



Horyzonty Polityki
2(3)/2011

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Contemplation and the University: Reflections on Liberal Education in the Age of Practice

Summary

The article deals with the change that has occurred in the field of university education. The old notion of „contemplation“ was thus thoroughly neglected, or „theory“ reduced to „practice“, in order to redeem the claims of modern „technological“ society. This society is built on the „imperatives of making and doing“. There is almost no learning for its own sake nowadays and we can find a fatal indifference to the real „message“ of „the matters“, as distinguished from the „media“ or „communicative competence“, as well. The humanities, however, should not be permeated by these currents; it should offer, instead, some alternative approach to education. Such approach may be linked with reflection on the figure of Socrates, who is not only a „historical philosopher“, but „a model for contemplation“. He was wholly immersed in the „practice of contemplation“ yet he never forgot „the question of morality and politics“. We are not expected to take after historical Socrates; what we should do is to learn from his fate, as Allan Bloom used to do, what love for truth in reality means; we should actualize „Socratic impulse“ while not imitating Socrates himself. We

must be aware that the great philosophers would not probably be welcome in the realm of the „hypermodern bureaucratized university”; we do, nonetheless, have to reflect on their examples. This is primarily because contemplation leads to happiness. If there is no place for happiness, or reflecting upon happiness, as the ultimate goal of human life, at the university, the fundamental aim of education is decidedly diminished. But contemplation has also its political dimension and ought to be considered in regard to its „important educational function”, namely, teaching philosophy. After all, university professors are citizens, too. And political philosophy, if properly understood, shows the right distance but discourages men from „complete withdrawal from political action”. Contemplation can be seen as „an indicator of political and cultural freedom”. It should be present as a counterbalance of economic and political claims dominating our society.

KEYWORDS

philosophy, university, contemplation, practice, competence,
Socrates, Allan Bloom

KONTEMPLACJA I UNIWERSYTET.
REFLEKSJE NAD LIBERALNYM KSZTAŁCENIEM
W EPOCE PRAKTYKI
Streszczenie

Artykuł dotyczy zmiany, jaka uwidoczniła się w domenie kształcenia uniwersyteckiego. Otóż całkowicie porzucono dawną ideę „kontemplacji” – „teoria” została zredukowana do „praktyki” – po to, aby sprostać wymogom nowoczesnego społeczeństwa „technologicznego”. Społeczeństwo to zbudowane jest w oparciu o „imperatywy tworzenia i działania”. Współcześnie niemal nikt nie uczy się dla samej nauki, możemy też stwierdzić fatalne zubożenie wobec przekazu dotyczącego prawdziwych znaczeń, nie zaś jedynie przekazu „środków przekazu” czy „umiejętności komunikowania”. Wszakże tego rodzaju prądy nie powinny wdzierać się do humanistyki; właśnie stąd powinno z kolei wypływać alternatywne podejście do edukacji. Takie podejście może łączyć się z refleksją na temat postaci Sokratesa, jako nie tylko postaci „historycznego filozofa”, lecz także jako „wzorca dla kontemplacji”. BYł on całkowicie zanurzony w „praktyce kontemplacji”, wszakże nigdy nie zapominał „pytania o moralność i politykę”. Nie chodzi o to, byśmy upodobniali się do Sokratesa historycznego; powinniśmy raczej uczyć się przez to, co go spotkało – jak czynił to Allan Bloom – co naprawdę znaczy umiłowanie prawdy; powinniśmy aktualizować w sobie „impuls Sokratejski”, nie naśladować przy tym samego Sokratesa. Miejmy świadomość tego, iż „hipernowoczesny, biurokratyczny

uniwersytet” nie przyjąłby z otwartymi ramionami wielkich filozofów; niemniej jednak, musimy zastanawiać się nad ich przykładami. Przede wszystkim dlatego, że kontemplacja wiedzie do szczęścia. Jeśli w uniwersytecie nie ma miejsca na szczęście czy też namysł nad szczęściem, jako ostatecznym celem życia ludzkiego, to zasadniczo osłabia się fundamentalny cel kształcenia. Ale kontemplacja ma także wymiar polityczny i należy myśleć o niej, mając na względzie „ważną funkcję edukacyjną”, jaką jest nauka filozofii. Uniwersyteccy profesorowie też są przecież obywatelami. Zaś właściwie rozumiana filozofia polityczna, choć zarysowuje konieczny dystans, odwołuje się do „całkowitego wycofania się z działania politycznego”. Kontemplacja może być postrzegana jako „wskaźnik wolności politycznej i kulturalnej”. Powinna ona stanowić przeciwwagę dla wymogów ekonomicznych i politycznych, jakie zdominowały nasze społeczeństwo.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE

filozofia, uniwersytet, kontemplacja, praktyka, kompetencja, Sokrates, Allan Bloom

Philosophy only hibernates in the universities
Nicolás Gómez Dávila¹

What does it mean to speak of contemplation and the university at the same time? Is there such a connection that makes it possible to deal with both at the same time? This is by no means an idle question. In fact, it seems to me that there is no more pressing question than this: should contemplation be possible in a university? And should universities even foster contemplation?

