

On Becoming Better Human Beings: Six Stories to Live By

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Abstract What are the conditions required for becoming better human beings? What are our limitations and possibilities? I understand “becoming better” as a combined improvement process bringing persons “up from” a negative condition and “up to” a positive one. Today there is a tendency to understand improvement in a one-sided way as a movement up to the mastery of cognitive skills, neglecting the negative conditions that can make these skills mis-educative. I therefore tell six stories in the Western tradition about conditions for a combined improvement process. The first three stories belong to our cultural ABC: an Aristotelian story about moral wisdom which brings people up from being enslaved by passions and up to a good life of virtues; a Biblical story about God’s word bringing listeners up from a self-centred life and up into creative work as God’s fellow workers, and a short Cave story by Plato about liberation—up from living by common illusions and up to enlightenment from what is perfectly good. The subsequent three stories interpret and actualise these basic stories in different ways: a story about moral wisdom and divine love (Thomas Aquinas), a story about individual freedom and rationality (Immanuel Kant), and a story about the love that builds us up as equal human beings (Søren Kierkegaard). These stories may directly guide us adults—and indirectly the children and youth who learn from our examples—when we struggle to become better human beings.

Keywords Upbringing · Stories · Moral improvement · Moral wisdom · Upbuilding · Unconditional love

Education as “Upbringing”

The human being [*der Mensch*] shall make himself better, cultivate himself, and, if he is evil, bring forth morality in himself. If one thinks this over carefully, one finds

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that it is very difficult. That is why education [*die Erziehung*] is the greatest and most difficult problem that can be given to the human being. For insight depends on education and education in turn depends on insight. For that reason education can only move forward slowly and step by step, and a correct concept of the manner of education [*die Erziehungsart*] can only arise if each generation transmits [*überliefert*] its experience and knowledge [*Erfahrungen und Kenntnisse*] to the next, each in turn adding something before handing it over to the next. (Kant 2007, 9:446)¹

If human beings are not good enough as they are, and if we ought to become better, then we have to ask: is it possible for us to make ourselves better? Immanuel Kant thinks that such self-improvement is the nucleus of *die Erziehung*, here translated by “education”. A direct translation of *erziehen* would be “to pull out (up)”. An English term for *Erziehung* could be “upbringing”, but then we have to bear in mind that “upbringing” in the tradition of *Allgemeine Pädagogik* (universal pedagogic) encompasses the ethical responsibility of the adult generation in *all* their contact with children and youth—at home, in schools and elsewhere (Mollenhauer 1994; Schleiermacher 1826/2000).² It is important to reclaim this broad understanding of education. A one-sided emphasis on formal schooling ignores the important parts of the child’s education which go on in informal and non-formal contexts. Upbringing concerns our life as a whole. It starts with embryogeny and birth and should continue in an active and challenging self-cultivating activity, “sich bilden” (Gadamer 2000, p. 11) or *Bildung* (Nordenbo 2002), which also has to face physical decline and death (Puolimatka and Solasaari 2006). The upbringing is difficult; indeed Kant finds it to be “the greatest and most difficult problem that can be given to the human being”. Is it possible for the human being to “make himself better”? What would that mean to us in practice, and can eventual improvements be transferred from one generation to the next?

What is “better” depends on what is “a good human being” and what is a “bad human being”. If we focus on the negative, we may ask what characterises a movement out of or up from a bad or inferior condition. If we focus on the positive, we may ask what characterises a movement towards a good condition. It is expressed in a simple way when a child no longer wants to be small; it wants to “become big”. The Americans “raise”, the Germans “erziehen”, the Norwegians “oppdrar” and the French “élève” their children. A pioneer in English educational theory, John Adams, refers to the Latin verb *educare*, which means “to bring up a child physically and mentally” (Adams 1912/1994, pp. 14–15).

The traditional words and metaphors of pedagogical practice presuppose a movement in a good direction, out of something negative or lower and into something positive or higher. Both these movements are necessary, both upbringing *from* and upbringing *to*. If we are exclusively concerned with getting out of negative conditions, we may get rid of weak and

¹ This is taken from a version of Kant’s lectures *Über Pädagogik* published by one of his former students, F. T. Rink, in 1803, the year before Kant died. We cannot be sure that the exact wording is Kant’s, but the text “is a compact (albeit not always thoroughly consistent), authentic and eminently graspable compendium of Kant’s view on education” (Louden 2000, p. 36). The German concepts that I have inserted in brackets are taken from the Prussian Academy edition of Kant’s collected works (Kant 1902-).

² For a discussion in English about the German notion of *Erziehung* and how this may be compared with the discussion of the study of education in Anglo-American context, see Gert Biesta (2011). In the Anglo-American tradition education has been studied within the context of teacher education. Here “education is mainly understood in terms of schooling and school education” (Biesta 2011, p. 180). The Continental tradition is different. Since the Reformation the word *Erziehung* has been used about all influences that may “bring about a virtuous personality” (p. 183). In his lecture on *Pädagogik* Kant talks about *die Erziehung* (using the definite article). It seems natural for us to translate this in indefinite form as “education” or “upbringing”. Is something changed in the phenomenon since the time of Kant?

bad structures and habits, but still be in a condition that is not as it should be. Earlier, instruction was understood as *erudition*, i.e. “*Ruditatis antidotum*” (Comenius 1659/1970, p. 59), the antidote or “means to expel rudeness” (Comenius 1659/1887, p. xiii). A process of “erudition” focuses on the students’ inferior present condition (rawness, roughness, rudeness), and the outcome could simply be a smooth surface of polished manners and book-learnedness. People can learn to say and do what is *comme il faut*, and yet be far away from truth and virtue, like Thomas Gradgrind and his favourite student Bitzer (Dickens 1989, pp. 5–6). Today the educational language is biased to positive conditions in the future, and education is driven by a technical rationality focused on learning outcomes. It is common to understand teaching and learning as *production*, the attainment of specified goals defined *in advance*, first of all by the market. The old meaning of education—as guidance out of a restricted and limited life towards a more free and open, better life—is almost forgotten.

