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Education as an Autotelic Value

KEYWORDS ABSTRACT

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The article presents arguments justifying the perception of education as an autotelic value. The aim of this text is to provide a philosophical and pedagogical analysis of education as a phenomenon that requires constant updating in social awareness. The autotelic nature of education has been discussed in the context of three of its components. These consist of ideas, people and institutions. Each of the components contains its own specific limitations. The context for considerations includes both historical premises and specific socio-cultural conditions which I discussed more broadly in my own concept of metahistory, described in the study on the pedagogical thought. In the methodological layer I refer to the metahistory of ideas, analysing the axiological imponderabilia of education and emphasizing its advantages on the one hand, and its limitations and potential on the other hand. I also remain in line with constructivism the basic idea of which is fundamental to the following research, and which was expressed by K. Ajdukiewicz who said that our image of the world constructed from the data of experience depends on the choice of concepts. As the result of my research, I would like to provide a convincing argumentation in favour of the inalienability of the concept of education as a specific categorical scaffolding in the field of scientific interpretations, and the concept of real education as a kind of frame in the construction of our humanity. The article is open-ended and constitutes an invitation for a discussion.

Education and pedagogy

The term “autotelic” is defined as being the highest goal in itself and, at the same time, it rejects the pragmatic approach assuming that other, higher goals can be achieved with its help. Examples of autotelic values include work, love or friendship. From my perspective, education, if it is to be seen as an autotelic value, must not only be valuable in itself, but it must also be a condition for achieving other values considered lower or derivative to it. There are no values above it to justify its valence, whereas education justifies other goals and values. Without love and friendship, a meaningful life would probably be unpleasant but possible; without education it would lose the value of a fully human life. This is also pointed out by the interpretation of culture formulated not by humanists, of whom such a viewpoint is typical, but by ethologists. It can be reconstructed as follows: culture is a set of information or behaviours taken over from representatives of the same species through learning in a community. Leaving aside the debate as to whether animals create culture, we are certain that, for humans, it is an essential environment. Immanuel Kant made our humanity depend on the internalisation of its values. Thus, we are human insofar as, through education, we manage to take over a certain set of values from the representatives of our species. Without education or outside of education, we are only apes living in a certain community but on the margins of what can be considered its essence for our humanity is a function of the enculturation process fulfilled through education (Kant 1999).

The history of education shows us that our ancestors deeply believed in the idea of pedagogy, as they believed that education makes people good, more perfect, more efficient in their creation, and more socially integrated¹. Arguments against pedagogy in contemporary Polish pedagogical literature were put forward, among others, by Zbigniew Kwieciński, who presented a multitude of its variations and simplifications². However, the strongest argument – following the critics of pedagogy – that weakens its value is the current war in Ukraine. It turns out that the lie of political propaganda outweighs the truth of education. In the name of their convenience of life (the West), and because of unjustified hatred (Russia), people are ready to (more

¹ A good example of such historically present pedagogy include the words by C. A. Helvetius whom I am quoting after the publication by A. Nowicki (2022: 41): “In order to do good, one has to be an educated person. [...] Ignorance is what causes most disasters in the world”. “The more enlightened the nations are; the more vivid the exchange of thoughts is among them, the greater the power and activity of the common mind are” (ibid. 42).

² The author quoted his own interpretation of the concept from 1978: “Pedagogy is a trend in thinking and acting which is based on the thesis that education changes the world; that the ultimate shape of the world, social relationships, situations in families, and personal lives depends on how a person is educated. If this is so, «the Republic of Poland will be the same as the education of its youth»; education be the same as schools; schools be the same as teachers; teachers will be the same as schools that educate them, etc.” (Kwieciński 2011: 90).

