

EDUCATION BETWEEN ETHICAL UNIVERSALITY AND CULTURAL PARTICULARITY

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At no time of his individual development is man ever a complete being. This fact is not only part of every personal experience, but it is also a starting point for every (philosophical) anthropology. For example, according to Max Scheler, man is the 'X that can behave in a world-open manner to an unlimited extent';¹ according to Helmut Plessner, man is characterised by an 'eccentric positionality',² whereby his eccentric existence, which possesses no fixed centre, is described as the unity of mediated immediacy and natural artificiality. Accordingly, Plessner formulates three *fundamental laws of anthropology*: (1) the Law of Natural Artificiality, (2) the Law of Mediated Immediacy, and (3) the Law of the Utopian Standpoint.³ Similarly, Arnold Gehlen states the thesis that man is by nature a cultural being,⁴ whereby his cultural achievements are seen as compensation for organs and man is defined as a creature of defect (*Mängelwesen*).⁵ For Friedrich Nietzsche, man is the not-yet-determined animal,⁶ whereby science too is seen as the expression of human endeav-

¹ M. Scheler, *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos* (Darmstadt: Otto Reichl, 1927), p. 49.

² H. Plessner, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch: Einleitung in die philosophische Anthropologie* (Berlin and Leipzig: de Gruyter, 1928), pp. 362ff.

³ H. Plessner, *op. cit.*, pp. 309-346. See K. Lorenz, *Einführung in die philosophische Anthropologie* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1990), pp. 102f.

⁴ A. Gehlen, *Anthropologische Forschung: Zur Selbstbegegnung und Selbstentdeckung des Menschen* (Reinbek: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 1961), p. 78.

⁵ A. Gehlen, *Der Mensch: Seine Natur und seine Stellung in der Welt* [1940], 9th ed. (Wiesbaden: Akademische Verlagsgesellschaft Athenaion, 1972), p. 37.

⁶ F. Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* [1886], in F. Nietzsche, *Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, G. Colli and M. Montinari (eds.), vol. VI/2 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1968), p. 79.

our 'to determine himself'.⁷ This opens up a broad horizon for an answer to the question as to what we are. Education in general, not only anthropology in a stricter sense, is a means for dealing with this condition in a productive way that also facilitates a human life.

Education is always education in the context of a given culture. Cultures are systems of values, of (legally defined) modes of action, and of symbols. As such, cultures are particularities – their values are always particular values, their modes of action are determined by tradition, their symbols express a particular world view, which means that they produce or represent (parts of) cultural worlds. *Cultural particularity* is, in this sense, an essential moment in every kind of education. Education always moves in a cultural environment, it is intra-cultural.

Education is, however, not only intra-cultural, but also *trans-cultural*, in the sense that it follows ethical principles which are not particular principles and as such part of different morals. Ethics in general is a critical theory of morals. It assesses socially implanted systems of action and goals, and it is universal (not particular) if it makes universal claims of validity. This means that for *ethical universality*, for a universal ethics, it does not derive its validity from the values of certain (particular) cultures, but rather that it appeals to a general will which is best expressed in Kant's categorical imperative. Expressions of a corresponding ethical universality are, for example, human rights and, in connection with these, the concept of human dignity.

A fundamental problem of education consists in linking both its constitutive moments, namely cultural particularity and ethical universality. The question is how much ethical universality is necessary in education, and how little cultural particularity is possible? The answer obviously lies in a kind of dialectics between the particularity and the universality of moral or ethical principles in education.

However, there are problems not only in this dialectical relationship, but also in the fact that universal ethics is often seen as typically 'European', i.e. determined by Christianity and the Enlightenment, and therefore, if considered from the outside, it is seen once more as particular; besides, with the concept of a multicultural society, the dialectics

⁷ F. Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Fragmente Frühjahr 1881 bis Sommer 1882*, in F. Nietzsche, *Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, G. Colli and M. Montinari (eds.), vol. V/2 (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1973), p. 533.

between different conceptions of culture and ethics becomes transposed from the relationship of different cultures with one another into culture itself. On what basis can we say that universal ethics, seen in cultural terms, is not particular? And what shape could education take in a multi-cultural society, assuming that this exists at all? This paper will deal with these issues in three propositions and their elucidation.⁸

1. In a global economy not only do economic structures change but social structures as well. One of its results is an increasing particularization and individualization of the forms of life and the substitution of the concept of self-determination by the concept of self-realization.

