

The Education of the Human Race

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German Enlightenment writer Gotthold Ephraim Lessing penned "The Education of the Human Race" just prior to his death in 1781. Lessing, a playwright, poet, essayist, and literary critic turned his attention towards theology in the final decade of his life; becoming influential in the liberalization of German religious thought. During this period of his life, Lessing was enmeshed in a controversy surrounding his publication of segments of works by German deist Reimaris on natural religion; inciting the wrath of orthodox German Protestants.¹ Lessing's provocative theological notions were clearly shaped by his historical environment: the Enlightenment of the 18th century.

The Enlightenment followed a revival of intellectualism, science, and artistic expression awakened during the Renaissance. As a philosophical movement, The Enlightenment was fostered by changing social and political mores, the rise of rationalism, a budding scientific revolution, and the deistic perspective of God. Socially and politically traditional authority structures were challenged; the Reformation magnified the atrophy of the Holy Roman Church, contributing to the erosion of Monarchal rule based on religious structure. A spirit of individualism blossomed from philosophical ground tilled by moral relativism, and watered by rationalism. Philosophy and theology, once melded in the Scholasticism of the past, were now viewed as distinct. Philosophy was free to discover truth by reason alone, no longer confined by divinely prescribed absolutes.

¹ Most notably the chief pastor of Hamburg, J.M. Goeze.

Concurrent with the rise of rationalism were new scientific developments and discoveries. New science and empiricism heralded knowledge based primarily on the senses and reason; the inductive view questioned anything based solely on authority and not authenticated by experience. The fresh scientific outlook on the universe was that of a closed system of cause and effect, giving rise to Deism, and the observation of God as the first cause. Deists understood God as the creator, but ruled out miracles, providence, prayer, and revelation as previously understood. The Enlightenment was painted on the canvas of human freedom and potential; covered with the bright colors of optimism, rationalism, and exploration. To this work the intellectual artist Lessing would add his touch, making among his last brush strokes “The Education of the Human Race.”

In “The Education of the Human Race” Lessing expressed his belief in the developmental process of human understanding, resulting in the eventual maturation of the human race. Lessing contends for this optimistic view by denoting the role of education and revelation relative to the individual and the entire human race. Beginning his essay with “What education is to the individual man, revelation is to the whole human race,” Lessing promptly defines revelation as essentially the education of a whole people. There is no unique knowledge provided by revelation that human reason cannot arrive at on its own; revelation only provides access to insight sooner and more easily. Espousing monotheism, Lessing defines polytheism as reason gone awry, breaking up “the one immeasurable into many measurables.” In answer to this subdivision, God chose “an individual people” for “his special education,”² namely the Hebrews. The Hebrews, viewed as basic students, necessitated a moral education based on

² Ironically Lessing's term "special education," intended to mean "particular" in this context, could be interpreted erroneously from a modern perspective as the education of the intellectually challenged. In consideration of his comments in paragraph 8, Lessing, *might* approve of this contemporary misnomer.

reward and punishment, consequential of their childlike stature. The Old Testament Scriptures are viewed as the first primer for this simple people; the people Lessing contends God will use to educate all of humankind.

From the Hebrew people, whom Lessing describes as “rude and ferocious,” God would raise leaders to instruct all of humanity, yet only after maturing their knowledge (revelation) of God through exposure to other more reasonable races. Serving God out of fear rather than love, the Jewish people demonstrated an imperfect concept of God; this juvenile perspective was expanded and enlightened by contact with the “wise Persians” while in captivity. Lessing states, “Revelation had guided their reason, and now all at once, reason and gave clearness to their revelation.” Maturing, the Hebrew people become “quite another people,” now reading their primer in a fresh way; they have outgrown the first primer, potentially stunting their intellectual growth. Lessing summarizes, “A better instructor must come and tear the exhausted primer from the child’s hands – Christ came!”

As the child now grows to be a youth, a superior instructor is found in Christ, and a second more advanced primer established in the New Testament. More important than the authenticity of Christ’s miracles and resurrection, Lessing emphasized the recognition of the truth behind his teaching; Christ’s message of an inward purity of the heart. The new primer is to be seen as no longer exclusively for the Jewish people, but for all humanity; by corporately assisting human reason, it is viewed superior to each nation having its own primer. As long as this new primer serves to benefit the pupil it must be considered as *non plus ultra*,³ yet based on reason, advancing students may sense truth beyond the New Testament. For the rising student

³ Latin, "nothing more beyond"

reason reveals truth, unveiling discrepancies in both the Old Testament and New Testament; beyond the individual, for all of humanity to be educated, reason must be employed.

Returning to his original premise, Lessing remarks that revelation can assist reason, but ultimately, in the education of the human race, revelation is subordinated to reason. The goal of human education is the creation of mature reasoning adults, whether accomplished individually or corporately (through revelation). The measure of this adulthood is action motivated by truth irrespective of reward or consequence. When humankind will “do right because it is right,” it draws nearer to its perfection. Lessing closes his piece musing about reincarnation and the opportunity it may provide for new knowledge in new skills, reflecting again his prevailing hope in human progress.

The reader of “The Education of the Human Race,” is immersed in recurring themes of progress, optimism, and truth. Lessing demonstrates his confidence in humanity’s ability to grow and mature intellectually, progressing in the direction of truth for truth’s sake. The progression, journey, and process are to be viewed with purpose; a purpose with both individual and Divine meaning. Lessing calls humans to a high standard of moral and intellectual excellence based on truth, not on recompense or retribution. By redefining revelation as education, Lessing interprets truth as guidance from God, indicative of his ultimate respect for both truth and the Author of Truth.

Lessing alludes that humankind will reach the “highest step of illumination and purity,” he describes as “the time of perfecting.” Lessing’s noble and sanguine ideas of human progress and truth introduce a question he does not adequately answer. What is the human position in relation to God when we reach “the time of perfecting?” Does this not imply that in achieving this state of perfection, are we no longer students of revelation, but in fact become the revelators

ourselves? Following Lessing's logic, humankind deifies itself by its own progress towards perfection. As Lessing proposes, the apparent result of human perfection, forged through educational progress, would result in the "measurable" ones displacing the "immeasurable one." The polytheism Lessing purports as the consequence human reason would now be multiplied beyond measure; as each individual student is deified through perfection. Education, revelation, and progress end; "the great, slow wheel," grinds to a halt. This conclusion would seem contradictory to Lessing's splendid outlook on human continual advancement.