

Ass. Prof. Barbara Sitarska, Pedagogy Institute, Faculty of Didactics

Department of General Didactics

University of Natural Sciences and Humanities in Siedlce

## SELF-EDUCATION IN JOHANN AMOS COMENIUS' PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHT

### (on the background of selected philosophers' views)<sup>1</sup>

The concept of self-education is quite ambiguous for educationists. The theory of education has put forward various, more or less speculative ideas of self-education, which were meant to precisely define this notion. At the same time, empirical research has been conducted, despite the lack of clarity about how the knowledge of self-education should be formulated, gathered, or organized. Its development is chaotic and does not follow any methodological principles. This has led to a discordance between the knowledge on this subject and social scientists' views.<sup>2</sup> There is still a gap in the knowledge on self-education, which is difficult to fill in due to the probabilistic character of the theory of education (pedagogy). This makes the researchers cautious in formulating their principles, based upon the already existing theories as well as on new cognitive investigation still being conducted.

### Introductory remarks

Self-education has been most frequently associated with self-improvement, striving for happiness, and as a result, for complete humanity. In order to reach this aim, one should make ethical choices and *rationaly accept certain psychical and spiritual structures*. The literature does not, however, present much research into the essence of self-education. Therefore, the term needs to be defined. Some attempts have been made to do it: *It is assumed that any process of education is automatically accompanied with self-education as far as the person concerned is treated as the subject rather than the object of education. Some views even relate to "unconscious self-education", which is a spontaneous shaping of personality, as a side effect of an individual's actions addressed to the outer world, "without minding their own development".<sup>3</sup> It is an individual's spontaneous work on shaping their own view of the world, their own attitudes, characteristics and personality, in accordance with the accepted criteria, examples and ideals.<sup>4</sup> According to another pedagogic concept, self-education is an individual's conscious, spontaneous and systematic activity, whose aim is to improve themselves in intellectual, social, moral, and volitional terms, as well as strive for self-achievement and improve their value as an independent person with their own view of the world.<sup>5</sup>*

Therefore, self-education is an ambiguous term, identified with an individual's own activity, man's work upon themselves, self-development, self-formation, shaping oneself, self-realization or self-achievement.

The idea of self-education has quite a long history in Europe's intellectual culture. It appeared as soon as in the ancient times and since then it has been analyzed by thinkers, creators and philosophers of

---

<sup>1</sup> More on this subject: B. Sitarska, *Człowiek współczesny- humanista przełomu XX i XXI wieku*, In: *Rozprawy filozoficzno-historyczne*, „Kultura i Wychowanie”, No. 1, S. Sztobryn (ed.), University of Education in Łódź, <http://www.wydawnictwo.wsp.lodz.pl/>

<sup>2</sup> B. Śliwerski, *Teoretyczne i empiryczne podstawy samowychowania*, "Impuls" Publishing, Cracow 2010, pp. 7-9

<sup>3</sup> M. Dudzikowa, *Praca młodzieży nad sobą*. Z teorii i praktyki, Terra, Warsaw 1993, p.7

<sup>4</sup> W. Okoń, *Nowy słownik pedagogiczny*, "Żak" University Press, Warsaw 2007, p. 366 (made bold by the author)

<sup>5</sup> Cz. Kupisiewicz, M. Kupisiewicz, *Słownik pedagogiczny*, PWN Scientific Publishing, Warsaw 2009, p.160

various schools.<sup>6</sup> The following ones are worth mentioning: Socrates (469- 399 BC), who promoted working upon oneself, as he believed it is an individual who designs their own life;<sup>7</sup> Plato (427- 347 BC), who invented the theory of four virtues (wisdom, bravery, self-control, and justice, the virtue linking all parts of the soul and keeping control of them), which has been retaining its significance for ages. According to him, each individual pursues their own goal in the world of ideas and strives for its accomplishment in a distinct way.<sup>8</sup> The Stoics (4th-3rd century BC) worked out the method of self-education and gaining happiness through the acceptance of a system of values worthy of a sage. According to them, man must find himself in himself, in his own reflection, action, and emotions. What controls all of these is the reason.<sup>9</sup>

In modern times, self-education has been a subject of distinguished philosophers' interest. From among them, **Johann Amos Comenius** deserves special attention: a Czech philosopher, educationist and theologian, for whom Poland (Leszno) was a second home. Apart from him, many other thinkers are worth mentioning, such as Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), Bronisław Ferdynand Trentowski (1808–1869), Martin Buber (1878-1965), John Paul II (1920-2005), Joseph Tischner (1931-2000), Władysław Tatariewicz (1886-1980), and many others, who are all impossible to list.

