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NON-CULTURAL DIMENSIONS OF LIBERAL EDUCATION

An appeal to liberal education sooner or later leads to recognition of a crisis that liberal education currently faces. Aiming to preserve this social institution, its adherers state time proven arguments, which may be tentatively described as either “political” or “personal”. “Political” arguments hinge on normative ideal of autonomous individual who is apt to justified choice. Free society is conceivable when there are enough individuals capable of critical, self-reliant thinking. Therefore, liberal education opens the door for free society. We can find this point both within works of classical authors, like T. Jefferson or W. von Humboldt, and in contemporary inquiries¹. Liberal education here overlaps with civic or democratic education but is not identical to none of them.

“Personal” arguments, on the one hand, point on transformative potential of liberal education that, one can say, alters mode of human existence². On the other hand, it is specified that liberal education is a rational, pragmatic choice for an individual, as far as in the VUCA-world (a world that is described as volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) fun-

damental education provides more opportunities in a long run, than specialized, vocational education³. These types of arguments enhance each other, thus forming quite an attractive image of liberal education. But why does it face the crisis despite of such a significant societal and personal benefits of liberal education?

To put it bluntly, I tend to see the problem in the established social institution of liberal education. To be more precise, liberal education that is per se culturally-grounded education today, often does not lead to or, more than that, may become a hindrance on a way to inner transformation and autonomous action. In this article, while sharing the aforementioned arguments in favor of liberal education, I would like to present some thoughts on possibility of non-cultural dimensions liberal education. To say in advance, the alternative, or rather full-fledged addition to culturally-rooted liberal education I search in the non-hermeneutics project of H. Gumbrecht, consciousness researches of F. Varela, and Buddhist philosophy of Pali canon (as F. Varela does himself).

Introduction

Now, in the article I attempt to turn away from a habitual view of liberal education as elitist education that strives for extra-utilitarian aims, referring to high classic culture, languages and basics of science. Reading of this sort does not, of course, exhaust a plenitude of interpretations of “liberal” edu-

cation. For more than twenty centuries of existence of the term, “liberal” education has had a wide range of different traditions of reading. The aforementioned one concerns, before all, the English-American tradition. Nevertheless, it can do a good job for purposes of the article. First of all, this reading lies in foundations of

1. e. g., M. Levinson, *The Demands of Liberal Education*, Oxford 1999.

2. e.g., F. Zakaria, *In Defense of a Liberal Education*, New-York 2015; Ch. Bailey, *Beyond the Present and Particular: a Theory of a Liberal Education*, London 1984.

3. *Williams College Mission and Purposes*, approved by the Board of Trustees, 2007, <http://archives.williams.edu/mission-and-purposes-2007.php>

modern discussion on the idea of a University (due to J. H. Newman), thus relating the subject of the article to the wider problem of university education. Second, there is actual pedagogical practice in colleges throughout the Western world correspondent to this reading. That means that critical examination of the chosen reading may yield to some pragmatic implications to current educational process. Last but not the least, this reading is fastened to a belief in transformative potential of culturally-rooted liberal education. Examining of that belief is crucially important and will take some part of the text below.

Using the notion of “culturally-rooted education”, I refer to an educational ideal based on belief that culture is a core and ultimate condition for unfolding “highest” potentialities of a human being. That theory has an evidence base which is not easy to challenge. It stems from observance that contact with high culture may lead to situation when something looks into human being, essentially transforming him or her. That understanding one may get from R.-M. Rilke’s description of contemplation of Apollo’s archaic torso, the feeling that I cannot escape the attention emanating from the torso. Reaching me wherever I would ran, something urges me: “You must change your life”⁴. However, despite numerous evidence of aesthetic/ existential experiences of transcendence, way out of day-to-day “medial” states and correspondent alteration of an image of a self (that grow out of contact with high culture), cultural rootedness, the belief in overriding significance of culturally-rooted education may have a reverse side.

Aiming to turn away from described understanding of liberal education, the attention is given to examination of role of culture (to be more precise, of socio-cultural mediation) in essential transformation of a human being. In other words, this means examining beliefs about methods, which lead to that transformation. With such a perspective, the established social institution of liberal education gives up its central position. Moreover, such kind of approach leads beyond mere “liberal education”, posing before all philosophical anthropology issues: what constitutes a human being and what does essential transformation means. But why then it is still possible

to talk about liberal education? Is it not essentially cultural?

