

ANNA MARIA PASSASEO  
*Editor*

CURRENT ISSUES  
IN MORAL MATTERS

A Call for Education



MESSINA  
UNIVERSITY  
PRESS

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*Editor*

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IN MORAL MATTERS**

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ETHICS OF SUCCESS AND PRAISE OF WASTE:  
PARADOXES OR TRENDS IN TODAY'S SEARCH FOR MEANING?

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SUMMARY: 1. The Ethics of Success in the Societies of Self-Celebratory Individualism. – 2. In an existential defense of waste. – 3. The concept of “waste” in education and its potential meanings. - 4. Conclusion.

*1. The Ethics of Success in the Societies of Self-Celebratory Individualism*

Contemporary society is marked by experiences and behaviors that, however excessive and sometimes pathological, are becoming the new “normalities”. What once defined the time of personal maturation, stemming from the natural pursuit of self-realization, recognition, and esteem from others, now has transformed into an obsessive - often premature - quest for success, power, wealth, and visibility.<sup>1</sup>

Through our narcissistic societies, we have ushered in the era of the *après-devoir*<sup>2</sup>, the post-duty era, a post-deontic epoch where the word “duty” has been delegitimized, resulting in almost no “compromise” on the ethical plane and a limited personal engagement regarding responsibility<sup>3</sup>. Ethics are replaced by aesthetics and performativity.

Indeed, ours is the age of self-celebratory individualism, of showcasing oneself, one's achievements, but also one's failures, which are obliged to become “epic fails”<sup>4</sup>. Both personal and others' failures are glorified but also trivialized, ridiculed, and stripped of educational meaning. It is no longer a means to learn from mistakes but has become a way to celebrate viral success if it becomes an “epic failure”, a grand occasion to garner attention and popularity in terms of “likes”.

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<sup>1</sup> Cfr. V. ANDREOLI, *L'uomo di vetro. La forza della fragilità*, Milano, Rizzoli, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Cfr. G. LIPOVETSKY, *Le crépuscule du devoir. L'éthique indolore des nouveaux temps démocratiques*, Paris, Gallimard, 1992.

<sup>3</sup> Cfr. Z. BAUMAN, *Le sfide dell'etica*, trad. it., Milano, Feltrinelli, 2018 [1993]; Z. BAUMAN, *Le nuove povertà*, trad. it., Roma, Castelvecchi, 2018 [2004b].

<sup>4</sup> Cfr. P. MAGAUDDA, G. BALBI (a cura di), *Fallimenti digitali. Un'archeologia dei “nuovi media”*, Milano, Unicopli, 2018.

In the society of self-celebratory individualism, we are effectively creating substitutions on both the existential and axiological planes, which have significant repercussions on the educational sphere.

We have replaced the 'other' with the narcissistic self<sup>5</sup>. We allow the other to touch our existence only if it serves to fulfill any of our needs or desires.

We have swapped ideals and values that once centered around the common good and solidarity<sup>6</sup> with pseudo-values that instead prioritize individual benefit, competition, and performance<sup>7</sup>. Exaggerated competition feeds, and indeed must feed, on a spectacularization and hyper-idealization of the Self, that gravely damages the education and mental health of children, adolescents, youth, adults, and even the elderly. It especially harms the younger generations to whom adults are issuing a paradoxical mandate: "Be yourself, but in my way!"<sup>8</sup>.

Young boys and girls are expected to mature according to grandiose expectations of success, popularity, beauty, that is, to become performers, but as the fragile adults and influencers of today demand. However, adolescents, unable to consistently meet these 'vampiric' social expectations, pay a high price in terms of low self-esteem, feelings of shame, a constant need to appear flawless, and a sense of failure. Evidence of this is seen in the fact that youngsters, unable to manage anxiety and expectations, exhibit a range of symptoms and behaviors, ranging from anxiety crises to panic attacks, eating disorders, self-isolation, self-cutting, and even suicide.

Furthermore, we have constructed a society where success lies in gossip, self-referential talk, at the expense of dialogue, a fundamental value and educational challenge for the future, for the entire world<sup>9</sup>. Dialogue forms the basis of every inter-relational, inter-generational, and inter-cultural educational process, thus becoming a privileged tool capable of building interdependence among individuals and nations, inspired by principles of equality, solidarity, and humanization.

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<sup>5</sup> Cfr. C. LASCH, *La cultura del narcisismo. L'individuo in fuga dal sociale in un'età di disillusioni collettive*, trad. it., Milano, Bompiani, 1981 [1979].