Some use the production-concept of education but try to add some ethics. The danger is that the ethics and the personal responsibility may be instrumentalised as well. Teaching is understood as “a body of techniques and skills in the service of an enterprise of which teachers themselves are not the primary authors” (Hogan 2003, p. 210). Parenting is instrumentalised in the same way under the guidance of supernannies. By specifying objectives and testing procedures, it seems possible for politicians and bureaucrats to warrant effective progress. But if a person is dominated by something negative (injustice or haughtiness, for instance), an increase in the person’s efficiency to attain objectives will rather warrant regress. If the aims are bad, greater skill implies a greater evil. The effective gas chambers in the concentration camps were “built by learned engineers” (Stern Strom 2011, pp. 519–520). Even if an objective is normally good, like learning to read, it has to be considered whether the learning process in the specific context is conducive to a good life in general, or rather engenders mis-educative experiences like callousness, rigidity and carelessness (Dewey 1938/1981, pp. 11–12). And if the specified ends contradict each other, the actual outcomes may be excellent per se but arbitrary and confusing as a whole. The person might become “scatter-brained” (p. 12).

To avoid a one-sided and bureaucratic understanding of education, I propose a broad concept of education with informal and non-formal aspects included, where education is defined as upbringing—a combination of upbringing *from* and upbringing *to*. It is therefore important to recollect the stories in our culture that remind us of *both* these processes and how they might interact in our struggle to become better human beings.

The paper is organised in the following way: First I explain the selection of stories and my approach to them as stories to live by, then I present six selected stories, and in the final section I compare them from the perspective of education as upbringing and appraise their coherence and fertility.

Stories to Live By

I have selected six stories with different views on the human condition and on our possibilities of becoming better human beings. All of them endorse a broad understanding of education as a combination of upbringing *from* and upbringing *to*. The first three stories are basic: an Aristotelian story about virtues and moral wisdom as conditions for happiness, a Biblical story about salvation through receiving God’s word and doing God’s works, and a Platonic story about liberation from the illusions of the Cave and the attainment of enlightenment. These basic stories represent an ABC of our culture. The three following

stories interpret the basic stories. They belong to the Christian tradition, and acknowledge that God's grace is necessary to reach perfection. The first story is derived from Thomas Aquinas. It describes a combination of moral wisdom and divine love. The second is derived from Immanuel Kant. It underlines individual freedom and rationality as conditions for the attainment of a moral community, whereby we make ourselves receptive to a necessary higher assistance. The third is derived from Søren Kierkegaard. It tells about human "upbuilding", grounded in the love that is given without conditions as a gift to *all* human beings, even the worst. Aquinas is one of the most influential medieval philosophers, Kant is central among the modern, and Kierkegaard challenges Kant by doubting that we are capable of making ourselves receptive to God's perfect gift. In the concluding section I consider how we could live by these stories, attempting to learn something from all of them.

My basic ideal of interpretation of any tradition is to be "open to the truth claim encountered in it" (Gadamer 1989, p. 362). But how can different truth claims be interrogated? I presuppose that we cannot think in a neutral and abstract way about the human condition. It is "an illusion to suppose that there is some neutral standing ground, some locus for rationality as such, which can afford rational resources sufficient for enquiry independent of all traditions" (MacIntyre 1988, p. 367). With Socrates I acknowledge that perfect wisdom is above what human beings are able to attain (Plato 1966, *Apology* 21a–23b), and with Simone Weil I see a negative approach as possible:

It is not for man to seek, or even to believe in, God. He has only to refuse his love to everything that is not God. This refusal does not presuppose any belief. It is enough to recognize, what is obvious to any mind, that all the goods of this world, past, present or future, real or imaginary, are finite and limited and radically incapable of satisfying the desire which burns perpetually within us for an infinite and perfect good. (Weil 1968, p. 158)

A self-referential consequence of this approach would be that we also refuse to love our own doubting activity and the possible intersubjective agreements that emerge from such wisdom-loving activity. Even "what is obvious to any mind" could be wrong. This is a warning against too strong judgments, but does not make it impossible to compare and appraise the six stories. Those who are connected to Western language and culture are influenced by them, whether they know them or not. Which story or story-combination, plus eventual other stories, that a person is rooted in and lives by from the beginning, is determined by one's upbringing and the persons that one admires and has chosen to heed. Human beings are "necessarily exposed to language, which is to say to particular languages in particular places at particular times: we are marked by the signs of what has gone before" (Standish 2009, p. 41). I understand myself as belonging to a Christian tradition influenced by Luther and Aristotle, and presuppose that those who belong to other traditions will see other things in the six stories than I do. Moreover, those who belong to atheist or agnostic traditions would probably have selected other stories than the Aquinas and Kierkegaard stories. Though I agree that the process of human experience is "an essentially negative one" (Gadamer 1979, p. 316), there are experiences that we rely upon as long as they are confirmed. Knowing some persons as trustworthy, we trust also the structure of the world that is inherent in their language and the stories they tell us. John Milbank (1991, p. 330) claims that basic stories or metanarratives, which actually are myths, "cannot be refuted, but only out-narrated". I'm not sure what it is to "out-narrate" a story, but perhaps it could mean to confront each story with alternative stories, trying to glimpse the possibilities in each story as a work of art—a coherent whole. This is a big