There are some words that saunter up on velvet paws and then whip out their claws. Globalization is one such word. It means, as we all know, the free transfer of raw materials, commodities, capital, services, and labour across all geographic and political boundaries. The (older) concept of *internationalization*, on the other hand, indicates a growing proportion of international trade and its increasing interlocking as well as the motions of capital, labour, and know-how between different national economies and their economic agents – and in this sense is a concept derived from national relations. In contrast, such limitations disappear in the case of globalization. What is global is not derivative, but what is given first; economic and political boundaries, which thus far have determined at least the ‘beginning’ of economic action, are dissolving.

Furthermore, the concept of globalization is not merely an economic concept or one of economic policy, to the extent that these concepts refer only to economic activities from the perspective of competition, but rather also a concept which increasingly includes cultural developments as well. Therefore, it is right to say

that globalization comprehends more factors than were observable in earlier stages of development and that our entire social and institutional fabric will change fundamentally. Even if globalization ... is economically induced, the consequences extend far

⁸ Here I refer to some earlier observations, among them the concept of the Leonardo world, the concept of education and to the distinction between instrumental knowledge and orientational knowledge: J. Mittelstrass, *Der Flug der Eule: Von der Vernunft der Wissenschaft und der Aufgabe der Philosophie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1989); *Leonardo-Welt: Über Wissenschaft, Forschung und Verantwortung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1992).

beyond this area and have thus far been little understood – especially in their significance for us in our social relations and organizational structures.⁹

In this sense the concept of globalization comprehends the new information and communication technologies as well, which are largely not subject to local control, the rise of supra-national political institutions (keyword: ‘globalization of the political’), and the increasing homogenization of education and research structures. Not only is an economic and political dimension defined but also general social and cultural dimensions.

If this analysis is right – and there is little doubt that it is – then globalization is the keyword for a multidimensional transformation process of modern society into a – rather imprecisely determined – future. Not only are enterprises in the traditional sense being dissolved by becoming ‘virtual’ enterprises, that is, by being replaced by a network of regional independencies, but the same holds for social structures, which up to now have been defined essentially by national and cultural stabilities.

Modern society is changing, and society itself doesn’t have a clear view of its change. This is easily illustrated with a variety of labels such as ‘post-modern society’, ‘information society’, and ‘risk society’. They all claim to represent the nature of modern society in its contemporary and future form, but these analyses remain unclear and controversial. But for all of them the following seems to be the case: Modern society is leading into an increasing *particularization* and *individualization* of the forms and manners of life. Uniform ways of life and uniform points of orientation are decreasing, *pluralization* is increasing (also in the development of new forms of life). This is true both of private life (family, leisure) as well as for large parts of professional life, namely in the further development of more individualistic forms of work. CVs become more and more diverse, more plural. The pluralization of life-forms, which gets expressed in the particularization and individualization of life-forms is also mirrored in the theory of modern society. Also there, pluralism is increasingly playing a major role. In this sense in contemporary society there is a bottom-up pluralization (in social practice) as well as a top-down pluralization (in social theory).

Another consequence of the development from traditional to pluralistic life-forms that affects both practice and theory of modern society is an

⁹ U. Steger, ‘Einleitende Zusammenfassung: Globalisierung verstehen und gestalten’, in U. Steger (ed.), *Globalisierung der Wirtschaft: Konsequenzen für Arbeit, Technik und Umwelt* (Berlin/Heidelberg/New York: Springer-Verlag, 1996), p. 4.

increasing particularization of the 'compartments' of reality in which the individual is living, for instance, family, professional life, leisure, political life. These areas are drifting apart, the individual is living in a plurality of worlds which have less and less to do with each other. We lose sight of the whole, which characterizes a life, the individual as well as the social. The *structures of orientation* are also affected by this. The corresponding features of cultural change are the de-traditionalization and de-conventionalization of modern society – including new forms of fundamentalism and the development of sects as the other side of the coin. The normative force of traditions and customs becomes weaker; compare for instance the decreasing influence of the churches in Western societies.

Part of the de-traditionalization is the dissolution of cultural identities, which today, with the impression of problems of migration in Europe, gets talked about as the development towards a *multicultural society*, which itself is an important element of cultural dynamics. In political discourses, the reality of individual forms and manners of life, which remain comprehensible intra-culturally, connects itself with the problem of preserved cultural identity, or cultural autonomy of groups of immigrants. However, culture here often gets confused with cultural folklore, namely when legal obligations are exempted from the demands of cultural identity or cultural autonomy, as if they didn't belong among the central elements of cultural identity. In reality, the problem of a pluralization of social forms of life gets belittled in the concept of multicultural society. After all, liberties and self-determination of reclaimed cultural identity end at the limits of human rights and (national) laws. The multicultural is hence an important cultural aspect of the pluralization of life-forms, but not an element of a 'new' society.

