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The pandemic

A spotlight on the potentiality of and obstacles to human becoming

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on how the Corona pandemic might influence human understanding of our position of being in the world. In the first part of the paper, we present how a pandemic can be understood in relation to our society and our educational system. Then, we will present problems and questions highlighted by the pandemic and the kind of transformations needed to address these problems. The core elements that require transformation are the understanding of the essence of man or the human condition, the understanding of what caring for nature and even a pandemic means, and how to measure human action and values.

Keywords

Oriental knowledge, creativity, cosmology, existential meaning, civic wisdom, caring

The pandemic and our artificial way of living

The modern knowledge society

The Western society is depicted as a knowledge society. Science and technology are considered the main elements that define society. The definition focuses on the man-made aspects of our society. We could also call it an artificial society, where almost everything has become man-made. This worldview is based on scientific information and connected to the modern mindset. "We live in a world that in its structures and its forms of life is the expression of the scientific and technical understanding. Science today is everywhere, and so is technology. Wherever we go in our world, we find that the modern mind is already there: grounded on the scientific and technological know-how it produces, builds, administers, and destroys."¹ This worldview and mindset have also become a dominant part of the educational system, focusing on science and technology. Both science and technology

¹ Jürgen Mittelstrass, "Education between ethical universality and cultural particularity." in *Globalization and Education* ed. M. S. Sorondo, E. Malinvaud, & P. Lén (Walter De Gruyter Incorporated 2007), 252.

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embrace knowledge that could provide humans with experiences that make life simpler and safer. The core values of this knowledge society are efficiency, control, and external safety. In such a society, nature has got a marginal position. To change the modern mindset, we must have experiences that challenge this worldview.

The pandemic is a natural phenomenon.

The pandemic challenges our artificial society. Even though control and external safety are some of the main values of the knowledge society, the pandemic took us by surprise. The human beings were not prepared and still our action against the pandemic is dispersed in different directions. It is important to distinguish between the pandemic in itself and the human reaction to handle the pandemic. In this article, our focus is on the pandemic, not the social interventions made to prevent it from having a larger impact on human beings. In the first part of the article, we present a view of learning and knowledge which could bring forth different forms of creativity. In the main part of the article, we will discuss how the pandemic highlights different challenges in the knowledge society and how this could transform the field of education.

Creativity, learning, and knowledge formation

Education is a cultural process, socializing children into a culture but at the same time, enabling humans to transform this culture. Education is both intra- and trans-cultural. In the mindset of Norwegian teacher education, the knowledge society has got a dominant position.² This understanding of an artificial society is connected to a socio-cultural learning theory, which excludes nature from learning. Learning has become a man-made activity and the human language has become the main instrument through which children are to attain an optimal learning outcome. In this perspective, it is implied that humans are no longer able to learn or to have a good life without education. Education is not merely supposed to socialize children into a culture but help them enter an increasingly artificial future knowledge society. To do so, humans must become knowledge producers. Education is supposed to give humans scientific knowledge through action that is scientifically known. From this vantage point, nature is just something humans may experience in their spare time, or something entailing problems that could be reduced by the educated man.

Jean Piaget's theory offers an alternative perspective which is criticized in the dominant mindset.³ In his cognitive theory, he explains learning as a dialectical interaction between humans and the world. In both human beings and the world there is a core natural element. Humans learn through nature and it is nature, together with other human beings,

2 Knut Ove Æsøy, *Profesjon og Vitskap – ein samanliknande studie av tankemønster i nyare grunnleggande litteratur for grunnskulelærer- og sjukepleiarutdanninga*. (Doktorgradsavhandling, Institutt for filosofi og religionsvitenskap, NTNU Trondheim 2017).

3 Æsøy, «Profesjon og Vitskabp», 57-58.

that challenges humans in their learning process. Piaget portrays the human dialectical meeting with the world as a search for equilibrium.⁴

The pandemic confronts the modern man in her illusory equilibrium. When the pandemic caught humans by surprise, it revealed many of the imbalances in the human society and this provides an opportunity for learning. This change in our life world can be both appealing and frightening. We have to face the unknown, meeting the strange, the foreign, or the Other. What we have learned is what we know. But to change is to accept the fact that what you have learned is not enough, that you must change, when facing the unknown. This is a dialectical movement from an equilibrium state (knowledge) to a disequilibrium state (facing the unknown), and further on to a new equilibrium state (new knowledge).