task, and I can only make some small attempts at the end of this article. Truth claims in a myth are strengthened when they are congruent with our experiences—when they seem to be coherent, fertile, simple and containing “an illuminatory depth of insight” (Wright 2007, p. 224). We need myths: stories to live by (May 1991), but it is important that rootedness in a myth is combined with openness for alternatives (Alexander and McLaughlin 2003, pp. 361–363). My main aim is to learn something from all the stories—something that can have consequences for my practice and thereby for the example I give to children. I study education hoping to contribute to some improvements in our practice. This aim is similar to what Aristotle aim for in his ethics: “Our present inquiry does not aim, as our others do, at study [*theoria*]; for the purpose of our examination is not to know what virtue is, but to become good, since otherwise the inquiry would be of no benefit to us” (Aristotle 1985, 1103b26). Applied to my situation, the point is not to know what a better human being is, but to become better. This demands a truth-seeking active condition [*hexis*] “involving reason, concerned with action about what is good or bad for a human being” (1140b5). In this truth-seeking I apply philosophical arguments, but I am also open to experiences from studies within arts, philology, theology, rhetoric, history of ideas and history of concepts.

Six Stories

The Cave Story

Plato portrays human beings as sitting in a Cave where they are unfree and live by illusions. But there is an upper enlightened world of freedom and truth. As the sun gives light, which we depend on in order to be able to use our ability to see, so the good gives all things their truth, which we depend on in order to be able to use our ability to know. As light and vision are sun-like but not the sun itself, so truth and knowledge are good-like but not the good itself. As the sun gives and sustains life, so the good gives all known things their existence and their being, “though the good is not being but something far surpassing being in rank and power” (Plato 2000, 508a–509c). Progress towards the divine, the good, makes a real change in both what we see and who we are. The transition is painful and has to be made gradually; and when the reality of the beautiful, true and good is seen at last, it is tempting to stay in the upper world, “in the clear air above” (520d). But that would not be just (520e). Enlightened in the demands of justice and prepared to contribute to the wellbeing of “the city as a whole” (519e), the enlightened follow the vocation to go down again into the Cave and help the fellow-prisoners.

The story visualises a liberating and enlightening upbringing. The conditions for improvement are represented as a gradual and difficult and personal learning process. Learning starts in the Cave with the dim light that is already reflected in our souls. This learning needs to be redirected and refined by the perfect source of light. However, one is confused and handicapped both when going from darkness to light and on the return from light to darkness. It feels much easier and safer to stay with the illusions. Liberation and enlightenment will initially be experienced as unpleasant and will therefore evoke resistance. And those who challenge the common illusions may even be persecuted and killed (517a). The Cave story gives a strong metaphor of learning as a personal process—a process of “*askesis* ... not as asceticism, but as the practice of spiritual exercises”. It is a process aiming at a complete turning of the person, “a transformation of our vision of the world and ... a metamorphosis of our personality” (Hadot 1995, p. 83). This presupposes a

good instructor, tutor or leader, (Plato 2000, 515c–d and 519c), a person who has already been liberated and enlightened, a person who is able and willing to help others.

The Aristotelian Story

Aristotle tells us in the *Nicomachean ethics* (NE) that we are all drawn towards (“up to”) what we perceive as pleasant and beautiful. The pleasant and the fine “motivate everything everyone does” (Aristotle 2002, NE 1110b12 Rowe). This compulsion is not something forced upon us from the outside without our contribution. We all seek happiness, but not in the same things. Ordinary people identify happiness “with one of the obvious things that anyone would recognize, like pleasure or wealth or honour” (1095a23), and “most people are ... not even having a conception of the fine and the truly pleasant, since they have had no taste of it” (1179b11–15). We voluntarily seek the pleasant and beautiful, but are we also responsible for *what* we perceive as pleasant and beautiful or as aversive and ugly things to do? We ourselves are the origin of our actions, as we are of our children (1113b19). The children are not the origin of themselves. Therefore “we need to have had the appropriate upbringing—right from early youth, as Plato says—to make us find enjoyment or pain in the right things; for this is the correct education (*he orthe paideia*)” (Aristotle 1985, 1104b Irwin). His hope is that we can learn virtue from *hoi phronimoi*—the best persons in the tradition we belong to—become good models ourselves able to give wise counsels, establish good laws and reinforce them wisely.

If the adults close to a child set bad examples, the child has got a serious handicap. The basic rational action of a child is to choose authorities: choose good persons to admire, emulate, listen to and obey more than others. Within the given limitations, the children will probably prefer persons with some degree of moral virtue, wisdom (*phronesis*) and love. Children experience who are doing well towards themselves and others, and who are not. From the beginning they experience how they are being “fed, warmed, and washed” (Burnaby 1938, p. 302), how adults deal with their anger, and how adults distribute goods between themselves and others around them. In play the children may reproduce these experiences. Both good actions and bad actions we do voluntarily. Thereby we also become responsible for our own character. We may wish to do good things, but it may not help us if we have a long story of choosing wrongly and of doing bad things, and thereby have attained a weak or bad character. It is impossible for a man “to retrieve a stone after it has left his hand, but ... it depended on him that it was thrown” (NE 1114a18 Rowe). Knowledge of general precepts (ethical theory) does not help us if our passions make us blind to the connection between the abstract precepts and the unique situation here and now, which demands action. Therefore Aristotle is sceptical as to the possibility of moral progress through mere verbal teaching. Our character does not become good merely by studying ethics. Only those who already are experienced and good may benefit from such studies (1095a3–8 and 1179b5–10). “One’s sight of the beautiful and pleasant is made clear by virtue, and clouded by its absence” (Sachs 2002, p. 116, note 172). The basic problem of freedom is how to avoid being blinded and enslaved by our passions. Curzer (2002) uses Aristotle’s descriptions of four groups of imperfect characters (NE 1179b7–16 and 1145b8–13), and proposes a possible progress for adults, moving through these character types in order to achieve full virtue. The many (*hoi polloi*) need external punishment to avoid the vicious. A modern example: speed cameras and fines seem to be necessary to reduce dangerous driving. The generous-minded or civilized (*eleutherioi*) have internalized the punishment and are feeling shame by actual or possible vicious actions. Thereby they are open to learn by themselves, for instance what safe driving implies. The incontinent

