of human education as something that concerns him or her in person, and here, together, we can explore some issues of fundamental importance that unite us, that transcend the very different backgrounds we start from.

The opportunity here is to start a *meaningful conversation* on the education of the future, trying to identify and isolate a sort of *common essential denominator* - if it exists - from which to start, the core of a structure deeper than any content that differentiates our formations. Nucleus in fact means: the point from which something exists, beyond which there is nothingness.

To start this conversation, I would like to invite you to

stay together for a moment in a survey, a space or a glade - in the form of an *open question*. In the great Western educational tradition, Socrates taught that true *wisdom* is never a product of 'seeking answers', but of 'living in the questions' the most profound and radical questions of life, using every answer that we obtain as a further opening, expansion, question. Plato defined this process: *the expansion of the soul*. The inquiry that I want to open concerns precisely what we feel to be - among the different questions that come to our mind - the *question of decisive importance for the future of education*. It would be important to be able to identify any self-evident criterion or underlying structural principle that might *transcend* our contents and background. In the *Crito*, Plato converses with the homonymous character, and teaches us that without a criterion (from the Greek *krino*: 'I judge') it is impossible to judge any aspect of reality.<sup>(3)</sup>

To be frank, I believe that - if this criterion exists - it has to do with, or in a certain sense is a *function of*, a more abstract background that unites us all: the *spirit*, the *theme* or the fundamental *mission* of our time.<sup>(4)</sup> We are *already immersed* in this spirit of time, which is as invisible for us as the air we breathe and as the water is for the fish. It is destined to be indeterminate as long as it remains not distinct, not noticed, but exactly for this reason it is *decisive*.<sup>(5)</sup>

But what I can say is that if this spirit cannot be grasped *directly*, we can, in a sense, do this through its phenomenologies or manifest effects. And one of these is the *total crisis* that characterizes this time, and which involves every field of human life (education, democracy, politics, medicine, economics, psychology, philosophy, etc.). Being in crisis is not something specific, but (involves) *all human identities and meanings*. We are on the threshold of a total anthropological crisis, of a radical crisis about the identity of what it means to be human. And education (*ex-ducere*, 'to lead out') can be seen in this context as the most important theme of the mission of our time, since it concerns 'pulling out' a new humanity, that is creating a turning point related to what it means to be 'human beings'. This survey is an open invitation to start from the most difficult (but most important) question, to do our part for the transformation of education as we have learned to know so far ...

*A.R.*: Regarding the invitation to the conversation that has been opened, and the most important and decisive thing in this direction, I want to say this: observing my life, as a mother and as a teacher, I had a tendency to focus on *doing* something as a teacher and not on *being a teacher*. The books we study are designed to teach us *what to do* and *how to behave*, without giving any importance to what it means to *be a mother* or to *be a teacher*. When you think this way, bringing attention to doing, rather than to the *presuppositions of education*, you cannot really create an impact and you cannot really alter anything thoroughly, because *you move and act like a blind man*. So far, a lot has been taught - and I myself have learned - on the content of the subject and on teaching, but almost nothing on the *being* of the child and the teacher, and on the *being of education* in general. As far as I am concerned, the most important thing to start with is to lay the foundations for a great investigation into the presuppositions of human education according to the old paradigm, and from there to move to establish an *entirely new one*».



[Darjeeling GoodWill Center] From left: Dr. Pratap Singh Rai (prof. of Buddhist Ethics, Director of Bhadra Sheela Memorial Institute), Mauro Ventola, Virginia Benzi, Marina Bernardi.

### The Turning Point: the Decisive Criterion

«Perhaps we are at a time when the night of the world is approaching midnight. Perhaps this era of the world is coming in the time of extreme poverty. But maybe not, maybe not yet. Long is the time, because even terror is ineffective until mortals have made the *turning point*. But the turning point is made by mortals only if they recover their *essence*». Martin Heidegger

The event at the "GoodWill Center" allowed us to bring to light one of the decisive ideas for starting our work: *the turning point*. This term can be traced back to the work of Martin Heidegger, considered in the history of philosophy as the main philosopher of the twentieth century. In his statement, Heidegger approaches the turning point towards the essence, the fundamental and substantial being of something. As far as the establishment of the human *being is concerned*, the turning point has a particular nature. Here's how two dictionaries define it:

- *Dictionary A*: Turning point
  - a) Change of direction
  - b) Crucial (existential) change
- *Dictionary B*:
  - c) Moment of decisive change in a course of events.