<sup>6</sup> Cfr. E. COLICCHI, *I valori in educazione e in pedagogia*, Roma, Carocci, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. A. HONNETH, *Riconoscimento e disprezzo. Sui fondamenti di un'etica post-tradizionale*, trad. it., Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 1993; U. GALIMBERTI, *La parola ai giovani. Dialogo con la generazione del nichilismo attivo*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Cfr. M. LANCINI, *Sii te stesso a modo mio. Essere adolescenti nell'epoca della fragilità adulta*, Milano, Raffaello Cortina, 2023.

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. D. LE BRETON, *Fuggire da sé. Una tentazione contemporanea*, trad. it., Milano, Raffaello Cortina, 2016 [2015].

We have substituted the value of freedom<sup>10</sup> - yearned for in every time and place - with an *imaginary freedom*<sup>11</sup>, often purely virtual, conceived solely as the absence of constraints and ties, a product of a hedonistic ethic summed up as 'I want everything and immediately' and 'Only I can decide what is good for me.' It's a freedom resulting from an adolescent and self-referential view of life, whose sole aim is to become collectors of pleasure without assuming responsibility.

We have built societies that fuel the value of subjectivism by distorting the concept of '*inter-esse*,' where the '*esse*' is constituted precisely through that '*inter*'<sup>12</sup>, that is, the being-*among* others, in that space that embodies mutual care and respect. This "*traità*" (*betweenness*)<sup>13</sup>, an original ontological structure, forms the relational and communal dimension, the encounter that gives meaning to our human existence, the space in which one can learn to be a person and feel part of a global and interdependent whole.

Therefore, we are facing an exacerbation of the concept of success, which represents one of the worst forms of ethical poverty, because it causes one to lose sight of the meaning of existence, discourages individuals from listening to their true needs and desires, and renders them incapable of accepting their own and others' vulnerabilities.

## *2. In an existential defense of waste*

Ensnared within the logic of efficiency and consumerism, today's individuals, both young and adult, are adept at the art of "consuming life". Consequently, they have become intolerant towards any form of frustration, incapable of dealing with any delay in gratification. Faced with a denial of their needs, they become capable of reacting fiercely and inhumanly.

As Alain Ehrenberg asserts, for many, today's suffering is not the result of a scarcity of goods and means, but rather the abundance of possibilities. The malaise of living and the "fatigue of being oneself" stem from the "weight of the possible"<sup>14</sup>, which may lead to responses characterized by forms of new addiction, depressive implosions, or aggressive outbursts.

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<sup>10</sup> Cfr. E. COLICCHI, A.M. PASSASEO (a cura di), *Educazione e libertà nel tempo presente. Percorsi, modelli, problemi*, Messina-Civitanova Marche, Armando Siciliano, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Cfr. M. MAGATTI, *Libertà immaginaria. Le illusioni del capitalismo tecno-nichilista*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2009.

<sup>12</sup> Cfr. R. ESPOSITO, *Communitas. Origine e destino della comunità*, Torino, Einaudi, 2006 (vers. ampliata e aggiornata) [1998].

<sup>13</sup> Cfr. M. BUBER, *Il principio dialogico e altri saggi*, A. Poma (a cura di), trad. it., Cinisello Balsamo, San Paolo, 1993.

<sup>14</sup> Cfr. A. EHRENBURG, *La fatigue d'être soi. Dépression et société*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 1998.



How is it possible that an increase in choices does not lead to greater satisfaction, but rather to increased feelings of inadequacy and dissatisfaction? Perhaps humans are searching in the wrong directions. In reality, having an excess of everything and this "excessmania" (unrestrained consumption, compulsive shopping, etc.) merely serves to fill voids with anything that appears as a semblance of happiness. Thus, modern men and women end up being slaves to what others want them to be<sup>15</sup> and slaves to anything that temporarily satisfies their needs. The key point is to understand that success and power are merely anesthetics that temporarily numb the discomfort of living, anxieties, and fears. However, success and power are not the solution.

Even more disturbing is that today individuals apply the disposable dynamics of things to people. Just as consumer goods are bought, used, and discarded, people seduce, use, and discard each other, leaving each other often via WhatsApp or social media. Individuals become waste. This unlimited consumption of both things and people represents the asphyxiation of ethics, which inevitably leads to crisis and self-consumption<sup>16</sup>.

