

Upbringing in the New Situation of Life (An Essay in Philosophy for Educology)

“We have fallen into an abyss of stupidity and cannot recognize that it follows some eclipse of values and the obliteration of their hierarchy”. (S. Lem, Glos z otchłani [Voice from the abyss]. "Tygodnik Powszechny", 6.5.2001)

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Introduction by Co-Editors

This paper was written by Dr. Wiesław Sztumski, Professor of Philosophy in the Social Science Faculty in the University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland for publication in the International Journal of Educology. It represents Professor Wiesław's philosophical position about the problems involved in the reality of the new situation of life in which human beings exist in the world today.

It is Professor Sztumski's description of the new situation of life in the world in the beginning of the 21st century, that the Co-Editors take to be an essential account of the situation of life in the world that John Dewey described in the early to middle 20th century.

It is not, directly, a paper in philosophy of educology. It is a paper in philosophy for educology that accounts for the reality of the new situation of life in the world in which the need for a philosophy of knowledge about education, i.e. a philosophy of educology, is clearly signified when Sztumski says:

“Old categories of ethics should be constantly evaluated according to the changes in our environment of life. Above all, it is necessary to recognize as proportional, not as perfect, what is variable and accidental, and it is necessary that we seek for some “quick-time axioms” of ethics in the situations full of uncertainty, risk, and instability. This seems to be the most urgent task for contemporary pedagogues and ethicists, persons in professions that should be responsible for the upbringing and survival of the future generations.”

Introduction by Author

Nowadays, we live in an extraordinary epoch in a strange life space-time. This is over all the consequences of the unusual increase of our life tempo. This tempo accelerates in accord with the measure of technological and scientific progress. We all have more to do in a quicker time than previously, by analogy, in the click-time of the computer mouse. In this situation, constancy and certainty does not exist for a long time, specifically the existence of the ethical norms, value systems, and behavior principles. For this reason an important tasks stand before us, i.e. the task of creating a new ethics (“a click-time ethics”) and to bring up a new generation for life in a complicated future world according to this new ethics.

Part 1

Nowadays, we observe, in all spheres of life, symptoms that announce the arrival of essentially a new epoch. People's behaviors, opinions, attitudes, and value systems changed radically in the last century. In addition, the ways of thinking, conceptualization, and making sense of the world, as well as our scientific and philosophical world pictures, were transformed quickly and really. This was caused by the radical transformation of the natural, social, and cultural environments. These changes consist in the rejection of all that was fixed in our consciousness and culture for many centuries, in what we acknowledged as unquestionable, in what grew into tradition thanks to propaganda and enculturation, and in what was inherited from one generation to the next as certainties, truths, and ethical canons. Our faith in constancy, certainty, reliability, and safety weakened, thanks to this secular experience.

The formation of constant stereotypes in the period from the 17th to the 20th century was caused by the development of science, leaning on classical physics, by technology, using unflinching mechanisms, and by philosophy, presenting the mechanistic and classical deterministic world picture. However, in the beginning of the last century, quantum mechanics and the theory of relativity have destroyed the foundations of classical physics and awakened the mistrust in stereotypes functioning in classical science and in philosophy. The development of quantum mechanics and relativistic physics caused the critique of contemporary convictions. In addition, technical progress (inventions of ever more complicated technologies and technical mechanisms) showed the nonsense of the belief in the infallibility of technology. On the one hand, risk of damages increased with the complication of technical mechanisms and with the use of new sources of energy (above all nuclear energy). On the other hand, the threat to life and the growing risk of ecological disasters increased with the saturation of the world with modern technologies. Therefore, the development of knowledge and technology led to the rise of the consciousness of uncertainty. Philosophy did not exist indifferent in the face of these occurrences. Therefore, the rules of criticism, relativism, and dialectics began to prevail in philosophical thinking in the second half of the twentieth century.