The current university – if such a generalization be accepted for the moment – rather appears to be the place of practice. Instead of contemplation, it is the dictates of practice and „competence” that rule there. The university is a place of busyness and shuffle, of tight schedules and bureaucratic stranglehold, of mind-numbing examinations and evaluations – but certainly not of contemplation.

I tentatively call our present age an age of practice since increasingly social value only attaches to what can be made practically

¹ Nicolás Gómez Dávila, *Einsamkeiten. Glossen und Text in einem*, Wien: Karoling, 1987, p. 151.

relevant, albeit in a very narrow sense of the term, fostering in some (though not all!) students the fatal tendency to regard any subject matter taught to them merely in relation to what they need in practice – or rather what they think they will need in later practice. Practice becomes the only form of relevance, to the detriment of everything that moves beyond the concerns of the immediate presence or short-term prospects. Hand in hand with this reduction of theory to practice goes the privileging of modularized, didacticized and powerpoint-based forms of teaching, virtually killing off the academic teacher as a personality. The medium is the message in many forms of modern teaching, it would seem. This is the reason why contemplation on the thought of the Canadian critic Marshall McLuhan² is now perhaps more pertinent than ever before.

The modern university can be called a multiversity, because it does not embody or project an image of learning for its own sake. This learning does exist, of course, but it is all too often in spite of the institutional arrangements for the many. Short term contracts and heavy teaching duties further contribute to this malaise. One example of the political attempts to influence evaluations of scholarship within the universities that is linked to practice, albeit in a complex way, is the promotion of special affirmative action for women. As this is a policy promoted by the European Union, the pernicious effects are likely to occur in more than one country, though perhaps to a different degree. At least in Germany, universities or university departments, receive considerable sums of extra money if they employ more female professors, thus seriously rigging the selection process for professorships. The practical political goal of promoting gender mainstreaming – a policy that claims to be in the service of gender equality but is based on ideological notions of social constructivism – intrudes upon the internal selection procedures for positions that should be, in accordance with the most fundamental principles of liberalism and civil society, gender neutral.

One of the most pernicious developments in the 21st century university is connected to the key term „competence“, as e.g. in

2 Cf. Till Kinzel, *Das Medium ist die Botschaft. Ein Kulturkritiker, der vom Thomismus lernte: Marshall McLuhan zum 100. Geburtstag*, in: *Die Tagespost* no. 85, 19-07-2011, p. 10.

„communicative competence“. For the competence to communicate, in itself nothing bad, of course, easily leads to incompetence in the matters that are communicated. Language and other signs become mere instruments in the service of the performance of communication. The medium again becomes the message.

The „multiversity“, as the Canadian philosopher George Grant called it³, is the university of the technological society, a society that follows imperatives of making and doing. Although these imperatives govern, and legitimately so, many aspects of modern life, it should be the task of the humanities to offer a certain distance from this overruling paradigm. This extends to both the promotion of scholarship and of teaching understood as a question of personality and personal relationships. The current attempts to create ever more advanced teaching methods based on online resources, twitter, and the like, do not necessarily lead to improved performance on the part of the students, as long as the crucial ethical disposition of „docility“, as in the Latin word *docilitas*, the willingness, and even eagerness, to learn, is largely absent from students. It was, perhaps singularly among twentieth-century philosophers, the German thinker Josef Pieper who stressed the importance of this particular virtue or habit for any successful process of education⁴.

The principle underlying the philosophical understanding of the university was aptly expressed by Allan Bloom, the American thinker who managed to capture an astonishingly large audience with his criticism of the state of the American academy in the last years of the Cold War. In his seminal actualization of educational Platonism, in his book *The Closing of the American Mind*⁵, Bloom

3 See George Grant, *Technology and Justice*, Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1986. Cf. as well the chapter on the „multiversity“ in David Cayley, *George Grant in Conversation*, Concord: House of Anansi, 1995, p. 161-171; and Till Kinzel, *George Grant – ein kanadischer Philosoph als antimoderner Kulturkritiker*, in: *Zeitschrift für Kanada-Studien* 36/2 (1999), p. 185-200, 186.