If we look at the etymology of the word (according to Assagioli this is a real “psychological technique”), we discover that in Italian *svolta* (turning point) is a term coming from the Latin *svoltata*, that is “turned”. The act of turning consists of turning our sight to a different place and implies the act of vision. For that specific being that is the human being, *the turning point is the product of seeing something in a new way* - which allows to see possibilities that were not present before. In the centre of the turning point is an alteration of a certain undisputed, not examined view of the world. This is the ground for the educational work for the future. The determining power of a particular view of the world is depicted by the anthropologist Henry Jules, in his book *Culture Against Man*:

«In a society in which the competition to seize the fundamental cultural assets is one of the pivots of action, one cannot teach people to love each other; on the contrary, it becomes necessary for the school to teach children to hate each other, avoiding showing it, because our culture cannot tolerate the idea that children may hate each other. How does school satisfy this ambiguity? [...] Boris had difficulty in reducing 12/16 to the minimum terms and could only get up to 6/8. The teacher asked him quietly if that was the maximum he could get to; the maximum he “believed”, the teacher insinuated, that he could get to. The other children raised their hands, eager to correct him. Boris was quite unhappy, with his mind probably paralyzed. [...] After a minute or two [the teacher] turns to the class and says: ‘Well, who can tell Boris what the divisor is?’. A forest of hands is raised, and the teacher calls Peggy. Peggy says that four is the greatest common divisor. [...] Boris’s failure made Peggy’s success possible; his unhappiness is an occasion for her exultation: here is a typical situation of the current American elementary school. To an Indian Zuni, Hopi or Dakota, Peggy’s performance would seem incredibly cruel, because the competition, gaining success through the failure of others, is a form of torture unknown to those non-competitive cultures. Considered from the point of view of Boris, the nightmare on the blackboard, perhaps resulted in a lesson of self-control, so as not to run screaming out of the classroom under the enormous pressure of the public. [...] At school the external nightmare is internalized for life. Boris was not just learning arithmetic, he was also learning the *essential nightmare*. *In our culture to achieve success we must learn to dream of failure even at night*».<sup>(6)</sup>

In the context of a significant work on education for the future and for nascent humanity, there is a *crucial distinction* that must focus all our efforts, commitment and energy:

- A work aimed at generating an *alteration of the content*, of doing, improving or changing.
- A work oriented to generate an *alteration of the horizon*, of the underlying vision of things, of the basic assumptions of a reference model.

**Paradigms of the Alteration and of the Turning Point**  
**«What you see depends on how you look. Since observing is not only receiving, unveiling, but at the same time a creative act».** Søren Kierkegaard

In other words, there is a substantial difference between working *in* the education (*content*) or *on* the Education (*horizon*). In the latter case, philosophy has often spoken of *transcendental*. Transcendental here does not mean something supernatural, but the hidden and implicit conditions that make possible an experience. It is the space - the whole of what must be present - *behind* the appearance of a phenomenon, so that it can manifest itself *in the way* it does. The event described by H. Jules does not emerge by chance; its existence (from *ex-sistere*: “being outside”) is made possible by the horizon behind certain assumptions and values (including “competition”). *So, if we want to achieve a turning point in human education, we must be able to alter that horizon.*

The word *horizon* is Heidegger’s favourite metaphor to refer to the transcendental sphere. A horizon can never be *objectified*, and at the same time no object can exist without an implicit horizon that hosts it. The horizon concerns the *network of conditions* relating to the possibility of existence of something; to have access to what Ava Rai pointed out, that is to the possibility of altering the *being* of education, *being* a mother or *being* a teacher, what is required is to alter the horizon. This means that a work aimed at obtaining *noteworthy* contributions for the future of education must first take place from the appropriate reference paradigm. The word paradigm comes from the Greek *paradeigma* and over time has taken on the meaning of “vision of the world”.<sup>(7)</sup>

The considerations made so far led us to state the existence of two general paradigms:

- The *paradigm of change* (or incremental improvement).
- The *paradigm of the turning point* (or of the ontological transformation).

