

Martin Strouhal*

ON SOME CONCEPTUAL PITFALLS OF THE TEACHING OF VALUES IN THE AGE OF RELATIVISM

One of the lessons offered by philosophy is that from time to time it is a good thing to ask questions about the meaning and substance of the concepts which people apply automatically, without deeper reflection. Lack of critical self-consciousness is particularly dangerous in those cases where the concepts and the terms concerned are those used to address realities that are very close to individuals, and relate to their lives so intimately that it does not occur to them to subject those concepts and terms to any radical interrogation. The author believes that this is precisely the case with the term “values”.

The aim of the article is not to offer a psychological or sociological view of values and their evaluation or to address the question of how and why people organise their preferences and create value hierarchies. Instead, the focus is on the concept of value, or “a value”, i.e. a principle that can be philosophically judged to be significant and engaging for the assertion of meaning and commitment in life. Obviously, thinking about a value or values is rather awkward in times when many leading intellectuals have been proclaiming value pluralism, relativism, or even loss and devaluation of values as the leitmotif of the times.

This text presents two main theses. 1. The author argues that the contemporary plurality of values is in principle a good thing because the end of metaphysical value universalism has, due to the recognition of the importance of *contexts* and *the unique*, brought about a chance of real freedom and real authenticity. 2. Next, the author attempts to show that in the post-metaphysical period of pluralism and deepened relativism, it is possible, and even necessary, to retain a relationship to transcendence. However, it is precisely in relation to the problem of value that one needs to think of this transcendence in a new way, i.e. *non-metaphysically (in a non-objectivist*

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way), non-objectively, and yet in a way that is compelling in its relation to life, governing life, and to try to make this new approach to transcendence, as such, an integral part of education.

Idea or Value?

The subject known today as the problem of values and value education has existed in educational theory from the very beginning. The theme is systematically grounded in Socratic-Platonic philosophy and in its discussion with the sophists. It could be said that the Socratic school and Platonism strive to identify the fundamental principles through which man becomes man (himself), through which he chooses a particular way of life. In some ways, these principles contribute to the understanding of reality and to the process of building harmony between reality and the “inner life”. Gabriel Marcel in one of his works (1977) speaks about the existence of a mysterious principle leading to the belief that deep in oneself a person cannot wish for anything but reality, and that reality opens up to this person in a way that enables them to be in harmony with it. And it does so not in the sense of just being adequate to it or corresponding to it, but in the sense of a unity of being, where the person’s convictions and actions are directed at the recognition and confirmation of reality. Where Marcel spoke of the ontological mystery, the Czech intellectual tradition of Huss, Masaryk, Rádl, and Patočka calls this attitude *living in truth*, but in the end, it adds up to the same: a certain kind of life perspective and attitude that believes in the existence of a certain form of transcendence, seeks to know it, and then to bring it into the life of the human being.

Earlier philosophers generally based their ideas of education on the following premise: education and upbringing are supposed to contribute to the recognition of the initially hidden principles on which the human being can rely and by means of which they can later grasp the nature of existence. The neo-humanist philosophy of education still reckons with the possibility of the unambiguous orientation of human life on the basis of the principles of *Bildungstheorie*. And even where the criticism of objectivist metaphysical assumptions or prejudices is making headway, it is possible to discover that one is dealing with a relatively clear expression of educational demand, an educational goal: become a human being (Kant, Herder); cultivate, refine, and raise your humanity towards the ideal of perfection (Fichte); identify with the being which, as a hidden meaning of history, permeates time and the present (Hegel, Dilthey).

Problems with the identification of the principles of being and a person’s relationship to it have been proliferating roughly since the middle of the

19th century, when two basic intellectual trends, one historically epistemological and the other terminological-conceptual in character, came to the fore. The parallel trajectory of these trends had rather unfortunate consequences. On the terminological and conceptual side, there was an ever-increasing inclination towards an axiological way of thinking that encouraged a form of moral thought essentially drawing on economics. In the philosophy of education and later in pedagogical theories, people started discussing values and education for or in values, but at the same time metaphysics was in the throes of a fundamental crisis, eventually resulting in its breakdown and loss of capacity to provide an intellectual and argumentational basis for any kind of monism or universalism of the principle (value). As a consequence of the concurrent crisis of metaphysics and adoption of an originally economic understanding of values in the thinking and vocabulary of the philosophy of education, and in some cases culture, mass-scale relativism arose.

