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BETWEEN NEUROEDUCATION AND THE HUMANITIES

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Abstract

Education seems to have been getting from bad to worse, here and elsewhere, and educators everywhere have been struggling to find solutions to improve this situation. This paper is looking at two distinct, opposite trends: the kind of solution proposed by the Anglo-American world (neuroeducation, an atomistic viewpoint), and the one proposed by Europe (returning to classical values). While both are concerned about the future, the former narrows the perspective by looking even deeper into neuroscience and brain physiology, while the latter looks to the past. A better answer would be a holistic type of education, that integrates both perspectives into one.

Keywords: *neuroeducation; teaching; coaching; brain; the humanities; meta-crisis; atomistic; holistic.*

1. NEUROEDUCATION

In his editorial for the journal *Educational Leadership* issued in December, 1970, Arthur Wright Combs, an American psychologist and educator, wrote: "In the midst of our current preoccupation with objective, mechanistic, cognitive, computerized education, it is good to know there are some who are deeply concerned with the human questions. The present curriculum scene is a depressing one for the humanist". Excessive focus on providing information "has dehumanized our schools, alienated our youth, and produced a system irrelevant for most students". Teachers are the ones to blame: "Teachers have

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long been expert in providing information. This is the thing we know how to do best. With modern technology we are now able to provide information faster and more furiously than ever before", but "our major failures do not arise from lack of information /.../ they come from /.../ our inability to help students discover the personal meaning of the information we so extravagantly provide them". But, "We know very little about the dynamics of helping learners discover personal meaning. We have, therefore, concentrated our efforts at educational reform on the things we already know how to do. As a consequence, the principle of overkill has come to education and we are in danger of drowning in a sea of information" (Combs 235-36).

At the same time, noticing that successful people have high self-esteem, American educational psychologists attempted to uphold a child-glorifying model of education, rooted in humanistic psychology and influenced by theorists such as Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow. The belief was that building self-esteem from an early age through constant praise would generate motivation and academic success. Yet longitudinal observation and research have shown that this approach often backfired. While children's self-esteem increased superficially and narcissism took the stage, their resilience, perseverance, and capacity for critical reflection suffered. Alfie Kohn argued that excessive praise created generations of entitled, fragile students who feared failure and avoided challenge, while Carol Dweck demonstrated that praising innate ability rather than effort fosters a fixed mindset that inhibits growth. Jean Twenge similarly notes that this approach contributed to increased anxiety, depression, and fragility among younger generations. So that, eventually, psychologists admitted to having reversed the relationship: high self-esteem is a consequence of hard work and great achievements, not the other way round. Nurturing self-esteem in isolation cannot replace the holistic development of character, intellect, and moral agency; well directed emotional support must accompany real challenge and responsibility, not replace it.

Anyway, back in 1970, Combs was mentioning a new concept and hope – *sensitivity education*, a student-centred approach based on empathy and inclusion. But things did not improve in the meantime, and, with the advent of the internet and social media, they actually seem to be getting worse than ever (a topic I will come back to presently). Today, in Europe this time, renewed hope is perceived for the concept of *neuroeducation*, in which specialized knowledge is conveyed in

a field that combines psychology, neuroscience, and education. Many believe this represents the most relevant level of analysis for solving current problems in education. But we should look again at U.S.A. The concept is far from new out there, so we should try to learn from their mistakes. Harvard trained neuroanatomist Jill Bolte Taylor makes some very interesting observations in her 2021 volume, *Whole Brain Living*. After the late 1970's split-brain surgeries captivated public attention with their astonishing findings about hemispheric specialization, "all sorts of 'right-brain' and 'left-brain'-based community programs popped up. Many schools even got into the game and established curricula that would help stimulate one or both of the hemispheres. The stereotypes of left-brain and right-brain people entered the mainstream, with the left-brainers appearing to be more organized, punctual, and good with details while the right-brainers thrived in creativity, innovation, and athletics" (Taylor 24) The problem arose when, instead of trying to create well-rounded minds, parents encouraged their children to excel in what they were already good at, so that, Taylor goes on, "over the last 40 years we have skewed our abilities toward the two extremes", and this spread throughout the whole society and its cultural life: "…you don't have to look far to recognize how marketers have mastered their advertising strategies to target our right- or left-brain preferences. Even our computer systems fit the bill: Apple products are viewed as right-brain creative, while anything Windows based screams left-brain analytical" (Taylor 24).