As it was mentioned before, there is plenitude of readings of the notion of liberal education. Among them, there are ones that demonstrate the restrictions that culturally-rooted education imposes on individual. Ralph Waldo Emerson, among others, pointed on importance of “self-trust”, ability of direct apprehension of the world, while qualifying the contemporary ideal of cultural, retrospectively oriented liberal education as an attempt to pin a genius of the past, as if he was merely a butterfly. Liberal education for R. Emerson results to spontaneity of life, aptness and courage to “read God directly”.

Exposition of the reading that assumes possibility of non-cultural education will start with comparison of J. S. Mill’s and R. Emerson’s interpretations of liberal education. It will help us to move from traditional (university-specific one) reading of liberal education to its non-cultural dimensions. That shift will make it obvious that we are considering principally distinct educational strategies and, therefore, it may be sound to introduce just another concept (but not “liberal education”) to refer to non-cultural approach for inner transformation. However, that should not be done: the intentions of both approaches, of culturally-rooted and of non-cultural one, are covered by denotation of “liberal” education (derived from latin *liber*, freedom), and, further, within the discussion on liberal education one can find both of them. That is to say that limitation of liberal education just to one approach (either cultural or non-cultural) conceals dimensions that may be truly liberating. I would venture to argue, that integral liberal education project must cover both approaches.

A further step is made with reference to works of H. Gumbrecht and F. Varela. Hans Gumbrecht provided significant insights with his non-hermeneutics project, delineating the possibilities of attaining the sense without referring to interpretation. Francisco Varela, following Buddhist tradition, points on significance of awareness development, specific skill that leads to unfolding of non-conceptual dimensions of Being. In general, I suggest considering the aim of liberal education as self-transcendence,

4. R.-M. Rilke, *Selected poems*, with English transl. and notes by C. F. MacIntyre, Berkley 1971, p. 93.

affordable, in particular, due to awareness development practice. Such a view is not opposed to socio-cultural engagement of individual. Nonetheless, overriding concentration on culturally-rooted edu-

cation conceals a challenge: socio-cultural engagement may become a source of core identity, and, as a result, become a source for imposing limitations and self-conservation within one's own beliefs⁵.

What is liberal education: from J. S. Mill to R. W. Emerson

As it was mentioned, the question of "essential transformation" leads us to philosophical anthropology domain, to the questions like what is a human being, what is actually being transformed in human being and, of course, what that transformation for. In case of J. S. Mill we read about transformative energy of culture that rises a human being above natural state, actualizes within him or her spiritual and intellectual potentialities. That is why the purpose of education, according to J. Mill, is cultural retranslation, cherishing of culture: "... which each generation purposely gives to those who are to be its successors, in order to qualify them for at least keeping up, and if possible for raising, the level of improvement which has been attained"⁶. As for ideal of liberal education, as a specific type of educational practice, J. Mill refers to "general knowledge", knowledge of basics of all significant arts and sciences (opposing it, on the one hand, to "superficial knowledge", knowledge of separated facts from different disciplines, and, on the other hand, to vocational, specialized education). Rather exhaustive list of "significant" disciplines would include reverence to classics, basics of contemporary science, socio-political theory, aesthetics, and apprehension of religious norms.

It seems that Millian type of interpretation of liberal education is substantial – in the sense that it provides descriptive norms and material waymarks of liberal accomplishment. One can almost infallibly recognize a person of liberal education, tracing acquaintance with canonical texts and advanced language commands. In this context, one can recall how

poet Kavafis satirizes Hellenized barbarians who choose respectable silence so as not to use incorrect grammatical form. At the same time, socio-cultural rootedness has a reverse side. I refer to a vastly described in traditions of sociology of knowledge⁷, existential psychology⁸ phenomenon of identifying oneself with available socio-cultural senses. That is situation when some set of identities, so to say, exhaust an individual. In that case, questioning the elements of one's identity (tribal, cultural, social, religious) means march off against oneself. Instead of intention to step beyond one's limits, instead of transgression, one runs into a scenario of self-conservation, defending own limits and opposition to the other.

One of the reasons of self-conservation may be found in functioning of social systems, of education system in particular. The system reproduces itself, as P. Bourdieu described, via agents, produced and legitimated by the system itself, thus allocating in social fabric some basic, nuclear beliefs about self. An attempt to question these beliefs is being marked as social deviation. In this context, culturally-rooted liberal education may function not as a potential source for unfolding human capacities, but as a source for self-conservation, identification with ready-made senses.

It appears that modern culturally-rooted approach to liberal education, represented by J. Mill, was getting institutionalized during Renaissance. At that time liberal education, as a part of "re-discovered" high classic culture, attracts both humanists

5. I think that E. Mounier's dialectics of engagement and transcendence is just about finding balance between socio-cultural participation and ability to step aside from social imagery (to the extent that is actually possible for individual). In this sense, non-cultural approach I try to develop in this article is about transcendence (with any slightest intention to diminish the importance of engagement). - See E. Mounier, *Personalism*, London 2008.