In this process, there are two cognitive elements in action. Piaget calls them accommodation and assimilation. Accommodation is when a human has to change something in one's own self, based on new experiences, while assimilation is to change the world to make it fit into how the human already understands the world. These cognitive elements are shown through adaptation and creativity. Adaptation can be both accommodation and assimilation. In assimilation, humans can only survive a change in their environment through adaptation. When this adaptation changes the human cognitive abilities, these changes are accommodation. Also, creativity can be understood in terms of both these cognitive orientations. When humans have the power to foresee, form, and change their environment according to their currently held visions and values, this is creative assimilation. But if human creativity is directed towards one's own mindset, this creativity creates a change in the human self or the interpersonal mindset in our cultural system. This kind of creativity is accommodative.

This creative approach of accommodation is transformative and frame-breaking, rather than reactive, or innovative within the existing general framework. The concept of *potentiality space* has been developed as a heuristic devise for assessing the degrees of freedom afforded by a certain framework.⁵ Essentially significant to this model are the number of dimensions contained in a given potentiality space that allow for certain *quality* of constructions and transformations. To give an example: The potentiality space of a behaviorist approach to planning a learning situation is one-dimensional as it sees human learning as a process regulated merely by positive and negative reinforcement. A cognitive or constructivist approach can be said to be two-dimensional because it adds to the picture the factor of human cognition. Thus, the planning options regarded by a teacher with a constructivist viewpoint are qualitatively different – without passing even any normative judgments – from the ones that would be considered by a behaviorist instructor. As far as the strategic

4 Barry J. Wadsworth, *Piaget's Theory of Cognitive and Affective Development: Foundations of Constructivism*. (Allyn & Bacon Classics Edition 2004).

5 Kamran Namdar. In *Quest of the Globally Good Teacher: Exploring the need, the possibilities, and the main elements of a globally relevant core curriculum for teacher education*. (Doctoral dissertation. Mälardalen University, Sweden 2012).

alternatives available to working with potential are concerned, it is important to note that the human can either explore and attempt to use the entire space provided by a certain theory or practical reality, or more radically, opt to adopt a new analytical perspective and thereby choose or construe a potentiality space with at least an added dimension.

Two different ways of forming knowledge

These two creativity approaches are connected to two different ways of forming knowledge. Creativity within the existing general framework exploits *instrumental knowledge*, while self or social creativity of accommodation exploits *orientational knowledge*. "Instrumental knowledge is knowledge of causes, effects, and means, orientational knowledge is knowledge of justified ends and aims. Instrumental knowledge is *positive* knowledge, orientational knowledge is *regulative* knowledge".⁶ The values guiding instrumental knowledge are progress, control and physical safety. This form of knowledge is connected to the idea of a knowledge society based on science and technology. The more scientific knowledge human society produces, the safer and more controlled is our life form. Orientational knowledge is based on values of dialogical exploration of questions like ethical universality, the essence of man, the quest for civic wisdom and a meaningful life in society, the nature of knowledge and being. A centrally significant aspect of this orientational learning is the tendency of truth or knowledge to move further as you approach it. The more you know, the better you understand how much you still do not know. This form of knowledge might not reinforce physical security but could be helpful to human mental or spiritual development or self-trust.

The problems highlighted and questions raised by the pandemic, and consequent transformations required in the field of education

The pandemic confronts the human life form. This confrontation highlights different problems and questions about ourselves and our social system. These problems are not new but known as cultural criticism. Cultural criticism is based on a conceptualization whereby human life forms are leveling and making society arbitrary. We need to distinguish between what is important and not, or what is essential and meaningful to human beings. All our critical perspectives are connected to these questions of existential essences. Based on this cultural criticism, we will discuss the transformations required to bring forth new perspectives and how they can be affected in the field of education. We will discuss existential meaning, scientific worldview, different values to measure human life, our understanding of human being and care, and the purpose of human society and civic wisdom.

