

How Much “Spirit” Should Higher Education Afford?

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Abstract *Those who are concerned with higher education often find themselves confronted with the claim of its benefit: In the light of almost common opinion, higher education mainly seems to be the suitable means in a struggle for economic welfare. Seemingly, its function is to provide competitive advantage for the individual as well as for nations. The following article intends to show that such an implicit but nevertheless influential view is based on a distorted concept of education and therefore cannot but fail in mastering present and future challenges of society and global development. The article will propose another, more comprehensive view of education instead, which not only means an adaptation to the necessities of worldwide economic competition but also includes the development of spiritual capacities which can enable us to reflect our present problems and their foundations in a more substantial, holistic way. It will sketch some anthropological premises of Rudolf Steiner’s pedagogy and suggest why this educational approach can provide a person with the ability to find more sustainable and better approaches to cope with present and future challenges.*

Keywords contemplative inquiry, educational reform, spiritual development, Waldorf education, Rudolf Steiner

We need to understand why a large percentage of the people who oversaw the murder of six million Jews had doctoral degrees from some of the “great” universities of the era. (Palmer, Zajonc & Scribner, 2010, p. 32).

The above statement certainly touches a raw nerve! It confronts the reader with one of the most earnest questions in the cultural history of the last century. How was it possible that in Germany, the land of “Bildung,” so many “cultured” individuals

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lent their support to this unprecedented cultural disaster? Why was the higher education process they had all been through unable to prevent it?

There has already been much thought and speculation around this question; in 2010 it was posed anew (as above) by the American sociologist Parker Palmer and the physicist Arthur Zajonc in *The Heart of Higher Education: A Call to Renewal* (Palmer, Zajonc & Scribner, 2010). In doing so, they did not direct it solely at the German people, but first of all at the American public and then at all their contemporaries concerned with the future of higher education. The purpose of the question is not to provoke a re-interpretation of the past, but to help prepare the future.

Within the current climate of the Bologna process and its promises of standardisation, Palmer and Zajonc have brought up an uncomfortable, and oft avoided issue. Shameful as it might be, it is nonetheless helpfully refreshing among the hordes of suggestions and solutions, seeking to meet today's educational problems purely in terms of economic progress and aids to career development. That the purpose of education is to outdo everyone else and thus have a better chance of getting a good job has become the basic credo of educational theory world-wide. Not the least significant of its promoters is the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), in whose international proclamations it appears as a constant refrain, which is then taken up and all but mechanically repeated by national policy makers.

That, accordingly, education constitutes a competitive advantage in the world-wide struggle for survival is the prevailing view both of individual people and of national governments. According to the OECD, then, the aims of higher education have always been pragmatic. Today they are not dictated by political ideologies such as National Socialism or Communism, but by the seemingly harmless adaptation of the human being to the pragmatic requirements – whether apparent or real - of the economy. The goal is economic prosperity and human happiness.

What is overlooked here, however, is that a certain assumption is being made. Across the board it is assumed that the term economy refers to the form economic activity usually takes today: in other words, a global competition for wealth among individuals and nations, which at the beginning of the 21st century has driven the world into a spiral of irreparable debt, which can only be prevented from causing collapse by constant economic growth.

In direct parallel to these developments are world-wide ecological threats caused by the systematic over-exploitation of natural resources. In this global orgy of debt-creation and waste the industrialised nations are indulging in, there is no longer any distinction between left and right-wing governments. They are all promising instant prosperity, and all according to the same formula: Enjoy now and let others pay later!

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In the context of this epidemic of educational short-sightedness Palmer and Zajonc's question stands out as a call to consider the spiritual dimension of education and what its true purpose might be. If people are to lead a meaningful and wholesome life, is it enough simply to school them in economic fitness? Is there any way things can carry on as they are, or might it not be better to consider how the higher education of the future, without being in any way prescriptive, could become a potentially life-changing encounter with the deepest existential questions facing contemporary humanity, whether in connection with the individual or the development of society? Nowadays educational models are usually proposed – with an air of being entirely pragmatic and free of ideology – in the course of Bologna-style debates about academic structures. Behind them, however, lurks a decidedly materialistic ideology, according to which the purpose of life consists merely in material survival: education will have fulfilled its task if it provides the basis for a life of material security. An educational ideology of this sort avoids the important questions, and, although it promises happiness, in reality contributes to a still and steady worsening of the calamity.

