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FRANÇOISE DOLTO

(1908–88)

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A Christian educator out of the ordinary

The tenth anniversary of the death of Françoise Dolto and the four-day seminar devoted to her work earlier in 1999 at UNESCO are a reminder to us that this psychoanalyst is still influencing our understanding of children. Although trained as a paediatrician, the setting up of the Maison Verte as a care centre and her co-operation with the school in Neuville were her principal achievements. No doubt, her popularity was also due to the radio talks that she gave over a period of many years.

It can nevertheless be seen from her biography that even at the age of 8 she wanted to be an ‘education doctor’. Significant events prompted the desire to support parents by teaching them to educate their children. The fact that she turned to medicine and psychoanalysis was therefore no accident, but the outcome of suffering endured in the course of her childhood and adolescence.

On the other hand, while Françoise Dolto is still famous for her clinical skills or her contributions to theory, notably the unconscious image of the body, the ontological status of her ethics remains less well known. She examined the Gospels via psychoanalysis, just as she looked at psychoanalysis and education in the light of the dictates of the Gospels. It could even be thought that her view of the human being, endowed with desire and language, linked up with that of the humanist educators of the sixteenth century and their Christian fervour. By recognizing the otherness peculiar to each individual and for the tolerance that this calls for, her very numerous books (more than thirty) have done much to clarify the rights of the child and the duties of adults.

The childhood of an ‘education doctor’

Françoise Murette was born in Paris in November 1908, the fourth of seven children of a well-to-do family of engineers. Right from the start, her distinguishing characteristics seem to have been originality and a sense of exclusion. The best-known anecdote concerns her cocaine-addicted Irish nanny, who was summarily dismissed when her escapades with Françoise in a high-class brothel were discovered. Those first six months spent with the nanny were so emotionally fraught that they came close to killing her. As she was to repeat on several occasions, only her mother managed to save her.

During her subsequent childhood Françoise often suffered from the incomprehension of adults:

And I used to wonder, having once been small and having grown up, how people could be so strange since they had been children. And I said to myself: ‘When I’m big, I’ll try to remember what it’s like to be small’ (F. Dolto, 1986, p. 43).

That perplexity developed a sense of questioning and communication tinged with a good measure of outspokenness. To cope with the silence of adults and the meting out of punishments, a self-taught attitude, common to many educators, emerged.

Her personal teacher, trained in the Froebel method, saw her through her first steps in education. Kindergartens, it may be recalled, were originated by Froebel (1782-1852) and employed a method based on motherly love and metaphysical and religious principles. The way of learning to read that developed out of this enabled Françoise Dolto to discover self-reliance and respect for the desire to learn.

Hence her wish, at the age of 8, to become an 'education doctor', to 'help parents educate and understand their children' (Dolto, 1988, p. 48). The fact that the adults did not understand this plan only added to the pain. In short, where a proper balance was lacking in her life, a desire to put matters right arose, the desire of the doctor 'who knows that when there are snags in education, children get illnesses that are not really illnesses but cause trouble in families and complicate children's lives which could be so peaceful' (Dolto, 1986, p. 44).

Other events outside the family influenced her decision, particularly the First World War with all its missing and wounded, but above all the sight of women who, without any training and having lost their husbands, fell into poverty and utter isolation.

The final ordeal Françoise Murette had to undergo concerned her elder sister. At the age of 11, on the eve of her first communion, her mother instructed Françoise to pray for the recovery of her sister, stricken with bone cancer. Her sister's death provoked an extremely violent reaction in the mother, who put all the blame on Françoise, even regretting that she was still alive instead of her favourite daughter. This rejection seems to have so marked Françoise that she entered on a process of redemption or exoneration. In so doing, she was following a path trodden by all the women of the family, all fated at one time or another to save a family member.

Discovery of paediatrics and psychoanalysis

After sitting her *baccalauréat*—against her mother's will—Françoise waited seven years before beginning medical studies with her younger brother Philippe. In 1930, however, with her mother's consent, she passed her nursing diploma.

On beginning her medical studies at the age of 23, she met M. Schlumberger, who subsequently became a psychoanalyst. He advised her brother to begin psychoanalysis with R. Laforgue (founder of the *Société psychanalytique de Paris*). A year later Françoise began her analysis with Laforgue. This lasted three years and gave her a start, before her meeting with Jacques Lacan, in training as a psychoanalyst.

