

## MONTESSORI AND RATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

*Experimental psychologists have long looked upon rational psychology with a jaundiced eye, dismissing it as too theoretical. Now they are discovering that too much that is being unearthed in the laboratory and the clinic is inexplicable or fragmentary without reference to common principles; much of what Freud and Adler and Jung have to say lacks solid foundation. Many psychologists are taking a second look at the psychology that has been developed with painstaking care over the last 2500 years. Among them is the Dutch Freudian psychiatrist A.A.A. Terruwe, M.D. whose two books attempting a synthesis between rational and experimental psychology have been reviewed in Dominicana (Summer/1959 and Spring/1961). Now in this issue Mr. E. M. Standing discusses the Montessori Method of education in the light of rational psychology, showing how it is based upon the age-old principles that are ever-new. Mr. Standing is the author of Maria Montessori: Her Life and Work, which was reviewed in Dominicana (Fall/1960). He has devoted his life to furthering the Montessori approach in educating children and in recent years has been especially interested in exposing the sound Thomistic foundation that underlies the Method. At present he is editing for Fall publication The Child in the Church, one of Dr. Montessori's most important works that has long been out of print, which will be published by Academy Library Guild, Fresno, California.*

**I**T SEEMS TO BE A FASHION among psychologists of the present day to start off by decrying rational psychology as out-moded, not to say defunct. Having done this they proceed to write chapters on reason, imagination, memory, attention, etc., as if nothing had happened. As Professor Spearman remarks somewhere, "the faculties have a way of losing every battle but always winning the war." Which goes to show that there must have been something in rational psychology which was fundamentally true. It is not likely, on the face of it, that the introspective and

analytical genius of so many philosophers from Aristotle to Kant should have been completely on the wrong tack!

Actually the conception of the soul according to Aristotle and the Scholastics is much more in a line with Hormic psychology than is generally supposed. For them the soul was a spiritual principle, and as such was something "simple," that is incapable of being divided into parts. And therefore, by definition, the faculties of the soul could never be separate entities, but were rather modes of activity. Knowledge, will and appetite were never thought of as separated in reality with philosophers like Saint Thomas Aquinas. On the other hand, it needs no great introspective acumen to realize that when a person, with eyes closed, is giving himself up to the enjoyment of the scent of honeysuckle on a summer evening that the faculty of sense (smell) is occupying the spotlight of consciousness, while the knowing and willing faculties are in the background. Similarly, at other times the knowing faculty may be to the fore; and other times, the will. To suggest, as some do, that the undeniable discoveries which have been made by modern psychologists have rendered valueless the whole of traditional psychology would be as foolish as, to quote William James, "to empty out the baby with the bath water." *A priori*, then, we should expect to find that a method of education which was based by experiment solidly and squarely on the true nature of man would fit in with the new psychology as well as the old. And so it does.

### The Human Reason

Aristotle, the greatest of the rational psychologists, defines man as a rational animal—a definition which has been endorsed by every subsequent generation. "What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason and apprehension! How like a god! How different from the 'beast that lacks discourse of reason.'" In striking contrast to many of her contemporaries Maria Montessori insists, like Shakespeare, on this unique gift of man as distinguishing him from the animals. Take, for instance, this rather surprising quotation from *The Secret of Childhood*:

The baby starts from nothing: it is an active being going forward by its own powers. Let us go straight to the point. The axis round which the internal working revolves is *reason*. Such reason must be looked upon as a natural creative function that little by little buds and develops and assumes concrete form from the images it absorbs from the environment. Here is the irresistible

force, the primordial energy. Images fall at once into pattern at the service of reason. It is in the service of reason that the child first absorbs such images. . . .

or again:

The child is passing from nothingness to a beginning. He is bringing into being that most precious gift which gives man his superiority—reason. On this road he goes forward long before his tiny feet can carry forward his body.