Related to the general pluralization of modern society we also witness a pluralization of *ways of learning*. Their dominant indication is the influence of the media and information technology in particular. These are not just some of the modern world's most influential architects, but also a part of the 'schooling' of children and teenagers. The processes of learning are de-institutionalising, they become more liberal and, with that, less easy to control and more manipulable. The anonymisation of the learning processes has found its modern form of orientation in the media; compared to which earlier forms of appropriation, also those we know from communist states, appear almost harmless. Free media do not free the individual – still less, young ones. In those places where they do not presume it – as the ideal of an enlightened society would have it – they rather take its place by occu-

pying its consciousness, directing its perceptions and experiences, and influencing the view of the world through their pictures. School, or the family, has little power to influence this.

Also connected to the increasing particularization and individualization of life-forms and manners of life is the issue of *self-realization* – linked in an often rather unclear way to the older idea of emancipation in social matters. Self-realization here typically means the self-determined growing independence of the individual. But it is often precisely the concept of self-determination which loses its original meaning, stemming from the enlightenment, namely, the practiced autonomy in matters of orientation. *Self-determination* here simply means the living of one's individuality, it means simply *to be* this individuality. A sensible social construction of reality gets lost sight of, and with this, the reclaimed self-realization also conflicts with the nature of humans – that of a being of needs. Put differently: Only where self-determination is an element of self-realization in the demanding, accountable sense, is self-realization an element of reasonable conditions of life. But precisely this is less and less the case today. Lived, unreflected self-realization is taking the place of realized (accountable) self-determination.

2. When the market becomes the measure of all things and man withdraws behind his economic goods, when the distance between instrumental knowledge and orientational knowledge widens and our world turns into a Leonardo world, culture and education become a concrete utopia.

Education is the expression of a culture in which, according to the European idea, the rational nature of man is realised. This culture is not something external to the modern world, something that has to be lovingly preserved and nurtured for the very reason that it is superfluous to the future of this world. Culture is rather *the world itself*, a world that has been transformed into the world of the human being, who can only recognise himself in those things that he has made himself. He recognises himself not only in those things to which he lends objectivity, as in the sciences, but also in those that partake in his subjectivity. Man moves in this world by discovering, interpreting, and shaping it. In doing so he makes this world. And thus the modern world is always, within this context of discovery, formation and invention, a cultural world. It may sometimes forget this fact, above all in the pursuit of political and economic affairs. But it cannot divest itself of its cultural form.

Education is at the same time the obverse of culture – culture that has become a form of life, indeed an individual form of life. And thus education is above all non-theoretic. It is an ability and a form of life, and not merely a matter of knowing one's way around the stacks of knowledge. Wilhelm von Humboldt is still in the right. An educated person for him is someone, who tries 'to grasp as much of the world as is possible, and who tries to bind it to him as tightly as possible'.¹⁰ Thus the concept of education in both the classical and the modern sense includes the concept of *orientation*. Orientation is itself something concrete, not something abstract like theories, or the manner in which theories are transmitted. The locus of orientation is the life-world, not the conceptual or theoretical world. And this holds true of education as well. Education and orientation are structurally correlated, not so much in the form of science (and by science I mean in general the German *Wissenschaft*, which includes the humanities and the social sciences) as in the form of life, that is to say in the form of an ability. We might, following Humboldt, say that it is the ability to integrate the world in oneself and to express the world in itself. Put otherwise: Knowledge is, at least when one considers knowledge and experience as well as sensibly dealing with them, the universal expressed as a particular.

What I have just formulated in rarefied and abstract – that is to say in what is commonly called educated language –, describes quite exactly, in my opinion, the sense in which a humanist educational ideal might be reintroduced into our culture. It is concerned with an active conceptualisation of the world; it is opposed to an essentially economic preference of the *Zeitgeist* for a divided self, that is to say one that is split into a private, a social and a consumer self. Thus it is concerned with the restoration of an undivided self, and with restoring clarity to the concept of knowledge by means of which our society defines itself. It is just this clarity that we are beginning to lose.