Her hospital training took her to the most well-known department at the time, run by Dr G. Heuyer, who was a pioneer in child psychiatry and speech therapy. That was where she also met S. Morgenstern, the principal protagonist of child psychoanalysis in France, particularly through the use of drawing as a means of therapy. Despite this fruitful contact, the way in which care was organized led her away from being a non-resident student to being a house officer.

In 1938, however, she met Dr E. Pichon at the Hôpital Bretonneau and his teaching influenced her particularly. The next year she presented her medical thesis: 'Psychoanalysis and paediatrics' (1971).

In 1942 she married Boris Dolto, who was to become an eminent physiotherapist in France.

After the Second World War, the only contact Françoise Dolto maintained with hospitals was through her free consultations at the Hôpital Trousseau from 1940 to 1978. She was also a consultant at the Centre médico-psycho-pédagogique Claude Bernard from 1947 onwards, and later entered the CMPP Étienne Marcel, where she remained from 1964 to 1981. Another activity nevertheless caught her fancy, halfway between education and clinical practice, which was that of psychoanalyst for Radio France-Inter, from 1976 to 1978. Three popular books based on her broadcasts confirmed her listeners' interest.

In the meantime, she became a member of the Société psychanalytique de Paris, until the split of 1953. She then took part, with J. Lacan, D. Lagache and J. Favez-Boutonnier, in founding the Société française de psychanalyse. After the second split, in 1964, she remained with Lacan, the founder of the Freudian School in Paris, which she left in 1980.

Conditions and aims of education

In 1945, in her fundamental text on education and psychoanalysis, Dolto described her aim of supporting the human being in its integrity and in all its otherness. In her writings we find constant references to developing the awareness and releasing the desire of the child. This precaution was so central that she saw it as a means of preventing neuroses.

Nevertheless, she still had misgivings about our techniques and about our anticipation of a future that escapes us: ‘We prepare children for a life about whose course we know nothing, and yet they must be different from us precisely because they have acquired experience that was not ours at the same age’ (F. Dolto, 1985, p. 330). Hence her harsh criticism of our education system, whether in the family or at school, as not developing in children the means of seeking the fulfilment of their desires: ‘The important thing about education is not at all the “why” but the “how”’ (F. Dolto, 1973, p. 100). This choice is reminiscent of a definition of the educator as being there not to lead children but to teach them to lead themselves.

As she saw it, the respect of children can be won only through co-operation between child and adult. Such a view implies accountability that works both ways and experience based on real life—the example set by the adult. It is therefore not surprising that she did not lay any particular store by institutionalized educational methods: ‘The adult who serves as a role-model does not claim to offer a method. Method is anti-pedagogy’ (F. Dolto, 1985, p. 276). In emphasizing how much more important the distinctiveness of each individual was than any theory, she would repeat to all and sundry that it was ridiculous to seek to ‘do it Dolto’s way’.

The foundations of her educational thinking are close to those of the active methods advocated by psychologists like Célestin Freinet, or psychoanalysts like A. Adler and A.S. Neill. In this respect, her educational thinking also ties in with the institutional pedagogy movement that drew its inspiration from institutional psychotherapy (F. Tosquelles). She remained convinced that every child possessed a revolutionary potential that traditional education sought to stifle.

Freud maintained that educating, treating and governing were three impossible jobs, and Dolto took the principle further, with a certain sense of disillusionment: ‘As children see it, we always fail’. Freud put it like this: ‘Whatever you do, it will never be right’ (F. Dolto, 1989, p. 69). This paradox, which led her to say that education is successful when it is a failure, is explained by the child’s reaching maturity. Only when children have established themselves in relation to adults by means of rejection do they display their capacity to become educators in their turn. According to Dolto, it is also on the basis of this position of rejection, accepted by adults, that children believe in their own judgement.

Unconscious image of the body and education

Psychoanalytical theory served Françoise Dolto in the treatment of children and adults, but not on its own. She evolved a personal theory around such key concepts as subject, language, desire and body. This is the theory of ‘the unconscious image of the body’, which she described in detail in 1984 in all its complexity.

