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Teacher as Philosopher? Patočka's Philosophical View on Education

Introduction

Jan Patočka was one of the first thinkers in the former Czechoslovakia to devote him/herself to the philosophy of education. Although the philosophy of history plays an important role in his philosophy, the scope of his work is much larger. Patočka was a unique expert not just in the history of philosophy, but also in related philosophical disciplines, and he also worked as an educator at several types of educational institutions. He was able to capitalise on this experience in philosophical reflection on the educational process, and in a practical sense – as a lecturing teacher for future educators. He devoted a considerable part of his philosophical life, as is well known, to a thorough study of the works of J. A. Comenius, not just from a pedagogical but also from a philosophical point of view.¹

The basic questions I want to address here in relation to Patočka's philosophical view of the issue of education include: What is the essence

¹ See: Věra Schifferová, "Jan Amos Komenský – Portrait of a Philosopher", in: *Patočka and Modern Philosophy*, ed. Vladimír Leško et al. (Košice: UPJŠ, 2014), 126.

of education? What should be the personality of the educator – that is, the teacher? What relevance can philosophy have for the development of the teacher’s personality and thus for the improvement of education as such? I will try and answer these questions in such a way as to confirm the fundamental thesis of Patočka’s philosophy of education that philosophy does not have to remain at the level of a purely theoretical approach to the world, but can actively contribute to practical action in the field of education and training.

Patočka’s philosophical delineation of education

There are many definitions of the concept of education that explain this process in different ways and at different levels. Patočka’s reflection, however, focuses on the very notion of education from a philosophical point of view, thus clearly showing the intersection of two areas – pedagogical and philosophical. He himself draws attention to what he cannot agree with, notably that there is a widespread view of education which “would like to detach education and the science of education completely from any philosophical presuppositions”. This is a widespread view (within contemporary science in general), the essence of which is the claim that philosophy is not an exact, positive science, and is therefore just a kind of “unscientific” speculation. Patočka – like many other philosophers – does not want to, and cannot, identify with this claim, so he attempts to define the notion of education philosophically. It is a concept (in the form of the Greek word *paideia*) which, as is well known, has been used by philosophers in a very significant way since the time of Plato.²

In Patočka’s understanding, education is above all a process of *forming a person* as a personality in a certain socio-cultural relationship to the community in which he/she lives. Thus, he him/herself primarily defines education as the formation of “the human capacity for community in such a way that the cultural content to which the older generations have arrived is transmitted to the new generation, which in this way becomes a full member in the society of the elders”. The prerequisite for education in this view – as formation – is that the human being (usually young) is incomplete, unformed, which is naturally given to him/her

² See: Jan Patočka, *Platónova péče o duši a spravedlivý stát*, Sebrané spisy sv. 14/4 (Prague: OIKOYMENH, 2012), 255–260.

and is not to be seen as a deficiency, but “only plasticity, the possibility of developing in different directions”.³

Patočka distinguishes two different ways in the process of education itself, i.e. the formation of the (“incomplete”) human being: the first is the formation that is natural, more precisely unconscious, and the second is the formation that is deliberate, i.e. conscious. This is a rather broad understanding of the concept of education, but the philosophy of education is precisely an attempt to take – as far as possible – the most holistic view of the issue of education. For the sake of comparison, I can cite the definition of the concept of education from the point of view of M. Zelina, a recognised expert in the field of educational psychology, who distinguishes between influence and education in relation to human development. According to him, “we can also talk about the influence of man by an animal, by nature, by everything, but this is already too broad an understanding of education. In this case, we should, and do, speak more precisely of influence and not of education. Thus our environment influences us, not educates us”.⁴ On the other hand, he also distinguishes (like Patočka in the formation of man) conscious and unconscious education, when he writes that “by the word education we do not mean only the conscious influence of man on man, but also the unconscious, unintentional, unaware influence”.⁵ Therefore, he then further defines this broad concept of education from a pedagogical-psychological point of view. But let us return to Patočka's philosophy of education.