The Postmodern Period as a Time of Relativisation

The contemporary educational theory in the Czech Republic and abroad has for quite a long time now regarded the problem of relativism as a major and fundamental issue in education. Although relativism is as old as the Christian religious tradition (and is also encountered in earlier, oriental traditions), in recent decades it seems to have been greatly gaining strength and importance. The history of relativistic philosophies (e.g. Popkin 1979) shows that relativism, usually in combination with all kinds of different skeptical attitudes, flourishes in periods of breaks and discontinuities, and when previous interpretations of the world and man (or sacred matters and traditions) are becoming hard to credit, “anachronistic”, and internally contradictory. In such circumstances, what was earlier understood as an unambiguous truth is relativised as merely context dependent. These times, which some call “postmodern”, are in this respect reminiscent of the period of the Renaissance, which apart from problematising the generally clear medieval world picture, significantly transformed the moral-religious ethos. At that point, skepticism became a practically unifying intellectual form, and the great philosophers founding the modern epoch were more or less without exception great skeptics and in a certain sense also relativists (here one might mention at least Bacon, Montaigne, Pascal, or Descartes).

The author stresses the qualifier “in a certain sense” in this brief retro-spection, because relativism has taken and takes many forms and consequent formulations. Relativism is not a monolithic, internally homogeneous movement or point of view, but can be treated and used in different ways, as thinkers, such as Descartes or Pascal, indeed showed. Two things are cru-

cial in determining the meaning that any particular relativism acquires: the context and the purpose of relativism. If today's relativism is seen mainly as a (morally) alarming phenomenon, one needs to a) set discussion of it in proper contexts and b) identify what contemporary relativisation is actually aiming to achieve, its pragmatics.

Postmodernism emerged as a reaction to metaphysically speculative thinking and to dogmatic monism or absolutism that had for a long time seemed unstoppable, especially in the field of ethics. Between the field of the newly thematised hidden depths of subjectivity and the twists and turns of the history of evolution, on the one hand, and the philosophy of the absolute with its presumption of a universal world and moral order, on the other hand, there opened up a yawning abyss. The last certainties of man disappeared into this abyss in the final tremors of longing for the absolute and in the twilight of metaphysics reduced to untrustworthy "idols" or "household gods". Postmodern thought has certainly opened up new or, more precisely, earlier neglected areas of research and has emphasised some themes to which little attention was devoted in metaphysics (the linguistic basis of thought, the problem of identity, power, sexuality, and the unconscious areas of the human mind). However, in the overall constellation of the socio-political and academic possibilities of the present, what has become fundamentally important are the social-psychological and ideological impacts of the relativising potential of post-modern thinking and modes of life. This is the reason why relativism is considered so relevant to education and teaching.

The crisis of values, or in other words the inability to stipulate an unambiguous value system on which human perspectives can be based, is often argued to be a key characteristic of the post-modern. To put it in pedagogic terms, the post-modern is the period in which the question is asked which values a human being should be taught to adopt. People constantly confront different life attitudes that fight for recognition and equality; in the era of globalization, different life styles and attitudes are no longer organized hierarchically but side by side, since the hierarchisation of values is regarded as a remnant of the metaphysical orientation that by sheer power (it does not matter whether intellectual or physical) privileges one area of values at the expense of others. Modern relativistic argumentation is based, alongside psychoanalytical influences, on the methodological approaches developed in social sciences, above all structural anthropology, ethnology, and the very influential late 20th-century relativistic sociology and deconstructionist philosophy (Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, Derrida and others). From this perspective, it is impossible to identify any universal criterion on which some values

are privileged over others and opted for. Whether a person defends or does not defend a certain principle, and even the very possibility of perceiving values as such, is always just a matter of preferences resulting from specific education and experience, the influence of the environment, and the pressure of collective ideas. In any case, value systems cannot be viewed as separate from the history, traditions, and lifestyles of communities and societies, from the epistemes that gave them birth. Therefore, no chosen value or value system can be proclaimed as model and universally binding.