Nevertheless, circa seventy years was necessary to make finally sure that ruling stereotypes of thinking and paradigms in science and culture have irrevocably lost their power and are no longer adequate for the new social reality and modern conditions of life. Such a conclusion appeared because of the stormy development of the natural sciences, technology, and negative historic experiences. By negative historical experiences, I mean the two world wars, social revolutions, dictatorships (fascist and bolshevist), the holocaust, exterminations of ethnic groups, the period of the so-called cold war (or 'frozen peace'), and now, after September eleventh last year, global terrorism. By the stormy development of technology, I mean the development of the production of mass-extinction weapons, the development of nuclear energy and the enormous progress in the spheres of transport, telecommunication, exploration of the cosmos, and the processes of automation, computerization, and robotization. At present, we see that the ethical canons in life's situations have lost their power. They surrendered the lack of belief, criticism, relativism, and dialectical thinking. Some traditional ethics, leaning on the religious beliefs of different religious groups defended against the destruction of their foundations by the overthrow of myth about the inviolability of norms and of rules consisting allegedly in so-called natural laws. However, under the pressure of modernity and postmodernism they have lost their position.

These ethics can still be preserved in the social consciousness as a relict of the past. The faith in the infallible authorities fell, lack of confidence in ideology and political leaders is growing, and a critical view of the ideal political system and object of religious or laic cults are preserved. Now, we behave with reserve, with distrust, and we have a critical attitude towards what in the past was acknowledged as good. Old norms, patterns, paradigms, prohibitions, and command systems are simply rejected as unnecessary ballast not needed by anybody. These not only do not help us to

live in the contemporary world, but prevent us, also, from adapting to the essential requirements of the present environment of life, i.e. they are the elements that threaten even the possibility of our survival.

Therefore, we find in this situation that some rules and norms of coexistence cease to function, and that others surrender to progressive erosion and lose their importance. However, nothing has yet been introduced in the place of what has been rejected and what has been broken. Even today, we do not know what to introduce. We do not know what “new” should replace the “old” in the sphere of ethics. We do not know, after all, what waits us neither in the foreseeable future nor for what purpose, what to bring up, and on what to lean. Therefore, we are neither able to foresee, nor to define our expectations. Then, we can state that we have to deal with an unusual crisis in ethics. We have begun to live in an inter-epochal empty ethical space. In other words, our topical life space-time has become to some extent devoid of its ethical dimension or this dimension is significantly reduced.

It would appear as though this is a normal course of life. Maybe, we live during a period of ethical crisis in one of the successive periods of turn of epochs in the history of human kind. Since ancient times, people have known that the world changes, but they knew too that there are also some elements of constancy. This was reflected in some philosophical views. Here, rivaled opinions that acknowledged certainty and despair, constancy and variability, unity and plurality, and harmony and contradiction. Besides, in ancient times, people thought that such attributes as constancy, certainty, unity, invariability, and harmony constituted the perfection of being and also the good, whereas their antinomies were acknowledged as the degeneration of and the deviation from perfection, and the bad. We have to deal with the clear asymmetry of the evaluations of constancy and variability and of certainty and uncertainty, etc. These ancient opinions survived throughout the epochs, and were even strengthened by the foundations of Christian philosophy and modern science. Always, in philosophy and science, one looked for some absolutely certain fulcrum, i.e. some foundation or axiom. And, one tried to find it in the self-consciousness of man, in God, in the Mind, etc.

The development of science in modern times delivered the arguments for and against these opinions. On the one hand, we discovered phenomena, which prove changes in the nature, society, and culture. On the other hand, we discovered different invariants in the form of objective, eternal, and obligatory regularities in science and scientific laws; permanent and invariable structures in thinking, language, psyche etc, and; physical invariants and cosmological constants. But the ancient way of thinking has prevailed continually till present times, i.e. the thinking that what is invariable and necessary is good and what is variable and accidental is bad. In this connection, the picture of our changing world demands a foundation of something invariable. Therefore, change and uncertainty can only take place in what is invariable and certain.