### The Soul Informs the Body

It was the scholastic doctrine that man is a being whose very nature is a compound of two different elements, spirit and matter. He is not a pure spirit who has dropped, temporarily and by mistake, into a material world, hampered therefore by a body, and waiting for the moment when he can escape. The doctrine of the resurrection of the body clearly indicates that the true nature of man is a compound of body and soul. No theory with regard to the inter-relation of these two elements could better express the principles behind Dr. Montessori's *practice* in dealing with young children. Her doctrine of the "Progressive Incarnation of Man" (not re-incarnation, if you will please note!) is based precisely on this most intimate relation between the soul and body. To quote from what we have written elsewhere:

The new-born child is "incompletely incarnated." Unlike most of the higher animals which are born with a marvellously complete, but instinctive power of carrying out complicated actions (directed to instinctive ends) the "*neonato*" is comparatively helpless. He has very limited powers of muscular co-ordination.

This apparent inferiority is however really the mark of the child's superiority. For, and this is the fundamental point on which Dr. Montessori insists and upon which all her practice is based, *man's nature consists in the perfect union of body and soul*, not the soul of the animal completely dependent on the matter of its body, but an immaterial, rational, super-sensitive soul. Her observations on very small children, even before they can talk or walk, have led her to believe that the very small child is often at a disadvantage, because adults do not realize that it is a being who possesses knowing and willing faculties great out of all proportion to its power of expression. Therefore it is the duty of parent and

teacher not only to foster the physical growth of the child, and help it to acquire ordered physical experience, but also to enable it to perfect the relation between soul and body, so that the latter becomes the apt instrument and means of expression of the former. This is the reason why Dr. Montessori has introduced into her classes those original "Exercises in Practical Life" so often misunderstood by outsiders, but so beloved by the children themselves. They are many and various. They include, for example, one series of actions directed to the care of the person: washing hands, doing one's hair, cleaning shoes, etc.; another, directed to the care of the environment: dusting, sweeping, scrubbing; a third, to the "Lessons in Grace and Courtesy," and many others of a similar kind.

Of deep significance in connexion with these is the teacher's duty in presenting to the children what Dr. Montessori aptly describes "*The Logic Analysis of Movements.*" In every complicated action, such as opening and shutting a door, there is a logical sequence of subsidiary actions which collectively make the whole, and this sequence cannot be neglected without confusion and loss of grace. For example, it is no use pulling the door towards you until you have finished turning the handle. The principle in this analysis is always the same. *The light of reason is brought to bear on these actions, transfusing them with an intelligence which relates all the parts in logical order.* These distinctions may seem trivial to us, but are not so to a child of three or four, who finds such a deep interest in them that he will repeat the actions again and again, ever more perfectly, and with a sense of increasing power. In this way the child's motor-forces are gathered together and co-ordinated towards reasonable ends, and order replaces disorder.

#### Relation between the Senses and Intellect

In all the Montessori sensory occupations the child is busy composing and decomposing groups of objects which form carefully graded or contrasting series. And as he arranges and re-arranges them his mind forms ever more clear notions with regard to such ideas as length, breadth, color, tone, geometric forms, and the like. This is a practical application of St. Thomas' oft-repeated dictum that the human mind knows "by composition and division." It is important to realize that the child's mind is as active during these operations as his hands.

The clearly defined images which the children derive from these graded sensory materials become to them as "keys which open up new realms in the world around them." These clearly defined images form

what the scholastics called the "phantasms," from which the child's intellect derives corresponding ideas, equally clear. Those conversant with Aristotelian psychology will recognise in these examples of Montessori method a familiar principle: Nothing is in the intellect which was not first in the senses. As St. Thomas expands the notion:

There are three degrees of the cognitive faculty. There is first the act of the corporeal organ, i.e. the sense, which knows particulars; secondly, the power, which is neither the act of the bodily organ nor conjoined with corporeal matter, and such is the intellect of angels, the object of which is form as it exists without matter; and thirdly, there is the human intellect, which stands midway between the other two, which is the form of a body, although not the act of a bodily organ . . . We must therefore admit that our intellect knows material things by abstractions from phantasms; and that by material things so considered it becomes in some manner able to understand immaterial things.

No words could better describe the mental processes which, to the observer, appear to be taking place in the minds of the children as they work spontaneously with the various didactic materials in the Montessori school. There are indeed moments of sudden intellectual expansion in the lives of these tiny scholars when one can almost see the "agent intellect" abstracting the "intelligible species" from those "phantasms" which the children have gained through contact with the material. These are to the children moments of pure joy (to the teacher no less so). It is the joy which accompanies the right use of a faculty; and St. Thomas remarks somewhere that what we learn with pleasure we learn better than what we learn without pleasure.

