

Education, Philosophy and University

A Consideration thorough Jan Amos Comenius and Jan Patočka

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Abstract

This article deals with the requests to open higher education through the works of Jan Amos Comenius and the contemporary interpretation of his works. Whilst his ideas suggest an image in which openness in education was pursued to the apex, it is easy to criticize his ideas in terms of multiculturalism insofar as his request for unconditional opening is seen as monism. Nevertheless, we can hardly oppose the requests to open because education, which correlates to the transmission of knowledge and technology, is nothing but an emergence of openness in a broader sense. Therefore, it is necessary to assess the validity of the requests to open.

In Czechoslovakia during the cold war era, when the freedom of speech and academic research were strictly restricted, twentieth century Czech philosopher Jan Patočka gave some significant lectures at the so-called Underground University. He regarded Comenius as a thinker of the open soul, who experienced itself as something which is innately dependent on unparalleled otherness. Insofar as human existence was understood as the openness towards the world, education cannot be an action to form the human into a vessel and fill it with knowledge and skills. Education is founded on the conversion or the turn through overcoming self-centeredness, turning around and meeting otherness outside of the self.

At present, the more scientific technology penetrates all the aspects of human life, the more education is reduced to technological matters. In this sense, attention should be paid to that which Patočka researched, within philosophical thinking, the possibility to restore the nature of human existence. The Open Soul, which was brought to him through his interpretation of Comenius, might be paraphrased as 'Openness Within.' It implies that any openness is never activated without philosophical thinking as Openness Within.

Keywords

Higher education reform, Openness, Comenius, Patočka, Philosophy of education

University exposed in the requests to open

Today, universities are under pressure for further reform to respond to the global transformation in politics, industry, sciences and education. In the trend for higher education reform based upon the requests for open and access, there is, among intellectuals and academics, a concern that research will be reduced to mere form. However, these feelings are not always shared with the public, probably because this scepticism on the part of intellectuals is perceived as self-interest. In fact, such a slogan “Towards an Educating University” captures the demand for universities to make all possible efforts to accept various students, to incorporate more diverse content in education, and to open the organization towards the society.

In this article, I will try to consider the requests to open higher education through the works of Jan Amos Comenius, a seventeenth Century philosopher, and the contemporary interpretation of his works. In spite of the fact that this approach is seemingly a roundabout way, Comenius’ works are full of suggestions for the reconsideration of higher education. For example, universities in the time of Comenius could not adequately respond to the political, religious and cultural crises because of conservatism in education. In fact, most intellectuals who contributed to the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century were neither professors nor alumni of traditional universities. Nevertheless, there were various ideas and practices in higher education in the century that deserve attention. As for Comenius, he dealt with higher education within the lifelong process of human transformation through his unique philosophical concept, *Pansophia*. Two Comenian texts are noteworthy to understand his ideas of higher education. In the main work in his later years entitled, *De rerum humanarum emendatione consultatio catholica* (*The General Consultation on the Emendation of Human Things*), he considered the universal reform of society including religion, politics, sciences, languages and education. The fourth part of the work, *Pampaedia* should be regarded as the climax of his educational ideas. Although in *Pampaedia*, Comenius elaborates on education in academia after gymnasium (high school), there are no references to research activities in this work. However, he mentioned that the location of academia ‘is desirable also for colleges’ [Comenius 1966=1986: 154] and he elaborated the collegium (colleges) in the sixth part of the work, *Panorthosia*, which dealt with the reform of sciences,

politics and religion. In short, the college is seen as a research organization and academia as an educational function in the university today. His ideas of education are summarized as universalism seen in his motto, ‘all men are taught all subjects in all thoroughness (Omnes, Omnia, Omnino doceantur).’ [Comenius 1966=1986: 19] His thought is, curious to say, affinitive to the present trend of higher education reform.

Openness in Admission

Comenius, who was a successor of the tradition of Czech Reformer Jan Hus, had to confront the entrance barrier for higher education because of the religious intolerance of the period. He was not accepted by the institutions of higher education in Prague such as Charles University (the oldest university in central Europe), and Clementinum, founded by the Jesuits, and therefore he studied at two institutions in Herborn and Heidelberg in Germany. Although academia in Herborn is non-existent, it played a significant role in the scientific revolution owing to its tolerant atmosphere. When he later considered education as a lifelong process, he emphasized that ‘no man may be exempted, much less debarred from the pursuit of wisdom and the cultivation of his mind.’ [Comenius 1966=1986: 30] Thus, he argues that ‘academies should therefore be founded in every kingdom and or sizeable province,’ [Comenius 1966=1986: 154] and wished for the expansion of opportunity in higher education. It is worth pointing out that the openness of admission has been a main principle of educational reform. We may acknowledge that the contemporary challenges in higher education originate through responding to the openness of admission. Thus, it is clear that openness in higher education was a primary concern addressed by Comenius in seventeenth century Europe.

