

Aristotle's *homo mimeticus* as an Educational Paradigm for Human Coexistence

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In the Poetics of Aristotle there is a definition of the human being that perhaps has not yet been well considered in educational theory and practice. This definition calls into question a dynamism that according to Plato was unavoidable for an appropriate understanding of the educational process that turns a human being into a beautiful, good and just citizen: mimesis.

The paper's intent is to reconsider the definition of the human being, centred on mimesis, presented by Aristotle in the Poetics (4. 1448 b5–9) to demonstrate if, and how, it might establish new paradigms for human coexistence. Aristotle's anthropological statement is included in a much wider discourse concerning philosophy of art; but if isolated from the context, it is an essential definition of human beings that can be synthesised as follows: human beings are the mimetic animal par excellence, and their process of understanding (that distinguishes them from other animals) has a fundamental connection with such excellence.

Ignorance and/or negligence of how relevant mimesis might be in the educational process may have decisively contributed to separate human beings from this core aspect of their humanity and therefore produced painful consequences in human coexistence. As long as education does not pay attention to the pedagogical implications of the definition taken from the Poetics, how can human flourishing be safeguarded?

I argue that recognition of the centrality of mimesis in the educational process allows human edification to proceed devoid of ideological basis, be it secular or confessional; and overcomes the risk of relativism.

Mimesis, formerly recognised by Plato as a link between what is expressed and what really is, is masterfully reinterpreted by Aristotle. Aristotle recognised its positive pedagogic value in the Poetics, and nowadays we can recognise how it offers existential dynamics that restore the

vital human relationship between self and other (be it another human or other than a human being).

The sense of this proposal lies in giving mimesis the role it deserves in education, by raising the significance of how coexistence might benefit from a vast human dimension, capable of recognising our humanity beyond our rational capacity.

HOMO MIMETICUS

In the *Poetics* of Aristotle there is a definition of the human being that perhaps has not yet been well considered in educational theory and practice. This definition calls into question a dynamism that according to Plato was unavoidable for an appropriate understanding of the educational process that turns a human being into a beautiful, good and just citizen: *mimesis* (in this context *mimesis* cannot be translated into ‘imitation’, as will be argued below). My intent is to reconsider this definition of the human being presented by Aristotle in the *Poetics* in order to investigate if and how it can establish new paradigms for human coexistence.

We find this definition at the very beginning of the *Poetics*. Aristotle has just introduced poetics in itself and its forms. These are all *mimesis*; and can be identified through the means used to obtain *mimesis*, through the object of which they make the *mimesis*, and through *how* they make *mimesis*. After presenting examples illustrating the quantity and quality of the different *mimesis*, Aristotle describes the two natural causes that generated poetics. The first of them contains the definition mentioned above:

[...] mimetic activity [*mimēsthai*] is instinctive to humans from childhood onwards, and they differ from other animals by being so mimetic [*mimetikótaton*] and by developing their earliest understanding through mimesis [*dià miméseos*] (Aristotle, *Poetics*, 4. 1448 b 5–8 in Halliwell, 2002, p. 178).¹

Therefore, there is an *activity*—says Aristotle—that *is* in human nature, but also in the nature of other beings.² This *activity*—though not exclusively human—is that *something* that makes humans different from other animals because of the intensity of such an activity in humans and for the *earliest understanding* they develop through it. Aristotle refers to it as *mimēsthai*. In the following pages, I will argue that, in Western countries, institutionalised *paideia* ignores, or at least underestimates (or sometimes hinders) this *activity*. It is difficult to hypothesise the causes for this. One reason may be that it belongs to other beings as well, therefore it is not considered as properly human; and so, the necessity to educate it in order to treat the humanity of man has been underestimated.

Ignorance and/or negligence of how relevant *mimesis* might be in the educational process may have decisively contributed to separate human beings from this core aspect of their humanity and therefore produced painful consequences in human coexistence. As long as education does not

pay attention to the pedagogical implications of the definition taken from the *Poetics*, how can human flourishing be safeguarded? This is what I would like to examine in this paper: to re-think *paideia* starting from the definition of human beings in the *Poetics*, and ascertain the advantage human coexistence may take from a *paideia* built on a consideration of mimetic activity as *fundamentally* human, but requiring appropriate nourishment to reach its full intentionality. I would like to ascertain if such an advantage needs an anthropological re-discovery: an immersion in the humanity of *homo* to recover the amplitude of human nature. In this re-discovery, the educational action may find different principles than those that are now prevailing.

