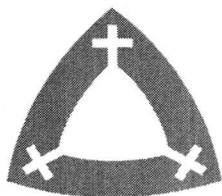


**Catholic University in Ružomberok
Faculty of Education**



**MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II. 2016
"Current challenges and trends in the social sciences"**

Ružomberok 2017

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WHY DO WE NEED HUMANITIES?⁹⁰

Lukáš Švihura

Abstract

The article is a philosophical reflection of the current status of the humanities in Slovakia. In many areas of our society there is an evident deficit in humanities-science knowledge, reflected also in parliamentary election results in 2016 and having serious consequences on our society. The article therefore suggests the possibility of transposing the knowledge of the humanities, particularly philosophy, in the educational process appropriate to the character of a pluralistic liberal democracy in the 21st century.

Keywords: Humanities, Philosophy, Education, Plurality, Ethics

Introduction

The public discourse is full of statements backing up the idea to reduce not only the number of universities and colleges but also the number of courses and students of the humanities. The arguments in favor of this proposition are backed up by the interests of the impersonal entity called "labor market". However, as pointed out by E. Višňovský (2014), universities have cultural and intellectual mission and do not aim to fill the market. It also means the mission of universities is to create people who will be able to live in the ever-changing and contingent⁹¹ environment. This process should be backed up by humanities education because it provides knowledge that can be applied in the context of individual human existence: when solving conflicts of values, moral dilemmas, critical attitude to social issues etc. Apparently, this thinking was proposed by J. Dewey (1998, p. 478) when he said that "the absence of a genuinely humanistic knowledge is a great source of our problems – that is why we need active human science." Furthermore, he adds that "Today, it is especially important to develop methods of scientific research which would provide us with humanitarian or ethical knowledge we miss so much" (ibid., p. 479).

Pluralism versus uniformity

In this article we would like to outline the value of humanities education through the philosophical analysis of the problem of pluralism, relying on the findings of selected authors who support their findings with their empirical research in the field of sociology, cultural studies and other sciences. The philosophical analysis of the problem of pluralism is up-to-date since we are confronted with radical difference in lifestyles and the rights of those who vehemently articulate for this otherness. We are speaking about the emancipation of sexual minorities and following the influence of massive migration flows, we must also address the plurality of cultures that have fixed different civilizational patterns of behavior. In short, we are in the time of the booming pluralism.

In terms of ethnic and cognitive certainty and traditional values the current pluralistic situation is often unclear. Z. Bauman expressed this situation as follows (1996, p. 213): "The social space of a modern man is made up of the islands of importance, spread across huge areas deprived of meaning: each island is a paradise of knowledge in the middle of a semantic desert deprived of characteristic features and focal points." In a situation of radical pluralism without ontic and cognitive certainty a need to hold on the nearest fixed point ostensibly providing such an assurance easily arises. With regard to politics, this trend is gradually

becoming visible with the rise of the radical right in the European Union⁹². Potential outbreak of this negative aspect, manifesting itself at democratic political scenes and in societies themselves was described by the postmodernism theorist and philosopher W. Welsch who dealt with the problems of pluralism, and who despite the affirmative attitude towards postmodern pluralism stated: "where people part their ways with the usual standards and where the transition to a large number of different orientations leads to a situation of arbitrariness a call for a leader may get followers" (Welsch 1993b, p. 18). The important thing is not to get hold of the first populist and demagogic rhetoric but rather learn how to navigate through the situation of radical pluralism. This is also one of the reasons for preserving humanities and university education.