In this context, my attention has been drawn to *Neurolanguage Coaching*, a 127-page self-published volume authored by British teacher Rachel Paling, in 2017. She is convinced that understanding how the brain works and informing our students about it could be "key to more effective and efficient learning processes" (Paling xiii), since "The possibility to now have insights into brain states, genetic states and hormonal states, as well as brain structure and activity, will really enable us to ascertain the best way of delivering and learning". She, too, sees the root of the problem in us, teachers, and advocates improving ourselves: "…once we teachers, trainers, coaches are able to fully understand and embrace the findings that modern neuroscience is enlightening us with – and not only understand and embrace but actually put this knowledge into practice daily with all our learners and students – we then create brain-friendly

education. /.../ Ultimately, the greatest transformation is us as neuroeducators" (Paling 29).

Paling's book is about teaching English, either as a foreign language, or as specialized vocabulary. The term neurolanguage coaching is a trademark owned by Paling herself, but the phrase language coaching has been in use since the 2000s, especially in connection to the private teaching of business English. Briefly put, the new formula evidently draws from sports terminology and attitudes: the teacher is a coach, the student is a coachee, the two are equal, and the coach is supposed to animate, inspire, and motivate the coachee. The novelty of this approach would be twofold: 1. a differentiation between teaching and coaching, and 2. between the traditional way of conveying linguistic information and the neuroscience-based process. Coaching someone (health-wise, career-wise, spiritually-wise and so on) means "helping them to learn, rather than teaching them" (Paling 58): an ongoing conversation needs to take place between the two, online, on the phone or face-to-face, in which goals (short-term or long-term) are established, personal motivations are discovered, realistic targets and deadlines are set. Language coaching is the kind that "transports elements and principles from the coaching world /.../ into the language learning process", the main focus falling on learning, improving or developing a target language. *Neurolanguage Coaching* was defined, by the author, in 2012: "... the efficient and fast transfer of language knowledge with sustainable effects from the Language Coach to the Language Coachee facilitated by brain-based coaching and coaching principles as vehicles" (Paling 62).

We can easily understand the difference between language coaching and language teaching. The former is a tutoring kind, which can never occur in a classroom of students; goals are not set by the curriculum, but are co-created with the learner, aligning with personal goals; the learning structure is not fixed, but flexible; there are no grades, but self-assessment, and so on. The real novelty definitely relates to the neuro- part of the whole process, because the actual contents (grammatical information and the like) remain, more or less, the same as in any other kind of language teaching. So let us see the concrete contribution neuroscience is supposed to make in this new method.

After a short description of the connection between diverse cerebral structures, cognitive processes and emotions, the vital necessity to maintain the learner in a mentally positive state is emphasized: "The predominance of quiet,

brain-friendly coaching conversations, in a non-directive and non-demonstrative style, will always ensure an extremely calm and tranquil limbic system" (Paling 90). Since emotional or social pain (like, for example, feeling embarrassed or frustrated at, say, a strong accent, or lack of fluency, or imperfect pronunciation) may trigger reactions in the limbic system that negatively impact areas essential to learning (like the prefrontal cortex or the hippocampus), the coach needs to work with the coachee in order to find those activities and tasks that bring pleasure to the latter: we need dopamine in his/her brain, to help memorization. Brainwaves and their states are brought up, and, after a short description, the conclusion comes: "as a neuroeducator we should constantly aim for the learner to be in a continuous state of calm and tranquillity together with positive emotions and generating the appropriate brainwaves to reflect this state, ideally oscillating constantly between mid-beta to alpha" (Paling 26).