Aristotle's anthropological statement is included in a much wider discourse concerning philosophy of art; but if isolated from the context, it is an essential definition of human beings that can be synthesised as follows: human beings are the mimetic animal par excellence, and their process of understanding (that distinguishes them from other animals) has a *fundamental* connection with such excellence. Aristotle does not provide any clarification on *mimesis*: what *mimesis* means was probably commonly understood at the time. The common translation of the term as 'imitation' appears reductive and misleading due to the superficial and external characteristics of the action it refers to, and to the sense of negativity it evokes.³ It seems clear that in no way did Aristotle associate such characteristics as superficiality and negativity with the *mimetic* activity. Besides, because of human primacy over the animals (due to humans being the best *mimesis* makers), it is impossible to accept the idea of *mimesis* as simple *imitation*: many animals are much more *mimetic* than a human being in merely reproducing actions, external forms or places, and able to make astonishing and unique transformations. But even if we refuse to solve *mimesis* as 'imitation', the comparison with the animal world makes it complicated to solve the enigma of human primacy: it is clear that not only animals, but also plants, follow harmonisation processes where assimilation can achieve a natural perfection that human beings could never reach. Therefore, human mimetic primacy is to be found in a much more appropriate understanding of what Aristotle sees as *mimesis* in human beings. And in order to get this understanding, it is necessary to search the *ratio* of *mimesis* in human life.

Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, uses the word *hómoios*, 'similar', to describe particular traits of the mimetic works referred to poetic features.⁴ In the wider breath of the *Politics*, *mimesis* is more generically expressed with the traditional Greek words for likeness(es).⁵ 'Becoming similar' had already been used in the definition of the verb *miméisthai* in Plato's *Republic* (III. 393 c ss.). In Plato's pages, this activity is initially described as an activity in which a subject's voice or gestures become similar to those of another subject. But in the subsequent examples by Socrates, *becoming similar* is extended to the capacity to represent any kind of thing, thus becoming similar to it. In the *Republic*, the effects of the *mimetic* capacity on the interiority of the subject are presented in various ways, also when there is no evident external movement involving the body or the voice. This is an internal mimetic activity that occurs before human artefacts and proves

the profound human attitude to *become similar* and to structure interiority according to a process of assimilation, even when the subject involved is wholly unaware of it (*cf.* Plato, *Republic*, III. 401 b ss).

GIVING HUMANITY A SENSE

The definition of *homo* in the *Poetics* (4. 1448 b) is very different from the one Aristotle proposes in the *Politics* and that is often reported as ‘a human is a rational animal’.⁶ Deciding that a human is a rational animal and forgetting that he/she is also the most mimetic one, or recognising the full presence of both qualities in humans, are two positions that envisage totally different educational perspectives because the aspects they aim at educating and feeding are different.⁷ If this natural human capacity to make the self and the other alike were properly cultivated from childhood, human coexistence would benefit from a new perspective, which can be seized if we analyse some of the essential distinctions between *mimesis* and rationality arising from Aristotle’s definitions. A radical divergence is immediately perceived between the concepts developed under the two definitions. Unlike *mimesis*, rationality is a purely human trait. A human is not more rational than another animal; a human is rational and the other animals are not: if another animal were rational, this would be a human one. Instead, *mimesis* is a connective power, an earthly relational energy that doesn’t belong exclusively to humans; though only in humans does it reach its utmost expression in *art*. Hence, both rationality and *mimesis* belong to humans, but—according to Aristotle—while the latter speaks of humans in continuity with other beings and what distinguishes humanity is only the intensity that characterises *mimesis* in human animals; rationality is based upon a radical difference: it *is* in humans and it *is not* in other beings.

This may be the reason for the simple choice that is so obstinately and seriously pursued in the Western world: education *makes* adults by developing rational capacity. And so, the education of a human being in schools has primarily become the education of one’s rationality. Children’s early understanding through *mimesis* has yielded to rational understanding, an educational *effort* led by the certainty that developing rationality means developing humanity. In Western culture, an educated adult is one who has gained rational adulthood, not certainly mimetic adulthood. The latter can be imagined as mastering the intentionality of letting the other live in ourselves: investing our best energies to celebrate otherness through a process of becoming similar. This act fully satisfies our natural inclination for understanding and enjoyment of similarities,⁸ as explained in the following pages where we will examine the *very nature* of *mimesis*.

CRITICAL ASPECTS OF MIMESIS NEGLECTED

Before Aristotle, Plato, in his *Republic*, had already mentioned the importance of providing us with the necessary antidote against the risks we could run if our mimetic nature were deprived of education. This antidote consists of an appropriate study of the nature of *mimesis* (Plato, *Republic*, X, 595

b). Without this, one can find oneself in the unpleasant situation of being formed inside and influenced in one's actions by any person who is able to master mimetic dynamics and wishes to exploit and use this power even to the most dehumanising end. With modern sensibility and paying attention to the problems arising from a coexistence that, due to communication technologies and intense migrations, is becoming global, it is possible to feel that inattention to *mimesis* causes much more serious issues than those foreseen by Plato. In the Western world, what has been developed, especially in the educational institutions, is the essence that makes humans able to *discriminate* (rational essence), against the essence that makes humans able to *become similar* (mimetic essence); though this latter is a very—perfect and perfectible—essence of human beings.⁹ Therefore, *discrimination* has been favoured to the detriment of *participation*. Can this have negative consequences on relationships among adults? Turning us away from what, in our nature, would drive us towards assimilation with any reality (and comprehension through assimilation)—can this turn us away from happiness as well?