Unlike his contemporaries, Rousseau called for a kind of education to develop each individual's humanity. He contrasted the model of "positive" education, or shaping an individual in accordance with a formerly determined pattern, with the idea paradoxically called "negative education". It consisted in avoiding any kind of outer influence and leaving the individual on their own to let the good side of the human nature develop freely.<sup>10</sup> According to him, it is only the natural education, whose main aim is to shape a human being, that ensures positive effects.

Bronisław Ferdynand Trentowski believed that man is a dialectical synthesis of creative reality, which he related to the idea of extra-temporal divinity. The aim of education within the ideal or speculative pedagogy he followed was to accomplish the principle of duty. As a result, a noble person was supposed to be shaped. Trentowski attached much importance to philosophical pedagogy, which harmoniously combined shaping human exterior with shaping human interior. From among the principles of empirical pedagogy one should mention, among others, the postulate for imitation- and experience-based education, (...), the postulate for shaping a strong character, resistant to life difficulties, the postulate for the sense of duty, tact, restraint, and rational obedience. Trentowski believed that education should be universal, and its harmony is to be found in the synthesis of the eternal unity, i.e. the synthesis of the soul with the infinite multiplicity (the matter).<sup>11</sup>

Martina Bubera and the modern dialogue philosophy, also called the meeting philosophy, emphasizes that it is meeting another human being that shapes a person. Self-defining in the process of shaping one's own humanity always takes place with the correspondence to You. A meeting with You makes it possible to discover the meaning of an ethical relationship with another human being, the significance of responsibility for them, of the overcoming of the feeling of existential solitude.<sup>12</sup> Martin Buber emphasized the significance of the tutor-tutee dialogue, with the tutor being a personal authority and the tutee freely following their ideals. Freedom was a way to a personal tie for him rather than the opposite of compulsion.<sup>13</sup> According to him, education should be based on a communitarian tie (dialogue) and consist in a *common journey* of the trainee and the master.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> J. Rachańska, *Aktywność samowychowawcza człowieka w ujęciu wybranych koncepcji filozofii*, In: S. Sztobryn, M. Miksza (eds): *Tradycja i współczesność filozofii wychowania*, "Pedagogika Filozoficzna", Vol. 2, "Impuls" Publishing, Cracow 2007, p. 279

<sup>7</sup> See also: T. Mazur, *Kapryśni bogowie Sokratesa*, Marek Derewiecki (ed.), Kęty 2008, p. 318

<sup>8</sup> See.: W. Tatariewicz, *Historia filozofii*, op. cit., pp. 98-99; J. Górniewicz (ed.), *Studia nad problematyką samorealizacji*, Toruń 1991, p.11

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem, p. 132; 12; see also: J. Rachwańska, *Aktywność samowychowawcza człowieka...*, p. 280

<sup>10</sup> S. Sztobryn, *Historia wychowania*, op. cit., pp. 61- 62

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem, pp. 68-69

<sup>12</sup> See: E. Levinas, *Etyka i nieskończony*, B. Opolska- Kokoszka (transl.), Cracow 1991