Yet, even crisis can become an opportunity for a change of course and hope if, starting from it, one begins to reflect on what truly matters in life, on what is essential and what is incidental, on how to reconsider desires, failures, and waste, and how to learn from them<sup>17</sup>.

In defense of waste, I would like to start from the basic existential idea that everyone desires to be happy. However, setbacks, shattered expectations, and broken dreams convince the individual that happiness lies outside of oneself and must be sought "externally" - travels to the ends of the world, real and virtual quests, extreme forms of control over one's body and mind, etc. Men and women are convinced that everything that can make them happy and successful is far from home, from their city, from their relationships, and most importantly, outside of themselves.

Upon closer examination, many of the activities offered by the digital society are a push to move away from oneself, to challenge one's own limits (consider challenges), to immortalize oneself as happy and joyous even when one is not inwardly so. Consequently, individuals throw themselves into a series of activities (even good ones) that they think can bring them happiness: working hard, pursuing a career, studying and writing incessantly, holding prestigious roles, and more. What is done externally should actually help the individual to enter within oneself, to embark on an internal

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<sup>15</sup> Cfr. R. GIRARD, *Menzogna romantica e verità romanzesca. Le mediazioni del desiderio nella letteratura e nella vita*, L. Verdi-Vighetti (a cura di), trad. it., Milano, Bompiani, 2005 [1961].

<sup>16</sup> Cfr. Z. BAUMAN, *Vite di scarto*, trad. it., Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2011<sup>4</sup> [2004a].

<sup>17</sup> Cfr. H. ARENDT, *Vita activa. La condizione umana*, introduzione di A. Dal Lago, trad. it., Milano, Bompiani, 1994 [1958].

journey, which is the most arduous journey, one that almost no one wishes to take, except when compelled by significant problems<sup>18</sup>.

Therefore, what was initially good not only becomes a compulsion to act (leading to forgetting the true motivations behind the anancastic need for success) but in the long run, tends to demotivate and prevent acceptance of what one has become. It does not measure up to the expectations placed on oneself and the idealizations made about oneself and others. If a failure occurs, it becomes even more apparent that pursuing success, not only fails to satisfy one's deep needs, but also erodes and diminishes the existential and relational depth of one's life<sup>19</sup>.

However, it is thanks to a failure, to something not going as anticipated, to a disappointment, that it is possible to change course and turn failure and waste into an educational opportunity. Waste, as Maria Grazia Contini writes, can become a «propulsive and dynamic element between what we have managed to achieve within the limits of our concrete experiences and the horizon of the possible[-other] that, opened up in front of us, always and again indicates other paths and further objectives»<sup>20</sup>.

At this point, we can outline an initial educational path that involves *accepting what one has become*, not in terms of a resigned acceptance, but as a pacification with oneself<sup>21</sup>. Not everything in life is repairable, and as long as a person spends all their time trying to repair themselves, it means that they have not yet accepted themselves with their own limits and fragilities<sup>22</sup>. It is only through self-acceptance that one can begin to see life through different lenses, to stop blaming oneself, to understand that sometimes the choices made were the only ones available. Only then will one be able to accept failure and reassess waste.

Embracing failure means trying to understand what is hidden within that failure and what can be learned from it. If experienced in this way, waste becomes an «emblematic figure of education»<sup>23</sup>, to be praised because it urges pushing the bar further and, at the same time, teaches to accept failures (without narcissistic wounds) as an integral part of every individual's life.

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<sup>18</sup> Cfr. P. BARONE, *Il bisogno di introversione. La vocazione segreta del mondo contemporaneo*, Milano, Raffaello Cortina, 2023.

<sup>19</sup> R.G. ROMANO, *Genitori e "figli della rete". Mutamenti antropologici e nuove sfide educative*, «La Famiglia», 56/266, Brescia, 2022, pp. 219-230.

<sup>20</sup> M.G. CONTINI, *Elogio dello scarto e della resistenza*, Bologna, Clueb, 2009, p. 14.

<sup>21</sup> Cfr. R. GUARDINI, *Accettare se stessi*, trad. it., Brescia, Morcelliana, 2011<sup>5</sup> [1987].

<sup>22</sup> Cfr. R.G. ROMANO, *La sete generativa. Ermeneutiche pedagogiche e percorsi formativi*, Brescia, Morcelliana-Scholè, 2018.

<sup>23</sup> M.G. CONTINI, *Op. cit.*, p. 14.

