

Chapter II: The Ultimate End of Man is Beyond this Life

John Amos Comenius

Reformed · Post-Reformation · Treatise

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INTRODUCTION

Drawn from the opening of the *Didactica Magna* (1632), this chapter lays the anthropological foundation on which Comenius built his lifelong project: a universal pedagogy rooted in the conviction that human formation in this world is preparation for an eternal one. A Moravian bishop scattered by the Thirty Years' War, Comenius writes here not as a schoolmaster but as a theologian of human destiny, arguing from creation, from the threefold structure of life, and from the gradient nature of all human striving. The argument unfolds in patient, accumulating steps, closer to scholastic reasoning than to devotional reflection, and rewards the reader willing to follow a careful chain of inferences toward a single conclusion about what a human being is for.

Reason itself dictates that such a perfect creature is destined to a higher end than all other creatures, that of being united with God, the culmination of all perfection, glory, and happiness, and of enjoying with Him absolute glory and happiness for ever.

Now although this is clear from Scripture, and we steadfastly believe that it is the truth, it will be no loss of time if we lightly touch on the various ways in which God has indicated that our destination lies beyond this life.

First, in the creation itself; for He did not simply command man to exist, as He did the rest of His creatures; but, after solemn consideration, He formed a body for him with His own fingers and breathed the soul into it from Himself.

Our nature shows that this life is not sufficient for us. For here we live a threefold life, the vegetative, the animal, and the intellectual or spiritual. Of these the action of the first is confined to the body, the second can extend itself to objects by the operation of the senses and of movement, while the third is able to exist separately, as is evident in the case of angels. So that, as it is evident that this, the last stage of life, is greatly overshadowed and hindered in us by the two former, it follows of necessity that there will be a future state in which it may be brought to perfection.

All our actions and affections in this life show that we do not attain our ultimate end here, but that everything connected with us, as well as we ourselves, has another destination. For whatever we are, do, think, speak, contrive, acquire, or possess, contains a principle of gradation, and, though we mount perpetually and attain higher grades, we still continue to advance and never reach the highest.

For in the beginning a man is nothing, and has been non-existent from eternity. It is from his mother's womb that he takes his origin. What then is a man in the beginning? Nothing but an unformed mass endowed with vitality. This soon assumes the outlines of a human body, but has, as yet, neither sense nor movement. Later on it begins to move and by a natural process bursts forth into the world. Gradually the eyes, ears, and other organs of sense appear. In course of time the internal senses develop and the child perceives that he sees, hears, and feels. Then the intellect comes into existence by cognising the differences between objects; while, finally, the will assumes the office of a guiding principle by displaying desire for certain objects and aversion for others.

But in all these individual points of progress we find nothing but succession. For the intelligence that underlies matter makes itself seen by degrees, like a ray of dawn shining through the darkness of night, and, as long as life remains, there is a continual access of light, unless a man become utterly brutish. Thus our actions are at first weak, unformed and confused; then the virtues of the mind unfold themselves proportionately to the forces of the body, so that as long as we live (unless the greatest lethargy take possession of us and bury us alive) we are continually exercising our faculties.

In a worthy mind all these functions tend to a higher development, nor can we find any end of the things that we desire or wish to accomplish.

In whatever direction a man turns he may perceive this experimentally. If any have an excessive desire for riches he will not find anything that can satisfy his greed, though he possess the whole world; as was evident in the case of Alexander. If any burn with desire for honour he will not be able to rest though the whole world adore him.

If any give himself over to pleasure, rivers of delight may bathe all his senses, but he becomes accustomed to them, and his appetite continues to desire one thing after another. If any apply his mind to the study of wisdom he will find no end; for the more a man knows, the more he realises his ignorance. Rightly did Solomon say that the eye could not grow tired of seeing or the ear of hearing.

Indeed, the examples of those who die teach us that death does not put the last touch to existence. For those whose life has been righteous rejoice that they are to enter on a better one; while those who are filled with love of the present life, seeing that they must leave it and migrate elsewhere, begin to tremble and to reconcile themselves with God and man, if by any chance this be still possible. And, although the body, broken down by pain, grows faint, the senses become clouded, and life itself slips away, the mind fulfils its functions more vividly than ever, as we see when a man circumspectly summons his family and heirs about his death-bed. So that he who sees a pious and wise man dying sees nothing but the structure of clay falling asunder; he who listens to him hears an angel's voice and cannot but confess that the dweller is only taking his departure while the house falls to ruin about him. Even the heathen understood this, so that the Romans, according to Festus, called death *abitio*, and with the Greeks, ἄλκιμος,±1

which signifies "to go away," is frequently used instead of "to die" and "to perish." This can only be because by "death" nothing is understood but transition to another life.

This is all the more evident to us Christians, now that Christ, the Son of the living God, has been sent from heaven to regenerate in us the image of God. For having been conceived of a woman He walked among men; then, having died, He rose again and ascended into heaven, nor had death any more dominion over Him. Now He has been called "our forerunner" (Heb. vi. 20), "the firstborn among his brethren" (Rom. viii. 30), "the head over all things" (Eph. i. 22), and the archetype of all who are to be formed in the image of God (Rom. viii. 29). As then, He did not visit this earth in order to remain on it, but that, when His course was run, He might pass to the eternal mansions; so we also, His companions, must pass on and must not make this our abiding-place.

To each of us, then, his life and his abiding-place is threefold. The mother's womb, the earth, and the heaven. From the first into the second he passes by nativity, and from the second into the third by death and resurrection. From the third he makes no move, but rests there for all eternity. In the first stage we find life in its simplicity, with the commencement of movement and of feeling. In the second we have life, motion, sense, and the elements of intellect. In the third we find the full plenitude of all.

The first life is preparatory to the second, and the second to the third, while the third exists for itself and is without end. The transition from the first into the second and from the second into the third, is narrow and accompanied by pain; and in both cases some covering or surrounding must be laid aside (in the first case the after-birth, in the second the body itself), just as the egg-shell is discarded when a chicken is hatched. Thus the first and second abiding-places are like workshops in which are formed, in the first the body, for use in the following life; in the second the rational soul, for use in the life everlasting. In the third abiding-place the perfection and fruition of both will be realised.

Thus (to use them as a type) were the Israelites born in Egypt. Thence, through the passes of the mountains and through the Red Sea, they were brought into the desert. They built temples, they learned the law, they fought with various tribes, and, at length, having with difficulty crossed the Jordan, they were made heirs of Canaan, the land flowing with milk and honey.

Source: The Great Didactic, trans. M. W. Keatinge (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1896)

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