<sup>13</sup> *Wielkie biografie*, op. cit., p. 619

<sup>14</sup> Compare: Ibidem

Self-improvement and striving for complete humanity, the meaning and quality of life are the subject matters of the philosophical treatises by John Paul II, a pope, theologian and philosopher, who was mainly concerned with the philosophy of man. His standpoint is the perfectionist personalism, in which personal improvement is essential. He adopts one's personal experience as a starting point, which is a phenomenological approach in this sense, however, what he considers to be the basic datum of this experience is an individual's free-choice deed, for which the individual is to be charged with responsibility and morally judged. A person's fulfillment is dependent upon their approach towards others and takes place mostly through co-operation, which makes it possible to participate in another individual's particular existence. Man is expressed through culture, which he creates himself, and creates himself through it as well, living in truth, good and beauty. The full sense of culture is that it reshapes nature and shows the transcendent perspective of existence in communion with truth, good and beauty.<sup>15</sup>

Joseph Tischner developed the idea of *thinking in accordance with values*.<sup>16</sup> As he emphasized, every human being is a "continuous becoming" and develops all the time.

In every life situation and through their every act, a human being pursues happiness, which is difficult to achieve. Self-education is very often associated with happiness. It is Władysław Tatarkiewicz who created the conception of happiness. According to him, happiness does not only resolve itself into emotions and feelings, but it also contains an intellectual ingredient: a rational positive evaluation of the whole of events which a person has participated in or experienced.<sup>17</sup>

Each of the mentioned thinkers deserves of course a more extensive analysis, however, due to the conducted empirical research, the present paper is devoted to Johann Amos Comenius.

## 1. Johann Amos Comenius and his philosophy of education/self-education

Man is an educable creature: without education/self-education one cannot become a human being. The idea of man becoming a human being only through education<sup>18</sup> is the central thought of all the writings by Johann Amos Comenius (1592 -1670), a Czech educationist, evangelical clergyman, considered to be the reformer and thinker of the *modern period*. Besides other famous characters of the epoch, he is the one who had enormous influence on the course of history, the development of culture, science and civilization. One could say that he conquered the world and changed it, leaving a permanent trace in its history, by his influence on the philosophical thought, social and religious life, in both a positive and negative way. This distinguished man's life was complicated and impressive at times. He took part in some important events in various countries. He created some significant and immortal works<sup>19</sup>. He linked his hope for world restoration to the restoration of education, and it is from this standpoint that he defined his tasks and educational objectives "as people's common welfare".<sup>20</sup>

Comenius' strong belief in human cognitive powers might be a starting point for the analysis of the philosophical foundations of upbringing and education in his writings. This thought is vividly present all over his works. Comenius assumed that the world is fully intelligible to people: children, youth, and adults alike, as only then is it possible to gain a universal knowledge of it.

Comenius would ask: *How does man get to know the world? How does he manage to learn about it more and more?* These were the two major questions he answered in a practical way in his books. It was only in his later life that he tried to formulate the theoretical theses. In his "Exit from the Labyrinth" he claims that there are three objects of our knowledge, three factors of our wisdom: God, the world, and man. *In fact everything is God, therefore there is just one object of our knowledge; however, due*

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem, pp. 745,747, 748

<sup>16</sup> *Wielkie biografie*, op. cit., pp.772- 773

<sup>17</sup> *Wielkie biografie, Odkrywcy, wynalazcy, uczeni*, PWN Encyclopedia, Vol. 3, PWN Scientific Publishing, Warsaw 2008, p. 557

<sup>18</sup> See: W. Brezinka, *Jan Amos Komenký, učitel moudrosti, reformátor školství a klasik pedagogiky / Johann Amos Comenius: Weisheitslehrer, Schulreformer und Klassiker der Pädagogik*, In: P. Zemek, J. Benes, B. Motel (eds): *Studien zu Comenius und zur Comeniusrezeption in Deutschland, STUDIA COMENIANA ET HISTORICA series*, Johann Amos Comenius Museum, Uherský Brod, 2008, pp. 424 - 431

<sup>19</sup> *Wielkie biografie*, PWN Encyclopedia, Vol. 1, *Przywódcy, reformatorzy, myśliciele*, PWN Scientific Publishing , p.366

<sup>20</sup> J. A. Komeński, *Wielka dydaktyka*, Ossolinskis Department, PAN Publishing, Chapter XXIII, § 19

to the fact that Gog cannot be known directly, the ways of our cognition must be defined in a different way. These are the ways of knowing the world, ways of knowing man, and ways of knowing The Holy Bible as a divine revelation.<sup>21</sup>