If certainty and invariability exist not in the real world (because maybe this does not exist), it postulates their existence in a conceived (ideal) world. Hence also in modern science, we have to deal with the unchanging conditions of border values (attained allegedly in infinity), with some absolutes and fictions (as e.g. perfect solid body, frictionless movement, balanced market etc). It appears that European culture, founded on ancient philosophy and on classical science, yearned for what should be constant, certain, and absolute. Therefore, the search for constancy, certainty, and various absolutes became an important aim of the cognitive activity, as well as the belief in the constancy and certainty of the knowledge of the stability of our conditions of existence, profession, good, norms, rules of human coexistence, beauty, etc., and the basis of our upbringing and education.

Until now, the turns of epochs consist in this, that instead of old elements (or moments) of the constancy and certainty, new ones were introduced, and the old ways of interpreting absolutes were replaced by new ways, which are more adequate to new social situations and more consistent with modern knowledge. However, these new substitutes of the moments of the certainty and invariability had an absolute character, i.e. they were irrefutable. Nobody could risk doubting them for fear of exposing themselves to infamy. Thinking of the world as structured on some invariable, solid, and certain basis was still obligatory. Consequently, the theories describing the world had to refer to moments of the persistence, invariable, and absolute certainty.

The turn of the epoch, in which we live now, is quite different from preceding ones and therefore seem to be strange. It generates justified anxiety for the future of humankind, especially in connection with the foreseen scenarios of disasters and with the feeling of the loss of certainty and safety. This is a typical fear of the unknown. The present epoch and the crisis of ethics differ essentially from preceding critical states because it has been proved that we ought not only reject the acknowledged moments of constancy (values constants, certainties, invariants etc), but that we have to reject even the thought of them. It has been proved that something like this does not have and cannot be the constant, invariable, certain, and absolute and are simply fictions in which we can believe and have no reference to the real world. Such an assertion can wake the anxiety of the extreme view that we acknowledge only variability and uncertainty, that the world does not have any permanent foundations, that it is like 'plasma', and that the theories describing the world will not demand any axioms.

Perhaps it would be more reasonable to formulate some compromising position, in this context, that the facts of the real world do not have, in principle, anything permanent, certain, and invariable, and that people have to appeal to these fictions in order to hold any social law and order so as to give them a sense of their own life and history. Order, harmony, and the sense of life are basic elements of organization of individuals and society, without which they cannot function. The organization is a necessary condition for the survival of humankind. In spite of the realization of the lack of certainty and invariability, it would appeal to them, but not as to something eternal and certain in an absolute sense, but as something temporary, passing, and risky. The speed of their lapse depends on the tempo of the changes in our environment of life and of the changes of civilization in the concrete society. In topical conditions of life, the stability and certainty of ethical norms, values, opinions, feeling of safety, and world pictures, etc. are limited to the lifetime of one generation, and all indications are that it will be even shorter.

Part 2

The progress in the development of science and technical demonstrates the uselessness and the nonsense of yearning for constancy and certainty. The endeavor towards perfection understood as faithfulness of definite values, norms, standards, and other "absolute truths" has been proved so unrealizable as to be useless. Modern science rejects the classical worldview leaning on the idea of exact causal determinism and on dynamic laws, in accordance with which next states result univocally and necessarily from the preceding states. Nowadays, relativism is dominant in our science and culture, therefore, creating demands for the qualifications and choice of a suitable reference system. The choice is, in principle, optional because nothing is eternal or certain in the world. Besides, we increasingly attribute the greater part of the world to be accidental events, to fluctuations, to indeterminate states, to probability, to statistical distributions, and to chaos. It has been even proved that so-called universal physical constants and their values change with the aging of the universe. A short time ago, at the conference in Baltimore "The Dark Universe,"

Prof. M. Livio from the Hubble Space Telescope Science Institute asked: "Of what are we really certain?" and he answered: "Certain are only death and taxes." And, the astrophysicist M. Turner, summing up the discussion about cosmological models of the Universe said: "We live in a grotesque Universe." He had in mind that no models leaning on physical and cosmological constants are adequate to reality and that many years of effort by scientists to construct some adequate cosmological model miscarried, because "about the greatest part of the Universe we know today so much, as nothing." Nota bene, we know also little more about the fundamental components of the world, which are elementary particles or quarks. I generalize M. Turner's statement by saying that: "We live now in a grotesque world of nature, in a grotesque culture and in a grotesque social situation."