6. J. Mill, *Inaugural Address Delivered to the University of St. Andrews (1867)*, [in:] J. Mill, *Essays on Equality, Law, and Education*, ed. John M. Robson, Toronto 1984, p. 218.

7. N. Elias, *Problems of Self-consciousness and the Image of Man*, [in:] N. Elias, *The Society of Individuals*, tr. by E. Jephcott, New-York 2001, p. 67-152.

8. J. Welwood, *Toward a Psychology of Awakening: Buddhism, Psychotherapy and the Path of Personal and Spiritual Transformation*, Boston 2002, p. 22-35.

and wealthy classes of prosperous cities. Liberal education becomes a component of social capital, a standardized educational practice. Transformative potential of that liberal education is believed to unfold through the access to wisdom of ancients. Since that wisdom is in texts, liberal education becomes inevitably bookish, and liberal accomplishment requires study of ancient languages. “In cultivating... the ancient languages, - states Mill, - as our best literary education, we are all the while laying an admirable foundation for ethical and philosophical culture”⁹. However, the focus on materialities of culture provokes critique on the part of R. Emerson, who says that in such case “love of the hero corrupts into worship of his statue”¹⁰. Let us give some attention to his views.

Regarding the question of how a human being unfolds his or her potentialities, R. Emerson utilizes an analogy with creation of an artwork (J. Mill, we should recall, believed in transformative power of culture). R. Emerson points that sacredness which follows the act of creation is transferred to the artwork. When a Poet writes a Poem, he gets in touch with presence of deity and thus the Poem becomes deific. Presence of deity is reflected in the artwork, but, nevertheless, it is not exhausted by the artwork (whether it is a Poem or a Book). “The sluggish and perverted mind of the multitude”, once perceiving the touch of deity, fiercely protects the artwork in case someone would dare to question its authority. “Colleges are built on it”, - states R. Emerson. “Meek young men grow up in libraries, believing it their duty to accept the views, which Cicero, which Locke, which Bacon, have given, forgetful that Cicero, Locke and Bacon were only young men in libraries, when they wrote these books”¹¹.

And further: “Books are for the scholar’s idle times. When he can read God directly, the hour is too precious to be wasted in other men’s transcripts of their readings”¹². Schools and universities are attached to geniuses of the past. But it is impossible to pin a genius like a butterfly. Instead of sinking to the

ocean of formed knowledge, it is crucial to find the source of truth within oneself: “In self-trust, all the virtues are comprehended. Free should the scholar be,—free and brave. Free even to the definition of freedom...”¹³. Somewhat edgy conclusive remark may be formulated in this manner: if the aim of education is socio-cultural reproduction, then Emerson’s view on liberal education should not be considered as an educational project.

Relying on Emerson’s argumentation, it follows then that contact with materialities of culture does not necessarily lead to unfolding of inner potentialities. Self-trust, instead, is important, a specific reflexive orientation due to which “all the virtues are comprehended”. R. Emerson insists that this sort of orientation is open to everyone, though for the multitude it remains unborn.

Here we make a further step – to contemporary research in cognitive science and philosophy of consciousness. Actually, it would take some tremendous effort (and space) to demonstrate connection between Emersonian notion of self-trust and development of awareness, which I place in foundations of non-cultural liberal education practice. Moreover, I doubt whether firm ground between these notions may be achieved (except if one turns his attention to re-legitimated by F. Varela notion of first-person-experience and correspondent methodology: in this light, self-trust may be described as quality of living experience that unfolds and deepens with the development of awareness). Instead, I would argue that the development of awareness, if not equal to development of self-trust, may be regarded at least as a practice that helps to transgress necessity of socio-cultural mediation, to question the basics of an image of a self, the aim that Emerson seems to share in his project of liberal education.

Neurophysiologist and zen-Buddhism practitioner J. Austin in the first volume of influential three-volume edition focused on impact of meditative practice on human brain, states that awareness “... is the natural soil for positive, spontaneous per-

9. J Mill, op. cit., p. 230.

10. R. Emerson, *The American Scholar: An Oration Delivered before the Phi Beta Kappa Society, at Cambridge, August 31, 1837*, [in:] *Essays and Poems* by Ralph Waldo Emerson, New-York 2005, p. 91.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 92.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 93.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

sonal growth...¹⁴. In this article I will not address to questions on nature or origins of ability to be aware. Instead, the attention will be given to a pragmatic issues: how is awareness relates to essential transformation, why there is need in that transformation and

Liberal education and development of awareness

Project of non-hermeneutics of H. Gumbrecht one may describe as an attempt to loosen absolute domination of “discourse of meanings”. Author defines the concept of interpretation as identification and attribution of a meaning to some object – that is what usually considered to be the essence of literary education and fascination with culture. But efforts of constant attribution of meanings, then re-attribution and again re-attribution may be suddenly perceived in existential experience of deep weariness. H. Gumbrecht refers to J.-L. Nancy who describes his desperate experience, which author in any new book does not even pretend to anything more than just to add some new meanings.