4 Josef Pieper, *Schriften zur Philosophischen Anthropologie und Ethik: Das Menschenbild der Tugendlehre*, ed. Berthold Wald, Hamburg: Meiner, 2006, p. 12, 14. Cf. as well Josef Pieper, *Darstellungen und Interpretationen. Platon*, ed. Berthold Wald, Hamburg: Meiner, 2002, p. 169.

5 Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, New York: Touchstone, 1988, p. 22.

argues against the pessimists who, to be sure, will always be able to marshal sufficiently plausible facts for the claim that education is in a crisis.

These claims are not irrelevant, for the recognition of a crisis is also evidence for the fact that education is regarded as a public issue that is somehow linked to the fate of the political system as a whole, even though the precise nature of this link may not be understood particularly well. Bloom argues against the pessimists but he does not do so on the basis of facile optimism or of any hopes to achieve a major reform that will tackle all the crucial issues. In fact, he is rather skeptical about the feasibility of any such reform precisely because the very nature of academic education as some sort of Socratic education is inimical to the over-optimistic expectations of reformists. So what does Bloom then suggest? He points, and most emphatically so, to Socrates.

Contemplation on the fate of Socrates, Bloom avers, is the one thing needful⁶. And contemplation of Socrates is, of course, not only contemplation of Socrates the particular person who lived in Athens in the fifth century B.C. It is always of necessity contemplation on contemplation, i.e. contemplation on the character of that kind of human being who served as a model of contemplation throughout the history of philosophy. Socrates as a historical philosopher – disregarding for the time being the claims of those who assert that we do not have access to the historical Socrates – presents the complex image of the contemplative mind in the body of a citizen who is never merely the citizen of a given city circumscribed by walls or other markers of separation from the surrounding world. The philosopher in Socrates's sense is a most wondrous man – *atopotatos* in Greek – that is a man, who is in the precise sense „without place“, who cannot be placed in a preconceived category. This leads one to reflect on an issue which I cannot address here but which needs to be mentioned at least in passing, as it has the most important consequences for thinking about contemplation and the university. This issue can be summed up by the remark that contemplation as embodied by, and modelled on, Socrates, can never be entirely at home

⁶ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, New York: Touchstone, 1988, p. 312, 382.

in the university, in any university. In fact, philosophy is never *completely* at home anywhere. What this entails for the fate of philosophy in relation to the fate of the European universities of the 21st century, is a serious question which I have to leave open here but which needs to be addressed, I believe, by everyone genuinely caring for the philosophical life. But let us return to the issue at hand.

Socrates's practice of the contemplative life takes place within a concrete political context. Universities have to take account of their own political context in many ways that differ from the way that the individual Socrates, or any political philosopher, will have to take into account his political context. Socrates's philosophical contemplation never forgets, as Plato's dialogues amply show, the question of being. But he also never forgets the question of morality and politics. Ultimately, the model of Socrates offers the most complex image of education in the fullest philosophical sense; he presents us with the most challenging icon of philosophy. For the imitation of Socrates in one sense necessitates the non-imitation of the specific form of Socrates's philosophizing. In order to preserve the Socratic impulse of contemplation about all things human and divine it is never enough to try to be Socrates. This, however, also means that there is no institutional guarantee for the existence of even remotely Socrates-like characters within the modern or post-modern university of the 21st century.

The paradoxical situation implied in the possibility and impossibility of imitating and following Socrates and his example is encapsulated in Socrates's own injunction: do not follow or care for Socrates but rather care for the truth. It is again Josef Pieper⁷ who most emphatically draws attention to this fundamental point. Socrates turns out to be not only a model but a non-model. His personality stands for something which can only be realized if the followers or imitators do not follow or imitate him too closely. His personality stands for philosophy in the way of a „concrete universal“, namely a person who cannot be imitated but only emulated, whose identity can only be captured by those who acknowledge the need to identify with Socrates while maintaining or developing

⁷ Josef Pieper, *Darstellungen und Interpretationen. Platon*, ed. Berthold Wald, Hamburg: Meiner, 2002, p. 49, 115.

their own identity as practitioners of contemplation. The medium through which such emulation might come about is, as Bloom suggests in his fascinating book, and in accordance with the views of both Xenophon and Leo Strauss⁸, the reading of books, preferably, though not exclusively, of „great books“.