(*acratai*) know what is virtuous to do, but need support to do it in the actual situation, where their passions sometimes take command. The continent or self-controlled (*enkratai*) know what is virtuous and are always able to do it in practice, but they have to struggle with their emotions. Finally the virtuous (*aretai*), those who have all the virtues, do the good out of their character. Their thinking and emotions play together. They find some pleasure in doing virtuous actions, even when the action itself may be experienced as painful. A virtuous person therefore “spontaneously desires and seeks what is in accordance with the truly good life that he is trying to lead” (Porter 1990, p. 103). The upbringing in this story, as in the Cave story, presupposes good leaders who give righteous laws—leaders who are wise exemplars to emulate.

The Biblical Story

starts with the condition prior to human misery. On the first page of the Bible it is told that God creates everything from nothing; and all is good, time and change included! (Bouwisma 1976, p. 82) All human beings are created in the image of God. Therefore obedience to God is not something externally imposed on mankind. God’s image (*Bild*) can in this story be seen as the limit of what in the mystical tradition has been called human *Bildung* (Gadamer 1979, p. 11). Within this limit the human being is “a free agent and not a mechanical instrument”; s/he is called to be “a fellow worker with God” (Burnaby 1938, p. 265). The actual unfree situation is the result of a revolt against God. Humans have wanted to transcend the limit, have wanted to be gods themselves; attempting to be above change they have started to fear experience and change (Bouwisma 1976, p. 84). Humans have become self-centred and egoistic, bound to seek their own pride independent of God. All persons, even the best, are subject to this condition. The enemy in moral life is “the fat relentless ego” (Iris Murdoch, quoted in Meilaender 1984, p. 58). In the Aristotelian story the children ought to emulate virtuous adults. In the Biblical story the best adult persons are emulating the children, who “are given to us as a mirror, in which we may behold modesty, courteousness, benignity, harmony” (Comenius 2009, p. 12). Children have had the least time to study and imitate adult cunning, hypocrisy, hatred and war.

Progress, in this story, is dependent on God. God chooses a people descending from Abraham, leads the selected people out of slavery and guides them through the wilderness towards the Promised Land; as an example to follow for *all* people. The followers are always tempted to regress to greater security and wellbeing. The enlightening and correcting truth is God’s word, revealed by God’s messengers. God’s word is enlightening and therefore challenging. When Moses came down from Sinai, his face was shining with a light that was too strong for the people (Exodus 34:29–30). However, listening to God’s word and the story of God’s liberation of the people is necessary for the following generations. Thereby they “make the story of the Bible their story” (George Lindbeck, quoted in Wells 1998, p. 55), and understand their own life story as a participation in a great narrative, which starts with creation and ends with the final judgement and the hope of a new heaven and a new earth. The task is to identify and fulfil one’s own part in the common story. This demands time for listening and praying, worship and sacraments. In this time the moral imagination is formed (Wells 1998, p. 122). “The task of human creative differentiation is to be charitable, and to give in ‘art’ (all human action) endlessly new allegorical depictions of charity” (Milbank 1991, pp. 425–426). In this story rationality is not the main condition of progress, as it is in the previous ones. God’s people include “mentally handicapped, infants and the mentally ill” (Wells 1998, p. 128). God’s people live in secular time and space, but “the new time”, the time they hope for, is

constantly breaking in, giving a perspective on their actions that is different from ordinary perspectives (pp. 150–162). In this new time there is peace, which helps in the resistance against the temptation to rest in common human illusions. All things are good insofar as they exist, but something may become evil “in terms of its failure to be related to God, to infinite peace, and to other finite realities with which it should be connected to form a pattern of true desire” (Milbank 1991, p. 432). This story, with the prophetic Word of God as the final authority concerning the conditions for improvement, obviously creates tensions with the two previous stories. It is therefore a demanding task to combine these stories!