Openness in Curriculum

In the philosophical concept of Comenius, *Pansophia*, human knowledge was premised on the parallelism between World, Mind and the Bible as the *Three Books of God (tres libri Dei)* between Sense, Reason and Belief. Therefore, Comenius tried to deduce the didactic principles through the philosophical analysis of the nature in the world and human. As emphasized in the mutual relations between mind, tongue and hands, Comenius positioned

reason within the inseparable connection to language and action. He thought that *Pansophia* should be learned at all stages in human life. This can be interpreted to mean that the higher education curriculum should be open, contrary to the traditional curriculum, in which philosophy was positioned after mastering liberal arts. Moreover, since he positioned academia as a transitional stage between the private and the public, he was consistently critical about contemplative thinking. He composed the curriculum in academia of three classes as Universal Wisdom, Universal Books and Universal Preparation and added them to Foreign Travel and the choice of career. Whilst his idea is distant from professional education, it cannot simply be positioned in the humanism tradition. Given that he grasped human development in the process through theory (*theoria*), practice (*praxis*) and use (*chresis*), it is likely due to the fact that he stressed the ability to apply skills in higher education.

Openness of University

In Comenius' work for the reform in politics, sciences and religion, *Panorthosia*, he stated that 'we have multiplied schools and studies and selfish scheming for advancement, but we have not yet added to the true joys of life.' [Comenius 1966=1993: 38] Such negative evaluation can be attributed to his scepticism of intellectualism. In the work for the reform in education, *Pampaedia*, he explained two ways to present teaching materials; 'philosophical rigidity' and the 'popular way.' [Comenius 1966=1986: 89] Whilst the former is 'to present teaching matters in the form of rigid decrees,' the latter 'uses appeal, persuasion and encouragement.' He criticized that the former 'insults or threatens intelligent minds and thereby intimidates them' and appreciated that the latter 'inspires the inborn light to burst into flame.' As inferred from his attitude to intellectualism, he believed that the college as a scholarly institution should be thoroughly open to the public. In *Panorthosia*, he proposed three international councils taking responsibility for the reformation in philosophy, politics and education and positioned the College of Light 'to exercise control over all human knowledge, curbing its excesses or defects or any tendency to go astray at any stage or in any circumstances, seeking ever to increase and improve the dominion of the human Mind over the real world, and to spread the light of Wisdom throughout the minds of nations

all over the world.’ [Comenius 1966=1995: 221] Whilst the incorporation of each college and academia into the international council might be oriented to realize the openness of higher education, it implies the restraint of freedom in each institution.

Openness and Education

Within Comenius’ reference that ‘the colleges of light will use the power of light to banish the darkness of error,’ [Comenius 1966=1993: 142] we are able to perceive the implication of the Enlightenment despite the fact that his optimistic trust in light was based upon his belief that his design on universal reform included the conversion of the Jewish and the Turkish to Christianity. Whilst his ideas suggest an image in which openness in education was pursued to the apex, some points cannot be exempted from criticism. It is easy to criticize his ideas in terms of multiculturalism insofar as his request for unconditional opening is seen as monism. Nevertheless, we can hardly oppose the requests to open because education, which correlates to the transmission of knowledge and technology, is nothing but an emergence of openness in a broader sense.

Despite that a contemporary of Comenius, Descartes, was critical of education in the Jesuit College where he was educated, when he was asked about the teaching method of philosophy, he highly appreciated the Jesuit methodology of education because of the ordered and varied materials. [Descartes 1936: 74] The Jesuit schools, which rapidly prevailed in the seventeenth century because of paying much more attention to education than research, is well associated with ‘the Educating University’ today. Apart from the difference in denominations, it is obvious that Comenius also emphasized the educational function in higher education institutions.