The thinker strongly believed in unlimited development of human cognition and abilities. All his works prove his enormous belief in a more and more perfect human development, which does not, however, follow automatically, but arises from an intentional and consequent work, removing the obstacles and limitations, and using the right means. He equally emphasizes two fundamental theses: of people's innate qualifications and of the necessity of educating them. The former is the basis for argumentation proving each individual's possibilities as a human being's, while the latter serves as a basis for argumentation showing the necessity of all people's education. Each individual is equipped with the same senses, reason, and free will. Each one has the desire for cognition and work. Comenius attached much importance to the development of innate abilities.<sup>22</sup>

The problem of all-embracing knowability of the world was the central issue of Comenius' philosophy. It could basically be solved by the optimistic belief in human cognitive powers, but it still involved numerous difficulties arising from various traditional burdens: its proper solution involved overcoming the scholastic concepts of the world and its creator, and of the role of man as a divine creation and master of the world.<sup>23</sup>

Comenius was concerned with discovering the human nature, also children's nature. Since St. Augustine's times (354 – 431 AD ) children's nature had not been studied. It is only Johann Amos Comenius who revealed and proved his interests. He was not, however, alone in his research in the Baroque culture, as Pascal conducted some investigation into the essence of humanity at the same time. Comenius realized that a child has senses and reason, however he believed it was necessary to develop and foster them in order to ensure the child's proper development and prevent any malformations or aberrations. His idea was that children should draw knowledge *from the sky, the earth, oaks and beeches* rather than from books and words. They should discover things through knowing the things themselves rather than through knowing someone else's remarks and reports of things. The teacher's task would be then to gather useful empirical material to raise the children's interest, which would make it possible to find out, define, classify and remember. Comenius emphasized the role of exercising and improving the three spheres: reason, hand, and speech, which formed his famous educational triangle. Its three equal sides stand for the equal chances of physical skills, speech, and reason. The objects of cognition are: God, nature, and sphere of activity.<sup>24</sup> Comenius believed that school should be a "forge of humanity" where young uneducated people become aware of themselves and of the world, remove the darkness of ignorance and become human beings.

Comenius perceived his program of world and people improvement in multidirectional activities, geared towards a universal system of "limitless education" which lasts till the last moment of one's life. His idea of life-long education made him the forerunner of geragogy (the pedagogy for elderly people).<sup>25</sup> The basis of this vision of a transformed world was supposed to be the ethical man, formed through pansophy, a universal knowledge accessible for all people, who are equal by God's design. Comenius was a deeply religious man. In his writings and through his function of a religious leader of the Czech Arians he called for religious education, faithfully served his own communion and proclaimed the pricelessness of eternal life. However, he was not satisfied with those doctrinal principles. He used all his philosophy and pedagogical axiology to turn to the earthly existence, the need for man's human growth, the necessity to make good the unjust world full of wars, wrongs, oppression and violence. His democratic and humane approach can be fully identified with universalism. Comenius extended many basic categories of new-enriched human life to the "all-embracing" dimension. It is equally true in reference to human rights and to the new areas of multilateral cognition and human activity related to his complete philosophical educational triad: *mens, linqua, manus – reason, speech, hand*.

---

<sup>21</sup> See: B. Sitarska, *Dlaczego Jan Amos Komeński wciąż żyje wśród nas?*, In: B. Sitarska, R. Mních (eds), *Jan Amos Komeński w kontekście kultury i historii europejskiej XVII wieku*, STUDIA COMENIANA SEDLCENSIA, Vol. 3, Siedlce University Press, Siedlce 2010, p. 154

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem

<sup>23</sup> J.A. Komeński: *Wielka dydaktyka*, Wstęp, Ossolinskis Department, PAN Publishing, p. XXXVII

<sup>24</sup> A. Książek-Szczepanikowa, *Życie w odbiorze...Czytelnicze wyzwanie z pozycji edukacji*, Szczecin University Press, Szczecin 2009, pp. 75-76

<sup>25</sup> A. Zych: Comenius, In: T. Pilch (ed.): *Encyklopedia pedagogiczna XXI wieku*, Vol. 1, "Żak" Academic Publishing, Warsaw 2003, p. 535

In all the areas of his varied work, Comenius tried to fully embrace man with all his earthly areas of activity. He was especially concerned with man – a life-long student in the "school of life", to whom he recommends a continual "limitless" education.<sup>26</sup> To be a life-long student means to make the best use of one's life.