As a way out of “loss of world”, out of endless vortex of self-reproductive and newly grown, never ending interpretations, H. Gumbrecht sees in attention to “presence”, reestablishing “being-in-the-world”. Human body is the key: an individual has to learn how to comprehend the world not only through the concepts, but through feelings as well, which, in turn, open non-conceptual dimensions of Being. “»[K]nowledge« revealed or unconcealed can be substance that appears, that presents itself to us ... without requiring interpretation as its transformation into meaning¹⁵. Feelings exist before any meaning and despite any meaning, they just are. In this statement there is an immense potential for emancipation: pointing on region that may be refuge from tyranny of symbolic world – of course if there is a necessity for such a refuge, if for some reason fascination with meaning is not joyful anymore. Such type of world-view, by no means, steps aside from established systems of thought (as E. Cassirer’s phil-

why those senses, which culture supplies, may not be satisfying. I will start with referring to H. Gumbrecht who points on human body as a tool to re-establish “being-in-the-world”, as a way out of constant spins of interpretations, created by cultural rootedness.

osophical anthropology project), but still represents a distinct type of living experience.

Meanwhile, it seems that not a body as such serves for re-establishing of “being-in-the-world”, although we cannot ignore our body, in all senses of the word. As it follows from F. Varela’s researches, the main attention should be given to awareness – an ability to trace what is happening now, at this moment¹⁶. Awareness of the body, shift of attention to the feelings of the body is, actually, one of the tools for development of awareness. Starting with awareness of visual images, sounds, odors, an individual is able in some time to learn how to trace his own emotions and thoughts (instead of being in the vortex of thoughts or emotions). While being aware of something, comes dis-identification of the one who is aware with that which is one aware of. It suddenly may become obvious that “I” am not my thoughts or emotions. “I” as something substantial, something separated may vanish at all. In a living experience comes something that may not be named, though it is experienced as unconditional existence, which, at the same time, is aware of its existence.

Considering this type of experience, J. Austin insists that it should not be described as mystical, in a sense that it is not reachable for “common” people. He uses term “extraordinary states of consciousness” that are actually “... innate, existing brain functions, rearranged into new configurations¹⁷. A human being gets an opportunity to realize his or her own limits or boundaries (mental and emotional), get in touch with non-conceptual knowledge, and reach existential experiences of love and integrity. F. Varela states, that one may and should develop awareness.

14. J. Austin, *Zen and the Brain: Toward an Understanding of Meditation and Consciousness*, Massachusetts 1999, p. 13.

15. H. Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey*, Stanford 2003, p. 81.

16. *On Becoming Aware*, ed. by Natalie Depraz, Francisco Varela, Pierre Vermersch, “Advances in Consciousness Research”, Vol. 43, Amsterdam 2002.

17. J. Austin, op. cit., p. 23.

In one of his interviews, F. Varela says that it is obvious for everybody that while learning how to play musical instrument, a person has to bridge a long way and make a lot of effort; in the same time, it is not so obvious that attempt to know oneself requires efforts as well¹⁸.

Important for Buddhist tradition *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* describes in detail the ways of development of awareness¹⁹. Of course, development of awareness is not limited to practices of Buddhist tradition. The point on which I would like to focus in the end of the article is that there are such dimensions of human

being in the world, which are not covered by interpretations that culture rootedness supplies. With any slightest intention to reject fruitfulness of intellectual development or socio-cultural engagement, I would venture to state that liberal education, the one that aims for non-utilitarian ends, self-knowledge of a man, can find a new vast universe in development of awareness. That component of liberal education is by no means practical, it is based on personal effort, “inner activism”, sincere questioning the sources of the self.



18. *Three Gestures of Becoming Aware: Conversation with Francisco Varela*, by Claus Otto Schamerl, January 12, 2000, Paris, <https://www.presencing.com/dol/varela>

19. *The middle length discourses of the Buddha : a new translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*, orig. transl. by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli; ed. and rev. by Bhikkhu Bodhi. Boston 1995, p. 145-155.