The Aquinas Story

Thomas Aquinas has given a Christian interpretation of the Biblical story, integrating the Aristotelian story into it. According to Thomas, “every creature is oriented toward an end proportionate to its own determinate potentialities” (Porter 1990, p. 64). Human beings are determined to have full freedom as rational beings, and we express ourselves in our acts. Single actions are like “individual tones within the larger melody of one’s life” (Schockenhoff 2002, p. 245), and thus “the final end is present in everything one does” (p. 244). Therefore it “is necessary that all things which a person desires, he desires on account of a final end”³ (Porter 1990, p. 72). The “free human being is one who has made the roles that she occupies into a part of herself by her conscious choice to accept them, and who takes responsibility for the direction of her own life by fitting those roles together into an orderly life-plan that is the goal of her life” (p. 82). The cardinal virtues (temperance, courage and justice—coordinated by moral wisdom) provide a “foundation for” this unification of the personality (p. 167). Through moral wisdom (*phronesis*) I grasp “what the good life requires” of me, both as a general sketch and in each particular case (p. 163). However, this unification “will inevitably be partial and vulnerable to tensions and regrets” (p. 169). The final end, perfect happiness, is above human capacity. In other words: the ultimate aim depends on God’s grace alone. “The naturally just individual who lacks grace is objectively as far from salvation ... as the worst sinners” (p. 66). The listening to and the living in the message of the prophets and apostles open the possibility for the Holy Spirit to infuse faith, hope and charity (*agape*) into human hearts, which creates a determination to stay in relation with Jesus Christ, the new Adam. Baptism represents the drowning (annihilation) of the false human pride. The “death” of the self-centred existence is necessary, before the creation out of nothing (*ex nihil*) of the new human being. *Agape* (unconditional love) completes the unification of the person, and adds something to moral life that the cardinal virtues in themselves do not attain: “a new motivation for moral behavior”, “inner harmony” and “patience” (pp. 66–67).

The infusion of faith, hope and charity is caused in the human being “without any action on our part, but not without our consent” (Aquinas 1947, I–II 55,4 ad 6 Benziger). Justifying grace is infused into the human being by the Holy Spirit. This happens over time and the Spirit becomes part of one’s character. Therefore, Nicholas Healy says, every action is really *my* action, also when “God acts immanently in my act” (Healy 2003, p. 86). In Christ therefore, the people become responsible for their actions and their character or *habitus*, the way they hold themselves.

³ necesse est quod omnia quae homo appetit appetat propter ultimum finem. (Aquinas 2005, I–II 1,6 co.).

The Kant Story

Kant's essay about liberation through enlightenment (1784) maintains like the previous stories that the unfree condition of the human beings is "self-incurred". But it tells us that this is caused by "laziness and cowardice" (Kant 1996, 8:35). Therefore it seems possible for us to make our minds up, become free from the immature following of authorities and traditions, and make ourselves better. "People gradually work their way out of barbarism [*Rohigkeit*] of their own accord if only one [the government] does not intentionally contrive to keep them in it" (8:41). Progress happens when the individual mobilises the courage to use his or her own reason. "*Sapere aude!*" (8:35), dare to think! How, one may ask, can Kant's disciples be thinking independently when they follow this imperative?

All the three critiques that Kant wrote during the 1780s orbit around the "I": What can *I* know? What ought to determine *my* will? How can *I* judge without concepts? The first critique can be seen as a program for seeking truth independent of moral and political concerns, the second as a program for seeking the right thing to do independent of tradition, and the third as a program for appreciating beautiful form independent of both moral concerns and tradition. The third critique is the "keystone", which makes the bridge between epistemology and moral philosophy. Confidence in the "I" is grounded in our experience of the beautiful forms of nature. "I do assert that to take an *immediate interest* in the beauty of *nature* ... is always a mark of a good soul" (Kant 2000, § 42, 5:298–99). One does not find ends in themselves in nature, but one finds beauty. One considers the beautiful shape of a bird or a butterfly and is pleased by its sheer existence, without having any advantage of it. Such interest in the beautiful nature gives the "I" a hint that it is "a good soul"; and a good "I" can give itself (*auto*) the laws (*nomoi*) to follow. This story seems to tell that human beings confidently can use their own reason and autonomously determine criteria for what is true to think and what is right to do. It seems that the conditions for becoming better are in our own hands.

Only if this "I" were perfect, however, could it be trusted absolutely. A work of Kant from 1793 to 1794, *Religion within the limits of mere reason*, (written after the critiques) really challenges the common Enlightenment views of human beings. It starts with a comprehensive discussion of the problem of evil. Kant maintains that all human beings have a propensity to evil: "according to the cognition we have of the human being through experience, he cannot be judged otherwise, in other words, we may presuppose evil as subjectively necessary in every human being, even the best" (Kant 1998, 6:32). We ought to and can make ourselves better in a limited way, "even if what we can do is of itself insufficient and, by virtue of it, we only make ourselves receptive to a higher assistance inscrutable to us" (6:45). The radicality of the problem of evil requires more than a gradual reform. Reason is "conscious of its impotence to satisfy its moral needs", and we need concepts of God and grace (6:52). We can become new human beings "only through a kind of rebirth, as it were a new creation (John, 3:5; compare with Genesis 1:2) and a change of heart" (6:47). Though Kant here refers to the Bible, and unexpectedly talks about "rebirth" and "change of heart", this story of human improvement seems to trusts human reason and education. "Kant believes that there is a kind of education that can (somehow) cut through natural causes and temporal circumstances and "get to the bottom"—that is, to the agent's manner of thinking and moral character" (Louden 2000, p. 47).