Conversations ought to be based on the personal life of the coachee, so that enough attention be brought to the prefrontal cortex and the hippocampus in order to "achieve constant brain connections", together with some other recommendations, out of which I select a few: "Chunk material down/ Utilise constant repetition/ Formulate and reformulate/ Use humour/ Keep the material interesting and novel/ Carry out language coaching through storytelling or through social issues/ Make learning easy to digest with order and structure/ Include visualisations/ Space out testing or consolidation of vocabulary/…". We can make the commonsensical observation that any good language teacher has been doing all that, all along. The other recommendations refer to the humane part in any good (language) teacher: "Questions formulated with emotion and motivation/ Make it 'real' and 'personal' and therefore relevant/ Grab the full attention of the coachee/ Establish trust/ Instil confidence/ Provide a safe environment…", and so on (Paling 92-3). Now, placing Neurolanguage Coaching in the broader context of neuroeducation, we can observe that they are closely related, although distinct in scope and application. They have key principles in common, like brain plasticity, metacognition, intrinsic motivation, emotional regulation, affective filter theory (while neuroeducation also includes memory systems, attention, executive function, developmental stages, etc.). They differ a lot in their applications: one-on-one situations, or very small adult groups, vs. classroom, curriculum design, teacher training, and education policy. Regarding the role of the educator: on the one hand, there is the coach-partner who adapts

to the learner's brain and goals, while, on the other hand, the traditional teacher who can, nevertheless, bring something of a coach's attitude in the classroom.

Anyway, schools across Europe have been implementing programs influenced by cognitive sciences. In Finland, neuroscience-informed ideas are incorporated - like play-based learning and delayed formal instruction, which align with brain development stages; France has national-level initiatives that promote neuroeducation via collaborations between ministries and research bodies; in Spain there is the Neuroeducation Foundation which collaborates with schools to train teachers; some pilot projects and teacher-training programs have been launched in the Netherlands and Germany that include neuroeducation modules. I am not aware, this far, of any suchlike ministry-fostered initiatives in Romania.

2. RETURNING TO CLASSICAL LANGUAGES AND VALUES

On November 16, 2021, on the occasion of the "Days of Classical European Languages," the ministers of education from France, Italy, Greece, and Cyprus adopted a European cooperation plan through which, starting in 2022, the number of Latin classes increases by introducing it into vocational high schools; at the same time, Ancient Greek becomes a school subject. These measures represent an attempt to "tune" young minds to the values upon which the whole of Europe is built. They also have another purpose, explicitly declared by the four ministers: counteracting the woke movement in the United States. I will return to this point after making two clarifications. My first clarification: Latin, as the international language of the European elites, encompasses all forms of Western thought: the literature of Antiquity, the writings of the Church Fathers in the Christian tradition (those written in Greek having been transmitted through Latin translations), as well as the works of humanists and medieval scholars. That is why it is important for it to be more present in education than it already was. But in the ministers' decision we probably also find echoes of a long-standing tradition in the philosophy of language, in whose view there is an indissoluble unity between thought and language: language shapes thought, clarifies it, transforming mental representations into concepts. In the Romanian culture, for example, in 1862, Titu Maiorescu (directly exposed to this ethno-psychological spirit of the age through his studies in Vienna and Berlin) argued

for the necessity of studying Latin in secondary school for moral reasons: this language, he said, fostered objectivity because it had regular grammar, rigor, and brevity, producing a "deep spirit of reality" that disciplined thought and instilled in the learner seriousness of character, honesty, and love of truth.

My second clarification: Today we know that it is not a language in itself that transforms our mind and soul; grammar and vocabulary, separately or together, do not have such power. A prestigious language can indeed influence us, but the mechanism is different. Concepts represent crystallized thought, set into forms through which values are transmitted to us, through which we become aware of the ideas that generated them (incidentally, American linguists at the beginning of the 20th century, who described the oral languages of indigenous peoples in the U.S. and Canada, observed that their vocabulary was centred on naming concrete realities from the environment—flora, fauna—and lacked words for generalities and abstractions, "the idea of..."). Now, once we learn high, philosophical concepts, such as those in Greek and Latin, the thought of the people to whom a language belongs makes its way into the mind of the learner, expanding their capacities.