### 3. The concept of “waste” in education and its potential meanings

It is fundamental to understand that the construct of waste embodies four meanings that can become directions for education.

The first meaning of waste refers to an educational proposal that envisages - as a formative moment - an interval of reflection and elaboration between the proposal and the solicited response. This time is necessary for the other person to evaluate the proposed plan and adjust it according to their possibilities and desires. It does not mean to promote grand expectations of success, popularity, or beauty, nor manipulative communication that drives towards performance and excellence. It is not about immediate freedom, but rather waiting patiently for the other's growth. Waiting carries with it the power to make the individual understand if what they desire is truly what they want. For example, within the 'no' - a word children, adolescents, and young adults are no longer accustomed to hearing - lies a great educational potential, as it allows time for desire to mature. Any contribution aimed at fostering the development of another person can yield generative effects only after a long, very long, winter-like period<sup>24</sup>.

In the era of hyper-hedonism, where pleasure must be compelling and immediate, it is also important to learn perseverance by waiting. As Paul Ricoeur suggests, «commitment is not the virtue of an instant [...]; it is the virtue of duration»<sup>25</sup>, of fidelity, and perseverance. Simone Weil connects the term 'waiting' to the Greek expression ἐν ὑπομονῇ (*en hypomonè*), which literally means 'to stay under, to remain within, to dwell', and consequently, to persevere<sup>26</sup>. Perseverance is an educational element of fundamental importance because it teaches a person to remain without fleeing from difficulties, to dwell in an unresolved situation without escaping, to stay in a challenging relationship without leaving, to inhabit the unknown and the incomprehensible without immediately wanting to resolve it. *Hypomonè* teaches a person creative fidelity, remaining faithful to the original inspiration while being open to novelty by courageously undertaking new paths. It leads individuals to acknowledge their personal incompleteness, fostering patience towards oneself and others and teaching respect of others' time, which often does not coincide with one's own.

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<sup>24</sup> R.G. ROMANO, *Riprogettare l'esistenza partendo dal futuro. Un itinerario dal desiderio alla speranza*, in S. POLENGHI, F. CEREDA, P. ZINI (Eds.), *La responsabilità della pedagogia nelle trasformazioni dei rapporti sociali. Storia, linee di ricerca e prospettive*, Lecce-Brescia, Pensa MultiMedia, 2021, pp. 468-475.

<sup>25</sup> P. RICOEUR, *La persona*, trad. it., Brescia, Morcelliana, 1997 [1983-1990], p. 32.

<sup>26</sup> Cfr. S. WEIL, *Attesa di Dio*, trad. it., Milano, Adelphi, 2008 [1950].

The second meaning of waste is less common and involves a shift, a change in direction, an exit from the path outlined by the educator. It is essential to recognize that there will always be a distance between the path indicated by the educator and the one chosen by the learner. It is crucial for the individual to perceive that the educator does not expect to know what the right path is or what their happiness might be. This presupposes that the educator is the first to be convinced that each person has the right to find their own path and can deviate from the educational proposal.

As Contini writes, waste is the «'distance between': between educational planning and its outcomes, between the timing of our words and the timing of responses from our educational interlocutors, between what we and they are and the horizon of the possible»<sup>27</sup>. The distance between what we are and what we could or will be always marks the starting point, the generative position of educational planning. Hypothesizing the educational potential of what is now considered waste implies believing in the strength and fragility of every human being and in their educability always and in every condition.

Generally, the abrupt deviation of the learner from the educational proposal is due to excessively high expectations nurtured by the educator, causing a fear of failure. Explaining to young people that the discrepancy between the educational proposal and their actual capabilities is less severe than they perceive, often does not serve much purpose. Rational explanations do not always aid in understanding. In family and affection-based education, we have shifted from 'You must obey!' to 'You must understand! I would like you to understand!'.

However, young people do not always fully understand, and, above all, educators and parents are not always obliged to explain everything in an attempt to obtain what they ask for. There is a pedagogical weakness among adults who have become incapable of dealing with conflict with their children and, to avoid it, are willing to provide any kind of explanation to ensure that young people 'understand.' The 'rupture' and the suffering with children have become intolerable for adults. From this new situation, a significant amount of literature has emerged on the importance - undeniably - of empathizing with children and young people, understanding their difficulties, expressing serenity, and having confidence in their abilities<sup>28</sup>. Yet, at time, this emphasis on empathy hides the adult incapability of establishing rules and enforcing them.