Actually, these are two ways of *conceiving* the work on education, which inevitably determine the way we *relate* to it and therefore our *interaction*. As a result, the paradigm we *choose* has domino-effect implications. We can

discover the most important differences between these two paradigms by observing the configurations that they take, from at least seven angles:

1. *Genesis or source.* The word ‘genesis’ comes from the Latin *genēsis* and from the Greek γένεσις whose root is γεν - of γίγνομαι “to be born”. Saying “genesis or source” of the paradigm we intend to examine the aspect of birth, origin, formation. We refer to the question: where do these paradigms come from or how do they originate? The paradigm of change has its source *in the usual and customary way of seeing things* : it is inherited, since it is based on the pre-understanding that man has breathed and internalized by osmosis from a certain historical-cultural environment.<sup>(8)</sup> An individual does not choose these pre-understandings, he does not think them, but they are the unexamined assumptions *from which he* thinks, and correspond to the sphere that M. Heidegger called the “unthought”. Whenever a man wants to *change* or *improve* something, he *always* moves within these pre-understandings. Unlike the first, the genesis or source of the transformation paradigm *finds its origin in a creative act*. The philosophers of the great scholastic theology held that true creation is *ex-nihilo*: “from nothing”. Creating really means “bringing something to light” and doing it from nothing. But it must be distinguished that it is created *from the nothing of itself*, and not *from absolute nothing*. In fact, every creation always derives from our *being*, and is proportioned and allowed by our being. From the point of view of psychosynthesis our being has *two dimensions*<sup>(9)</sup>, and therefore this creative act must require - as it were - two movements:

- An *act of awareness* (and therefore, to a certain extent, of liberation) from implicit assumptions inherent to culture.
- An *act of intentional creation* of new presuppositions, inherent to a culture closer to the laws of the world of life.

2. *Intention or future.* Each paradigm has an intention or a future that becomes its ‘organizing principle’. Intentionality, starting from Franz Brentano, is conceivable as a “tending towards” something, as a “will towards” an object. It concerns the irreducible internal tension of a form of reality, and indicates its basic design, its project, its vector: the goal for which that something is

drawn, towards which it tends. The ultimate reduction of every psychic activity is its *intentional essence*. And for this it is very important to understand what the two paradigms tend towards. The paradigm of change: it tends to improve, alter, change an aspect of the future, but within *what is possible* (according to a certain vision of the world). The paradigm of transformation or turning point: its tension is to offer *new possibilities*, and in particular to *create a future that otherwise would not have happened* (and therefore “impossible” according to the same vision of the world).

3. *Direction of attention.* Referring to the ten laws of the psyche declared by R. Assagioli, we know that where attention is placed, there follows energy. We must understand clearly that every paradigm *preforms* and *pre-orientates* the attention of people in a certain direction; a paradigm is never neutral. If we remove all the accidental and momentary elements, and after having made various ‘cuts’ we look directly at the *substance* of the way in which these two paradigms organize our attention, we discover the following:

- In the paradigm of change, our attention is focused *within* the boundaries, limits and definitions of ‘what is possible’ within a given vision.
- In the transformation paradigm, attention is focused on what is *outside* the boundaries, limits and definitions of ‘what is possible’ within a given vision.

4. *Operating mode.* The Webster Dictionary defines the word ‘function’ as: «The way something works, the action or the normal or characteristic behaviour of something». In the paradigm of change: we work on what we are *doing*, on the *process of the action*. In the paradigm of transformation: we work by altering the way in which something *is*, in an indirect and radical way, that is through the alteration of the implicit horizon in which that phenomenon *exists*, from which it *appears*.

5. *Definition of human action.* In each of these paradigms, human action is conceived in a certain way. In the domain of change: action corresponds to a *series of material activities aimed at altering something (content) and obtaining a certain effect (result)*. In short: the action is seen and conceived from the point of view of the phenomenic Ego.<sup>(10)</sup> In the domain of transformation: action is seen and conceived from the point of view of the real Ego (which is a pro-creator Ego)<sup>(11)</sup>: *a series of stances on the future (resolutions*<sup>(12)</sup>*) that have the power to create new, otherwise non-existent “possibilities for life”*.