After these two clarifications, I return to the other declared purpose of the educational measure mentioned, namely countering the ***woke*** movement in the United States, still drawing on Titu Maiorescu, more precisely on his view regarding the purpose of education: that of taking the individual out of their own subjectivity and placing them under the guidance of reason, by providing spiritual weapons with which to oppose inner emotions and external influences. If we accept this view (and I do), then everything that has happened in the American cultural arena (especially in universities) since the 1960s, with the rise of postmodern theories, has in fact represented an assault on education, because it was reason itself, rationality, that came under attack. Multiple authoritative American voices (Andrew Sullivan among them, for example) blame postmodernism for seeing reason as a kind of myth destined only to serve those in positions of power, therefore needing to be counteracted. The very ideas promoted by postmodernist authors according to whom there is no absolute truth, there are multiple, equally good, viewpoints, there is no such thing as objective reality but everything is an illusion, bring despair to young minds: the theory is in blatant contradiction with the obvious, commonsensical truth that human pain is all too real.

There are only ***narratives***, they say, stories with a provisional, shifting meaning. Not even science can claim objective truths, since it is considered a cultural construct created by power differentials—by the heterosexual, cisgender white man (that is, whose "gender identity" corresponds to the biological one fixed at birth). To be ***woke*** means to be "awake," to realize that everything is a struggle between groups and identities that essentially fall into two camps: oppressor versus oppressed (white versus black, woman versus man, cis versus trans, and so on). Linguistically speaking, the avalanche of new words and meanings associated with the **woke** movement over the past decade (*non-binary*, *cis*, *trans*, *toxic masculinity*, *transphobia*, *whiteness* - "the structures that produce white privilege," *mansplaining* - "the condescending attitude of a man explaining something, usually to a woman") show, by their remarkable statistical frequency in online environments, a rapid, top-down reorganization of the English language - contrary to the natural way a language changes or renews itself, which is slow and bottom-up. Rightly noting that education is in crisis, Europeans therefore propose, as a remedy, a return to classical languages and values.

In the U.S., not only have the harmful effects of the **woke** movement caused unprecedented upheavals in university campuses and society as a whole (clearly visible in the re-election of Donald Trump as president, in 2024), but to complicate matters even further, social networks and artificial intelligence have been invented since the times of Arthur Combs. A.I. has globalized and deepened the danger in which education finds itself. Communication on networks (texting) contains a multitude of abbreviations, pictograms, and emojis that change not only the way written language looks, but also the spoken one, in which we notice a shrinking vocabulary, but this phenomenon seems to worry only educators and older people. In the U.S., there have even been experiments where young people communicated exclusively through pictograms, using apps designed for this purpose (usually Chinese ones). Participants reported that this mode of communication brought changes to the content of messages (naturally, if we consider the vast difference between the number of meanings conveyed through an alphabet and the number of possible images), but they were enthusiastic (Zomorodi). Of course, with the advent of the A.I., nothing is just an American phenomenon. Almost whatever we see out there, we see here as well, or we are about to.

This, then, is the general landscape in which Europeans look hopefully toward the humanities. But is it not too late? In a conference held in October, 2024, in Brașov, professor Mircea Dumitru, from the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Bucharest, spoke about the end of the humanities: "There are at this very moment, even as I speak, managerial projects at top universities in Australia, Japan, the United Kingdom, not to mention the U.S., where these [humanities] programs are being merged, and the result is the disappearance of the identity, the specific profile that philosophy and other humanistic sciences once had." The cultural crisis we are experiencing stems, he said, citing famous Martha Nussbaum, from the fact that governments and policymakers, motivated by a misguided social and cultural pedagogy, equate economic growth with the development of human personality. Actually, things seem to be worse: Western thinkers believe that we are not facing just a cultural crisis, but also a social one, an economic one, a political one, an environmental one - all interrelated in what they now call a ***meta-crisis*** (Nate Hagens's concept). In their talk, *The Psychological Drivers of the Meta-crisis*, Iain McGilchrist, John Vervaeke, and Daniel Schmachtenberger explore the multiple crises manifesting today in the world, with Iain McGilchrist, British psychiatrist and philosopher of culture, pointing to common factor to all of them: a spiritual crisis.