A FUNDAMENTAL PAGE FOR REFLECTING ON HUMAN EDUCABILITY

In order to examine the sense of an education considering the anthropological value of the mimetic activity, and to hypothesise the effects that it may have on the creation of a new kind of human coexistence, I deem it necessary to read the whole passage from the *Poetics* that presents the definition of the human being as the mimetic animal par excellence.

Poetry in general can be seen to owe its existence to two chief causes, both of them natural. First, mimetic activity is instinctive to humans from childhood onwards, and they differ from other animals by being so mimetic and by developing their earliest understanding through mimesis. [Second], everybody takes pleasure in mimetic objects.

A practical indication of this is that we take pleasure in contemplating the most precisely rendered images even of things whose actual sight we find painful, such as the forms of the basest animals and of corpses. The explanation for this is that understanding gives great pleasure not just to philosophers but similarly to everyone else, though their capacity for it may be limited. Hence people enjoy looking at images, because as they contemplate them they understand and reason what each element is (e.g., that this person is so-and-so). Since, if one lacks prior familiarity with the subject, the artifact will not give pleasure *qua* mimetic representation but because of its craftsmanship, colour, or some other such reason (Aristotle, *Poetics*, 4. 1448 b 4–19 in Halliwell, 2002, p. 178).

In my opinion, the passage above is so relevant for education that ignoring it in any action aiming at developing human *understanding* would be impossible. I chose to highlight the word *understanding* because, together with '*mimesis*' and 'pleasure', it is one of the crucial points of

Aristotle's passage. The Greek verb recurring in the sentence is *manthánein* (and the related noun *máthesis*) which, as Halliwell explains, contains the two meanings of *learning* and *understanding* (Halliwell, 2002, p. 179).

In revealing the two causes that gave rise to poetry, Aristotle presents the mimetic activity under two dynamics, both driven by the intent to learn and understand. In the first cause, he presents this activity in the expressive form it takes when a child naturally makes the *mimesis* of somebody or something; in the second, it presents the activity in its impressive form, i.e. when people contemplate *mimesis* in a work of art.¹⁰

What the two movements, expressive and impressive, have in common is *manthánein*. When we do the mimetic activity, we understand; when we contemplate a mimetic object made by others, we understand. This can be easily justified if the movement inside the subject is essentially the same; in other words, if *mimesis* is occurring: a process that can be defined of 'as-similation'. What Aristotle seems to argue is that understanding through as-similation belongs to human nature. It is the mimetic activity in itself, the activity through which we make ourselves similar to any realities, objects and actions, that allows understanding. And understanding consists in a productive activity and in establishing a relationship with *objects* produced by others through *mimesis*. This productive activity is always done with pleasure and is partially comparable to the activity of a philosopher.

Learning and understanding are so crucial in this passage that it would be difficult to imagine more significant pages to reflect on education and find inspiration for schools and other educational institutions. Here both, the object to be learnt/understood and the movement produced by those who wish to learn/understand, are briefly represented, together with the simplicity and pleasure characterising this process; and all this is formulated in an extraordinary simplification of spontaneous human actions, all described in the mimetic activity. Aristotle seems to recognise the supremacy of understanding through *mimesis*, this being an activity that ensures *fundamental* learning (*mathéseis prótas*) and defines the object of contemplation that produces further knowledge. Even if the first cause refers to childhood, it does not imply that learning *dià miméseos* occurs in infancy only: indeed, this way of learning might characterise early learning in general, and might therefore represent the *fundamental* basis to further learning.¹¹ This extensive interpretation of the first cause apparently allows a deeper clarification of the process developed by Aristotle in the second cause: where he does not feel the necessity to explain how human beings develop the early learning that allows them to recognise mimetic works.

The passage by Aristotle can be applied to school education and to any other educational activity involving an educator and a person to be educated (and it applies whenever a person tries to communicate a humanising message to another person). A teacher, because of this natural human capacity that we all have since childhood, may use the teaching activity to induce an effective *mimesis* and favour appropriate learning and understanding. In other words, teachers can become intimately and expressively similar to what is to be taught. By means of the human natural excellence in mimetic activities, a teacher can generate a

work—the lesson—where he/she becomes similar to the essence of what she/he is going to teach (and *naturally* expresses this assimilation). This way, the school lesson approaches the mimetic object—mimema/artwork—Aristotle describes in his second part, the object that pupils can contemplate and enjoy while learning and understanding. It is Aristotle himself that authorises this comparison between the work of a teacher and that of an artist¹²: first, because the whole activity connected with *mimesis* aims at learning/understanding; second, because Aristotle's assimilation of the actions of a child with those of any artist, even the greatest one (cf. Halliwell, 2002, p. 179), implies the denial of the divine to justify artistic *poiesis* and resorts to an anthropological process (Lanza, 1993, p. 40) involving all those who are interested in the learning/understanding practice.