6 Mittelstrass, "Ethical universality and cultural particularity", 251.

Existential meaning, science, and construction of knowledge

The human search for existential meaning is one of the core problems in the knowledge society. The postmodern imperative “stop making sense”, together with scientific development, reduces the human search for existential meaning. The positive belief in science and scientific empirical methods expel differing experiences of truth. This is connected to the modern understanding of orientational knowledge. Mittelstrass writes: “Science has lost sight of this [orientational] knowledge – and, to a large extent, society has as well. The consequences are weakness of orientation (though not yet loss of orientation), self-doubt and the tendency towards fundamentalism of different kinds.”⁷ Humans have not yet lost sight of orientational knowledge and the pandemic might vitalize these questions.

The western society has turned science into the dominant ideology of our time. The understanding of science is clearly anti-metaphysical.⁸ And as Habermas points out, not even ethics and aesthetics are any longer parts of the reasoning sphere.⁹ From Descartes to social constructivism there is an anti-metaphysical project, walking hand in hand with methodological atheism. Heidegger sees Descartes’ philosophy and methodological atheism as the background for Nietzsche’s theory that all knowledge is the will to power.¹⁰ Descartes turns knowledge into subjectivism, as something that is divorced from the earth. The same subjectivism is derived from Martin Luther and the Christian reformation a century before Descartes. In the Protestant movement, each person could use one’s own reasoning, and have one’s own faith in God.¹¹ This kind of subjectivism leads to the notion that knowledge is a construction of the human consciousness and based on the human ability to construct or imagine. Modern scientific thinking does not believe in an objective ontology but in a knowledge society where new constructions of changing knowledge are based on an atheistic method.

The will to power is an anti-metaphysical and anti-rational perspective that has been embraced by the postmodern and post-structuralist movement. The consequence is that modern science, like natural science, together with social constructivism and postmodern thinking, all reduce the human sphere of reasoning and limit the impact of ethical, aesthetic, and metaphysical thinking on this sphere. As part of this development, “the language turn” turns human language into the most important element of human and social changes. Through the discursive power of language, the world is changed by constructing new words.

7 Mittelstrass, “Ethical universality and cultural particularity”, 251.

8 Jürgen Habermas. *Samtalens fornuft: Historiebevidthed og posttraditionel identitet: Efter metafysikken*. (Charlottenlund: Rosinante 1987).

9 Habermas, *Samtalens fornuft*, 56.

10 Martin Heidegger. *Martin Heidegger Basic Writings*. (ed. Krell, D.F.) (London: Routledge 2011).

11 Marius T. Mjåland, *The hidden God*. (Indiana University Press, 2015).

Transformation of scientific worldview and highlighting of existential meaning

In this perspective, society becomes increasingly artificial and the pandemic hits us as an anomaly. The pandemic creates small cracks in the scientific worldview that make humans aware that nature might change human thinking and shake up the human mindset. The pandemic might bring forth a new understanding of human beings and our position in the world. From this point of view, culture is ubiquitous. There are already other anomalies. On the global scale, many of the achievements of science and technology, like an autoimmune disease, have turned against man, in forms such as environmental degradation, weapons of mass destruction, and over-engagement of people with electronic gadgets. Meanwhile, some old problems, like poverty, hunger, and lack of health care persist, despite all the technical means for resolving them. The current pandemic is a clear outcome and embodiment of the attempt to reduce all in life to a scientific-technical rationality and the consequent alienation of humans from the core of their humanity.

The pandemic could broaden our understanding of the sphere of reason. This could bring forth a second Enlightenment project that would integrate scientific, existential, ethical, and aesthetical perspectives and epistemologies into an integrated whole that is fundamentally rational, but with an added supra-rational – rather than irrational – dimension. This could interrupt the belief in a purely material definition of progress and the human ability to master or control the world and the human condition. The social intervention of the pandemic situation is, in general terms, an expression of the human ability to control the interruption, but still the whole experience of the pandemic might awaken human beings to a search of meaning in the world – a meaning that is predicated on a better balance between our existential condition and the human ability to control our future. Humans might accept their own human condition without being the only constructors of the future world.

Values, measurement and speaking with the transcendence

The scientific worldview is also connected to the kind of values that count in the knowledge society. Mittelstrass sees this as a development towards market and goods. When the world is transformed into an artificial world, a human being can only recognize himself in those things that he has made himself.¹² The market becomes the measure of all things. This we call consumerism. Thus, the prevailing consumeristic attitude reduces the possibility of accommodative creativity. All creation is a continuing conversion of society into more of the technology we already have. Even knowledge becomes a consumer good, a raw material we could produce, buy, and throw away as we like. Scientific knowledge has become a fresh good with a stamp of date.