or less consciously) accept dehumanisation which is against the recognised values of education. The cold, or even cynical, realism of politics is the driving force behind the great social processes in which education is only a periphery. What is shocking is how easily this negative process occurs. Is there a way out of this aporia? Has education lost its autotelic value? In my opinion, it does have an autotelic value, and this value is all the greater the more the reality of war is driving us into the abyss of its negation. Certainly, education cannot be considered an exclusive factor of human well-being, but it may help us get out of this civilisation collapse. First, however, let us look at it from a negative perspective – what the world would look like if education did not exist. Such unconditional descolarisation (for this is how education is historically and contemporarily perceived) would mean a state of primeval savagery; spiritual barbarism. People, the vast majority of whom are selfish, would pursue their own needs at the expense of everyone else. Those who remember martial law in Poland and the empty shelves, have certainly not forgotten the aggression of the crowd in the struggle for elementary goods. What brings people together is communication, and the mutual exchange of information (and goods). However, without preparation for such communication, we would probably grind our teeth at each other. Education builds into us the necessary codes to see others as partners who are different from ourselves, but who are subjects, too. We know the stages of human moral development according to I. Kant and S. Hessen, and we understand that certain value systems are the basis for human functioning. And here the paradox of pedagogism is revealed. Values are the condition of our humanity, but the awareness of their validity, their internalisation, their anthropagogic sense (Sztobryn 2020) appears when a person reaches a certain level of development. Thus, pedagogism, as interpreted by Kwieciński, may have emerged late in the evolution of our species and does not have a universal meaning, but gained strength with that development. Pedagogism as a certain idea is relativized to place and time. In this context, the validity of values increases rather than decreases as we approach the present time. These considerations, however, do not aim at defending pedagogism, but they are to justify the thesis that education is a value in itself, albeit one that is threatened by many factors that can have a destructive influence on it. If we look at Abraham Maslow's pyramid, the developmental needs that are the most important from the pedagogical point of view emerge late, so the primary factors (physiological needs, safety needs) are the first to block the attractiveness of education. The competition of needs when there is a deficit of opportunities to satisfy them is an elementary source of limiting the power of education, and it is used by politicians to practise social engineering. The perception of education as a value, although it appears early in human ontogeny, in fact concerns its later, more mature states in the sense that the awareness of its autotelic character (if it appears at all) appears only as a result of the complex process of "being in education", its experience and subsequent (self)

creation. An analysis of the factors that block the power of education and undermine its value should more strongly emphasize its unique nature. Each education has its own specific, cultural trait derived from what Julian Ochorowicz called the national character (Ochorowicz 1907). Transferring education systems *en bloc*, from one place to another, is not only a misunderstanding, but also a risk, precisely because the places in which these models are to be implemented are different. Thus, there is no single education common to all, and, as a result, the autotelic character of education is specific and unique to each community. This also applies to the global community, which is a unity of multiplicity.

Attributes of education

Education has an analogous function to that of a ritual of passage, although it is not a one-off event, but a continuous thing. From this perspective, it becomes clearer that we are dealing with a permanent need to overcome our own anomie. What is uniquely human is to work on building oneself up internally. Thus, for all those who see autotelic value in education, the position of Kant, rather than that of Arthur Schopenhauer, who negated it, is close. People who believe in the autotelic value of education are aware of the fact that it is only one of numerous social processes, but they also know it has specific attributes. Education concerns everyone, but everyone differently; it is pluralistic, but, in connection with the developing personality, it is a unity; it is an ever-updating novelty, although it is largely influenced by tradition. Édouard Claparède unilaterally noticed its functional character when he claimed that education makes it possible for a man to adjust to the environment in the same manner as it happens in biological processes. In today's rapidly changing reality, adjustment is not possible in the way it was designed at the beginning of the 20th century. We are dealing with a rapidly accelerating process of continuous and complex interaction between a human being and his/her environment. Adjustment is no longer seen as a passive, once and for all adaptation to specific conditions of existence, but as the creation of the reality in which tradition and the future are the specific vectors of our presence in the present time.