The originality of this theory is based on the idea that, unlike a medical chart of our body, an image of the body is built up in the unconscious right from the foetal stage, the reason being that it is ‘the unconscious symbolic incarnation of the desiring being’ (F. Dolto, 1984, p. 16). Hence the idea of organizing advantageously the development of this unconscious

image of the body through a form of education, or humanization, which she called ‘symbol-generating castrations’ (*castrations symboligènes*).

This unconscious image of the body is neither unique nor static; it possesses several components (a basic image, a functional image, an image of the erogenous zones and a dynamic image). Without going into details about the interconnection between these elements, the essential idea to bear in mind concerns an archaic relational experience marking our memory as we become structured. And where Dolto concurs with another famous psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, is when she asserts that this structuring is only possible once all these archaic experiences have been verbalized, that is, symbolized.

The symbol-generating castrations referred to above are thus symbolized by language, on the basis of a ‘castrating statement’. Why speak of castration here? Simply because what is involved is a taboo fostering ‘renunciation of cannibalistic, perverted, murderous, vandalistic and other impulses’ (F. Dolto, 1984, p. 76). These castrations are all the more humanizing when the child knows that the adults submit to these taboos. This is also why, according to her, children can intuitively recognize adults with incompletely castrated archaic impulses. In this connection, Dolto recalled the situation of adults experiencing difficulty in letting a child grow up and become independent; for that often means that they are still subject to archaic impulses and have not renounced them.

The new ethics of education

In attempting to picture the ethics of Françoise Dolto in her practice as a psychoanalyst, we should consider first of all that she undertook to differentiate between morality and ethics. As a therapist, she was opposed to the ‘categorical imperatives’ of Kant, ‘moral obligation’ and maxims, addressed only to the ego, the empirical self. As she saw it, in weighing on the conscience, morality disregards the complete individual by ignoring the unconscious: ‘The dynamics of desire has no use for morality since the unconscious is unaware of the conflict of good and evil’ (F. Dolto, 1987, p. 131).

Dolto, in fact, recognized only one universal law, that of the taboo of incest. In short, she referred to no principle or purely theoretical moral code. There were at least two reasons for this. The first is that the human being is not confined to the ego, even if represented by the transcendental unity proposed by Kant; hence Dolto spoke to infants, whatever their physical or mental health, without bothering herself over whether or not they ‘reasoned’. The second reason stems from her discovery of the lack of oneness of the human being:

The human being is fundamentally three. For a human to appear, it is not enough just to place a man beside a woman. From the moment of its conception, the infant has a desire to live and grow. To the desire of its parents must be added that of the infant wishing to develop, to become a being endowed with speech and responsibility [...] The reason I wanted, from the age of 8, to become an ‘education doctor’, was because I had observed, in my family, what happened when the atmosphere became stormy—the children reacted straight away (B. This, F. Dolto, 1980, p. 10).

Rejecting any domination of the human person, she never intervened imperatively, but indicatively. She thus condemned any morality that might control a person and threaten a person through obedience or imitation. In the educational relationship, therefore, the risk of alienating the child’s desire in that of the adult seemed to her to be inevitable. Hence her wish always to ensure a comparison of desires between adults and children, because ‘if desire is always satisfied, it is the death of desire’ (F. Dolto, 1985, p. 226).

Thus, the fact that word and desire were not taken into account in the family threesome prompted Dolto to elaborate an ethical code of education. It is therefore not a coincidence if we find in her childhood the roots of this consideration of the link between these three desires, particularly through respect for the word—as the mediator of desire—by maintaining the oneness of person and desire. However, this support of the child, of whatever age and ability,

was in her view only possible through trust: 'For its development to be sustained, the child must be considered in relation to what lies ahead and trust be placed in the adult it aims to become' (F. Dolto, 1985, p. 230).

Further progress in understanding Dolto's ethics calls for a remark prior to any argument about their 'utility'. In what she has to say, she does not confront the reader with a will to convince or to provide justification. All she offers, in fact, is her own subjectivity, refusing to make 'her' truth 'the' truth. Dolto merely supplied a testimony, that of a Christian; her ethics can be understood solely as the meaning she gave to her life.