The third meaning of waste is *letting go*, which is the most challenging action in education, without which the entire generative educational process risks being

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<sup>27</sup> M.G. CONTINI, *Op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>28</sup> Cfr. A. BELLINGRERI, *Per una pedagogia dell'empatia*, Milano, Vita e Pensiero, 2005; M. FABBRI, *Controtempo. Una duplice narrazione tra crisi ed empatia*, Bergamo, Junior, 2015; M. FABBRI, *Problemi di empatia. La pedagogia delle emozioni di fronte al mutamento degli stili educativi*, Pisa, ETS, 2008.

nullified. The gap is between the emotional-affective desire to hold onto something and the rational comprehension of having to let go. Without this action, educational care turns into possession, control, and mutual dependence. The litmus test of generativity could be seen precisely in letting go of the other person and allowing them to grow autonomously, to increase their freedom, and to discover, in turn, their own generativity<sup>29</sup>. In this letting go of the other, there is the handing over of the baton, authorizing others to bring to fruition what has been sown, but in their own way. Without this loss and trust in the other, nothing new can emerge<sup>30</sup>.

The fourth and final meaning concerns existential waste, referring to what is considered 'marginal,' 'residual,' or 'of little value' in relation to everything that matters in our consumeristic societies<sup>31</sup>.

We are talking about groups and individuals who are marginal and weak in terms of power, but who, from their position, manage to pose questions and open breaches in the granite walls of postmodern certainties. Naturally, we refer to the marginalized, the poor, and those who do not conform to the current rules of success and the aesthetic canons imposed by celebrities, aesthetic consumers, and hedonists. These groups, minority subjects, actively responsible and critical, previously considered losers (pacifists, environmentalists, the many volunteers in vulnerable areas worldwide), themselves discarded in relation to groups and subjects who sometimes impose themselves violently, manage to achieve unexpected results and visibility. Contini writes:

Their message of justice and peace, respect, and solidarity plays a valuable role in pedagogical consciousness: anticipating, within the realm of possibility, educational goals that are currently unachievable, but could potentially be achieved in the future, who knows. Once again, waste is envisaged, between the given condition of our 'thrownness' into the here and now in which 'we must' live – without evading its tasks and difficulties – and the possible direction chosen, to be pursued and built with the ethical commitment of our planning for the future<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup> Cfr. P. BERTOLINI, *La costruzione della libertà*, in E. COLICCHI, A.M. PASSASEO (a cura di), *Educazione e libertà nel tempo presente. Percorsi, modelli, problemi*, Messina-Civitanova Marche, Armando Siciliano, 2008, pp. 151-160.

<sup>30</sup> Cfr. H.G. GADAMER, *Educare è educarsi*, trad. it e a cura di Mario Gennari, Genova, Il Melangolo, 2014.

<sup>31</sup> Cfr. Z. BAUMAN, *Homo consumens. Lo sciame inquieto dei consumatori e la miseria degli esclusi*, trad. it., Trento, Erickson, 2006.

<sup>32</sup> M.G. CONTINI, *Op. cit.*, p. 17.

#### *4. Conclusion*

Are success and waste paradoxes or possible trends in today's search for meaning? If success is understood as achieving power, money, and visibility, and by waste, everything that deviates from these imperatives, the two terms become not only paradoxes, but also antinomies.

However, if success is instead defined as the ability to commit ourselves, take on the responsibilities of growth, and help others grow, allowing ourselves to be challenged by life's questions and embracing fragilities and failures, then even what is considered waste becomes a fundamental existential and educational dimension, generating meaning.

Understood in this way, the praise of waste is a serious axiological-educational proposal that primarily aims to reconsider the values, priorities, and socio-educational objectives that our societies impose and, consequently, to value alternative experiences that do not conform to the logic of being first 'at all costs.' These experiences are often ignored and marginalized by efficiency-driven and hyper-technologized societies.

Therefore, success will consist of the ability to bring together all these aspects that individualistic and self-aggrandizing societies conceal and reject, but which constitute possible directions for educational and projective meaning, along with that openness that determines the possibility of existence, today and always.

Educational commitment, in this sense, takes the form of an existential stance that, on one hand, counters both resigned passivity and the anancasm (obsession) of rampant and competitive ambition, and, on the other hand, educates to 'dare' happiness as a horizon of meaning derived from our solidarity and truly human existence with everyone in the world, even if away from the spotlight.