We can thus imagine two pictures in the mind's eye; one of the great St. Thomas defending Aristotle against the Platonists in the Schools of Paris; the other of Mme. Montessori (six centuries later) observing the astonished revelations of her liberated children in her first school in the San Lorenzo slum at Rome. At first sight there does not seem much in common between these pictures; but on looking closer we shall find they are both doing the same thing, showing forth the true nature of man.

### **Learning by Discovery**

Many of these sudden and joyous illuminations (they are called "Montessori Explosions" by the teachers) are the result of intellectual

discoveries of numerical or other relationships. They are indeed "truths that wake to perish never," which burst like new planets into their ken. Space forbids the multiplication of examples; what we wish to emphasize here is that spontaneity is one of their striking and essential features. Indeed the whole Montessori Method is based, and based successfully, on the spontaneous activity of the human intellect. Hence its value as against most other systems, for as St. Thomas says: "There are two ways of acquiring knowledge, (1) by *invention* or finding out, and (2) by *discipline* or learning. *Invention* is the higher mode and *discipline* stands second."

### Breaking Up Truth into Simpler Parts

One of the reasons why Dr. Montessori has been so extraordinarily successful in teaching by "auto-education" (or *Invention*) arises from the clearness with which she has grasped, and the originality with which she has applied, the principle which she calls "The Analysis and Separation of Difficulties." She says, in effect, that when we present a truth to be perceived by the immature mind, and we find it beyond the power of that mind to assimilate, it is no use fretting, or coercing, or persisting in presenting that truth; we must set about analyzing it into simpler elements, and then present each of these separately. This is the method of St. Thomas too: the truth must be broken up until something is reached which the mind *sees*, i.e. until it *sees* a logical connection between subject and predicate.

### The Spontaneity of the Intellect

Montessori, as we have seen, bases her method on the *spontaneous* activity of the human intellect. Here again she is in agreement with the scholastic principles. St. Thomas taught that "the natural inclination of man is towards knowing" and that "a faculty of itself does not err concerning its own proper object *under normal conditions*. The intellect has been created to know truth; and if a thing is made for a certain purpose it would be a contradiction in terms to say that it could not reach its object.

The phrase *under normal conditions* is the most important point as far as the present discussion is concerned. If the Montessori child reveals an altogether unsuspected capacity for spontaneous intellectual concentration, it cannot be because its intellect is any stronger than that of the child in the ordinary school; it must be because the conditions are more favourable, for, as St. Thomas observes, "if a faculty fails it fails *per accidens*."

### Liberty

It is interesting to note that Dr. Montessori, in her practical dealings with children, has, by a sure instinct worked out a method which is in remarkable conformity with scholastic views regarding the nature of human liberty.

The following is a summary of the main points taken from Leo XIII's Papal Encyclical *Libertas Praestantissimum*:

- (1) Only those who have the gift of reason can have true freedom.
- (2) Liberty is the faculty of choosing means fitted for the end proposed.
- (3) Every act of true choice is preceded by an act of judgment.
- (4) Because of the imperfection of man's nature a law is necessary to point out the way in conformity with reason.
- (5) One who acts through a power outside himself is a slave.

Anyone who studies what has been written on Montessori's idea of "liberty" with these points in view will realize how perfectly Montessori's practice with regard to freedom in the schoolroom is in conformity with these principles.

Other parallels could be mentioned between rational psychology and Montessori's ideas derived from her experiences with liberated children, for instance the relation which exists or should exist between imagination and reason, and also certain further details with regard to the part played by the "agent intellect" in the formation of abstract ideas from concrete objects. But enough has been written to show that both Montessori's theory and practice fit in with what is permanent in rational psychology, as well as with the latest discoveries in the new.

—E. Mortimer Standing

## DAVID HUME: FLIGHT FROM ABSTRACTION

*David Hume is considered one of the greatest modern philosophers. He is to modern philosophy what St. Thomas is to the Scholastics—the mind that resolved all difficulties. Our secular universities teach Hume's philosophy extensively. Many of these centers of higher education require*