We could understand these ethics as the ethics of tolerance: 'Tolerance towards the different behaviour of each individual, self-confidence always restored to every pupil, the freedom left to everyone to express themselves, with no store ever being set by imitation or rivalry, with children being taught day by day the laws governing buying and selling and the sexuality of the country in which they live; this is how to prevent deficient moral training, a deficiency far more dangerous for a society's future than poor performance at school' (F. Dolto, 1986, p. 42).

The creation of the Maison Verte

The opening of the Maison Verte in Paris dates back to 1978. It is a place that takes in children from birth to age 3 accompanied by an adult. It represents a departure from the plan to build a day-care centre in the sense that children are never left alone at the Maison Verte, and it follows Dolto's original plan for organizing early prophylaxis.

Regarded as a place of transition, before admission to a crèche or nursery school, the Maison Verte mainly seeks to limit the adverse effects of an unprepared separation. By involving adults and children, a gradual separation is effected: 'The social group co-operates all the better as differences are signified in words. Diversity gets each and everyone to work together with due regard for everyone else' (F. Dolto, 1985, p. 413).

This transition through the mediation of language, which the Maison Verte attempts to prepare between the family unit and society at large, is based upon a major ethical presupposition, which is that every person seeks, very early on, to communicate with others. Hence Dolto's idea of restoring, in a social context, 'an invitation to comprehensible language, to camaraderie with children who are different, to mutual help' (F. Dolto, 1986, p. 409). This was something which impressed itself upon her day after day and alerted her since it is disregarded by adults: 'We are only in the very first stages of an essential discovery, which is that the human being is a language being from the moment of conception; that every human being is vested with desire; that there are potentialities which we support or we discourage' (F. Dolto, 1985, p. 415). This is particularly so since any violence surrounding this quest for contact corresponds to a traumatism, an 'early micro-neurosis'. These 'things unsaid' or 'misunderstandings' usually affect the autonomy of the child's desire, contributing to the emergence of emotional or even physiological troubles.

From this point of view, what Dolto (1985) observed was that there were a number of risks in keeping the child confined with its parents, a confinement reinforced by an urban environment. It is no surprise then that weaning should have been one of the prime considerations at the Maison Verte: 'It works for the prevention of weaning, which is the same thing as the prevention of violence and, consequently, of social tragedies' (F. Dolto, 1985, p. 396). Nor is it surprising that the success of the Maison Verte is to be explained by this accession to early independence offered to the child. Through this liberation, it ensured that there was no family alienation: 'The mother can thus, from one day to the next, cast off the slavery in which most mothers [...] become ensnared as victims of the exclusive care of their children, at great risk to the latter's education' (F. Dolto, 1986, pp. 409-10).

The main interest about the way in which the Maison Verte operates lies in the presence of parents reassuring children when they begin to explore, at their own pace, an

environment outside the family. The contacts between parents, accompanying persons and children, together with the pleasure they derive from them, amount to offering a new form of preparatory care, a form of social prophylaxis. Dolto described this early preparatory care as informing and dispelling misunderstandings: 'Preparatory care must, above all, enlighten the attitude of parents while the child is in the foetal stage, how they imagine the child and how they communicate with it; then, at birth and in the early months' (F. Dolto, 1985, p. 423).

The basic purpose of the Maison Verte is therefore to let children acquire the security of being their individual selves: 'One first has to be assured that one is oneself and that this "oneself" is in a state of security such that, no matter where, one knows what the body needs and one is not ensnared by a look or by what one hears' (F. Dolto, 1985, p. 416). For, as can be verified at each successful departure from the Maison Verte, the child leaves with a confidence acquired in and with the group.

The school at Neuville: a workshop for Françoise Dolto's educational thinking

The school was founded in 1973 by F. d'Ortoli, M. Amram and P. Lemaître in Neuville-du-Bosc, in Normandy. Every year for seven years, it took eight children into a single class. The school was subsequently transferred to the Château de Tachy, near Paris. There are now four classes (two primary and two secondary) with some forty children under the supervision of six adults.