In the lectures on *Pädagogik*, Kant is concerned with the difficulties of improvement. To overcome them it is necessary that "each generation transmits [*überliefert*] its experience and knowledge [*Erfahrungen und Kenntnisse*] to the next, each in turn adding something before handing it over to the next" (Kant 2007, 9:446). In other words: in order

to learn to think for oneself, one has to start within the tradition one already belongs to. Children should have freedom, but the freedom has to be limited by what is dangerous to them and what may reduce the freedom of others. This actualises one of the greatest problems in the upbringing: How can “submission under lawful constraint [*Zwang*]” be united with freedom? “How do I cultivate freedom under [*bei*] constraint?” (Kant 2007, 9:453). A definite kind of coercion or constraint is a necessary condition for freedom: In order to become independent the young child has to learn that it is difficult to get what you need, that sometimes you do not have what you need, and that acquiring it depends on yourself. The child “must feel early the inevitable resistance of society”, and at the same time be encouraged “to make good use of his freedom” (9:453). Moral improvement takes time, regress is always possible and imperfect educators cannot produce perfect children: “individual human beings, no matter what degree of formation they are able to bring to their pupils, cannot make it happen that they reach their vocation [to be perfect]. Not individual human beings, but rather the human species, shall get there” (9:445). Only gradually there may be some improvements from generation to generation. Education should “create adults who can and do act from duty”: autonomous individuals who set ends for themselves and “pursue these ends insofar as they remain consistent with others’ ends”. Such persons will “work individually and collectively to bring about the ethical community”, which is “the highest good” (Moran 2009, p. 477, 482). And to warrant continuous progress, avoiding that one generation is bringing down what the former has brought up, “The mechanism in the art of education must be transformed into science [*Wissenschaft*]” (Kant 2007, 9:447), a concept which probably includes the humanities, because the transformation he hopes for is dependent not only on experimentation, but on “a correct concept of the manner of education [*die Erziehungsart*]” (9:446).⁴

The Kierkegaard Story

Søren Kierkegaard did not search for abstract and scientific truth, but for truth that is “concerned” (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 233), truth that builds us up as human beings (Kierkegaard 1987, Part II, p. 354; 1992, Vol. I, pp. 252–253). Like Aristotle and Aquinas, he underlines the importance of the positive choices that make it possible for the person to feel and act in a good way. To live in truth is an existence of “proper pathos” (Roberts 1998, p. 179). What we choose to love with all our soul becomes “engraved” (*charattein*) in us, it determines the character that we *are*. This is Kierkegaard’s challenge: I ought to face myself with all the negative possibilities that already are there, and choose with passion who I ought to be. If I forget how this self really is, the result will be false pride, as when persons who look upon themselves as “educated” or “liberated” or “saved”, think that they are better than other people (Grøn 1994, pp. 23–24). In *Works of love*, Kierkegaard defines what is “upbuilding” by reference to 1. Cor. 8:1—“Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up”. What can be upbuilding is *not* “The things of the world, however

⁴ González (2011) has given an account of Kant’s philosophy of education, describing its tension between an imperfect education of the individual and the hope of perfection of the human species. Kant’s hope for the human species is grounded in his belief in a top down policy of “the sovereign power” at a cosmopolitan and national level (González 2011, pp. 441 and 447), and in the development of *Pädagogik* to become a *Wissenschaft* (Kant 2007, 9:447), “a science to be improved through experimentation, whose results should be accumulated and passed on from one generation to another” (González 2011, p. 449). She does not question if Kant’s concept of *Wissenschaft* is adequately understood by today’s English concepts of science and experiment, and she does not question the realism of attaining a perfection of the human species through improvements in policy and theory of education.

glorious they are and however acclaimed”. It is *love* that builds up: even “the most insignificant word, the slightest action with love or in love is upbuilding ... Yet knowledge and the communication of knowledge can indeed also be upbuilding, but if they are, then it is because love is present” (Kierkegaard 1995, pp. 214–215). The love that builds up is never boastful and selfish; it is patient and kind and it is unconditional: love is a readiness to do well towards anyone close to you who needs your help; even those who do not deserve attention, even those who you normally do not see as “loveable”. In a citation from *Søren Kierkegaard’s Papirer*, Vol. VIII 2 B, p. 226, Kbh. 1918, all education that creates differences between people is called “miseducation”:

With the upbuilding, one can be educated [*dannes*] without any other form of education; all other education without the upbuilding is, eternally understood, miseducation [*Misdannelse*]. For the upbuilding—yes, as little as love which always requires two will create strife, and as little as the oceans of the world can be divided—as little will the upbuilding strengthen a difference between man and man. But like love, upbuilding, if possible, will unite those, who are most different from each other, in the essential truth. (Translated in Søltoft 2000, p. 22)

Kierkegaard understands the human self as an imperfect and temporal being standing before the perfect and eternal. The upbuilding of the soul proceeds in three stages: 1. the stage of being possessed 2. the stage of impatience and doubt, and 3. the stage of patience in the struggle with oneself.

1. *Being possessed*. When “God’s house is right next to his father’s residence, and it is entirely natural for him to be there” (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 242), the child will tend to experience itself as God’s child. It is legitimately possessed by God—immediately connected to the eternal. Growing older, the human soul desires the world and its pleasures—the temporal and imperfect. Striving to possess the world, the soul becomes possessed by it. And because the temporal contradicts the eternal, which is there from the beginning, the soul becomes “the contradiction of the temporal and the eternal” (Kierkegaard 1990, pp. 163–164).
2. *Impatience and doubt*. This self-contradicting soul finds itself in a situation of uncertainty, anxiety and doubt. The outcome may be an impatient and futile search for pleasure or control; it may also be an impatient movement of thinking to ever new positions—a movement which never brings truth. False doubt is the doubt that doubts everything except the doubt itself (p. 137).
3. *Patience in the struggle with oneself*. Perfection of the soul demands patience in the struggle with oneself. It is terrible to admit that one does not manage one’s own life, but it is necessary for improvement. This process demands more than the overcoming of laziness and cowardice. The basic condition for improvement is not in one’s own hands, but is a gift of God. “Just as knowing oneself in one’s own nothingness is the condition for knowing God, so knowing God is the condition for the sanctification of a human being by God’s assistance” (p. 325). The soul

belongs to the world as [an] illegitimate possession, it belongs to God as [a] legitimate possession, it belongs to himself [the human being] as [a] possession, that is as the possession, which is to be gained. Therefore he gains, if he really gains, *his soul [back] from the world, [as a gift] of God, through himself* (Kierkegaard 1962, p. 151, my transl.; 1990, p. 167).