Let me return to the concept of orientation once more. In modern society the distance between *instrumental knowledge* and *orientational knowledge* is increasing. Instrumental knowledge is knowledge of causes, effects, and means, orientational knowledge is knowledge of justified ends and aims. Instrumental knowledge is *positive* knowledge, orientational knowledge is *regulative* knowledge. And things do not look very good for regula-

¹⁰ W. v. Humboldt, 'Theorie der Bildung des Menschen (Bruchstück)', *Gesammelte Schriften*, vols. I-XVII (Berlin: B. Behr, 1903-1936), vol. I, p. 255.

tive knowledge today. Science has lost sight of this knowledge – and, to a large extent, society has as well. The consequences are weakness of orientation (though not yet loss of orientation), self-doubt and the tendency towards fundamentalism of different kinds. That also belongs to the particular character of the modern world, a Leonardo world. Let me expand on this point briefly.

Our world, the world which has just been described in terms of a widening distance between instrumental knowledge and orientational knowledge, is the work of man. ‘Natural’ worlds exist only on the margins of this world, and they are becoming ever fewer and ever weaker. This is not simply an incidental but a logical result of the developed essence of man. We live in a world that in its structures and its forms of life is the expression of the scientific and technical understanding. Science today is everywhere, and so is technology. Wherever we go in our world, we find that the modern mind is already there: grounded on the scientific and technological know-how it produces, builds, administers, and destroys. I call this world the *Leonardo world* after Leonardo da Vinci, the great Renaissance engineer, artist, philosopher, and scientist. What I mean is a world in which man no longer moves merely as a discoverer, as a stranger in a strange land – I call this a *Columbus world* – nor with which man is essentially linked by means of his interpretations and symbols – I call this a *Leibniz world*. It is rather a world in which man is constantly confronted with his own work, a world that in the hands of the scientific and technical mind is becoming ever more an *artefact*, fragile like nature but ever less natural.

The Leonardo world is in this sense an artificial world, but there is ever less natural world beyond its boundaries to correspond to it. The Leonardo world has become boundless. This means, in turn, that science and technology, that is, the constructors of this world, are drawn ever deeper into their own world. Man confronts himself in his own works and has become a part of his own work. Will he be able to free himself from this situation – one in which the world does not belong to him, but rather he to the world, a world created by him? What role does education play and what is the one played here by ethical universalities and cultural particularities which are, in turn, threatened by globalization? What is the matter with the dialectics mentioned earlier, between the particularity and the universality of moral or ethical principles in education? And again, on what basis can we say that universal ethics, seen in cultural terms, is not particular? I hereby come to my third thesis.

3. *Globalization and universality are not the same. Globalization controls economic and cultural development; whereas universality, in the shape of universal reason and universal ethics, governs universal claims to validity. In the Leonardo world, the fate of education hangs between ethical universality and cultural particularity.*

In a world in which globalization determines not only the pace of economic development, but also that of cultural development, in a world which is a Leonardo world ruled by scientific and technical spirit, the old philosophical dream of a *universal form of life* expressed by a general world culture made up of and increasingly driven by economic culture, seems to become real. The 'project of modernity' (Habermas) prefigured in the writings of the Enlightenment is steered by a *principle of universality* and the idea of permanent peace (Kant), namely by the concept of *universal reason* before which all privileges favouring origin, race and gender are removed, and by a world-society or world-government constituted as a republic, in which universal reason would finally become fully realized. Is globalization not then, in this case, 'the ruse of reason to bring itself into cultural reality as a universalizing ability?'¹¹ Hence, is it not also, so asks the philosopher, 'the local and regional identities, the cultural contexts, the particular economic styles, illegitimate conditions that are to be overcome in the name of humanity, be it with the beneficial force of authority?'¹²

The answer is that (economic and cultural) *globalization* and (philosophical, in a stricter sense ethical) *universalism* are not the same. While globalization means first of all a further dissolution of frontiers in the economic process, and then in turn, within this process, the possible emergence of a uniform world culture, universalism aims at the assertion of universal claims of validity, for example in the form of human rights, though not as a universal life form, even though this might acquire to a certain extent, as a by-product of economic processes of globalization, more and more reality.

If, conversely, all this does not result in a universal way of life, it does not mean that universalism comes any closer to doing so. On the contrary:

The current process of globalization does not only involve no fostering of universalism, instead it seems even that opposite tenden-

¹¹ C.F. Gethmann, 'Universalismus und Globalisierung', in K. Pinkau/M. Popp/Chr. Stahlberg (eds.), *Der Universitäts- und Forschungsstandort Deutschland im globalen Markt* (Stuttgart: Hirzel, 1998), p. 54.

