AUTHORITY IN THE EDUCATION OF A HUMAN BEING

by Anthony Esolen, Providence College

The world of education is one where humans can flourish by acknowledging authority.

The egalitarian ideology of our time, writes the philosopher Philippe Beneton, in *Equality by Default*, cuts the human heart and soul out of the profession of the teacher. "Why give priority to classic literature," he asks, "when Pascal is no better or no worse than any other author, when his style of writing is just one technique among others?" The teacher becomes a technician—and often a not highly skilled technician at that, as witness our millions of young people who cannot calculate a 15 percent gratuity for a restaurant bill, or who cannot name the nation south of the Rio Grande. The great mission of education as "the formation of taste, of character, of will, of civic spirit" is set aside. "How can a school educate," he concludes, "when it refuses to distinguish between an educated person and an uneducated person? How can it shape a human being when it no longer knows *what a human being is*?" (emphasis mine).

The human being, Beneton argues, cannot flourish without authority. He does not have in mind the swaggering of the autocrat, that cartoon parody of authority that egalitarians draw, to frighten simpletons withal. For the exercise of authority is a labor of service and devotion: "The person who takes on a responsibility invests himself, he assumes a burden that obliges himself as a human being." We bow to the embodied ideal, and not to the mere person, when we show a special respect to those who risk their lives to protect us, or who wear themselves out in seeking the common good. The poet Charles Peguy, says Beneton, felt a profound gratitude for the teachers of his youth, just because "they put themselves in the service of something greater than themselves." Therefore they could naturally and justly invite their students into that sanctuary. They would no doubt have furrowed their brows to try to make the least sense of the educational patois of our day, which insists that school be "child-centered." It would be like asking a hymn to be "choir-centered," when the very purpose of a hymn is to bring the singers out of themselves, in devotion. So too the "child-centered" classroom, if indeed it focuses on the tastes and habits of the children who happen to be there, mistakes both the nature of the child and the purpose of education. It ignores what the child, as a human person, most needs, and that is to

Anthony Esolen is professor of English at Providence College in Providence, Rhode Island, and the author of Ten Ways to Destroy the Imagination of Your Child *and* Ironies of Faith. *He has translated Tasso's* La Gerusalemme liberata *and Dante's* The Divine Comedy. *This article originally appeared and is reprinted by permission from* Public Discourse: Ethics, Law, and the Common Good*, the online journal of the Witherspoon Institute in Princeton, NJ. See http://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2011/11/4072/.*

give himself in love to what transcends his personality or his class or his age.

If we follow Beneton's reasoning, we must conclude that no genuinely human reform of education is possible unless we are willing to cast aside an essentially *inhuman* egalitarianism. The point is not to deny the words of Jefferson, that all men are created equal, and are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights. That ontological equality, however, as it is expressed in the Declaration of Independence, is itself grounded in the hierarchical relationship of creature to Creator, so much so that even if a man should himself desire it, he could not *alienate* his rights by his own fiat. It is rather to see man as a being who, if he ceases to ask the questions that orient him toward the truly great—such as "How should a good man live?"—ceases to be fully human. The man who does not give honor is but half a man, not merely because he is selfish, but because he is missing one of the sweetest and most human things in life, the reverence that makes him greater than himself because he has learned to rejoice in what is greater than himself. But "where vital questions are concerned," writes Beneton, modern man "has nothing to learn," having denied in fact that there is anything to learn. He need not follow the lead of Socrates, because that would be to recognize and honor a real superiority in Socrates, which his egalitarianism forbids him to do. He need not study with love and care the art of Dante, because that would be to submit to the wisdom and genius of the Florentine, rather than seeing in him only a product of his age.

If we are not ontologically equal by virtue of our status as embodied spiritual beings—or however else one wishes to express a truth that even the deist Jefferson admitted—then our equality must be located somewhere else. But the quickest glance at human variety suffices to teach us that we are not equally tall or fast or musically talented or agile with a differential equation. What then? If equality cannot be predicated upon anything that is admitted to exist, then it must be a *negation of inequality*, an insistence that something real which would render us unequal *does not exist* or is of no importance. The vision must be one of essential homogeneity.

Where is that vision of homogeneity to be found? Wherever, Beneton suggests, we find the reduction of man to his constituent parts, or to his environment, or to whatever else will replace the mystery of the human person with a general and scientistic "law." We would then be equal—in our unmeaning. The carbon that makes up my flesh, the calcium that makes up my bones, the iron that gives my blood its energy-delivering properties, are no different from those in anyone else's body. The encounter with a particular being, the irreplaceable person, yields to indifference, as one lump of flesh is much like another. One family, like a molecule in the economic crystal that surrounds it, is no "better" than another such molecule. What has happened is that, instead of the object of knowledge determining the method of study, the method of study has determined and reduced the object of knowledge. "The great works thus lose their status of great works," says Beneton, and are reduced to cultural artifacts, to be explained by the technician, the neutral archaeologist, and not honored for their beauty or wisdom.

When we argue, then, about how to improve our wretched schools, we must be clear about what we intend to do. If the object is to produce an elite cadre of technicians (since not everyone, practically speaking, can master the calculus of variations) who unite their facility with the dead and the homogeneous to a complete obliviousness to the great human questions, then I fail to see why people should support schools at all. What would be the point of subjecting the overwhelming majority of young people, those who will not be the elite technicians, to a regimen of denial? How long, after all, can it possibly take, to teach that there are no permanent and objective values in the moral life, or

that one culture is as meaningless as another?

There is an alternative. It is what Charles Peguy called "living knowledge," as opposed to the "dead knowledge" that he believed had conquered the Sorbonne, in the years before the First World War. It is the handing on of culture, against which the mass phenomena of our time, and the facile reductions of scientistic academe, array themselves in enmity. When we read Aristotle with the honor he deserves, when we enter the sanctuary, we enter the sacred conversation of mankind on his pilgrim way. At the least, we celebrate the joys of simple work well done, of the laughter of children, of the peculiar beauty of man and woman; but we may also rejoice in the genius of Homer, the insight of Racine, the broad humanity of Shakespeare. We are exalted by such obedience, such humble listening. We are made great by the acknowledgment of authority.

Forty years ago, a few wise men at the college where I teach, motivated both by that acknowledgment of authority and by their belief in the ontological equality of all mankind, embarked on a brave reform. At the time when the elite colleges were scrapping their curricula, effectively burning the books of three thousand years of our Western heritage, our faculty dedicated themselves to something beyond themselves, deserving of their honor. What if the elites at Harvard no longer honored and studied Dante? The students at our college would do so—the children of ordinary people, not rich, and perhaps not destined for riches, either. What if the technicians of education no longer saw any use for the political wisdom of Aristotle and Plato? The faculty at our school, not exalted technicians with conveniently reductive equations, but rather human beings asking the human questions, would try to recover and hand on something of their wisdom. They welcomed those young people with equal heartiness into a world of glorious inequality. I cannot say we have always succeeded at the task. But it has at least been a human enterprise. And that is more than I can say for most of what goes on in the egalitarian prison house that goes by the name of "school."