Western civilization is already in free fall, says McGilchrist, who does not believe a return is possible. The sense of the sacred has been lost, the sense of belonging to a whole; we harbour a *hybris* that makes us believe we can do anything: though we wish to live as long as possible, we are committing intellectual, moral, and physical suicide as a species; we freeze our bodies, denying death, forgetting that death is part of the natural cycle of all things, and that the opposite of life is not death but mechanicalness—and therein lies the danger: that life be swallowed up by mechanical thought. "We must break the spell of the machine," he says – by that meaning the spell of robots, of A.I., toward which we are irresistibly drawn, even though our cultural history abounds in myths warning of the deception of an alluring idea: we are seduced by Circe, by the sirens, by Peter Piper, by something that drives us, like a herd, toward destruction; Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, John Milton, Christianity - all speak of these forces, with an ancient wisdom we have lost, Iain McGilchrist maintains, making a very compelling case.

If we look at the whole picture, from a bird's eye-view, knowing what we know today, what is there for us, educators, to do for our students? Maybe it is easier to state *what not to do*. We are keenly aware that, in education, one should run from utilitarianism as fast as one can. And yet, with neuroeducation, we have become ever more deeply engrossed in it. Students have become clients, teachers have become service providers, educational acts have become transactions (and I am not speaking here about private enterprises). Shifting the focus now on information, now on how it is delivered (notice how actual terminology betrays the transactional perspective), now on the teacher, now on the student, means to fragment a unitary whole made up of relationships between these entities. Instead of widening and relaxing the point of view, we have been narrowing it down ever further, we have been going in ever deeper, in search for brain buttons to push. Blaming teachers for the failure of education means leaving out of the equation not only students and their free will but, most importantly, *the environment* which, in my opinion, bears most of the weight. Educational acts are not just about teacher-student, they are not binary relationships, but Gestalt. There are more than two parts involved in them, and they are more than the sum of these parts.

Thus, reaching safe harbour would require a return to wisdom, by recovering cultural tradition (with emphasis on literature, history, philosophy, music—thus once again on the humanities), as an implicit means of regaining the sense of the sacred. Iain McGilchrist does not believe this is possible anymore—not in the West, where the robot resembles man more and more, while man more and more resembles the robot; human thought, since the Industrial Age, has shown an imbalance of forces between the two cerebral hemispheres (an idea brilliantly explored in his exceptional volume *The Master and His Emissary*), which has strongly intensified and today has led to the dominance of the left hemisphere's way of seeing things: impersonal, utilitarian, mechanistic, prioritizing accumulation, technologization, bureaucratization, explicitness, and absolute control. The left hemisphere's perspective on the world has come to dominate societies, with A.I. being the advanced mechanical expression of this hemisphere's will to power. The right hemisphere, in contrast, is responsible for context, for the implicit, for the living quality of the world, for relationships among things; it hosts ambiguity and metaphor, among other things, through which we gain access to concepts such as the Good, the Beautiful,

the True - too vague and, above all, unanalysable for the logic of the left hemisphere, which thus constantly minimizes and undermines them as irrelevant. "You cannot make people wise," rightly says McGilchrist, "you can only draw them so that they come to love wisdom." What we really have to do is rebuild and nourish the global network of relationships underlying the social fundament which has been crushed, at all levels, under the weight of "Me first!" And this, indeed, starts with rethinking *early* education. In this way, all the other types of more or less local relationships that evade (over)regulation will change organically, from within, not from without.