Problems of Relativistic Argumentation in the Field of Values. Value as non-reality

The concept of education in values has therefore from the beginning had an air of ambivalence, even paradox. This is because the value-relativistic standpoint has two consequences: (1) Values are essentially relative, because bound to social-historical conditions and hence specifically educational conditions. (2) It is nonetheless possible and essentially necessary to educate the coming generation to accept the values that a certain society professes, otherwise that society may not survive.

All the same, it is debatable whether a purely pragmatic and basically sociological or social psychological argument can suffice to support one or another value perspective. One example here is the conflict that is becoming a major challenge for the so-called intercultural education with its long-term aim of fostering the so-called respect for otherness. The change of public mood in Europe after several years of the migration crisis has led (at least in the Czech environment) to a rather puzzling clamour of calls for the defence of European traditions, Christian values, and so on, all in order to counter the alleged danger of Islamic fundamentalism. In fact, on closer investigation, the religious argumentation of the fundamentalist Islamist turns out to be essentially identical, formally, to the pragmatic-sociological argumentation that people invoke when choosing an acceptable (in Czech conditions liberal) type of value education. A religiously impassioned person claims superiority of their moral ethos because it corresponds to the ideal of the believer described in the sacred book or in some interpretation relating to their cultural community. Meanwhile, it is too often claimed that liberal values are part of our social inheritance, our history and tradition, and are natural to us because they create a type of person that appeals to us (democratic, critical, and so on). In both cases, values are embraced as some sort of communal regulations of life, well defined in customs and laws.

The author wishes to indicate at this point that insofar as the polemic with value relativism appears in educational discourse, it always tends

to be incomplete and internally questionable. This is because it does not address the truly problematic foundation of relativism which assumes that a value is a certain type of reality, whether spiritual or specific in some other way. For a long time, under the influence of numerous psychological schools, educational theory tended to understand values in connection with needs (Maslow, humanist psychology, and, in its own way, behaviourism). In teaching texts, but also academic ones, people regularly come across all kinds of pyramids, ladders, and above all conceptual confusions between needs (even if spiritual) and values. This is what makes it so extremely difficult to think about which values should be given priority and why in other than clearly psycho-social or political contexts. No serious reasons are offered for choosing a fragile and frightening freedom over a dogmatically formulated certainty and for setting the value of an individual human being over the value of ideology.

Like the philosopher, the educationalist is not at liberty, in their work, just to leave everything at the proverbial level of “there’s no accounting for tastes”. Or to put it otherwise, there really exists educational responsibility involving commitment to the search for truth and a life stance associated with it. Educational theory involves the philosophemes of search, responsibility, and ambivalence. Moreover, Judeo-Christian culture as a culture of the word emerged and sustained itself in the context of conceptual thinking about terms, so the reflection on values is associated with the analysis of terms and attempts to improve and refine them. People, thus, need to consider the possibility that there may be obstacles in the very foundation of the terms used, obstacles to the discovery of a satisfactory way to address a serious problem of the present-day. This is how to educate children to adopt certain forms of thought and to defend particular value viewpoints in the times of relativism

The European critical reflection on the principles that determine the essence of the Thing and an adequate (noetic and moral) attitude to it, has from the beginning been characterized by the conflict between what it is and what it ought to be, what should be considered as an ideal, i.e. *as a non-reality* (authentic Plato, Kant, Whitehead). Here is the root of the matter, for there are reasons for thinking (and this is why the author mentioned the contradictory character, or, in better words, lack of thoroughness in the educational polemic against value relativisation) that as long as the researchers of educational theory continue addressing values as if they were realities (or even correlates of certain, for example “spiritual” needs), no reasonable progress in the discussion on education in values will be possible. Values cannot be treated as realities. If they are treated in this way, it

becomes impossible to decide in an ultimate sense whether one value or another should be given precedence at the expense of another: realities are always what acquires importance and meaning only in a context.

These contexts cannot be arranged hierarchically without a transcendent measure. This is something highlighted by relativism, something that turns out to be fruitful¹ whenever it rejects the objectification of values.² The most radical expression of the idea put forward here can be found in Nietzsche.

Nietzsche showed that in the post-metaphysical age the only legitimate (and transcendent, even though not acknowledged as such) value is that which does not have the character of reality but which shows that reality in its true light: something that is not, but ought to be. Nietzsche's viewpoint involved primarily the theme of creative forces, creations that are by definition bound to the subject of this article, and his will to act (Nietzsche 2003, p. 158). It is only a human being's courage to leave behind what has already been created and what has in a sense become part of the human world, culture, education, and suchlike that opens the way for something new to enter the world, for the stereotype to be identified as such, and for strength to be found to overcome it (e. g. Nietzsche, 2010, pp. 30-32, 149).