With a curriculum extending from primary level to the fourth year of secondary education, this 'institutionalized living community' offers a great variety of educational opportunities (printshop, computer workshop, cinema club, photographic laboratory, etc.). The educational ideas, drawn essentially from the institutional pedagogy movement (Makarenko, Neill, Célestin and E. Freinet, Deligny, Oury and Vasquez), can be summed up in this phrase from Makarenko: 'It is not the educator who educates, but the environment'. Prompted by the idea of well-being and non-compulsory activities, this scheme for reconciling children with school has, through their active participation, made it possible to organize a cordial and stimulating collective existence.

Collaboration by the founders with Françoise Dolto began before the school was built and continued until 1979, the year she ended her private consultations. Up to then, she used to send them children who were receiving therapy from her. Since the school has a very mixed batch of pupils, it is quite common for children with serious psychological difficulties to be accepted. As Dolto saw it, taking children like this teaches the other children tolerance. 'The fact of seeing children who are wild and disturbed is a great help to other children since it shows them that life is not fun for everyone the whole time [...]; for them it is an introduction to the difficult life of humans, who are all the time caught between reality and the imaginary. They thus acquire a real understanding of the mind' (F. d'Ortoli, M. Amram, 1990, p. 101).

Dolto's influence subsequently made itself clearly felt through repeated meetings with the founders on the occasion of 'educational surveys'. One of the major consequences of this collaboration was brought to light through the discussion of wishes as part of the life of the school. The most interesting point around which the life of Neuville is organized concerns the 'grumbles' book and the meetings. To quote Dolto: 'Once the meeting becomes a place where everyone speaks without fear of being judged, or punished, the group [...] can enable all participants to communicate and so advance' (d'Ortoli & Amram, 1990, p. 60). All the children are able to write down all their complaints, ideas, and so on in a book. The book is then gone over, read and discussed at a general meeting at the end of the week.

All this institutional machinery works like a 'purification unit', and its operation has the effect of binding the group together. 'To express oneself in words is to purge everything from oneself that hinders mental circulation' (d'Ortoli & Amram, 1990, p. 155). This mechanism, fully described by Dolto, can be explained by the time-lag that exists between writing and the moment when the problem is dealt with. It is a very important mechanism, not to say a

discovery: that of going beyond and relativizing suffering. It is a transition after which children cease to lie: 'A child will lie on the spur of the moment but not after having had time to think' (d'Ortoli & Amram, 1990, p. 156). Likewise, although "'grumbling" represents a need for mediation in order to get out of a conflict-ridden, sterile and inextricable relationship' (d'Ortoli & Amram, 1990, p. 63), it can be seen that the community is not an agglomerate but a body linked with a place where the identity of each individual can take shape. This 'grumbles' book also represents a really good way of learning to read and write. The children prove the correctness of Dolto's central idea about the learning of reading, and understand that the book in question plays an active part in awakening the desire to be able to read and write.

Conclusion

Her brief experience of paediatrics and her subsequent discovery of psychoanalysis gave Françoise Dolto access to a therapeutic practice enabling her to apply ethical principles that were in conformity with her view of the human person. This path led her to develop a prophylaxis, put to the test in various institutional projects, with a 'socializing' or 'educational' value.

Psychoanalysis thus not only enabled her to bring the light of ethics stemming from it to bear on the therapeutic process, but also stimulated her in her educational and spiritual activity.

It was, no doubt, that feature of her thinking that prompted Dolto, in her relations with others, always to use speech for the benefit of the person, by calling or recalling each person to his or her archaic desire. This is perhaps the origin of what prompted in her readers and listeners that jubilant enthusiasm so decried thereafter. There is a paradox here between the rejection of any claim to set standards and any imitation, and the power to attract an extensive readership or audience that 'imitated' and 'set standards' and, above all, was not steeped in the ethical convictions that she alone knew to be essential to any application of her 'advice'.

The very inner distinctiveness of her therapeutic, educational and spiritual action no doubt explains the absence, as Dolto saw it, of pupils to whom she might have taught the essence of her practice, since her subjectivity—the sense of her genius, her faith—is not something that can be taught.

Notes

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The association 'Archives et documentation Française, 21 rue Cujas, 75005 Paris, Tel.: 01.40.51.72.05, Fax: 01.40.51.74.27, E-mail: dolto@wanadoo.fr, is at present the only centre where all the writings of Françoise Dolto can be consulted, together with all translations.

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