¹² *Op. cit.*, p. 50.

cies are emerging: If the observation holds that regional conflicts caused by religious and other cultural diversities increase in number and militancy, and that sects of a fundamentalist nature within Western civilization gain recently more and more followers, then we can assume that the dynamics of globalization not only do not foster universalism, but, moreover, that the dialectical counter-movement of regionalization strengthens particularity.¹³

While regionalisation belongs essentially to globalization as its complement or 'dialectical counter-movement', particularity represents quite simply and in a non-dialectical way the opposite of universalism: fragmenting claims of validity into particularities is not part of universalism, but rather its negation.

We should keep this in mind if we wish to draw far-reaching conclusions from the fact of globalization to the (emerging) fact of universal reason or universalism. In other words: globalization is in essence an economic process with secondary cultural effects; universalism is a philosophical principle which, against all particular claims of validity, asserts the idea of universal reason, including the idea of man as a rational being, and of ethics as rational ethics. The ideals of education should follow this argument – against the development of a process of individualisation and pluralisation of life – forms that I have described and against the disintegration of instrumental knowledge and orientational knowledge that accompanies this development.

At the beginning I said that education always means education in the context of a given culture – cultures being systems of values, of (legally defined) modes of action and of symbols, which produce or represent (parts of) worlds. In this sense, education is always intra-cultural. But it is, again, also trans-cultural in the sense that, according to the concept of universalism, it follows the idea of universal reason and, in this context, ethical principles which are not particular principles but universal principles. This, too, presupposes the idea of universal reason and universal ethics, the principles of which are universalistic.

Universal ethics holds that it does not derive its validity from the values of certain (particular) cultures, but rather from a general will which is best expressed in the formula of Kant's categorical imperative:

¹³ *Op. cit.*, p. 55.

Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end!¹⁴

Only the 'rational' being exists as 'an end in itself',¹⁵ which is why for Kant only rational beings have 'dignity'.

Such universal ethics, just as the underlying idea of universal reason, are, as has been mentioned before, often said to be typically European, determined by the ideas of Christianity and the Enlightenment, so that, at least if seen from the outside, they appear as particular. Yet this is a misunderstanding. After all, its expressions of a corresponding ethical universality are, as also stated already at the beginning, human rights and, in connection with them, the concept of human dignity.

Thus, with respect to the notion of universal reason, and against the assumption that reason be no more than a feeling or even essentially organized in a pluralistic way, reason is a cultural fact, but it is not a condition on culture. This means that if cultures claim their values to be more valid than those of other cultures, they have to justify these claims of validity in the face of reason, and not the other way round. Therefore, reason is simultaneously a *principle of universality* (against claims of validity on the basis of origin, social class, gender, race, etc. and a pluralistic understanding of reason), a *principle of transsubjectivity* (reason as transcending pure subjectivity) and a *principle of legitimation* (referring to claims of validity that cannot be relativised).

This does not exclude a dialectics of ethical universality and cultural particularity in the context of education. Indeed, universal principles too must normally be learnt in the context of cultural particularities. To this extent, particular cultures point beyond themselves, namely towards a general culture of reason in which the essence of man, his rationality and his dignity are expressed. This essence must be achieved over and over again – against particular concepts of the good, the just and the rational, assumptions which aim at taking the place of the universal. The universalism of reason does not admit particular worlds which pretend to be the essence of reason themselves.

¹⁴ I. Kant, *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* B 66f. (*Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, H.J. Paton (ed.), New York: Harper & Row, 1964, p. 96).

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, B 65 (*Groundwork, ibid.*).

This is particularly relevant nowadays to so-called *multicultural societies* where globalization is mirrored in the particular (regional). Here, however, the question arises whether a multicultural society, namely a society that consists of different cultures and tribes, in spite of this, to find its own identity, is at all possible. It would be among other things a society in which there are no more (cultural) majorities and consequently, no cultural minorities. The answer has to be no. Real identity generates only in *one* world, in a common world. And how should this common world exist, if it is made up of different cultures – each with their own world-view? It is as with language: he whose language one does not understand has a view of the world one does not understand, and thus inhabits a world one does not understand. For language articulates the world; and what is thereby articulated is the way the world *is*.

Conclusion

From a philosophical perspective, it is not decisive how education adapts itself to the conditions of an ever-increasing globalization, but how a universal principle of reason or ethical universality and cultural particularity come together to a single world in the realm of education, without reason losing its universal essence and the world losing its cultural diversity.