The first mode of formation, i.e. *unaware* formation, is in Patočka's understanding characterised by the action of various formative influences that are constantly acting on man at every age. This is the influence of the environment in which a person lives from birth and which influences him/her in various ways. This influence cannot be avoided; it is a natural part of human life and, although there is no formative intention behind it, it nevertheless has an (sometimes even decisive) influence on the life of the person concerned. This effect of the environment on a person at different stages of life is dealt with primarily in psychology. There are even a number of pedagogical systems which deliberately favour this *natural* way of education – starting, for example,

³ Ibidem.

⁴ Miron Zelina, *Teórie výchovy alebo hľadanie dobra* (Bratislava: Slovenské pedagogické nakladateľstvo, 2004), 10.

⁵ Ibidem.

with the concept of the French philosopher J. J. Rousseau⁶ and ending with modern (or postmodern) pedagogical concepts. This process of unconscious formation is characterised by the acquisition of various life experiences, which one acquires primarily by experiencing. What is important at this point is that this is happening irrespective of the will of the person who has to experience these life situations, because it is impossible to avoid them.

However, more interesting for us – in relation to Patočka's philosophical view – is the second way of human formation, which is *aware* formation. On the basis of such formation – through the educational process – the hitherto unfinished, unformed human being acquires a certain shape. Here Patočka hesitates in identifying this conscious formation with the notion of education. For it seems that it is not possible to reduce the formation of man to one of the two ways mentioned above, which would be the only correct or true one. Both the first way and the second way are involved in the formation of the originally and naturally incomplete human being. He characterises education itself as a modified and particularly valuable education which leaves something solid and resilient in man. Man so formed or educated acquires “a certain solid shape, acquires a certain solid consistency of his whole being, which is [...] his/her property”.⁷ Elsewhere, Patočka writes in relation to education that this presupposes “formation, discipline, strict demands on oneself, but in such a way that the guiding force of spontaneity remains in it, that it remains clear who the master here is”.⁸ At this point, perhaps, lies the essence of defining the right or effective way of education as the formation of the incomplete man – that is, whether it is able to leave in man certain fixed values, on the basis of which he is able to withstand various (whether pleasant or unpleasant) situations in life. However, the whole problem has another level of possible insight, which Patočka also reminds us of. This is the issue of the extent to which the *forming one* (educating, i.e. the teacher) should lead the *formed one* (educatee, i.e. his/her pupil) to the free development of personality. There is the possibility, often exercised especially in the past, of forming a person in such a way that “what he/she is in his/her

⁶ See Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Émile ou De l'éducation* (Paris: Flammarion, 2009).

⁷ Patočka, *Filosofie výchovy*, 387.

⁸ Jan Patočka, “Myšlenka vzdělanosti a její dnešní aktuálnost”, in: Jan Patočka, *Umění a čas I*. Sebrané spisy sv. 4 (Prague: OIKOYMENH, 2004), 20.

own nature cannot in fact be exercised at all".⁹ Patočka designates this method of education as "dressage". On the other hand, there is also an option to shape the pupil in a manner where "all our respect, all the purpose of our endeavour is in relying precisely on them, that we want this process to culminate in themselves".¹⁰ This means providing this pupil with a certain amount of freedom so that his/her own personality is fully developed. This way of education aims to achieve that the personality of the pupil is able to contribute spontaneously, actively and freely to the process of formation as an interaction between pupil and teacher. It is the setting of this limit of freedom for the formed one – the pupil, however, that is most essential in this view for Patočka.

Here, however, we are already approaching the issue of the personality of the teacher, who has this very responsible task, that is, to decide on the right way of education, understood philosophically as the formation of man by man. What kind of teacher should he/she be – that is, the formative one – in order to be able to carry out the pedagogical process as ideally as possible? How can philosophy itself help to achieve this?