The consumeristic society kills transcendence, which means that an important part of orientational knowledge is lost from the human dialogue. This dialogue is the human ability

¹² Mittelstrass, "Ethical universality and cultural particularity", 250.

to create new sublime forms. It is a kind of genius creativity that provides an opportunity to speak with the transcendence. This talk is the human quest for universal or unchangeable truth expressed through ethical or esthetical forms. To do so, a human being must free herself from cultural particularity, and at the same time embrace universal traditions. Freedom from cultural particularity is not relativism, but universalism. This kind of universal orientational knowledge is no longer part of science. Science no longer has a dialog of ethical or esthetical universalism or any other form of speaking with transcendence. Even other art forms, like music or painting, have reduced the idea of universal ethical or aesthetical expressions. The evaluation of these art forms has become part of the market mind and cultural imperialism.

This market mind has also invaded the educational system. In the dominant mindset of Norwegian educational system, traditions and routines are presented as burdens.¹³ Teachers are told to create changes and progress in the classroom. The changes should be based on scientific methods to produce higher efficiency in the pupils' learning outcomes. This is a form of assimilation creativity. The search for progress based on scientific methods keeps teachers busy and prevents them from being able to change the system or their own way of thinking. The pandemic experience proved this point. The teachers had no problem changing their practice from physical classroom settings to a digital educational environment, continuing the same kind of educational approach towards their pupils. Our educational systems are perhaps mainly about helping people become functional cogs in the existing societal machinery, rather than acting as arenas for creation of a future conducive to a higher degree of human universal flourishing.

Transformations in standard of values

A consumer society is a kind of opium for the people. People are busy collecting economic goods, unable to sense what is needed or what a good life is. The pandemic situation has reduced or changed access to the modern opium of the market. The pandemic experience might bring existential experiences into the human condition. Such experiences are an alternative standard to the market. We have enough empirical data to conclude that material welfare and modern educational systems are not a guarantee of even psychological health. A report by the Swedish Public Health Agency shows that almost half of all 15-year-olds in Sweden suffer from some form of mental disorder.¹⁴ After a year of the Corona pandemic, an increasing number of young people in Norway are calling to express their lack of meaningfulness.¹⁵ They feel life is put on hold, they see the fragility of society being revealed, and they talk about loneliness and mental health problems.

13 Æsøy, «Profesjon og Vitskap», 59, 94, 100.

14 Folkhälsomyndigheten, Årsrapport, 2018 URL: <https://www.folkhalsomyndigheten.se/publicerat-material/publikationsarkiv/f/folkhalsans-utveckling-arsrapport-2018/>.

15 Stella Bugge 5. Mars 2021, URL: <https://www.vg.no/nyheter/innenriks/i/M3EPbr/mental-helse-har-faatt-en-eks-plosjon-av-henvendelser>.

We need to explore an art of assessment that is more in line with orientational knowledge and unchangeable truth. In ancient Greece, this art of assessment was called logos. Logos as the standard is a logical necessity for knowing. In Heraclitus' view, this logos administers the whole universe. "Men are at variance with the one thing with which they are in the most unbroken communion, the reason [logos] that administers the whole universe".¹⁶ We must use this cosmological logos to assess what is of human value, and stop valuing what the market or science are able to assess. Maybe the pandemic might highlight the question of human values.

Logos is both the source and the fundamental order of cosmos. Heraclitus urges humans to listen to logos and not to man. That is to speak with transcendence, to sense a cosmic wisdom. We find the same concept in the Christian Bible. In the beginning there was logos. This is the same divine or transcendent logic, which is connected to recognition of unchangeable truth.

The pandemic highlights this cosmological perspective of life, which is generally ignored in today's Western world. It raises questions about human nature and the ontology of nature, in general, and more specifically about the balance between the human life form and nature. In the educational system, the curricula are telling people what they should know and what skills the knowledge society needs, believing that we can know the future and the kinds of needs society will have. The pandemic interrupts this belief, proving that nature and new generations of humans will bring forth new forms of communities. Logos and the cosmological perspective are part of this wisdom. Without that kind of perspective, even the well-intentioned welfare state can deteriorate into a comfort-creating mechanism and eventually become misused. Just because things are functioning well practically does not indicate that they are meaningful or functional in the future.