6. *Ethical conception.* With the word “ethics” we mean: the investigation of the source of human behaviour in relation to the categories of ‘good’ and ‘evil’. In the paradigm of change: the notions of “right” and “wrong”, “should” and “should not” are already given by an implicit system, undisputed and taken for granted. One moves within a *world of options*, organized by a series of stereotypes established by the specific culture (*cultu-*

ral imperative). In the paradigm of transformation these stereotypes are made explicit and made relative. It works “beyond good and evil”, removing any stiffness and absolutism from moral stereotypes. Every ethical direction is possible (*world of possibilities*), provided that it respects the intelligence of the circumstance, and the functional utility to the laws of life (*vital imperative*).<sup>(13)</sup>

7. *Relationship with risk*. Finally, the two paradigms pre-orient the relationship with risk. The paradigm of change (survival-oriented) is designed to win, ascertaining and controlling things, *avoiding risks*. The paradigm of transformation (oriented towards greater vitality) is designed to give itself fully to a **noble** possibility,<sup>(14)</sup> and we deliberately and freely assume the risks necessary for its manifest realization. This relationship with risk is indicated - among others - in a Handwritten Note by R. Assagioli (AS 6631):

«A wise will has, in the right time and place, *to be able to dare*, assuming responsibilities and risks. It is necessary to have the courage to make mistakes, to give in life its right part to the ‘unexpected divine’».

And by the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who wrote from the concentration camps:

«Thinking and acting with the next generation in mind, and being ready to go away every day, without fear and without worry: this is the attitude that is practically imposed on us and that is not easy, but it is still necessary to keep bravely».

### A Culture for Nascent Humanity

«**Culture is the spread of light, in the darkness of matter**». *The Portal, Città della Pieve*

One of the most significant *synthesis* achieved in the journey on education is that most of the current attempts for intervention are not sufficient to have an impact on *the formal cause* <sup>(15)</sup> of the real educational crisis that humanity is going through, which makes it unique and peculiar, compared to all previous ones. Much of the practices, attempts, expected results, perceived possibilities and actions carried out, move within a paradigm (culture) <sup>(16)</sup> created in the image and likeness of the same configuration of the human Ego (egoic-separated) that is in crisis. What is *required* at this moment by the appeal of our time is to rethink education *entirely*, selecting the paradigm of the turning point, to offer to the future *an education for life*. We need not make an improvement, but to *create new alternative bases for a change and transformation of being (ontology) of education*. The great challenge is to work on the elaboration of *a new horizon*, from which a new way of *seeing* things and of *interacting* with them can take life. The real source from which the being of education comes, is the horizon of meaning.

The *fabric* of this horizon is made of language, it exists in language. As M. Heidegger says: “Language is the

home of being”.<sup>(17)</sup> Creating a new culture on education is nothing more than *inserting new conversations onto the general conversation of education according to the categories of our time, to alter it in a meaningful way*. A culture, in fact, is nothing but a *shared conversation*. The creation of a new culture takes place when a critical mass of human beings develops a new language, different from the previous one, which then becomes a common language, a new pre-understanding or a horizon from which to see things. As individuals, our challenge is being able to *give voice* to real human “I” and to incorporate its principles into a new horizon delivered. In its essence, it is a *semantic revolution*.

If creating a new paradigm - or culture - is generating a new shared point of view (language), we need *words that are well founded, sufficiently clear and powerful*,<sup>(18)</sup> but also more *radically human*.<sup>(19)</sup> We could say powerful words (masculine) in the measure in which we will develop a great silent (feminine) *listening*. These words cannot be invented. We must train the perception of that *inner voice* that is always ‘measure’ of our identity, reality, humanity. But we could never understand the insights of that voice by improving or changing one of the various responses *within* the presuppositions of our way of seeing things. Rather, as the philosopher Hans-George Gadamer has clarified in his *Truth and Method*, the insights will come from the measure of our ability to live in the *school of questions*, questions so powerful as to redirect the axis of the assumptions that found our paradigms:

«[New insights] always presuppose an *indication* in the direction of an *opening area* from which the idea may come, that is, always presuppose *questions*. The real nature of the sudden idea (*insight*) is perhaps not so much the realization of the solution of a problem, as the sudden realization of the question that advances in the opening and therefore makes an answer possible. Every sudden idea has the *structure of the question*».<sup>(20)</sup>