Personality of teacher and his/her philosophical predispositions

To Patočka, the teacher, as one who is able to proceed in forming others, which in his/her understanding means above all leading them toward *humanity* as such, should have certain attributes that can only be acquired in a certain worldview. In Patočka, then, the teacher should be the one who "is able to lead, i.e. has him/herself already taken the effective path to humanity, and thus shows the tasks, goals, and issues that need to be addressed, so that he/she calls (the formed, the pupils – R.S. note) *to one's own responsibility*, to an independent, self-sufficient, freely fulfilling life".¹¹ In this understanding, for Patočka, Comenius is also the thinker who understands that "education is guidance, it is leading out of the labyrinth".¹²

But what does that humanity mean here – the path that the teacher has embarked on? Does it mean that the teacher is already a completed,

⁹ Patočka, *Filosofie výchovy*, 388.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ Jan Patočka, "Jan Amos Komenský a dnešní člověk", in: Jan Patočka, *Komeniologické studie II. Sebrané spisy sv. 10* (Prague: OIKOYMENH, 1998), 356.

¹² *Ibidem*.

formed human being, who as such has a kind of morally or professionally grounded right to humanly form others? I should believe that Patočka would definitely disagree with such a characterisation of the personality of a teacher (we mean here personality in the broadest sense of the word – a person as a personality, not a personality within a particular area of expertise, a field of study). A teacher in this understanding is also not a completed, finally formed human being, but what is important is that he/she has consciously embarked on the path to humanity. As such, she/he is herself/himself being formed, but at the same time *forming* others (the pupils). But what then distinguishes him/her from his/her disciples? He him/herself is, after all, in a certain sense a disciple – the formed one.

Here, we have to help ourselves again with Patočka's reflection on the completed, formed man. Who can be considered as such? Patočka sees in this moment a significant connection with education, which can play a decisive role here and which is essential in relation to the personality of the teacher. He distinguishes between *educated and uneducated* man in this context when he writes that "the educated man stands against both the natural, the naive, and the superficial, the *insufficiently educated*".¹³ An uneducated person in this view is one who is either naive and as such "accepts the world as it is, and does not claim that there are uncertainties and issues in it that may be addressed with the help of one's own reason and one's own will".¹⁴ Or there is also the possibility that he/she is insufficiently educated, uneducated, i.e. one to whom "everything is clear; also he/she has not actually felt the sting of the true question, but has found his/her truth once and for all, as it were, in the street, and is flaunting it".¹⁵

A certain, though certainly not exhaustive, but important for the philosophical view, distinction between the educated man and his/her opposite can be seen precisely in the issue of the definiteness, certainty, or closedness of man's view of the world. Patočka also subsequently distinguishes these two types of people, in such a way that "the uneducated man moves on definite ground, on the ground of (supposed) certainties", whereas opposite him stands the educated man (which basically means constantly educating him/herself, as Patočka reminds us), who moves on the "tentative, undefined, uncertain, or not fully assured ground".¹⁶

¹³ Patočka, *Myšlenka vzdělanosti a její dnešní aktuálnost*, 19.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, 20.

Paradoxically, an uneducated, or perhaps not completely educated, person considers him/herself to be completed, definitively formed – especially in terms of his/her view of the world. All the questions he/she arrives at mentally he/she has, or at least thinks he/she have been answered, so he/she has a clear and, as a rule, for him/herself unshakable view of the world. The case is different with educated people, to whom the teacher should also belong as formative of others. For in education, as Patočka understands it, “there lives a free, autonomous ideal, which is why it cannot be replaced by any exclusive, definitive formation of the human spirit”.¹⁷ The educated man is thus not, nor does he/she considers him/herself to be, definitively formed, but is rather “full of humility towards his/her ideal; he/she may be harsh towards people, but in reality he/she knows something more important than his/her own person, his/her meaning, his/her intellectual outpourings, and this important thing is all that matters to him/her”.¹⁸ To put it in simpler terms with Patočka: an educated person – in the true philosophical understanding, a person aware above all of the questions and not retreating, not running away from them – takes a different attitude to the world than other people. This is the essence of that humanity – to accept one's finitude as a chance, a challenge, that is, as a question understood in a Socratic way.