These kinds of logical or cosmological question are alive in pupils. Young children question the possibility that what is could have been created out of nothing, or the idea that something that is, could become nothing. The logical human nature asks for cosmological meaning or sense in the world. No matter how much the postmodern tradition demands not making sense, humans still have an inner standard or logical reasoning. The Norwegian school system has the possibility to explore these kinds of questions through philosophical dialog, but we could ask how great an impact these questions have on other fields of knowledge or on the school system. The existential part of human nature may be highlighted by the realization of death and fragility induced by the pandemic.

A fundamental question is to understand why the educational system has removed the cosmological perspective that might give theory the power to orient humans and societies towards transformative action to realize a higher degree of our essential humanity. A long line of educational thinkers, from Plato to Freire, have promoted the idea of schools opera-

16 Heraclitus "Fragment 93", In: Friedrich Nietzsche *The Pre-Platonic Philosophers*, (trans. and ed: Greg Whitlock, University of Illinois system, 2006) Chapter 10 URL: <https://www.press.uillinois.edu/books/catalog/47fbz6xa9780252074035.html>.

ting as spaces for reimagining and reconstructing society. So, should a school or a society want this, it can be done.

The understanding of human nature and human caring

If we are to assess what is of human value, we must ask what a human being is by nature. Self-realization in modern society is just to be oneself as one is. “Only where self-determination is an element of self-realization in the demanding, accountable sense, is self-realization an element of reasonable conditions of life. But precisely this is less and less the case today. Lived, unreflected self-realization is taking the place of realized (accountable) self-determination.”¹⁷ Lack of self-determination is the lack of examining the human nature as a deeper aspect of being. There is no question of understanding the whole being, neither philosophical nor spiritual. In Arendt’s attempt to understand totalitarianism, she writes: “The totalitarian attempt at global conquest and total domination has been the destructive way out of all impasses. Its victory may coincide with the destruction of humanity; wherever it has ruled, it has begun to destroy the essence of man”¹⁸ Arendt regards the lack of respect for objective truth and dialog as the main reason for this destruction of the essence of man. Without respect for objective truth there is no real dialog. A conversation without objective truth would just be people telling each other their subjective opinions, talking about their own individual worldview and needs. There will not be a respect for objective truth without a conversation with transcendence.

A similar critic of our educational system is stated by Dufour, which is based on his interpretation of Arendt. He presents the school as an amusement park.¹⁹

A whole current within postmodern educational research, even in the universities, now argues that the last thing we should be doing is asking «young people” to think. The important thing is to keep them entertained and amused. We must not bore them to death with lectures, and should let them zap “democratically” from one subject to another while they interact as they please. We must simply let them talk about their lives, and show them that the power of logic is no more than an abuse of the power of “intellectuals” or “Western” thought. Above all, we have to show them there is nothing to think about, that there is no object of thoughts: all that matters is self-affirmation and the relational management of that self-affirmation – and any self-respecting consumer should be able to do that.²⁰

We believe there is still a possibility for the young people to think. But mostly, the pupil is asked to think by herself, not to take part in the wisdom to be found in the world. Each person is told to construct their own meaning and worldview,²¹ like their own will to power. This is the same subjectivism that is stated above. There are two attitudes that hinder true

17 Mittelstrass, “Ethical universality and cultural particularity”, 250.

18 Hannah Arendt. *The origins of totalitarianism*. (Penguin Classics 2017), xi.

19 Dany-Robert Dufour. *The Art of Shrinking Heads: The New Servitude of the Liberated in the Era of Total Capitalism*. (Polity Press 2008), 118.

20 Dufour, *The Art of Shrinking Heads*, 116.

21 Æsøy, “Profesjon og Vitskap”, 70-73.

ethical growth in students. One sees rationality only pertaining to the field of science and not values and ethics. The other would construe all meaning on the premises of scientific rationality, ignoring every form of supra-rational consciousness, referred to here as talking with transcendence. Virtue becomes instrumental, just like science. Empathy and collaboration are good skills to secure a job and to be successful in it. In a non-transcendental humanistic society, the egoistic aspects of human beings become dominant and all else serves these. Ends and means exchange place: earning money becomes an end and honesty a means to that.