As pars pro toto, though highly significant in itself, Bloom points to Plato's *Symposium* as a model to study⁹. He highlights the always present possibility, though not always actualized, of philosophy. He does so by pointing out that students (more so than their teachers, perhaps) can gather in order to read a book like Plato's *Symposium* together, not as a purely historical text, a source from which to learn something about the philosophical culture of ancient Greece or Athens in the fifth century B. C. or about the mind of Plato. Studying such a great book functions rather as a model for philosophizing and philosophy as such, pointing to the philosophical life as the most comprehensive form of contemplation as thinking.

It may well be that, for institutional reasons, universities will hardly make room for philosophers like Socrates or Rousseau, another incommensurable thinker who actualized the Socratic impulse without imitating Socrates. Yet they should at least offer the opportunity to get to know these and other instantiations of the philosophical life. For it is here that we ought to seek for inspiration for our attempt to maintain an inkling of what education in the fullest sense can be. Contemplation is of the essence of this understanding, even though in today's bureaucratic climate of educational reform this is about the last thing that will receive official recognition. Kant, who worked on his book *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* for many years, without publishing anything much in between, would not be welcome in the hypermodern bureaucratized university bent on regular publishing, acquiring additional funds, and the like.

Contemplation is linked to a notion that today's universities do not, and most likely are not meant to, evoke, do not cater to, do not and perhaps cannot factor into the equation: happiness.

8 Leo Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995, p. 3-25.

9 Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, New York: Touchstone, 1988, p. 133, 380-381.

The tradition of contemplation, as e.g. expounded by Josef Pieper, convincingly indicates and even claims that happiness in the full sense of the term is a function of contemplation. A university that expells this very notion of contemplation would thus also seem to displace happiness as the ultimate life goal of human beings, including the happiness of the philosopher of which Heinrich Meier has most recently reminded us in his book on the happiness of the philosophical life, taking his cue from the life and work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau¹⁰. To disregard happiness, precarious and evanescent as it may be, would mean the stultification of human striving. And the university should, of all places, remain a place where education means exactly this: knowledge of the aims of human life and research into the means to achieve them.

But we should not forget that the university is not a utopian setting, an island of the blessed, in which the conditions of the outer world would not apply. Despite the comparatively high level of freedom traditionally associated with universities, this freedom is not a non-political freedom. In fact, the professors in a university are both citizens of the city of the mind and the city of the body, they are not just acting out the role of academic citizens while they are teaching or conducting research – or even contemplating something, whatever it may be. They are citizens of the political world as well, and even though they do not have to refrain from engaging in political activity outside the university, their very position at the university is part of their obligation towards the political community as such.

The citizen in the world, quite in contrast to the philosopher, is not at home everywhere, even though there may be a few true cosmopolitans. As citizen, the individual needs to be at home in some particular place – for all practical purposes, that is, such as voting, being elected, raising one's children, maintaining some coherent family life. Getting into a distance from this place and rootedness, e.g. by travelling, can lead to new insights into the political situation of one's life. Even though the connection between travelling and philosophy may be tenuous, as e.g. Seth Benardete seems to

¹⁰ Heinrich Meier, *Über das Glück des philosophischen Lebens. Reflexionen zu Rousseaus ‚Rêveries‘*, München: C. H. Beck, 2011.

have indicated¹¹. However that may be, contemplating one's own from a distance – spatially or mentally – can increase the citizen's understanding of the conditions of his own existence. A proper understanding of political philosophy may prevent this creation of distance from developing into complete withdrawal from political action. Political philosophy entails both the transpolitical dimension of contemplation and the recognition that contemplation itself is, in a certain sense, political, i.e. fulfills an important educational function. This may sound odd, to say the least. For does not contemplation stand for the very opposite of politics? Does not contemplation imply the most radical non-politicization of thought? Surely, contemplation is not to be subjected to political instrumentalization of any kind. But the political dimension of contemplation cannot be ignored either. It does not go away by our simple wish not be implicated in political education in the widest sense – taking any kind of political activity as an ongoing education in civic behaviour. The political dimension of contemplation rests in this: the public presence of contemplation without political molestation might serve as nothing less but an indicator of political and cultural freedom. Promoting philosophy, in this sense, is therefore a politically charged engagement. This is also why philosophy is the most proper education for citizens of our world, in which the claims of economic efficiency and political stability need to be balanced by the more than political needs of contemplation – and that entails everything that is of the mind, which, as Thomas Aquinas reminds us, is *supra tempus*.

11 Cf. *Encounters and Reflections. Conversations with Seth Benardete, with Robert Berman, Ronna Burger, and Michael Davis*, ed. Ronna Burger, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002, p. 97.