Patočka expresses this important moment in the moral sphere as a life attitude – also in connection with Comenius – in the notion of *open soul*,¹⁹ of the soul which sees human finitude as an insurmountable human misery, but at the same time as man's only wealth. To Patočka, only a soul understood in this way, as an open soul, enables man to grasp the fundamental fact of his/her existence, namely that “human existence is not something ready-made and easily stated, but something that must be *carried and placed on*, something that must be *given up and delivered*”.²⁰ For in order for the soul to remain open, we must care for it, and this is the essence of soul care, which thus presupposes above all this *moral* element as an unflagging (as a free and inner decision of each individual) *will* to care for one's own soul, and in it at the same time for the soul of the community in the Socratic and Platonic meanings.²¹

¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸ Ibidem, 19.

¹⁹ See: Jan Patočka, “Komenský a otevřená duše”, in: Jan Patočka, *Komeniologické studie II*. Sebrané spisy sv. 10 (Prague: OIKOYMENH, 1998), 337–350.

²⁰ Jan Patočka, “Doba poevropská a její duchovní problémy”, in: Jan Patočka, *Péče o duši II*. Sebrané spisy sv. 2 (Prague: OIKOYMENH, 1999), 44.

²¹ See: Jan Patočka, “Evropa a doba poevropská”, in: Jan Patočka, *Péče o duši II*. Sebrané spisy sv. 2 (Prague: OIKOYMENH, 1999), 125–148.

Life schedule and meaning

Such a firm attitude of life is the result of a kind of philosophical development which man has to go through in his/her life and to which he/she has to work their way. This attitude means having a kind of conscious relationship to the world and to one's own life – having a kind of life schedule, as Patočka calls it. Such a *life schedule* should also be held (among other professions, of course) by a teacher who is called to form other people. But how does he/she arrive at it? Should he/she be, or more precisely, is a good (not only) teacher *also* a philosopher?

It is here, at this point, that for Patočka the clearly philosophical and pedagogical spheres of human life are interrelated – and in such a way that a teacher (and, in fact, every educated person) should have a certain intellectual path gone, which shows him/her a direction in life and which thus gives that person the possibility of mastering his/her life, of giving it a certain meaning. Here, too, is a question that many philosophers have addressed: is every man (in their own way) a philosopher, and if so, to what extent? Or should philosophy be the domain of only a few “chosen” people? In a similar vein, Karl Jaspers, for example, contemplates these two possible positions of philosophy when he writes on the subject: “They either look upon it with shame as an important endeavour of extraordinary men, or they despise it as the useless babbling of dreamers. They regard it as a matter that concerns everyone and must therefore be basically simple and comprehensible, or as so difficult that it is hopeless to deal with it”.²²

What is significant at this point is that to Patočka, philosophy in this context is a faculty “apparently limited, but nonetheless a faculty of mastering the total self and the world, and exclusively spiritually in that”.²³ It is thus the ability to “reflect, to capture what dominates the whole of life, that which gives it meaning”.²⁴ On the other hand, pedagogy – the doctrine of education – has, what Patočka considers necessary, also “always as a prerequisite a certain idea of the meaning of life”.²⁵ And it is this idea of the meaning that this life has for us that is the result of philosophical reflection, of asking questions and trying to find answers to them. It is here that the essential correlation between philosophy

²² Karl Jaspers, *Úvod do filosofie*, transl. Aleš Havlíček (Prague: OIKOYMENH, 1999), 9.

²³ Patočka, *Filosofie výchovy*, 372.

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

(however broadly we understand this term) and pedagogy is found, for, in Patočka's words, "if we educate for something, we educate for a form of life that has value for us, an importance that we want to maintain not just for ourselves, but for the whole community, that is to say, education, that is to say, pedagogy, rests on a certain idea of the meaning of life, which is dealt with by philosophy".²⁶

This idea of the meaning that we ourselves give to our lives and according to which – perhaps unconsciously – we direct our actions, concerns every human being. It creates for us just the above-mentioned essential life schedule – a certain ordering of our life and action, which arises specifically from our experience and from the reflection of this experience. The life schedule is characterised by the fact that it has its (usually fixed) line. Each person's life has different, less or more important, moments or longer periods of time that affect him/her in different ways. Experiencing thus involves several levels – from the everyday to the most crucial, important moments that life brings us. The issue with which philosophy is concerned is the one of a unifying meaning of life, one that unites in an overall view all the aforementioned levels of life. The task of the philosophical worldview is exactly to find such a unified and unifying meaning in human life, that is, to find a life schedule on the basis of which "man would have a clear understanding of one's life".²⁷ This thus implies that man has (consciously and by his/her own free decision) a certain line determined in which he/she wants to live his/her life in the future.