In the Platonic sense, the ethical behavior or virtue is based on care for oneself. From an Aristotelian viewpoint, care for oneself implies realization of one's potential which is not possible without engagement with and care for other humans. This care is the essence of politics and the quest for wisdom. If philosophy also contains the care for others, philosophy becomes politics and thereby the question of civic wisdom. Care for oneself and others, presupposes suffering or longing. It is reported that once a student asked Margaret Mead what she thought was the first sign of civilization in a culture. She had answered that it was a fractured femur found at an archeological site. The femur is a bone that connects the hip to the knee. If you fracture that bone, it takes about six weeks of rest for it to heal under natural circumstances. Mead had pointed out that in the animal kingdom, breaking one's leg meant certain death. The animal would not be able to hunt food, get water, or run away from a predator. It would be killed before the broken bone had mended. Among humans, a broken femur that has healed is evidence that another person had taken time to stay with the fallen, had bound up the wound, had carried the person to safety and had tended them through recovery. A healed femur indicates that someone had helped a fellow human, rather than abandoning them to save their own life. And this, Mead felt, was the true sign of civilization. Many creatures, both human and animal, do not behave as the fittest were an issue of surviving or not, but an issue of caring or not. In a society without suffering there is no such thing as political caring. With the pandemic, a new reality is encircling our society. Not only must political decisions be made for the best of all humanity, but each person must act with the awareness that other people might get the virus because of her.

In his analysis of the transformation of the public sphere, Habermas regards caring as a value or deed originated in the family.²² The child needs caring. The child is not suffering, but dependence on somebody else is a kind of suffering. In Habermas' analysis, human beings transfer the value of caring from the private sphere to the public. It becomes part of civic wisdom and politics. Therefore, Habermas is critical of the depoliticization of a population. The fall of the public sphere is illustrated by technocratization of society and

22 Jürgen Habermas. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 1991).

the depoliticization of the population caused by scientism in politics.²³ Technocratization and the science of politics are both part of the human project of a satisfying social order. When modern science becomes the method of civic wisdom, the essence of politics (civic wisdom) disappears. The essence of politics is not only caring for the community, but also the distinction between friend and enemy. In the public sphere, the question of civic wisdom presupposes suffering in parts of the community and a common enemy. Maybe the pandemic could be this common enemy? But for the moment, the pandemic seems to divide rather than to unite people and countries.

If we connect the development of caring and politics to the world of childhood, it becomes clear that as a child the idea that one's parents are superior to everyone else's constitutes a foundation of security. That is how it has been during the childhood stages of the development of the human becoming, where regarding one's religion, race, culture etc. as unique and better than those of other groups of people has been an important point of identity and a source of a strong self-image. Today, however, humanity has all the prerequisites and faces even the necessity of its ethical and spiritual coming of age. As a mature humanity, we can see all separating borders disappear and embrace the essential oneness of humanity. Facing the challenges of the pandemic, we stand at a turning point in human history that calls for a clear and conscious decision: to carry on as before with tribal and national interests as our driving force or to radically change direction and think in terms of our shared human condition and universal caring.

Transformation of human essence

There is a lot of anti-essentialism in teacher education. The final form of positivism, as an anti-essential/anti-metaphysical paradigm, is social constructivism. In a simplistic interpretation of social constructivism, human beings have become creators of knowledge and knowledge is the creator of reality. Social constructivism is in this way a totalitarian mindset. Modern science no longer wonders about the essence of human nature. Science has become proletarianized into a factory of knowledge production,²⁴ and the method of production has become atheistic. In the Norwegian school system, the goal is to develop every child into an independent learner in the future knowledge society. This independence is based on the human conquest of cosmos. "Man can be sovereign only because there is no cosmic support for his humanity".²⁵ By controlling the influence of other human beings and nature upon your life, you become independent or sovereign. We find the same notion in the concept of "livsmestring" (mastering life), which has got a key role in the 2020 Norwe-

23 Thomas Krogh. «Forord» In: Habermas, J. *Vitenskap som ideologi*. (København: Svensk-Norsk Bogimport 1974), 8. "Offentlighetens forfall er tegnet på samfunnets teknokratisering slik som avpolitiseringen av befolkningen vitner om og er forårsaket av politikken vitenskapleggjøring".