Limitations and potential of education

Even teachers look at education from the perspective of its economic function, which would be more understandable among, for example, sociologists or economists, but is far from capturing the deep layers of meaning hidden in its pedagogical view (Grzelak, Roszko-Wójtowicz 2017). The pedagogical point of view cannot accept the

category of human capital as an indicator of the functional value of education³. This idea is reductive, as it takes away the subjectivity of individuals participating in large social processes⁴. Education, if it is not simply a manipulation of people (and, by its very nature, it cannot be a manipulation), recognises what educators of culture have repeatedly claimed, i.e. the inalienability of the individual's value and the fact that he/she is irreplaceable. In this deeper sense, the essence of education is the *metanoia* taking place in each individual and in the collective subject. This subjective, individualistic or personalistic point of view, does not imply the negation of the social element. In my view, it is its necessary principle.

It is also possible to look at the autotelic value of education in a different manner, and to reflect on why it is so poorly exposed in social life. For obvious reasons, I am not referring to global problems which, due their complexity and multiplicity, exceed the framework of this work. I am more interested in the situation in Poland. First, we are dealing with the increasing centralisation of education, with the authorities setting the tone and direction of its development (although "stagnation" would probably be a better word here). Second, education, which is always subordinated to relativized politics, to a single religion, and to the ideas of ministers of education, does not have the opportunity to reveal its full value. Public school, from primary schools to universities, is extremely pauperised, which, in turn, facilitates its instrumentalization. Absurd parameterisation destroys what, in education, is its bloodstream. In the place of real work of school and in the place of original scientific research, superficial and unreliable rankings were introduced. Thus, a scientifically good article has some value for an employee's evaluation when he/she publishes it in a high-scoring journal, or no value at all when the text appears in a journal with a long tradition but no such scoring. The sickly scrutiny of every aspect of a teacher's work makes him/ her guilty before they even make a mistake. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that people who

³ The notion of human capital, absorbing aspects such as knowledge, skills, or individual characteristics of an employee, seems to lose the ontic and anthropological character of education. Without it, as Kant already wrote, we cannot rise from the animal to the fully human level. Human capital treats human qualities functionally, depersonalises them and determines what they are good for; what role they can play in the process of economic growth. The autotelic character of education makes us see not only the subjectivity of each individual, but also his or her unique, non-schematic construction in a specific space of time and culture, up to autonomous and creative self-fulfilment. Only secondarily to this process can the so-called "human capital" be taken into account. Education, if it is not artificial, must have a human face.

⁴ This is well illustrated by the thesis forged by E. Durkheim, which was radicalized in Soviet communism and, to some extent, sustained today in the notion of human capital. According to the thesis, the only specific reality is the society. Cf. Chmaj 1963: 229–240. J. Gnitecki gave this phenomenon a more generalised nature, writing about the factors favouring the marginalisation of education. Such factors include "making education based on: 1) one objective paradigm, 2) one, ordered and harmonious, vision of the world, 3) one imposed socialization norm, 4) one, strictly defined, standard of curriculum requirements" (Gnitecki 2006: 18).

were genuinely committed to the profession are quitting the job. The cheapest type of school organisation – Herbartianism, is still dominant although it was strongly criticised a century ago. Fortunately, it is not the only type of school organisation we know. Nevertheless, the achievements of the contemporary pedagogical thought do not match the patterns of action in the traditional school. We are preparing students to live and work in a reality which is different than the one they find in their workplace. Finally, education, despite great declarations, is being pushed to the periphery of social life, just like health care and, until recently, the system of defence. All of these factors seem to be the evidence of (at least) the weakness of education, if not its lack of autotelic value. However, this is not the case. In this seemingly poor school, we have a lot of great teachers, and – contrary to the schematic class-lesson system – great students. Also, despite the intervention of politicians and orthodox individuals, a significant part of the society are capable of independent, critical and creative thinking. It is precisely this immanent presence of the autotelic value of education that counteracts these numerous and harmful factors, although it does not eliminate them. It acts as a kind of osmotic barrier which stops and eliminates at least some of these factors.

Education can be discussed in the context of at least three of its components. Education is a certain cultural idea, historically present in the healthy tissue of the society. Also, education includes formalised institutions that, at least in the assumption and mission, are meant to serve the development of the previous component. Finally, education is the people who are “subject” to it, and who are its emissaries. Each of these elements has its own distinctive attributes and connections with the others. The fact that these three primary components must come together in education already points to possible difficulties.