However, we do not want to give the mistaken impression that pluralism is a negative phenomenon that has to be perceived in a negative ways. The article also provides a positive definition of pluralism, as stated by Sisáková O. (2001, p. 177): "The plurality of options gives a positive feeling from the wealth a life gives us, its unique moments, unrepeatability decisions and so on. The appreciation of pluralism as the value of life is reflected in the emphasis that is being put on otherness of its individual manifestations - the plurality and the enjoyment of the plural. In other words plurality is the concern regarding aesthetics cultivation." Despite positive-minded attributes of plurality today's empiricism convinces us of a negative approach towards the plurality, as evidenced by the success of the radical right-wing party in the parliamentary election of 2016, let alone by the discussions on social networks. This negative attitude is starting to manifest itself in the totalitarian political thinking which does not oppress (only) minorities but also interferes into the artists performances, not providing already approved funds allocated by the Ministry of Culture for organizing cultural events etc.⁹³ With this continuing trend we can expect that with the support of such arguments (in relation to the labor market) humanities, social sciences, arts bodies and various institutions working on the basis of pluralism, without which their existence is meaningless, will be dissolved and abolished. These claims are in no way a forecast, they are just simply outlining a possible state of things that needs to be avoided early on. That is why we insist on the view that we should not negate pluralism, as only pluralism prevents totalitarian uniformity. We should conform to the plurality and try to understand it.

As shown by Welsch (1993a), the so-called "aesthetic thinking" that can be refined through the perception of art can help us in the situation of the radical plurality. Welsch states that if we are equipped with an aesthetic sensitivity in relation to the modern art, our aesthetic thinking can be also used in our everyday life. This means the recognition of the radical pluralism - the recognition that each individual has different assumptions. It follows then that each individual is organized under *sui generis*. On the basis of that knowledge we affirm the incommensurable status of these singularities, which means that we understand that the criteria for assessing one singularity cannot be applied to the assessment of another singularity⁹⁴. Through such a cognitive processing of pluralism we will be able to understand and acknowledge the pluralism instead of suppressing it and feeding totalitarian thinking. With regard to this Welsch (1993) assumes that the aesthetic experience from art that mixes plurality of styles, genres, forms, content etc. without negating each other can be transposed to normal life and serve as a model for specific actions in a situation full of radical pluralism. In this sense we can perceive this aesthetic thinking to be also an ethical thinking.

The philosophy and concepts of private ethics

⁹⁰ This article was written under the grant project VEGA no. 1/0481/15 *Projekty estetizácie existencie v súčasnej filozofii a kultúre*.

⁹¹ The fact that the contingency is a fundamental attribute of the contemporary world was highlighted in the work *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* by the American pragmatist Rorty R. (cf. Rorty 1996).

⁹² In Slovakia, the extremism is represented by a political party of M. Kotleba - *Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko*, which in the last parliamentary elections got 8.04% of the popular vote (Statistics are available at: <http://volby.statistics.sk/nrsr/nrsr2016/sk/data02.html>).

⁹³ The above issues took place under the supervision of M. Kotleba.

⁹⁴ The art can be reflected in a single piece of art work and life can be reflected in a single life form.

The reasons why it is necessary in the response to the philosophical analysis of the plurality to consider the aesthetic thinking to be ethics and ethics to be aesthetics are as follows: a human being is able to think in terms of ethics and aesthetic, i.e. a human being is able to live in a pluralistic environment and be a person corresponding to the political and social framework of the 21st's century culture. Such a person can respect differences and understand particular motivations, intentions and methods of self-realization and self-interpretation. Such a person implicitly understands that in the situation of anti-essentialism and historicism of the contemporary modern society it is not enough to refer to the common ground. A person thus becomes aware of ethical relativism, however, which does not mean that his/her own actions are relativized. On the contrary, he/she understands that the ethical relativism is simply about forming and shaping one's own ethos according to one's own taste (if those criteria do not endanger other individuals). He/she shall also understand that one person's ethos is incommensurable with another person's ethos, which, however, does not mean that each of them should not act according to the rules of their own ethos – that is why individual ethica come into existence in the first place.