It is a matter of distance from reality, of the setting of reality in non-objective, creative contexts. As a philosopher much influenced by Plato, Jan Patočka spoke of ideal contexts, but always with an awareness that people have at their disposal only those measures – criteria that have literally been fought through into reality, not simply glimpsed in some metaphysically

¹Obviously, there also exists unproductive relativism, a one that is a genuine danger from the perspective of educational theory, but it is not the author's intention to consider it in this article. The relativism that casts doubt on everything and dissolves it into some kind of the first cause just in order to paralyse the intellectual and moral *impetus* to the search for what is truer and better. The relativism of pure negation, which is intoxicated with itself and refuses to see anything beyond the borders of its undoubtedly great power, is illustrated in the famous picture of Cratylus, who supposedly knew that nothing can be known, claimed, and decided definitely, for which reason, he just sat and waved a finger (Fragment 4 from Aristotle in Svoboda, 1944).

²There is no need in this article to elaborate on the fact that the problematic objectivisation of values occurred long ago and that educational theory simply accepted a long prevailing philosophical prejudice that values are some perfect objects, a perfect being. The tradition of value objectivization goes back as far as Platon's ancient followers. Sometimes, however, some less important stream of philosophy would "bubble up" with an understanding of the problematic nature of this approach, which in the history of philosophy has been more or less successfully articulated by philosophers (see, e.g., Pascal's distinction between *la pensée géométrique* and *la pensée fine*, Kant's moral philosophical distinction between *Sein* and *Sollen*, or Kierkegaard's radical juxtaposition of ethical and religious life).

perfect world. This fight may be better or worse waged, blindly or critically, one-sidedly or comprehensively, with a view to one's own interests or with a view to the truth. *Awareness that the value is not just a correlate of the need, but that it is above all that which ought to be – and so non-reality – should be the most proper pedagogical message of value education.*

This cannot, however, be achieved through any educational programme, and it is impossible to set up a “system” of value education. Education in ideals (not objectivistically understood values) always happens on the verge of communicability in a much more intimate contact between the teacher and the pupil than can be described in the textbooks of social psychology and psycho-didactics. It usually happens through examples and a strong story, but a one in which the basic chapters may be written by the pupil's own life. The problem of institutionalised education too frequently consists (in the author's words) in getting stuck “forever and fatally, in the form of quotation. We use the words of others”. But at the same time, “just as in the game of Chinese whispers. it is inevitable that we shall use the words of others in a slightly different sense than the others, because we too in a certain sense differ slightly from each other.” (citations from Binet, 2017, pp. 246-247). Discourse on values is the best illustration of this truth. It is precisely there that people tend to internalize the most as a result of the influence of social conventions, customs, and established interpretations and assumptions. The values (stereotypes) thus adopted are, however, not well thought through. What is more, they are deformed by people's still incomplete level of education, their personal preferences, ambitions, the environment in which they live, and a whole series of other formative forces. This state is so serious that people are not even interested in whether particular value standpoints they adopt are not at odds with each other. As Nietzsche showed, a real value is something that individuals create themselves and behind which they stand. It is not something taken over and put up on a pedestal, something that everyone knows about and “recognises”, knowing it to be important. “That which is known because it is known (by everyone), is not truly known” (Hegel according to Liessmann, 2008, p. 23). People “know” what truthfulness, honour, justice, freedom, and love are, and how important they are. But they should help the child experience these realities for themselves and be formed by them. It is other people's task to show to the child that a value is not something simply handed down, but something that the child will later create anew by their identification with the values, using the transmitted capacities to make intellectual and ethical distinctions.

It is in this that the pragmatic foundation of education resides in the best sense of the word. For the truth, good or any “value” to exist, what is

necessary is the act, the activity of a human being, without which neither the truth nor good ever enters the world. Value education is not just an education in emotions, as Aristotle already knew, but above all encouragement of activism and courage to act.