Gaining one's soul "through" oneself (*ved sig selv*) means that it is a necessary condition to struggle with oneself. But the soul does not belong to the human being as an actual possession, only as a potential possession. The actual possession is dependent on the outcome of the struggle. The first struggle is a struggle against being conquered by and possessed by the external, surrounding world—the temporal. The soul has to be gained back "from the world" (*fra Verden*). The second struggle is an internal struggle with oneself against inward temptations, especially the temptation of false pride, that occurs when the person "himself wants to be something" (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 226), instead of gaining everything as a gift "of God" (*af Gud*). Even the condition for receiving the gifts is a gift (Wivestad 2011).

The lifelong and patient struggle with oneself takes place in "the school" of the love commandment (Kierkegaard 1995, p. 376), a school for practice in unconditional love, *agape*. In ordinary human relationships "preferential love is the middle term" (p. 58). We tend to recognise the particularities of different persons and to love those who, in some way or other, we find lovable. *Agape* is possible, only because "in love for the neighbor, God is the middle term. Love God above all else; then you also love the neighbor" (p. 58), Kierkegaard says. If *all* human beings are bearers of God's image, this glorious mark renders *all* people lovable—even the most miserable and troublesome, even those who hate and use violence. But their "inner glory" will be "hidden from ordinary sight". Awareness of the inner glory of the other requires practice in switching off our natural tendency to focus on dissimilarities among persons (Quinn 1998, pp. 363–365). Therefore patience is necessary for personal and communal upbuilding in love.

Conditions for Improvement: Six Stories to Live By

All the six stories contribute to the understanding of upbringing as a combined process of upbringing *from* and upbringing *to*. We should be brought up *from* an unfree situation in the Cave where we live by illusions—to enlightenment by truth from the divine and perfect good; *from* bad habits, irrational passions and incontinence—to choices of actions which strengthen the active conditions for finding "enjoyment or pain in the right things" (Aristotle); *from* a lazy and spineless yield to what others require, and a common propensity to evil (doing contrary to the moral law)—to courageous, autonomous thinking and a will to moral improvements, by which we "make ourselves receptive to a higher assistance" (Kant).

These three stories represent robust alternatives to the common simplistic story of progress through the attainment of specified educational outcomes, a story which completely ignores to consider the upbringing *from* the negative situation. Education understood one-sidedly as the production of knowledge, skills and competencies that are appreciated by the market, is out of tune with the tradition of *paideia* and *Bildung*. If virtues, moral wisdom and independent thinking are seen as general competencies to be produced and tested, these good aims will be corrupted by hidden bad habits, irrational passions and knavery. The Cave story tells that education as upbringing *from* is a difficult, unpleasant and even dangerous venture, and we have to acknowledge the risk of failure. The core of upbringing depends on a situation where "a free being is approaching another free being in a challenging way" (Bolnnow 1959, p. 134, my transl.), a venture where the freedom implies that the outcomes should not be calculated on beforehand. A concept of education dominated by the production metaphor, with inherent ideals of controlling the

process, destroys the child's *free* choice when they emulate good adults and follow enlightened moral maxims.

The Biblical story also insists on human freedom, but here progress, for the people as well as the person, is seen as dependent on God. Patiently waiting for the Lord, the Psalmist experienced that "He brought me up also out of an horrible pit" (Psalm 40:2, King James). In the Biblical story, and in the stories derived from Aquinas and Kierkegaard, the negative situation is understood with other presuppositions than the three stories mentioned in the previous paragraph. We should be brought up *from* a situation where we falsely see ourselves as above change and in control of our future, and where we therefore try to hide our failings—to a situation where we are enlightened by the prophetic word and see ourselves as imperfect fellow workers in God's creative work; *from* a self-centred life where we are possessed by our strivings for mastery and by false pride—to a situation where we listen to the apostolic teaching, acknowledge that our life is dependent on God, let God improve our character, receive God's gift of unconditional love and share this love with all who need our help, without conditions. These stories represent radical alternatives to an understanding of people and education as resources for economic growth.

In today's "marketization" of education the first questions are: how can I help my child to make a career, how can my children, my school, my district, my country become a winner in the competition for power, prestige and prosperity? The general aims of school education in Norway state that education should be based on fundamental values in the Christian and humanist heritage. One of the values mentioned is "næstekjærlighet", which can be translated as "charity", "neighbour-love" or "unconditional love". In principle one could therefore expect the students to be brought up *to* unconditional love. But there is no combination here with upbringing *from* a self-centred life. The teaching and evaluation systems are both one-sidedly oriented towards specific competencies by which the children and youth "can master their lives" (Opplæringsloven 2008, § 1–1). The "No Child Left Behind" thinking in the US is based on preferential love. It is in fact only the child who belongs to one's own group who is cared for, and a "care" that expects all to attain the same outcomes, drives many children away from that group. When people are ranked according to learning outcomes, such ranking tempts the successful to look down on those who are less successful and the unsuccessful to envy the successful. What is called education can thereby strengthen the differences between us, and in reality be a miseducation in arrogance, self-absorption, unkindness, envy and discord.

Living by the Biblical, Aquinas and Kierkegaard stories is a real challenge for an educator. In the encounter with a person who is lazy, quarrelsome, lying to or even attacking the educator, it may be very difficult to see that this particular person has a hidden "inner glory", a love that can be presupposed and elicited by compassion and kindness. Differences between people are easily observed. It is, however, with reference to the Biblical story about the inner glory of *all* human beings that it can be meaningful to suppose that "all men are created equal".