These words are not stating the reality but rather outlining a vision. However, the question is how to implement such a vision. Going back to the introduction, we remember Dewey (1998) according to whom the source of many problems is the lack of truly humanistic knowledge. With the regard to the problem of ethics – aesthetics we see a way which humanities and higher education should take at the very basic level. Generalization disregarding specifics of the humanities would be a major mistake, though. Therefore we will limit the notion of humanitarian science to a philosophy, which, however, could also provide a base to many other humanities, social and educational sciences and higher education in general. We respect its status as a science with a strong traditional position within the university education which, under the *law no. 131/2002 on Higher Education* "[should] develop a harmonious personality, knowledge, wisdom, goodness and creativity in a person," thus create a human being equipped with a high degree of ethical knowledge (Dewey, 1998). With regard to the postmodern philosophical concepts and the real picture of the world today we see that universalistic, imperative and essentialist philosophical and ethical concepts are simply not enough in the world of proliferative pluralism. That is also why the current philosophy perceives ethics as aesthetics – ethos created in a creative and individual-generated process. Despite the fact the ethos is not fixed to any essence, it may act as an indicative scheme as flexible as our presence needs. Foucault (2003a, 2003b, 2005, 2010) in his last phase of his philosophical thinking thought of the antique concept of the aesthetics of existence and assumed that if we reject essentialism, we need to *create ethics by ourselves*. The emergence of private ethics, such as e. g. Rorty' (1996) private ethics, is subject to R. Shusterman's (2003, p. 373) explanation, according to which this trend "can be explained largely as a result of the decline of the more traditional model of ethics" related to the essentialism – largely rejected by the contemporary philosophy. Shusterman (2003) states one more reason – traditional morality is quite rigid, thus unable to adapt to real human situations. So if we think about ethics as of aesthetics, it means the following: "Ethical decisions – like art – should not be the result of strict application of the rules but the products of creative and critical imagination" (Shusterman 2003, p. 382). This does not, however, mean resignation to the order and rules, it is just a rejection of their strict and imperative enforcement.

Thinking about private ethics, i.e. ethics created individually and creatively – thinking about aesthetically formed ethos also has political consequences since it is connected with the affirmation of the pluralistic nature of the contemporary world. In the ideal case where the humanities taught at universities would provide humanistic education on the grounds of the above mentioned philosophical and ethical ideas, it would not be possible for people to enforce the political power that suppresses pluralism because they would perceive pluralism

as a concept they belong into. However, such a vision does not correspond with the real state of affairs. Therefore, this reflection wants aims to show the way university environment should be focusing on – creating intellectual culture and culturally responsible individuals.

Conclusion

The reasoning suggests that we should think about initiating public discussions on the real role of the humanities as well as social and educational sciences in our society. Socio-cultural and political reality of a globalized world in fact convinces us that we need the humanities education more than ever before, as evidenced by the empirical example of attempts regarding political uniformity and negation of pluralism and creativity. It would be irresponsible to ignore the consequences of the rise of the extreme right which explicitly promotes the principle of uniformity. We should take the last century as a warning. The fact that we need humanities knowledge - as claimed by Dewey – is in these moments the most visible. However, as we know, humanities education is not absent in our society. However, the question is whether such an education provides real humanities education and ethical knowledge. If it were true that with the increasing quantity of people educated in ethics and humanities also grows humanitarianism and solidarity, passivity or indifference to the problems that affect humanity like the suppression of pluralism would be hard to imagine.

The critical analysis of the university education and humanities education would require a separate examination. Despite the absence of such examination, however, we would like to express our opinion that today we should think about such an education that is suitable for our present times. Humanities and science knowledge cannot be only critical, as criticism, if not backed up by a real alternative, often turn into the anachronistic and dysfunctional concepts. The criticism of individualism generally brings about the idea of socialism and Marxism, which can again give rise to dangerous political tendencies. In contrast, it seems to be a better alternative to stoically affirm a given state, however conflicting it might be, and learn to deal with it. With regard to this we can turn to private ethics that can be perceived as a new way of thinking transported into the humanities. Private ethics is not a criticism of historicism and anti-essentialism due to which we can no longer construct universal ethical systems, right on the contrary. We recognized contingency, individualism, pluralism and other fundamental features of the present but we took advantage of them in favor of a thinking that would turn up to be up-to-date and yet humanistic and ethical because it would care about – in the case of private aesthetic ethics – the creation of new, own ethical values that govern human existence. Shouldn't be the humanities education exactly about these notions - creating individuals capable of forming and creating ethical values in the conflicted world?

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