THE ONTOLOGICAL/EXISTENTIAL STATUTE OF THE MIMETIC ACT

We shall proceed speculatively and existentially towards the ultimate end of the human mimetic act. We, thus, open to the reality of an act that is not just limited to the gnoseological sphere, but seems to belong to a larger place where one finds the energies to build on solid foundations, since they are real foundations, the human living of humans. In order for this to become evident it is necessary to *look* at the ontological *sense* of the act that makes a *mimesis* maker at the moment when he/she acts and shapes the *mimema*. It does not matter, here, if the *mimesis* maker who is making his/her act is a child playing a game or an artist creating his/her work—and it is in this sense that the non-differentiation between the two acts proposed by Aristotle shall be intended.

If we, therefore, look with ontological-existential sensitivity at the acts of a *mimesis* maker while he/she is producing the *mimema*, we can easily detect that mimetic activity appears as the *manipulation* of a *material* (voice and body, in its plastic and dynamic possibilities, if we consider the child's mimetic game; colours, sounds, plastic material, letters of the alphabet . . . if we consider the artist's creative act) that is other than *logos*, in order to give it a *form* that allows this *material* to pass from nothing (as *logos*) to being (as *logos*). The *form* thus created—the *mimema*—expresses a representation of *something*, not a representation of the *something* in itself, but of the universal that is recognised by the *mimesis* maker in the *something* he/she meant to express. It makes no difference, in this act devoted to expression and understanding, if the *something* of which *mimesis* is produced is *something* material or *something* conceptual. What remains is the search for authentic essentiality: of what is substantial in the *something*.

Let us take, for example, a little girl who is *doing the mimesis* of a sea wave (to reiterate; *doing the mimesis* is, in its most general sense, making oneself similar to someone or something—in the case of the example here proposed, imagination can help us and we can easily *see* a child in the act of generating her *becoming similar* to the wave *with the movement of her body*). The movement that the child produces—the *mimema*—will not be properly the *mimesis* of a specific wave, but rather the *mimesis* of what the child

immediately recognises inside her as the *universal* of the wave. The word ‘wave’, of course, coincides in the child to a specific essentiality (other than the word ‘dog’ or ‘fire’ for example) that to her is ‘the wave’, and she will be immediately able to produce a body *mimesis* of this specific essentiality that to her is the ‘wave’ and not something else; and she will generate, through this act of recognition inside herself, an essentiality distinct from herself (‘wave’ not ‘me’), yet held within herself, a movement that is properly a *mimaction*.¹³ The *mimaction* the child produces—that is, her moving in a certain way—takes the same name as the represented entity (indeed, we can say that the child is *doing* ‘the wave’); and, furthermore, since this *doing* is exercised by the child modelling a material which is her own person, she can properly call ‘me’ the universal of the entity which she is expressing: indeed the child may properly say: ‘I am the wave’ while she is *in* the act of making the *mimesis* of the wave.

This *essentiality* that the child recognises in her self as ‘wave’, must have been previously incorporated by the child through several meetings (or at least one) with the reality of the wave.¹⁴ Meetings that will have taken place both through an immediate contact with this reality, and through a mediated contact (for example, a *mimema* produced by another human being: a painting, a photograph, a movie, a music . . .), and will be able to deepen and evolve in the subsequent meetings that the child will have with the ‘wave’ reality. And, certainly, the *mimaction* she produces and the process that goes from the recognition of the universal in the entity to the creation of *mimaction*—properly *mimesis*—cannot but play a fundamental role in understanding/learning of the entity in question.

Nevertheless, every process of true learning/understanding is, in this light, a mimetic process. If we consider again the child who is able to make the *mimaction* of the wave, we can assume as a matter of fact that if the child can act the *mimesis* of the *wave* (achievement that we must consider devoid of any extrinsic evaluation: there is, in fact, no other form except the wave itself that can be considered as paradigm of the *mimesis*; and, how ‘the wave’ is in itself and for itself no one is allowed to know) this is a sign that to her the word ‘wave’ corresponds to *something* she recognises in herself and can express, modelling herself to the universal of what she considers as ‘wave’ and becoming herself ‘wave’ in turn. And in this expressive act it is totally evident that the entity ‘wave’ is freed from everything that is contingency in the wave: being a child in the flesh (and not a mass of water) that can effectively represent it. It seems evident even with this simple example of the child *playing* the wave how much the *mimesis* can by itself alone explain about human specificity.