To Patočka, pedagogy is one of the most essential disciplines, which has as a prerequisite "a certain interpretation of the world and of life in relation to it",²⁸ which implies a certain philosophical interpretation of the world from this point of view.²⁹ These philosophical interpretations of the world may of course be diverse, but one of them always prevails, especially in relation to the society in which the pedagogical process in question – that is, the formation of the unformed members of society – is carried out. What is important in the context of our issue, however, is that the teacher (or educator, as Patočka also puts it) is a representative of a certain worldview for the pupil (the educatee), representing

²⁶ Ibidem.

²⁷ Ibidem, 376.

²⁸ Ibidem, 378.

²⁹ See: Radim Palouš, Aleš Prázný, "Pedagogické založení filosofie u Jana Patočky", *Pedagogika* 2 (2007): 108–113.

to him/her “the totality of humanly attainable possibilities”.³⁰ Thus, he/she is not just a human person for the pupil, but also a symbol of a certain *view of the world*. This is a very binding position for a teacher to deal with, whether consciously or unconsciously. It is therefore necessary for him/her to have as firm and stable a life schedule of his/her own as possible.

Education in the philosophical sense, which is a prerequisite for creating a life schedule in human beings and, as Patočka understands it, is the pursuit of self-discipline, which “sees in the ideas of greatness, universality, wholeness, an effective remedy against the comfort and decline that inwardly threatens each one of us”.³¹ Self-discipline is also related to this moral moment, which is a prerequisite for not succumbing to an inner decadent way of life that is an obstacle to one’s development. This education and the consequent creation of a life schedule, sometimes unconscious, is certainly not a simple and harmonious path, but it contains the “indispensable moment of life’s struggle, that is, the one in which one struggles for life’s standards and models not just for oneself, but for all. This struggle has as a prerequisite complete freedom, but it must itself be directed towards authority, towards discipline, towards submission to clear overall considerations”.³² It is in the philosophical view that one acquires the total perspective, which thus conditions the formation of one’s life schedule, which rests on the meaning thus acquired. In this understanding, education and the search for meaning is, for Patočka, *a pain and a struggle* to be fought out in some way. In another place he writes about this struggle for meaning in life: “Every significant life has a distinct inner history, a self-given meaning: life’s collisions, crises, encounters, reassurances, breakthroughs, finds, and reconciliations belong in this meaning. But this meaning is not something external, objectively ascertainable and dictated – it is gained by personal struggle”.³³ Moreover, the meaning so acquired, which one must earn by daily *personal struggle*, “does not exist as a fact or a fatum, but is accomplished: life itself, the coming to oneself, is a constant experience of oneself, of the meaning that we put into ourselves”.³⁴ It is in the process of the search itself that this sense of man is formed and also formulated.

³⁰ Patočka, *Filosofie výchovy*, 429.

³¹ Patočka, *Myšlenka vzdělanosti a její dnešní aktuálnost*, 26.

³² *Ibidem*.

³³ Jan Patočka, “O filosofii dějin”, in: Jan Patočka, *Péče o duši I*. Sebrané spisy sv. 1 (Prague: OIKOYMENH, 1996), 113.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