First, we are dealing with the historical discontinuity of education. We have a very rich national tradition from, at least, the time of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment to the remarkable explosion of the Polish philosophy of education of the interwar period. Along the way, however, we had a major collapse in the form of Russianization and Germanization of Polish education in the era of the partitions and after 1945, when it was again subject to hostile Soviet indoctrination. It was also indoctrinated by right-wing political circles after 1989. The problem, therefore, is the coordination of the education of the Polish society (and I mean permanent education) with the institutional and non-institutional environment, and with a clear definition of the ideas with which we would like to associate modern national education. If we want to refer directly to the distant and closer tradition, it would be conservatism, which, in its extreme form, will destroy such education. If we think of reaching for foreign models (which is the case, e. g., in academic pedagogy), it turns out that although these models are cognitively attractive, they cannot be directly copied into the Polish reality. We can

even talk about a certain tradition of approaching this issue in Polish humanities⁵. In this situation, writing texts in English does not determine the autotelic value of education, although it is useful in this sense that the value of education and global language is characterised by a certain universality. Thus, the only sensible solution would be to seek a concept of national education that carries our best traditions and corresponds to the mentality of the nation, while, at the same time, participates in the global pedagogical thought and is able to design a visionary concept of the education of the future. This will not be done by politicians because it requires specialised training and different competences, and it will not be done by the pedagogical community itself, because it lacks the necessary tools. This brings us to the second component, which is people.

So much has already been written about pedeutology, and so many expectations have been built up for the pedagogical staff, that their aggregate fulfilment is absurd, especially because of the fact that the environment is expected to integrate itself into the existing educational system.⁶ Meanwhile, the basic requirement for autotelic education is to understand it in such a way that it presupposes the preparation of the teachers themselves, and even more of their pupils, for the undefined civilisation of the future. This is not done by school education limited by the so-called ‘curriculum minimum’, nor (contrary to the assumptions) is it possible in academic education based on a corporate way of thinking and schematically included in syllabuses, formalised learning outcomes and ECTS points. The autotelic character of education can only be expressed in education that is genuinely open and not artificial. Education should be bottom-up and free from schematic solutions, as in such an environment the entire educational community is focused on self-exploration and independent research work, taking into account the unique characteristics of personalities, along with their spontaneous creativity. As long as education is not fully open and free from political or religious inclusions, it will not externalise its autotelic value.

The third component, which is connected with the above-mentioned two components, includes institutions. The very name indicates that they have the strongest influence on the fact that the autotelic value of education cannot be revealed.

⁵ Such an opinion can be found, among others, in the views of K. Twardowski, as well as in contemporary writing – in veiled form, and in the thesis quoted by J. Kojkoła: “to reliably analyse and evaluate those thoughts, ideas and concepts that can significantly threaten both Polish national philosophy and Polish identity. Therefore, it is essential to balance the influences of foreign philosophies. Only in such conditions can they beneficially influence the state and condition of the native philosophy” (Kojkoła 2021: 17); or in a more radical form, as in the monograph by A. Smolański who argues that “for some time (the twentieth century) pedagogy has given the impression of being a science that does not produce any significant discoveries (apart from abundant dictionary variety)” by explicitly calling them “the coded language of corporate snobs” (Smolański 2009: 26 and 14).

⁶ A philosophical-historical characteristics of a teacher as one who carries human values in himself and in his work (an independent teacher), was presented by A. Smolański (2006: 16–22).

Institutions tend to be a relatively permanent component of human civilisations. The school, as we know it from our own experience, is not significantly different from Johann Sturm's class-lesson system. The distance between the Renaissance and the present day, which should not be measured in time but in the huge advancement of our civilisation, indicates that we do not have to reform the existing institutions, which carry within them all the old patterns of the past (so, by definition, are dead), but that we need to radically change our way of thinking about the institutional support of education of the future. For this, we need timeless, visionary minds such as that of Bronisław Ferdynand Trentowski, because such minds will most fully experience, understand and articulate the value of autotelic education. Therefore, the task is open.

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