Making a direct reference to Aristotle’s *Poetics* (1448b ss.), Gadamer writes:

When we know something as something, this clearly means that we recognise it, but when we recognise something, we do not simply know it for a second time after previous acquaintance with it. Recognition is something qualitatively different. Where something is recognised,

it has liberated itself from the uniqueness and contingency of the circumstances in which it was encountered [...] thereby it begins to rise to its permanent essence and is detached from anything like a chance encounter. [...] Aristotle is quite right to perceive the essence of mimetic representation, and thus the work of art as well, in such knowledge. From here he arrived at his famous distinction between poetry and history, according to which poetry is the ‘more philosophical’ of the two because history only recognises things as they actually happened, while poetry on the other hand relates how they might have happened: that is, according to their universal and permanent essence. Poetry thus participates in the truth of the universal (Gadamer, 1986, p 120).¹⁵

The child can be considered as taking part in the ‘truth of the universal’ when a freedom from the casualty of happening also lives in her creative act of *mimesis* making. What evidently differentiates the two—the child from the adult artist—is the intentionality in acting the mimetic act. And thus, it is as if the child participated in the truth of the universal, but without the intentionality specific to the artist’s act. What the artist can do—we maintain—is what also those who chose to teach, or to educate, can do. In a passage from the *Convivio* (tr. IV, par. X) Dante recognises the necessity of *making oneself similar* so that the artist can accomplish his/her work, but adding the ineludible presence of *intentionality* in one’s act aimed to produce the *mimema*:

Poi chi pinge figura [Se non può esser lei, non la può porre]. Onde nullo dipintore potrebbe porre alcuna figura, se intenzionalmente non si facesse prima tale quale la figura esser dee.

Therefore, Aristotle distinctly understands that *mimesis*, rather than being imitation of a particular, is, in its true essence (that which concerns the poet’s *making* and the child’s *playing*; but why not?—still we insist—the teacher’s *doing of the lesson*) a *making* that captures the universal in the particular; and if it is reflection of something, it is reflection of the universal and not of the particular.

It is immediately evident how powerful this creative *mirroring* is, through which something—anything—is reinvented in a human shape, even if it has a very different aspect from that of a human being (let’s return to the example of the wave), and however partakes of an essentiality that a human being can recognise in oneself. In the act of *mimesis*, the catching of the universal becomes expression, which, perhaps, in some way, coincides with the catching itself, and that certainly enhances its comprehension. It’s hard to deny that this process has an ineffable charm: the child is, in fact, able to seize a specific essentiality in any entity she has somehow met before and, in the space of a moment, model her own body with a movement that is *alike* this essentiality; and the *mimesis* making is so surprisingly quick that it is almost as if this essentiality were already movement inside her—inside the child. This process implies the

adjustment of each part of her body to the *specific* of the entity she means to express.¹⁶

As Aristotle seems to suggest in the first of the two causes he identifies to justify the human ability to produce poetry, understanding/learning (*manthánein*)¹⁷ occurs through the *making oneself similar*; in the second cause he asserts that human beings, through the *mimemas* produced by others, intensify their understanding/learning. Connecting the act of *mimesis* and the act of understanding/learning seems to show a mutual influence between the two acts, almost as if the intensification of the first produced the intensification of the latter in a virtuous circularity: a process which tends to the essential in the entity through the *existence* of the individual subject. A process in which the subject offers his/her *existence* in order for something else to be and, in this act of expression of something else from oneself, the subject is likely to express oneself: he/she expresses his/her *existence*. What seems to be produced, through such a spiral movement, is an ontological fulfilment of *existence* itself. Under this light, the *mimesis* appears as the way through which *existence* makes evident what being *is*.

If the act of a human being is his/her *existence*, a human being shows the intensity of his/her being in the recognition of the essential he/she expresses. And this recognition is *mimesis*. Gadamer writes unambiguously: that *mimesis* is an *act of identification in which something is recognised*.¹⁸ But the use of one's *existence* in order to achieve this recognition shows, in the actuality of life, what makes a *unity* of the *self* and *the other from the self*. If a child *does* the wave, and, while making the *mimesis* of the wave, may say, with good reason—as we have seen just above—‘I am the wave’; this is because the child in that act *is* the essential of the wave: she recognises the wave in herself, but so *in herself* that she can immediately show it through the self, allowing her interiority to become ‘wave’ wishing herself as wave.¹⁹ What is clear through the mimetic act seems to be nothing else but ontological *participation*. *Mimesis* makes alive and tangible *participation* in being that ontologically constitutes the entities; and letting it out of inexpression shows reality through the activity of human *existence*.

