

AMI Journal

2019

archival treasure publication

“Les Deux Justices”

Two kinds of justice

Maria Montessori

Closing lecture on the 1934 International Course, Nice, France



20th International Teacher Training Course

Nice, 14 September 1934

“Les Deux Justices”

On the closing day of the 20th teacher training course in Nice, Maria Montessori invited her students to revisit an important notion which she felt they had probably thought about throughout the course: the social question in all its aspects.

In our time, social justice is high on the agenda; we identify the unjust exclusion of groups in society, and instances where people are disenfranchised and under-served. For Montessori the fight for social justice begins at birth: the right of children to develop into independent human beings and be respected for who they are is stymied at many levels, starting with the parents who lovingly see their children as a kind of possession—or “project” if we were to translate this to 21st century family life. Montessori argues that society, furthermore, has organised itself along certain lines that offer perverse stimuli, which only institutionalise and encourage possession, both physical and mental.

In this lecture Montessori uses some strong language; she calls adults to order pointing out that children are not taken seriously even though they make up more than half the world's population. She scolds the human parent for not being better at their parenting “job” in view of the fact that we as humans have so many more options and such greater intelligence than animals — and yet the animals lead their young to true independence. Human parents see the child as a wonderful addition to their state of happiness rather than recognising the mission of the child to develop into a person who can help reform society. They should, also,

respect the tremendous work the child has done during childbirth.

It is interesting to note that in some instances the conditions of the time and Montessori's subsequent frustrations shine through this passionate speech—particularly, when she discusses parental authority that always rested with the father whether or not he took any interest in his children's welfare. She also advocates for better collaboration between school and parents.

This lecture occasionally reads like a manifesto, and as such clearly demonstrates that the passions voiced here echo Montessori's developing ideas on “The Social Party of the Child” which is “to bring to the fore-light that the child is a citizen whose rights are more sacred than those of any other citizen; to recognise the child as a being to whom society has the duty to ensure security, welfare and that social environment necessary to its special needs as a human individuality in the process of achieving its development.” Her thought process is complex, but the reader who approaches the text with appreciation of the adult's role and the importance of childhood will be rewarded generously.



We are her to announce to the world that there is a people yet unknown, as large, and perhaps even greater in number than the adult population, who should have laws, which they at present do not have, who should be triumphant where now they are oppressed.

He is our benefactor and teacher, whose value we fail to recognise. We all want to fight his

cause so it becomes a new mission of social justice. And this people is the nation of children. What has become obvious throughout our lectures is that the adult has a paradoxical insensitivity when it comes to children – undefinable, and apparently inexplicable. It is paradoxical because the world believes that adults are sensitive to children and loudly profess to it. In effect, the truth is that they lack that particular kind of sensitivity towards children. This is such a serious situation that the matter deserves to be brought to [the world's] attention and studied. This is one of the unconscious aspects that the whole of humanity shares.

The child is not seen for who he is, and we can compare this to the adult's eye which receives rays of light needed to discern images and objects and yet there is this completely blind spot our consciousness when it comes to children. We might say that in human history, in our expressions of high culture we do not see the figure of the child. There is so much poetry, but where is the poem that centres on the child where there are so many that talk about love. In works of art, music, great monuments, we notice that the child is absent. If man had truly loved the child, he would have given him magnificent works of art and we would have seen works of significance dedicated to the child. Because man cannot love without acting, without creating a work of art, because in man's make-up we see the drive to create with both feeling and intelligence; he does not create solely thoughts but also work. We should have impressive works of art, the most beautiful to be seen in our society that [is characterised by] creating. Society should regard the child as the most moving being, more important than anything else, bigger than churches, or impressive buildings. These kinds of things should be dedicated to children and show a profound interest in them. Where is the music that surrounds the children? Of course, we all know lullabies but

in those exquisite church hymns we find nothing for children. Considering the fact that animals offer brilliant ways of creating shelter and protection for their young, we should really see so much more in human society with our refined ways of communication and creativity.

Whatever you see with insects is seen within the species. Certain wild animals become more gentle when they have young as mammals do, and you also see it in birds that have a habit of flying some distance just for fun, who refrain from doing so in order to stay close to the fledglings. Nature has given to living beings different ways of acting depending on whether they fend for themselves or their young.