Thus, for Patočka, teacher or educator, that is, the one who is to form others, can only carry out his/her mission seriously and adequately if he/she is actually given the opportunity "to come to terms in some way with this humanly supreme",³⁵ which means that he/she is going through the aforementioned search and finds for him/herself a certain meaning of life and also of his/her action. Or, to put it another way, "the educator alone cannot have a completely serious relationship to one's own vocation and to one's own action if this meaning itself, for the sake of which education is education, is not adequately accessible to him/her".³⁶ The teacher and educator should not play an inferior and unfulfilling role in the process of education, but, as Patočka sees it, the role of "a truly autonomous, free person, and this cannot be attained in any other way".³⁷ Here, it is necessary to take responsibility for one's own life, which, of course, includes the aforementioned searching and finding the meaning and objectives of life, which Patočka formulates very clearly and unambiguously: "the decision about one's own life, about its meaning and its depth, lies in our hands, in the hands of each individual, it cannot be taken away from him/her in any way",³⁸ but neither delivered from outside, by someone else. This applies to everyone in principle, but for the teacher as a formator of others it is a particularly significant requirement, since it is he/she who, as a formator, is to show the way to other people.

So when we ask whether a teacher needs certain philosophical predispositions in order to exercise his/her profession, we have to answer unequivocally in the affirmative, together with Patočka. If a teacher is to be a real teacher – that is, one who carries out education understood as the formation of other unformed people – it is essential that he/she has certain predispositions. These predispositions for a teacher include education, understood as openness, a willingness to ask even the most difficult questions, to seek answers, an awareness of one's own situation, and, finally, an attitude towards the world and one's own life, which means creating one's own life schedule that gives meaning to one's life. But the predispositions mentioned above are inevitably the result of a certain view of the world, which can be called a philosophical view in the broadest sense of the word. According to Patočka, only a person with such predispositions can grasp the profession of teaching in a truly serious and adequate way. Finally, Patočka formulates the meaning of

³⁵ Patočka, *Filosofie výchovy*, 429.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, 430.

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, 434.

formation and education as such very succinctly: "Education is work, it is asceticism. It may be that a whole series of generations of searching and pain will pass before a new happiness is attained. But the search itself has its reward, because it has meaning".³⁹

Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to address a number of problematic issues based on Patočka's philosophy of education. The basic issue raised here was the one of the interconnection between philosophy and pedagogy, more precisely the issue of the existence or non-existence of the predispositions that a teacher should have in order to practice his/her profession. To answer this question, however, it was necessary to define philosophically the concepts of education and the personality of the teacher. Based on this definition and against the background of Patočka's reflections on philosophical-pedagogical contexts, I have tried to arrive at some answers to the questions posed. I have tried to show that even a contemporary teacher or an educator, as one who is supposed to form other people, should have a life schedule of his/her own, which only comes into being when a person undergoes a certain "philosophical" development in his/her life. If a teacher is to carry out his/her profession adequately and responsibly, he/she should have this life timetable set, which is essentially a necessary philosophical predisposition. However, he/she will arrive at this schedule only on the basis of other predispositions, which include education (as understood by Patočka) and awareness of one's own situation, which is a prerequisite for conscious action and management of one's own life. This is, in my opinion, an area often neglected in contemporary pedagogy, but not only in pedagogy, namely the setting of human life in a certain philosophical framework that can give it a firm basis for this life and, above all, for carrying out its vocation in a manner adequate to this vocation and thus show it its meaningful path.

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³⁹ Patočka, *Myšlenka vzdělanosti a její dnešní aktuálnost*, 26.

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Summary

Jan Patočka was one of the first philosophers in Czechoslovakia who, in addition to other areas of philosophy, also dealt with the philosophy of education. These ideas of his, concerned with the philosophical view of education, are still relevant today. The starting point of this study is, above all, Patočka's basic thesis, which states that a teacher who forms his/her pupils in a fundamental way must him/herself have a certain attitude towards the world and his/her life clarified, which means creating his/her own life schedule that gives his/her life meaning. For Patočka, this meaning is the result of a daily struggle to continually acquire it. It is the formation of this world view, which the teacher then transmits to his/her pupils, that is, according to Patočka, the purpose of education as such. It thus prepares the teacher for the responsible exercise of his/her profession so that he/she can perform it adequately as a humanly valu-

able personality. This is a crucial moment in which philosophy can go beyond a purely theoretical approach to the world towards a practical application in the educational process.

Keywords: Jan Patočka, philosophy of education, teacher's personality, meaning of life