To recognise *something* is, then, to free this *something* of all the aspects that make up its contingency, in order to contemplate the universal in one's interiority. The entity, in its incarnation in a subject that expresses it, far from lowering, is raised to its durable essence which finds expression and consequently is; while, in turn, the subject, in expressing the entities recognises his/her *existence* and becomes actual through that movement that harmonises him/her with the world.²⁰

OFFERING ONE'S OWN BEING FOR THE BEING OF THE OTHER

We can easily detect how, in the mimetic act, the person offers, in some way, one's self *in* a being *for* the other from the self; and how one realises this activity through a *harmonisation* between self and other: a process that

becomes more *perfect* the more it is intentionally sincere and deep. And as we have seen so far, this *becoming* self-other, started in the passage from Aristotle's *Poetics*, is intimately connected to the process through which human beings understand/learn. It is easy to imagine that each person accomplishes the *mimesis* of the same object with his/her own originality: since the recognition of the essentiality of the other from the self that takes place in each person is different, the expression of this recognition will be different, too. What opportunities would be opened for the development of humanity through a serious exercise in the achievement of the *mimesis*' *mimesis* that another human being expresses?

I think it is right to consider that if this practice were extended to every place of human life, and if this capacity were trained, human participation in humanity would be intensified. I believe this offer of one's own being to the *being for the other* of another person could have the power of re-founding the coexistence on a harmony that is the live result of the movement that radically expresses and researches, researches and expresses, the participation of each entity in the cosmos and accomplishes human beings in the act that is most specific to them.

Let us linger a little on this action—becoming similar to another person while she/he is *existing for* the other—and perceive its sense again. Let us imagine, then, a person who is *doing the mimesis* of *something* and another person *doing the mimesis* of the latter in the act of *doing the mimesis* of that *something*; what it is possible to *tend-to* with this movement—where what is made is the *mimesis* of the other one's *mimesis*—is not only the *something* such as the other recognises it in oneself, but also that mysterious place where the essential recognition of that *something* takes place in the other and in us. Through the contingency of a mimetic act it is, therefore, possible to move towards the *centre* from which the act of the *mimesis* maker is engendered; the same place where we recognise ourselves as *logos* makers. And if this research lives in a movement that never stops and that goes from one person to another, what will thus begin to live and express itself (i.e. begin to be) is the *participation* of human beings in humanity.

A RESPONSIBLE CHOICE

Coming to the end of this paper I can argue that recognition of the centrality of *mimesis* in the educational process allows human edification to proceed devoid of ideological basis, be it secular or confessional; and overcomes the bewilderment and uncertainty arising from any proposal that moves from a relativistic conception, be it explicit or implicit. *Mimesis* formerly recognised by Plato as a link between what *is expressed* and what *really is*; and masterfully resumed by Aristotle, who recognised its positive pedagogic value in the *Poetics*; should be nowadays resumed, and recognised as the existential dynamics that restore ontological coordinates to human relationship between self and *other* (be it another human or other than a human being). This paideutic process centred on *mimesis* is for humans a source of pleasure since it constitutes the *specific* of our own nature. Human beings, indeed, are born with the vocation to be in the image of

the *other* in order to understand it/her/him; and a process of knowledge is started after this first understanding and is deepened through the *mimesis* of the *mimemas* that, again through a mimetic process, other human beings produce.

It seems to me that there is, therefore, sufficient theoretical evidence to start requalification projects of the educational action that can proceed without following monisms or relativisms since they are built on the re-evaluation of an anthropological dynamic that fully responds to the laws of human nature (the laws that belong to the whole nature), and which produces its effect thanks to the commitment of human beings who take steps to understand the other and themselves. A mimetic and rationally mature *homo* will have the *habitus* to use his/her rationality to intentionally build the other's happiness, thus pursuing, with this act, one's own happiness as well. Any inhibition to the mimetic dynamism in the educational process exposes human beings to the unnatural risk of using and exploiting the other human being: since the latter's happiness or unhappiness is not recognised in one's own self.

The sense of this proposal lies in giving *mimesis* the role it deserves in education, by raising the significance of how coexistence might benefit from a vast human dimension, capable of recognising our humanity *beyond* our rational capacity.²¹ What is now necessary is to *simply* reconsider the educational action in a way that is coherent with this *other* recognition.