## Bibliography - Notes

- 1) M. Ventola, "La natura della svolta. L'accesso effettivo al rinnovamento" (The Nature of the Turning Point. The Actual Access to Renewal), National Congress Il Tempo del Rinnovamento (Renewal Time), Institute of Psychosynthesis, Gazzada (Varese), Villa Cagnola, 29-29 April 2018.
- 2) To deepen a vision of language, integrated with psychosynthetic principles, and about the power of conversations to create a future that otherwise would not have happened, see: M. Ventola, *Conversazioni per il Futuro - Vol.1 (Conversations for the Future)*, L'UOMO Edizioni, Florence 2018
- 3) Plato, *Critone (Crito)*, Bompiani, Milan 2000.
- 4) J. Ortega y Gasset, *Il tema del nostro tempo (The Theme of Our Time)*, SugarCo, Milan 1994.
- 5) As RD Laing wrote: «The set of the things we think and do is limited by what we fail to notice. And since we cannot notice what we fail to notice, we can do very little to change, until we notice how not to notice shapes thoughts and actions».
- 6) H. Jules, *Culture Against Man*, Random House, New York 1963
- 7) T. Kuhn, *La struttura delle rivoluzioni scientifiche (The Structure of Scientific Revolutions)*, Einaudi, Torino 2009.
- 8) «A paradigm is a view of the world constructed on the basis of implicit assumptions, accepted definitions, comfortable habits, values defended as if they were truths, and convictions projected as reality. Therefore, paradigms are deeply linked to the socialization of adherents and practitioners: the paradigms tell them what is important, legitimate and reasonable. Paradigms are also normative, asserting what should be done without the need for long existential or epistemological considerations. But it is precisely this aspect of the paradigms that constitutes their strength and weakness: their strength because it makes action possible, their weakness because the reason for action is hidden under undiscussed assumptions of the paradigm itself». (M.Q. Patton, *The paradigm debate and utilitarian synthesis, in Utilization-focused evaluation*, Sage, Thousand Oaks 1997)
- 9) «Self-consciousness, or I-consciousness, has two characteristics: one introspective, the other dynamic. This can be expressed in various ways: for example, 'I perceive myself being and willing'; or 'Because I am, I can want'». (R. Assagioli, *L'atto di volontà (The Act of Will)*, Astrolabio, Rome 1977)
- 10) «[...] What we are aware of is only what can be called the Phenomenic "I", which all the changing states of consciousness, thoughts, feelings, etc. refer to. But this phenomenic "I" is only the manifestation of the real "I", the permanent active principle, the true substance of our being.» (R. Assagioli, *Psicosintesi. Per l'armonia della vita (Psychosynthesis, For the Harmony of Life)*, Astrolabio, Rome 1993)
- 11) The connotation of the real "I" as "pro-creator" has been well explained by the philosopher Marco Guzzi: a living subjectivity capable of inserting new information that alter the structure of the universe. (M. Guzzi, *Fede e rivoluzione (Faith and Revolution)*, Edizioni Paoline, Milan 2017)
- 12) Resolution is the most radical of the acts of will, based entirely on the "I". Paul Tillich writes: «[Heidegger] [...] analyses a phenomenon to which he gives the name of 'resolution'. The German term that designates it, Entschlossenheit symbolizes the unlocking of what anxiety, submission to conformism and self-isolation have closed. Once this has been unlocked, we can act, but not according to rules given by someone or something. No one can direct the actions of the 'resolute' individual - no God, no convention, no law of reason, no norm or principle. We must be ourselves, we must decide where to go.» (P. Tillich, *Il coraggio di esistere (The Courage to Exist)*, Astrolabio, Rome 1968)
- 13) J. Ortega y Gasset, *op. cit.*
- 14) M. Ventola, *L'Evoluzione possibile dell'uomo (The Possible Evolution of Man)*, Iemme Edizioni, Naples 2016.
- 15) The word 'formal' in philosophy is usually opposed to the notions of 'content' and 'matter'. Logical formal: in the teaching of Aristotle, is the internal logic that brings matter from the power to the act, following an implicit ideal model. For the Greek philosopher, form has a logical priority on matter ("Of all things we can speak inasmuch as it has a form and not for its material aspect as such" - Aristotle, *Metaphysics VII*). The formal logic describes the movement of human rationality that is oriented to identify the substance that is independent of any content.
- 16) It is essential at this point to distinguish the notion of culture. By culture (or anthropological culture) we can understand that complex and set of models, modalities and structures of meaning that man has elaborated, and which he delivers and transmits in various forms to respond to certain types of issues of shared interest or fundamental importance (in the article: the problem of how to educate a human being for being fully human).
- 17) M. Heidegger, *Lettera sull'«Umanismo» (Letter on «Humanism»)*, Adelphi, Milan 1995.
- 18) As F.W. Nietzsche rightly guessed: "Truth needs power" - or is forgotten by history.
- 19) The aim of education for nascent humanity, in fact, is realized in new schools for the new generations of human beings.
- 20) H.G. Gadamer, *Verità e metodo (Truth and Method)*, Bompiani, Milan 2001.