In this context, one can go back to Whitehead, who writes as follows about the relationship between activity and the world of values (1970, p. 101): “The world of activity is founded on the multiplicity of endless acts and the world of value is founded on the unity of the active coordination of the different possibilities of the value. The essential linkage of the two worlds brings the unity of coordinated values into the multiplicity of finite actions. The meaning of actions is based in actualised values and the meaning of evaluation is based on facts that are realisations of their share of the value. *Each of the two worlds is nothing if it does not fulfil its function of embodying the other.*” (emphasis M. S.) Educationalists may deduce from this that no activity can be regarded as having a saving grace of its own, or even as being in itself an important educational value. In the same way, it is impossible to rely on the notion that pupils will find a path to values without efforts on their own part, i.e. without creative activity.

Conclusion

Values in their proper understanding cannot therefore be taught or transmitted. There is certainly a need to educate children in a feeling for values, ideally (as it is evident in moral psychology) through the parallel experience of transcendence and interpersonal communication. As Plato suggested, by communicating and sharing that which (i.e., the idea) infinitely transcends man, one shall grow, and that transcendence will “multiply” in the souls of other people. Educationalists are very familiar with this idea. After all, all educationally important “realities” (goals) are non-realities that gradually become part of an individual life form of every child entrusted to them. But it is precisely the individuality of subjects and the contexts in which they live and act, learn, and are educated that prevents defining a universalistic programme of value education that could be simply taught page by page, explained, transmitted. “There is no single sentence that could adequately communicate its own meaning,” says Whitehead. “There is always a background of assumptions that challenge us to analysis by their infinity” (Whitehead, 1970, p.113). His words should be taken seriously, above all, in educational contexts. No independent entity exists. And the assumption of objective, complete, and, in some way or another, perfect values is an abstraction born out of European rationalistic civilization (see op. cit. p. 113 and following, and Whitehead’s *Adventures of Ideas*). Values are something

that people have to carry out on their own, struggle for, looking for their “reflection” in their own activity.

Once again, the author would like to emphasize that despite the criticism of a universalistic understanding of values, a value cannot be regarded in a primitively relativistic way, i.e. as just as a reflection of a need or preference, a caprice. A value – if one has to call an idea by this term – is a horizon in relation to which people measure the things of this world, which they would like to bring into relationship with the idea of what ought to be. But no idea can ever exhaust the nature of a value. A value grows and forms in accordance with whether and how one decides on it and acts on its behalf. A value is therefore connected with creation and can be understood as a form of creative action. It will never be fully consummated, but will always break through into the world where people are willing to work and sacrifice something for it. One cannot profit from the definition of values or the sanctification of some closed value system because these are human beings who by building the historical determination of their lives co-create values and struggle for them. As Nietzsche wrote, only that which has no history may be defined. Therefore, a sensible and, in fact, the only possible kind of value education consists not in transmitting a complete set of value content, but in the repeated and context-bound confrontations of the child with the important difference between what merely is and what ought to be, and what will not become without his own action, responsibility, and love for the truth. Value education is an attempt to open up the child’s creative spirit, to encourage his activism, and cultivate his sensitivity. And, if today, some people are afraid of a global collapse of values, perhaps they should be reminded of the words of Hölderlin: “Where there is danger, deliverance always also grows”.

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Keywords: theory of education, value, value education, ideal, relativism.

The text deals with the question about the extent to which the concept of value and the value orientation in the contemporary pedagogical thought corresponds with philosophical and ideal intentions. The question is how reality approaches the ideal and what meaning this has for man. The aim of the text is to draw attention to the need to clarify the vocabulary which is used in the theory and practice of teaching of values in the era of deepening relativism.

Martin Strouhal

**O NIEKTÓRYCH KONCEPTUALNYCH PUŁAPKACH NAUCZANIA
WARTOŚCI W EPOCE RELATYWIZMU**

Słowa kluczowe: teoria edukacji, wartości, wartość edukacji, ideał, relatywizm.

Tekst jest próbą odpowiedzi na pytanie o to, do jakiego stopnia koncepcja wartości i zorientowania na wartości we współczesnej myśli pedagogicznej koresponduje z intencją filozoficzną i idealną. Jak realność ma się do ideału i jakie to ma znaczenie dla człowieka. Celem artykułu jest zwrócenie uwagi na potrzebę doprecyzowania terminologii, której używa się w teorii i w praktyce nauczania wartości w erze pogłębiającego się relatywizmu.