All the stories give sketches of a good life that is the same for all, however differently realised by individuals. This makes it possible to develop meaningful *common* principles for politics, ethics and education, a task that is urgent in the confrontation with today's individualism, where individual choices—even clearly irrational choices—are accepted as the final grounding of actions. We need common "stars" for navigation in life, sketches of what the human being and life in general ought to be. Therefore adults who have responsibility for children should be open to learn from all these six stories (and other stories as well). My critical appraisal of them (as they have been told here) will probably be disappointing for those who live by other stories or story-combinations than me. I try to

interrogate each story according to congruence with my experiences, what I see as the story's fertility when I try to live by it and eventual problems that I see with its coherence.

It is important that the Cave story sees personal improvement and clear thinking together. Living by this story may challenge educators to engage in a conversion of the whole person, aiming at what is perfectly true and good both for the person and for the citizens. However, the decisive steps of progress are determined by an intellectual elite of custodians who act as tutors, and it is their abstract thinking and knowledge which is leading both the personal and political improvement. This story may be dangerous if educators make themselves believe that they have attained perfect knowledge, and if they act in authoritarian ways to prevent reasonable opposition. It is well documented that this has been a problem through the whole story of Western education, where political leaders, church leaders and business leaders and their subordinated teachers have become authoritarian custodians (Hogan 1995). The Cave story neither tells why people became prisoners in the first place nor how one prisoner could get loose from the chains for the first time to become a liberator and tutor of the others. One might therefore suspect that no one, the elite group of custodians included, is really free from the illusions of the Cave.

The Aristotelian story opposes the Cave story. According to Aristotle, it is impossible to attain perfect knowledge in ethics and politics. Moreover, attaining theoretical knowledge of what is good in general will not help us when we are blinded by our passions in unique situations. We learn moral virtue primarily through emulating good models and we learn moral wisdom by considering those who we credit with it. Important also are our own experiences—supplied by poetic experiences (Aubenque 1963/1986, Third part: “La source tragique”). Living by this story, adults are challenged to improve themselves in order to become better models for their children. However, this story also seems to promote the establishment of an elite. According to Aristotle, “the many” seek the wrong things and are content with a life which does not realise the human good. The story does not tell *why* so many emulate vices, and seems to accept that most people must be governed by the elite.

The Biblical story gives a rich documentation of human life (truth, love and struggle for freedom) in confrontation with death (lies, unconcern and oppression). Living by this story can give adults an inner peace necessary for resisting irrational pressures in “the Cave”, for taking time to be with the children and for living a joyful life in the light of love and the shadow of death. The story presupposes that it is possible to differentiate between God's Word and human words. The history of interpretation shows that this is not easy.

The Aquinas story combines systematic philosophical clarity with rich references to the philosophical tradition, the Bible and the “fathers” of the Christian church. Living by this story, one is challenged to do acts commanded by a God-inspired unconditional love, a love which applies all the virtues: moral wisdom (judging the circumstances) and justice included (Wivestad 2008, pp. 315–317). The story is comprehensive and ordered, but actualises a question that concerns the Biblical and the Kierkegaard stories as well. Can we trust the witness of the prophets and the apostles?

Kant was brought up in an authoritarian school dominated by servility and with little room for critical questions (Løvlie 2012, pp. 115–116; Palmquist 2009, p. xlvii). The Kant story underlines the need for sincere choices and self-determination. Living by this story, educators should lead the children to use their freedom—only restricted by necessary constraints. Aristotle and Aquinas place the formation of moral character through good examples of the best traditions in the culture *before* the systematic development of abstract moral thinking. In the Kant story thinking has a leading position in principle, but in practical upbringing it acknowledges tradition and authority. The difference between these

stories should therefore not be overemphasised. Character formation is a condition for ethical thinking in all these stories.

The foundation of the Kant story seems to be a confidence in the self, “the I”, grounded in our interest for the beautiful nature. Can we trust this grounding? With Simone Weil we could ask: Did Kant love the self and its autonomy more than God? Can the rational self on its own terms define God and God’s grace, and make itself receptive to God’s assistance? Human efforts no doubt may help us to become better human beings. However, if one put *absolute* trust in human efforts, there is a danger of idolisation of human merits and institutions—in politics, business, arts, research and church.

The Kierkegaard story addresses, with greater intensity than the Kant story, *why* human beings started to choose the wrong things and to live in bondage and untruth. This opens for a radical approach to improvement. Living by this story, educators will admit that even the condition for receiving God’s gifts is a gift of God. When they let themselves be built up on the foundation of love and in love, they give God’s perfect gifts to the children, not as masters but as servants—forgetting themselves. In this story the differences in mastery between people does not result in ranking. The unique qualities of each person are seen as gifts that one has been given in order to share them with the community. An education which builds us up in love involves both a struggle against being possessed by our surroundings and a patient struggle with ourselves against false pride. It is attractive to sing “All you need is love”⁵—and we should give love a chance, but it is not easy. A cumulative transfer of improvements through the generations is contrary to our experiences so far and probably not possible. However, if we live “in truth”, the children will get acquainted with the story we live by in an informal and experiential way. If we live earnestly, passionately and patiently in the struggle with ourselves, we give the next generation a good example to follow, even when we fail.

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⁵ This was the message of the Beatles on the 25th of June 1967, in the first TV program sent around the whole world by satellite. As they understand “love”—“it’s easy”.

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