Maria Montessori, 1934

It is from the behaviour towards the young that we can see astounding wonders, of which modern biologists such as Fabre and Maeterlinck speak, who have studied the phenomena of motherhood and describe it as the most precious phenomenon to secure the survival of the species. It is difficult to explain in words, but if we

are to find a comparable situation for the human species we can also distinguish almost two different natures: one is where man thinks about himself, society, or all of mankind – or the other when it comes to children. Do we see the same? No, we see a desert, total silence. We see no manifestation of certain actions, no change at all. Since we think that feelings of peace and gentleness are of a very high order, just as acts of heroism, we should say, “because mankind has so many formidable characteristics they should care for and protect their young to an even greater extent”. However, we do not see any of that. We rather see the opposite, such as feelings of long harboured rancour about transgressions suffered against one’s own person.

We should explore a little deeper this question of insensitivity in our species. As we see instincts in all animals, we must conclude that man has lost this instinct or has hid it away so deeply that it does not appear to function anymore. In this regard man’s soul has descended into such a deep sleep that the mere presence of the child cannot re-energise it. Sometimes we can see such an inactive instinct come to life when the purpose presents itself. This does not apply to our human species although you will say that we love our children so very much. To be clear, we do love them, yet animals love their young as well, and even more than that: they are more sensitive than we. If we like to think of ourselves as having a strong and deep sensitivity that corresponds to a goal of such importance, we can no longer say that the child is “adorable”, but we have to be able to say that we love him. If we remain within these generally shared limits, we can say that man is much more insensitive than animals in their natural behaviour.

I once wrote a short poem about the child, one which was not at all lovely and did not have a sweet ending. But it was true, and I will share

with you what I remember.

“A quivering voice was heard on the earth, which never had been heard before. It came from a throat that had never stirred before and that told me a strange story, a story of a man that lived in the deepest darkness and in utter silence. Suddenly he faced a very bright light and met with different sounds, many in number, without being prepared. They told me of a man who had always lived under water, warm water, and who all at once was plunged into an icy stream, opening up his lungs for the first time during a difficult encounter. He was the man who had rested like no one because his rest was absolute. He did not have to exert himself walking or breathing because someone did it for him. Everything was given to him. The only work he did was the work of his heart. His heart had started to beat when he was not yet there as a human being and it was only his heart that kept on beating.”

From one moment to the next this person needs to make a tremendous effort; he carries out this unknown work all by himself; he is born into this completely different and challenging environment and his experience of having been created compares perhaps to the agony Christ felt when uttering his last words: ‘why hast thou forsaken me?’

This is how children are born. They need to be re-stored to a new life, to dignity and a new destiny.

This passage is certainly a dramatic experience. And yet the parents do not stop to think about this [sufficiently]. The child is born, everybody is happy, he belongs to the parents. Here is our son! You will understand that the love for this child melts the hearts of the people thinking of children. But we also see possession: it is ownership that makes parents act. We say: “The mother is really exhausted”. Everybody focuses on the

happy event, but forgets that for the baby birth is even more intense and exhausting.

In today's modern maternity wards, there is a lot of care for the mothers; we make sure there are no bright lights or noises but no such considerations for the child. He is exposed to light and noise: he is only a child. Everybody laughs and rejoices, he is adorable, he is a new-born, perhaps he is rubbed dry with a towel a little roughly; people just see a pretty thing that they own.

Regarding present-day education, the child is abandoned in relation to society. The father shirks his responsibility by handing him over to institutions, and with what ease are children taken from their parents' arms to be put in a place of torture: the school that is not accountable because all the rules and regulations stipulate that the parents' role ends at the school's doorstep. We see very little understanding between school and home. We also see that society gives all parental authority to the father; there is no authority higher than his until the child reaches maturity. Obviously, nature will bestow certain feelings on us humans, but society does not establish if the father actually has paternal feelings. On another note, people remain placed under parental authority until an advanced age. Until that age the young person is nothing; he remains outside of society without civil rights.

You can see a father who is proud of what his son has achieved because this reflects well on himself. Yet, if that son longs to reach the age of maturity so that he will no longer be under the forced parental protection, the father gets upset and offended as it is the proprietary relationship that interests him most.

Look at the birds and all other living things. When the fledglings have grown enough, they withdraw a little; father and mother give them a little

push so that they will fly. They need to lead their own lives as soon possible. The same goes for mammals. As soon as the young are full grown, the parents leave them so that they can live independently.

The instinct to keep one's children close to one in a state of slavery is not something dictated by love. Always the same evil: ownership of children by their parents. This is understandable as all of society is based on possession. Likewise, when speaking of love, be it that of a mother or father, love should be unconditional. When an original deviation occurs, society can only feed this deviation because the pervading sense of possession is continuously fed from a need to have all that is good in society, because they are limited in number. Animals find in nature what they need; nature is so rich that it can let go of many things. Man lives off his own work in a society that has been formed by himself, a kind of *supranatura* without which man cannot live.