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NOTES

1. Following Halliwell's solution, in this text the Greek word *mimesis* will not be translated: it will only be transliterated and the accent omitted.
2. Aristotle explicitly recognises *mimesis* in animals, as is exemplified in the case of birds. See Aristotle, *The History of Animals*, 8.12, 597 b 23–26; 9.1, 609 b 16; 9.49, 631 b 9.
3. In his interesting discussion, Adorno recognises that the crucial role of *mimesis* can be totally misinterpreted if it is not intended beyond the limits of representation and imitation. (See Cahn, 1984, pp. 31–34). In modern and contemporary times, the two most complex philological studies that radically confute the equivalence of *mimesis* with 'imitation' (*Nachahmung, imitation*) are the ones by Koller, 1954, and Halliwell, 2002. The two texts follow very different research and analyses to demonstrate their confutation. Another text dealing with the necessity to enlarge the meaning of *mimesis* beyond the narrow area included in the word *imitation* is Gebauer and Wulf, 1992.
4. Aristotle, *Poetics*, 2. 1448 a 6 et 12; 15. 1454 b 10.
5. Halliwell points out that: 'At *Politics* 8.5, 1340a, he claims that melodies and rhythms contain 'likenesses' (*homoiomata*, 18) of qualities of character (*ethe*), and soon afterward that they are mimetic (that they contain *mimemata*, 39) of these qualities. The two terms are here clearly synonymous, and this is confirmed by the use of 'likenesses' (*ta homoia*, 23), in the same passage, as a compendious description of mimetic artifacts. The primary concern with music in this passage also reinforces the fact that for Aristotle, as for other Greeks, the language of 'likeness(es)' could be applied to much more than the visual media of painting and sculpture' (Halliwell, 2002, pp. 155–156).

6. Although not faithful, this is the translation commonly used for the description of man as *zôon lôgon êchon* found in two topics of Aristotle's *Politics* (1253 a 9-20; 1332 b 5).
7. In some way, rationality and mimesis are here presented as the core principles underlying our civilisation. Adorno proposes the same bipartition as a basis to his aesthetic theory. He sees in *mimesis* the origin of rationality and talks of the effect of the 'mimetic taboo', that confines *mimesis* in the aesthetic field (see Cahn, 1984).
8. Edmund Burke, explicitly inspired by Aristotle, tries to raise awareness on how attention to *mimesis* (in the text referred to as 'imitation') may favour the creation of a coexistence where people's needs are all heeded (see Burke, 1792, pp. 65-67).
9. Regarding the excellence of human beings as mimetic animals and of the supremacy of the mimetic faculty over the other functions see Benjamin, 1999, p. 720.
10. According to Valgimigli, the first and the second causes are, in fact, two aspects of the first cause, both representing natural love for knowledge, whereas the second cause is to be found in 4. 1448 b 20 ss (cf. Valgimigli, 1964, p. 589, note 1). Our reflection remains the same for both interpretations of Aristotle's passage.
11. In *Nicomachean Ethics* (7. 1147 a 21), Aristotle refers to a sort of *imperfect* early learning when he describes the *prôtôn mathôntes* as those who have early learning of something but not yet understanding, without referring specifically to childhood. The role of *mimesis* in the process through which human beings learn and understand virtuous actions (based on the *Poetics*, 4. 1448 b 4-10) is studied by Fossheim, 2006.
12. According to Ricoeur, the *Poetics* is a reply to the *Republic X*: Aristotle considers *mimesis* as a *teaching* activity (see Ricoeur, 2008, p. 62, note 8). Ricoeur himself explains the difficulties in translating *mimesis* as 'imitation'. And in case this is the preferred translation, it is necessary to explain why and avoid misleading interpretations (see Ricoeur, 2008, pp. 60, 62, 80).
13. The noun translates—mimazione—a neologism from Orazio Costa Giovangigli, creator of the *Metodo mimico* for actors' training; for further reading see Colli, 1996.
14. It is necessary to be clear about this recognition. About this concept, Manara Valgimigli writes an illuminating passage saying that: 'The little girl who tightly holds her doll, and gives her a name, and lulls her and cuddles her, asks her questions and invents the answers, seems indeed to be imitating her mother, but actually is expressing and accomplishing in accents and movements and attitudes certain inclinations and dispositions which are building up and working in her little soul. Give a child, or two children, any reason whatsoever that generates in them a spiritual activity, and they will continue by themselves to imagine the story they prefer, and create and weave their own myth. Mimesis is imitation and creation; is the act of creation itself that complies with the created object, that adheres to it in an accomplished way, that is one with it in the flowing of life that lives in it. Adhering recognition between imitation and imitated object does not imply a previous or special or partial knowledge of the imitated object; it is, on the contrary, the recognition of a life process in its perfect development or rather of a life rhythm to which a soul tends as towards an own integration, and thus rejoices when it is recognised as closed and complete [. . .]. All our exclamations of joyful recognition before a work of art [. . .] reveal nothing but a new act of life which revealed itself fully and freshly; or also of a life rhythm which we saw turn and incarnate and close following its own law, which we felt and recognised as the same law that opened in our soul the subsequent intervals and marked the expected beats, until the rhythm touched its final point and closed its arch. The object of mimesis is not an acquired knowledge; it is not the particular, the single, the episode, what was and is not anymore, what is anywhere outside ourselves but not in ourselves; it is, on the contrary, the universal: and, besides, not an abstract universal, an idea, an aspiration a symbol, but a concrete universal, at the top of its concreteness; a universal that divides and multiplies recreating itself in thousands of ways and movements and life fragments, which is life itself in its innumerable radiating and refracting from the inexhausted fecundity of the spirit' (cf. Valgimigli, 1966, pp. 27-28).
15. In another place in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and other essays* Gadamer reflects on the exact meaning of 'recognition'. In this other page 'the recognition' is presented as a 'miracle' operating in the pleasure that accompanies the *mimesis* (cf. Gadamer, H. G., *Art and Imitation*, in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and other essays*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986, p. 99).
16. In this regard, Orazio Costa Giovangigli, master of the Italian theatre, writes in a letter that he'll start by observing the essential importance, for the development of the superior individual