3. SUMMING UP

As Anglicists and Americanists, we do not teach just language and/or literature, but ideas and modes of thinking about the world. We are educators, and even if, across centuries, the form and purpose of education have shifted with political powers, philosophical fashions, and technological revolutions, the essential question remains the same: what kind of human beings does education seek to form? Education has always stood at the heart of cultural life, shaping not only what societies know but how they imagine themselves. It is not just about transmitting knowledge, but about forming the mind and character in harmony with cultural values. But the promise of "personalized learning" has too often meant catering to superficial preferences, while the deeper formation of thought, character, and imagination has been neglected. With today's Internet-saturated, AI-mediated world, young people drown in information but starve for wisdom. Attention spans dwindle – a symptom of brains refusing to take in the sea of useless sensory stimuli. But, in the meantime, what is lost is not merely content, but a sense of belonging to a shared world of meaning. Against this background, it is no surprise that European policymakers recently called for a revival of classical studies. Their reasoning was not nostalgic but strategic: to reconnect young minds with the intellectual foundations of European civilization, to counterbalance the relativism of contemporary culture, and to discipline thought through exposure to languages that carry centuries of crystallized concepts. Such measures implicitly recognize what philosophers of language long argued—that language is not neutral but formative, and that

acquiring conceptual vocabularies from ancient traditions enlarges the horizon of thought.

As welcome as it is, the revival of classical studies alone cannot respond to the challenges of the present. The risk of a purely backward-looking reform is to miss the insights that contemporary science brings. Neuroscience has opened new perspectives on how learning actually occurs in the brain, so it too should be integrated in the new educational paradigm. The deeper lesson we can extract from all these struggles is that we should focus our efforts towards integration, not separation: analysis with creativity, logic with imagination, detail with vision. If education is to be truly holistic, it must restore the balance between hemispheres, nurturing both precision and imagination, both analysis and wonder. Still, the danger remains of mistaking neuroscience for a panacea. Brain scans and neurotransmitters cannot by themselves restore the sense of meaning and sacredness that Iain McGilchrist insists has been lost. Nor can they replace the wisdom embedded in cultural traditions, myths, and humanities. At best, neuroscience can support a more humane pedagogy; at worst, it risks becoming another technocratic fashion, reducing students to neural mechanisms and teachers to technicians of the brain. A truly holistic education must combine the ancient and the modern: the discipline of classical languages and philosophical traditions, the humanism of educators like Combs, and the insights of contemporary neuroscience.

The challenge is not simply curricular but spiritual. If education is reduced to skills for the labour market or to tools for identity battles, it fails to address the deeper need of human beings: to discover meaning, to situate themselves in a larger whole, to cultivate wisdom. As Iain McGilchrist reminds us, wisdom cannot be manufactured, but students can be drawn toward it by teachers who themselves love wisdom, who point beyond the mechanical routines of life to the mystery of existence. Literature, philosophy, history, and music are not luxuries but necessities, for they preserve the sense of the sacred and the awareness that we belong to something greater than ourselves. A holistic education, then, must resist the extremes of both mechanization and relativism, as well as the unintended consequences of self-esteem-centred, child-glorifying approaches. It must recognize that the mind is shaped by language, that thought requires discipline as well as imagination, that knowledge is sterile without personal meaning, and that science and the humanities are not enemies but

partners in human flourishing. Only such an education can prepare students not merely to survive in a world of information overload but to live wisely, responsibly, and fully. And, since in our line of work emulation of the master is at the root of all whole-hearted learning, we teachers must be transformed—not into mere conveyors of data, nor into neuro-technicians, but into guides who bring together tradition with innovation, reason with empathy, analysis with creativity. Civilization today stands at a crossroads. The temptation is great to entrust education to algorithms, machines, standardized testing, or to dissolve it into the shifting sands of identity politics. But the alternative is still possible, in spite of Iain McGilchrist's scepticism. Maybe we can still reclaim education as the formation of whole human beings, capable of rational thought and moral imagination, attuned both to the wisdom of the past and the challenges of the future. A holistic education is not just a fashionable slogan, but the only path to restore balance in minds, cultures, and societies. There are always multiple futures in front of us, not just one. What our future is going to look like depends on what path we are willing to take.

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