The grotesqueness of our topical environment of life consists neither of the fact that we know nothing (in fact, we know much more than at any other time), nor that what we know is uncertain, but that nothing is so stable and certain that it could fulfill the role of a sign-post showing the aim of our development and the direction of our activities. There is nothing able to be the basis for the normalization of our attitudes, behaviors, and actions. Up until now, knowledge (especially scientific) was a guarantor of certainty. Now, this knowledge has become increasingly relative, it has lost its own value of reliability and cannot warrant anything in an absolute manner.

Above all, the orientations resulting from knowledge about the world do not warrant the possibility of survival. On the contrary, the greater the progress of science and technology the more risky becomes our survival. Paraphrasing Sartre's statement we can say, that we stand at a crossing of infinitely many ways before a signpost that rotates chaotically and unpredictably. Therefore, we know neither where to aim, nor how to move in order to survive. Of course, we do not and cannot stay in one place if we are to survive. We try to go the way, towards which the signpost prompts us. Before we pass part of the way, the signpost turns around and shows us some other direction. We change the direction of our march and go in a new direction. We cannot turn back because reversible processes do not exist in the real world. Then the situation happens again. Besides, we live in an increasingly changing environment of life. In such quickly changing life space-time, the "signpost of life" turns more and more quickly. Consequently, our directions of movement change in accelerated tempo and we are not able to foresee these changes. It is impossible to infer about possible future states, with the method of "lengthening of trajectory." Therefore, we are not able to foresee the next direction of our march. If so, then no matter which direction we choose, we always risk failure and encounter the growth of threat. Moreover, the risk of failure increases proportionally to the speed of the changes in our environment. The world, in which we live and in which the next generation will come to live, is full of changes, threats, uncertainties, and risks.

Hitherto, existing ideas of ethics required unflinching fulcrums and orientations referring to the world that people treated as stable, because the world was really such. To be sure, the world changed then, but the changes were more slowly than nowadays. They took place during long intervals of time, usually in the course of a dozen or so generations. Therefore, the belief in constancy and certainty of the processes in the world, in the stability of life conditions, and in the educational ideals were not questioned. Now, such fulcrums and orientation do not exist. We live in the world that changes ever more thanks to our technological and cultural activities. The social life space-time does not remind us of a slow flowing stream but rather of a rapid river. Therefore, the well-known Heraclitus statement " " should be transformed into the statement: " " and ought to create an ethic, leaning on norms and values, that are constant and certain in long term intervals, in contrast to the radically new ethics, where values and norms will oblige us in progressively reduced term intervals to a "quick-time-ethics."

Ethical norms, obliging us now, will surely not be able to be in force in the near future because of the quickly changing life situations in the world.

The myths about stability, reliability and certainty have been overthrown, therefore, old ethics, good for life in former conditions and in a very slowly changing world, lose their applicative power in our time. They have become simply useless in our times and cannot function as theories and ideal conceptions. Therefore, we ought to build an entirely new ethics founded on the uncertainty of norms and of ideals, involving the risk of behaviors, involving the falling of expectations, involving the attainment of aims, and involving the impossibility to foresee the absolute results of our activities. We need a quick-time ethics. Old categories of ethics should be constantly evaluated according to the changes in our environment of life. Above all, it is necessary to recognize as proportional, not as perfect, what is variable and accidental, and it is necessary that we seek for some “quick-time axioms” of ethics in the situations full of uncertainty, risk, and instability. This seems to be the most urgent task for contemporary pedagogues and ethicists, persons in professions that should be responsible for the upbringing and survival of the future generations.