Comenius defines the range of real wisdom and universal knowledge using the three Latin words: *omnes, omnia, omnino* – *everyone, everything, perfectly*. Comenius wanted to educate people in an encyclopedic way, but at the same time he appreciated the fundamental significance of the practical use of knowledge and the need for continual confrontation of theory and practice.

Comenius' educational ideas and postulates depicted above define a totally new for his epoch and radically transformed philosophy of upbringing and education. It accepts each human individual's right to develop through educational creation. The humanistic value of that exceptional and universal postulate consists in a special mission that the wise and ethical man has in the new world. Knowledge and education are going to make the world better and full of man's happiness. Comenius argued that it is his own work that shapes a man. The best and only substance to form a real and authentically human man is knowledge. Man should receive this all-embracing, full and perfect knowledge from school. That is why school should be a common welfare for the whole human community.<sup>27</sup>

Comenius' anthropology assumed a triple concept: man is a thinking, communicative and acting creature. Comenius believed that man is born as an empty card, and life till its end is a process of continual learning. That is why Comenius can be considered to be a forerunner of permanent education and andragogy. *His other main pansophic assumption was that man should get to know the whole of nature in order to shape his own humanity. The consequence drawn from that premise was an absolutely novel thesis, which assumed that everyone should be educated at everything. Therefore, education was supposed to be democratic, complete, and encyclopedic. Those three mottos can be regarded as Comenius' principal theological concept. (...) His encyclopedism cannot be treated as a total dispersed knowledge, but as innerly integrated, forming a structure.*<sup>28</sup> Comenius constructed a philosophy of life whose essence was to learn how to live in a human way. Therefore his ultimate theological idea was the idea of humanity presented in a moral perspective. Comenius is a unique character, and the richness of his ideas and their present-day applicability make his pedagogy a subject of world-wide research.<sup>29</sup>

## 2. Final remarks

Johann Amos Comenius's views of education/self-education have been outlined on the background of other selected philosophers'. The humanists were all concerned with man and his self-improvement in the process of life-long self-education.

The above analysis proves that for many thinkers educational issues constituted an integral part of philosophical systems. The present paper attempts to present philosophical ideas integrated with Johann Amos Comenius' educational ideas, which are still valid, which keeps the thinker alive.

---

<sup>26</sup> Compare: J. A. Komeński: *Pampaedia*, Ossolineum 1973; Raport Klubu Rzymkiego *Uczyć się bez granic*; See also: B. Sitarska: *Johan Amos Comenius als Vorkämpfer der Idee der lebenslangen Bildung*, In: B. Sitarska, R. Mnich, M. Richter (eds), *W. Korthaase – badacz J. A. Komeńskiego*, STUDIA COMENIANA SEDLCENSIA, Vol. 2, Siedlce University Press, Siedlce 2009, pp.271-280

<sup>27</sup> Z. Łomny, *Humanizm i uniwersalizm – współczesne klucze do dziedzictwa Komeńskiego*, In: *Jan Amos Komeński prekursor uniwersalizmu*, collective work, Z. Jasiński, F. A. Marek (eds), Silesian Insurgents College of Education in Opole, Opole-Olomuniec 1992, p. 19

<sup>28</sup> S. Sztobryn, *Historia wychowania*, In: B. Śliwerski (ed.), *Pedagogika. Podstawy nauk o wychowaniu*, Vol. 1, Gdańsk Educational Publishing, Gdańsk 2006, pp. 59- 60

<sup>29</sup> See: *ibidem*, p. 60