It is the job of university education, however, to bring about exactly the opposite of this. However justified it might be to gear degree courses towards the communication of pragmatic knowledge and skills, and through structural reforms to remove national and international barriers to the transfer of acquired abilities and qualifications, it must never be forgotten that education, now more than ever, is primarily about exploring and understanding the nature of the human being. This demands more than study-programmes moulded by modules and credit points. Today the educational debate must in principle be concerned with how, in terms of content, to approach the nature of the human being. In his book, *The Nature and Future of Philosophy*, the British philosopher, Michael Dummett, expressed this point in the following way:

There are so many problems to which we do not know the solution: the relation of mind and body, the sense in which our actions are free, the ground of morality, the nature of time. What is consciousness, and could we behave just as we did without it? Is consciousness possible only for living organisms, or can there be unembodied minds? Does it make sense to believe in existence after death without the body? Would a complete description of physical events incorporate all that there is in the universe, or would it leave some things out? On what presuppositions does the idea rest that someone may deserve good or bad things happening to him, and are we entitled to these presuppositions? Are moral values to be discerned within the natural world, including the world of human behavior, or do they derive from some other sector of reality? All these, and many questions besides,

are proper to philosophy. (Dummett, 2010, p. 21-22)

Such questions do not fit into the OECD's framework, nor can they find adequate treatment through a modular type of instruction aimed at defined outcomes that can be tested in examinations and ultimately certified as "acquired skills." What is required is an entirely different form of inquiry and learning. It is a life-long process of inner growth that only gradually culminates in knowledge with the power to transform individual human existence. Questions concerning the nature and meaning of human life are what require our attention today, since they provide the contextual dimensions for crucial decisions about what kind of future and what kind of society we actually wish to live in. They are questions for which the head alone is no match; the heart is needed as well. These questions have no chance of finding an answer unless those asking them are doing so in the interests of further personal development. This mode of approach and the educational gesture associated with it can be characterized by a variety of terms, but the one increasingly used for it in the English-speaking world is "contemplative inquiry." This refers to a spiritual learning process involving the activation and development of inner abilities, the value of which cannot be defined by the job market, the ministry of education or any other institution. They can only prove their worth in the conduct of actual life experienced in the fullness of its individual meaning.

Learning processes, which do not rest upon programmed change and the prospect of economic gains, but which kindle spiritual potential and bring about genuine scientific and social innovations figured large in the thinking of the educational reformer, Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925). Today, Waldorf Education, originally inspired by him, is known world-wide. For its teachers it sets very high teaching standards, since it sees itself as an "art of education," grounded upon principles and methods directly derived from the observed regularities of human development. The leading methodological question in Waldorf education is: what educational contents and activities are best suited to developing the human being into a well-rounded, autonomous personality. Pedagogically this must, of course, be adapted to local socio-cultural and historical conditions. The main thing, however, is that the growing human being not be groomed according to some political or economic ideology, but be met at the level of his or her individual creative potential. This entails taking the human being seriously – in addition to his/her biological dimension – as an individual, spiritual entity (Steiner, 2012). Anyone studying Waldorf education, therefore, must, in addition to learning the subjects to be taught, strive to come to terms with the complexity of the human being as a physical entity endowed with soul and spirit. The aim is to develop the ability – from detailed knowledge and observation of the phases of human development – to perceive what pedagogical measures are appropriate in any given situation.

In this connection, it is perhaps worth mentioning that this approach to educa-

tion not only has its proponents, but also its critics. And this is to be welcomed because it shows that there is something to be discussed and integrated into the actual academic discourse. Recently, therefore, the Alanus University (www.alanus.edu), has taken up the task of establishing a scientific dialogue with other universities on the demarcation and ramifications of Waldorf education. As part of this it has also set up a diverse program of research and a comprehensive international network of connections with universities in Europe, Latin America and New Zealand. The results of this project can be followed in the first peer-reviewed journal devoted to this theme which is called Research on Steiner Education (RoSE) (www.rosejournal.com).

The openness for contemplative methods and existential questions is a new challenge for academic pedagogy. It is not sufficient to state and appreciate it in the realm of Steiner's Pedagogy or alike approaches. It is due as well in the realm of pedagogy in general since the question of meaning and values in education can hardly be answered in a convincing manner by means of a mere utilitarian perspective. On the other hand a new mindset is required, which has to be capable of combining intellectual rigor with empathies for new methods and means of cognition. The cultural gain of western enlightenment and methodic research has to be preserved and extended to a field that easily escapes consistent thinking. The aim of 'other education' can be to foster that discussion and thereby to contribute to complementing the ongoing research and discussion in the so called mainstream Pedagogy.

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