animal, of the instinct of imitation. Through it, the baby, by imitating the adult, acquires the definitive character of the species, its habits and qualities. Man participates in this instincts of imitation; however, his/her attention is not limited to the individuals of his/her species, but goes to everything that can be considered individual, be it animate or inanimate, and exercises his/her instinct of 'imitation' on every object of his/her attention. The purely animal imitation is exercised through repetition from 'member to member' in an act or a series of acts and in the same way the baby-human (and after the adult human) who exercises in the imitation of objects (animals, objects, phenomena) doesn't have identical members for imitation; however, almost without realizing it, and following another instinct which the author calls 'mimic', spontaneously overcomes this limit and continues to imitate, without correspondence of identical members (since identity is so far excluded), attributing to some of his/her body parts the role of others and of the most different shapes of the objects. In this way, through new and totally abstract actions and series of actions, he realises a new type of analogic imitation, which, for its new character, shall be called in another way. From 'imitation' we move to 'miming'. From simple repetition we move to a function which is at the same time interpretative and creative. It is interpretative because, it translates, rather than reproducing. It is creative because the choice of the expressive arts is not mechanically automatic, but is committed to the nature of the individual, his spontaneous movements with a specific psychic character (Quaderno XVI, 29/8/1966, private collection).

17. For *first cause* Aristotle uses the noun related to it: *mâthesis*. He will directly use the verb when arguing about the *second cause*.
18. Gadamer's reflection on *mimesis* allows a further understanding of what the mimetic capacity can represent for the making of humanity in a human being:
 'The meaning of the word *mimesis* consists simply in letting something be there without trying to do anything more with it. The pleasure involved in mimetic behaviour and its effects is a fundamental human pleasure that Aristotle had already illustrated with the behaviour of children. The pleasure of dressing up and representing something other than oneself, and the pleasure of the person who recognises what is represented, show what the real significance of imitative representation is [...]. Every representation finds its genuine fulfilment simply in the fact that what it represents is emphatically there. [...] *Mimesis* is a representation in which we 'know' and have in view the essential content of what is represented [...] the act in which something is recognised here is not an act of distinction, but of identification. However ineliminable it may be, and however we may emphasize it, the distance between the image and the original has something inappropriate about it as far as the real ontological meaning of *mimesis* is concerned. When the work of art carries conviction, the *paradigma* (to which, according to Plato, every representation is related as an image, and which it necessarily falls short of) is not present as such' (Gadamer, 1986, p. 119).
19. In this regard, it is interesting to see how Pirandello describes the creative act in his essay 'Per le ragioni estetiche della parola (On the aesthetic rationale of words)', which is the *Appendice* to the text *Arte e scienza (Art and Science)*. He writes that he cannot deny the dog as an object, even if he admits it only exists inside himself since he knows about it. The dog will always remain an object, if not physical, then spiritual, an object that he contemplates inside himself, but he does not create: he cannot create it because he did not want it and it doesn't want itself inside him. Then the author wonders when it will become creation. When he stops contemplating it as an object inside him, when it will start to want itself inside him, as he wants it for itself (cf. Pirandello, 2006, p. 774).
20. In *Art and Imitation* Gadamer writes: 'However there is more to recognition than this. It does not simply reveal the universal, the permanent form, stripped of all our contingent encounters with it. For it is also part of the process that we recognise ourselves as well. All recognition represents the experience of growing familiarity, and all our experiences of the world are ultimately ways in which we develop familiarity with that world. As the Aristotelian doctrine rightly seems to suggest, all art of whatever kind is a form of recognition that serves to deepen our knowledge of ourselves and thus our familiarity with the world as well' (Gadamer, 1986, pp. 99–100).
21. Adorno wrote some intense passages, reflecting on the criticality of the mimetic moment of knowledge, and, at the same time, on the necessary and complex complementarity and conflict between rationality and *mimesis* (see Adorno, 1977, pp. 91–95).

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