This explains why man attaches so much importance to possession. We see deviations that grow precisely because of this environment. And all the deviations that flow from a primitive sense of possession organise themselves in such a fashion in society that society can contain in itself sufferings and dangers, much like we saw in the comparison made the other day when a train derailed leading to a disaster; the history of mankind is full of disasters, crimes and all kinds of suffering, ranging from physical suffering to the greatest mental suffering. We also see many instances of adaptation that function as social camouflage—adaptations that remain to form a set part of how society is organised. This order, however, is no more than a way to survive amidst all these wrong assumptions on which society is structured.

Rules and regulations are put in place to chan-

nel these wrongs, which have already gained tremendous power and leave room for action. As everybody knows, this set of rules does not constitute real justice: it is a quest for a kind of equilibrium be it relative or “composed” of true justice which does not appear to be achievable in this world of ours.

On the other hand, it would be impossible for us to live without hope of a state of justice, at least outside of this world of which we have a fundamental idea. Justice in our society should be built on a different foundation—that of love; a justice that meets a deep need that we see in the young child. It is a highly felt need.

Love of the environment for the grown-ups also signifies a feeling

of justice, something which exists in the depths of man, except for the fact that it is immediately repressed, which is why we never see it.

We also speak of darkness; we say, "the world is full of darkness". Christian religion, for example, has symbols that tell us we must overcome the darkness because we see that in these deviations there is a very small possibility to understand.

In practice we have seen that when children are put on the right track they immediately can manifest their intelligence; they have very bright ideas that you could not have imagined: light comes about; darkness has moved away, there are no obstacles any longer.

We feel that there is something incomprehen-

ble, unfair in society to whose organisation we must adapt, although we also wish to escape from it.

We can say that all religions include this kind of shelter for the soul, a shelter for deeply felt needs, constructive action, forces of health that can bring equilibrium and normalcy that you cannot find in a society divided and organised along the lines of deviations.

Here is another idea that hails from Judaism:

original sin. Judaism sees this as the fall of man, an idea that has been adopted by Christianity, which takes original sin back to the origin of creation; we no longer see that we ourselves are a deviation. In the normalised child



we have seen that, on the contrary, there are characteristics that are not deviations. These are different characteristics that really exist in human nature with the possibility of developing during early childhood years if the child is provided with normal conditions.

We could then see characters never seen before because from birth on there was something not only between the child and the adult, but between the child and an organised society, the habitat of the adult.

However, we could bring out a different human personality if we removed these deviations, but this must be done conscientiously, combined with long study and care.

In the child there is a tendency to join lofty manifestations: work, love, perseverance, an inner sensitivity, the shining of the intellect, flexibility and adaptability, etc. This is in sharp contrast to the state of the adults in their environment.

Society has been organised by adults who have killed the divine in the child, who have buried it – but we know that in that “tomb” there is a being ready to be revived and to rise. “Resurrection and Ascension” that is the forward energy of the soul that is looking for the superior justice of a better world. This feeling of justice is the most profound truth the human heart knows: a reality all children can teach us. We have to protect it in such a manner that man can grow alive in his mind. Then he would not lose his fundamental instincts as he seems to have done today.

When we look at the evils of society, we can see them for what they are. We have to create clarity with experience as these evils do not have to be fatal; we can stop them becoming so. Everything is made and given to man. The life of the child is in the hands of man; not an earthquake or something dramatic in the face of which we are helpless; it is something in our hands.

Everybody speaks about the reform of society, but it is man himself who needs to change – something which we are starting to realise: the reform of man through the child.

© Montessori-Pierson Publishing Company, 1934

Translation from the French by
Carolina Montessori and Joke Verheul

With editorial assistance from AMI trainer Nathalie Justine

Everybody speaks about the reform of society, but it is man himself who needs to change – something which we are starting to realise: the reform of man through the child.

Publishers
Association Montessori Internationale
Koninginneweg 161
1075 CN Amsterdam, Netherlands
publications@montessori-ami.org

www.montessori-ami.org

ISSN: 1877-539X

AMI Board

Philip O'Brien, President

Lynne Lawrence, Executive Director

Ian Stockdale, Treasurer

Jennifer Davidson, Henk Franken, Christine Harrison,

Jacque Maughan, Patricia Miller, Jennifer Shields, Junnifa Uzodike