Philosophy as Openness Within

It is apparently not easy for us as intellectuals and academics to depart from the present trend towards an Educating University, since it is accompanied by the requests to become more open. However, we have to assess the validity of the requests to open, apart from Comenius who attributed this legitimacy to his beliefs. At this point, twentieth century Czech philosopher Jan Patočka and his

study of Comenius provides a lot of suggestions. In Czechoslovakia during the cold war era, when the Communist regime imposed an embargo on the freedom of speech and academic research, Patočka was expelled from Charles University for almost twenty years and gave lectures on philosophy privately from the 1950s. The main work in his later years, *Kacířské eseje o filosofii dějin* (*Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*), which had a decisive impact on Jacques Derrida, was created from his informal lectures at the so-called Underground University. He was known not only as a phenomenologist, who was under the instruction of Husserl and Heidegger, but also as an interpreter of Comenius. His interpretation of Comenius drastically changed from the end of 1960s.

In his article entitled ‘*Comenius und offene Seele (Comenius and the Open Soul)*’, Patočka revealed the historical view and positioned the era after the seventeenth century as ‘the epoch of closed-ness.’ According to his consideration, all phenomena, in the epoch, are seen as things which are inducted from reason which is hierarchically above the phenomena and thereby knowledge is deemed as a power to manipulate all things. [Patočka 1970: 63] By contrast, he regarded Comenius as a thinker of the open soul through his interpretation. As stated by Patočka, the open soul experiences itself as something which is innately dependent on unparalleled otherness. [Patočka 1970: 63] Insofar as human existence for Comenius was understood as the openness towards the world, education cannot be an action to form the human into a vessel and fill it with knowledge and skills. Education is founded on the conversion or the turn through overcoming self-centeredness, turning around and meeting otherness outside of the self. Such an interpretation is based upon Patočka’s insight to the transformation of educational concepts through modernization. He shared the view with Heidegger, who analysed the Greek concept of education, *Paideia*, in his lecture on Plato's Cave, mentioned the situation in which *Paideia* came to represent culture and education, and described it as ‘the worst of the nineteenth century.’ [Heidegger 1988: 116] Taking the transformation of educational concepts toward modern times into consideration, it might be natural for the Neoplatonism philosopher that learning was to realize the world-openness in humans and therefore mastering knowledge and skills was necessary to arrange the conditions toward the openness.

Through these reflections, Patočka stated that ‘the original meaning of future education is in conversion.’ [Patočka 2011: 283] Moreover, he discussed ‘universal conversion’ which Patočka said should be realized by the highbrow intellectuals to attain a prospect for the transition from the closed-ness to openness through emancipating themselves from the closed soul, since they are nothing but the bearers of the knowledge as power. [Patočka 1996: 134] The author of *The Velvet Philosophers*, Barbara Day summarised his view of the significance of philosophy as ‘a tool for diagnosis, thus enabling him [man] to recover his instinctive sense of the reality of the natural world.’ [Day 2008: 201]

At present, the more scientific technology penetrates all the aspects of human life, the more education is reduced to technological matters. In reality, learners are assessed according to the degree of their proficiency in responding to the stimulus which is arbitrarily constructed. However, not a day passes without watching scandals in which the intellectuals are involved. Although a young Japanese biologist was the object of the world’s attention on her sensational discovery two years ago, the discovery was revealed as fraud in just a few months. If this incident ironically shows that artificiality becomes natural or unconscious manner in natural science, it must suggest the technology-oriented education is in a deadlock. In this sense, attention should be paid to that which Patočka researched, within philosophical thinking, the possibility to restore the natural sense. The Open Soul, which was brought to him through his interpretation of Comenius, might be paraphrased as ‘Openness Within.’ If my interpretation was not far distant from the essence of the both thinkers, it implies that any universality or openness is never activated without philosophical thinking as Openness Within.

Even if school education was adequate to obtain philosophical knowledge as Descartes noted, learning philosophy is not identical with doing philosophy. Patočka’s practice in the Underground University must show another possibility of the openness of university. In its long history, the university has been able to continue through comprehending plural orientations which were so often in severe conflict. In this sense, the future of the university might depend on whether we commit ourselves to informal and voluntary endeavours even if they were not officially acknowledged. Comenius found the light in the darkness of his time when it is often deemed as the century of crisis. Whilst the time of normalization was seemingly illuminated by scientific positivism,

Patočka's lectures, which were conducted secretly, must have been a light for the people who were obliged to select multiple faces according to circumstances. It is common for both Comenius and Patočka to look through the darkness within the de facto publicness which was seemingly light, and at the same time, find out the light within appearing obscurity or darkness. Whether we are open to such vision or not remains a question.

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* This article was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number 24930577.