24 Mats Alvesson, Yiannis Gabriel & Roland Paulsen. *Return to Meaning: A Social Science With Something To Say*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

25 Leo Strauss. *Natural Right and History* (University of Chicago press 1965), 175.

gian National Curriculum.²⁶ This is the Norwegian translation of wellbeing. But “livsmestring” is not a question of being well in the world, but of mastering life, or one could say controlling or conquering life. This concept is based on the idea that each human has the possibility to develop knowledge to master life and become independent or sovereign in relation to one’s own human nature.

When the pandemic highlights the connection between nature and culture, this also has implications for what a human being is and for the position of humans in the world. These perspectives can become a revitalization of the orientational discussion about the essence of the human being. Mittelstrass argues that this discussion must be a quest for universality and not cultural particularity. “This essence must be achieved over and over again – against particular concepts of the good, the just and the rational, assumptions which aim at taking the place of the universal. The universalism of reason does not admit particular worlds which pretend to be the essence of reason themselves.”²⁷ The pandemic is global and demands global perspectives. This could help bring forth a universalism in reasoning when it comes to orientational knowledge.

If the school, and life in general, has become an amusement park for many, we may lose sight of the significance of suffering, even in the Stoic sense. But the pandemic makes our systems more transparent, bringing more suffering to the surface. The differences in material wellbeing are being exposed. The educational system, in some countries, has more or less collapsed. We learn increasingly about children having problems or not being able to participate in education. Even death becomes a larger part of life. All these experiences could highlight a more holistic perspective on the human being, and at the same time create new vitality into human aspiration.

A new vitality in human aspiration does not necessarily lead to a new debate on human essence. The history of ideas already contains such discussions.

The classic thought that, owing to the weakness or dependence of human nature, universal happiness is impossible, and therefore they did not dream of a fulfilment of History and hence not of a meaning of History. [...] Modern man, dissatisfied with utopias and scorning them, has tried to find a guarantee for the actualization of the best order. In order to succeed, or rather in order to be able to believe that he could succeed, he had to lower the goal of man. One form in which this was done was to replace moral virtue by universal recognition, or to replace happiness by the satisfaction deriving from universal recognition.²⁸

The modern attempt of actualization of the best order is a total satisfaction of humanity, which can only become a reality if nature is fully domesticated or conquered. But this satisfaction must turn human beings away from the quest for wisdom. The social order is giving humanity what it needs to believe in equality. Juridical rights and respect, in modern

26 The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, “Fagfornyelsen” (2020) URL: <https://www.udir.no/lk20/overordnet-del/>.

27 Mittelstrass, “Ethical universality and cultural particularity”, 255.

28 Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny*. University of Chicago press 2000, 210.

terms, after Hegel, are expressed as equal recognition. This is a logical conclusion of History if we follow a genealogical method. Still, not everybody has got this recognition. The “black life matters” movement is the latest of this kind of political fight for recognition. This fight works inside the dominant mindset and might even reaffirm the present social order. The question of human nature and universalism is not a question of universal recognition, but of moral virtue and happiness. By bringing forth this discussion, we must discuss if it is possible to educate people, so they are able to face nature with virtue. The educational system has a decisive role in this question.

The new reality, after the pandemic, might be a realization of the weakness of man and of his dependence on nature. “Still, however much man may conquest the nature, he will never be able to understand nature.”²⁹ This will reduce the human position in the world, but at the same time this could bring forth new interest in the question of happiness and moral virtue. In order to do so, the pandemic must be severe and bring human values under question. This genealogical or historical-empirical method cannot search divine truth about mankind. Essential exploration to understand nature would presuppose a method which implies talking with transcendence.

At this transformative moment, it becomes essential to determine what the most fundamental change required is. In the Western world, there persists a myth of knowledge whereby increase in the amount of knowledge is expected to lead to a better quality of life, both for the individual and for society. This is a dangerous outcome of the Enlightenment project carried too far. Whereas the Enlightenment sought to replace dogmatic and absolutist ways of thinking with scientific rationality, its modern and post-modern developments led to a total separation of this epistemological approach from an existential and transcendent one. This intellectual divorce has had paradoxical consequences: Many people in the Western world, while enjoying the benefits of economic prosperity and the security of a welfare state, experience various forms of psychic ailment, due to lack of true meaning in their lives.³⁰

At school, there is a space for highlighting questions pertaining to the human essence and the metaphysical challenge of discovering true humanity in a cosmological perspective. Based on these questions, we may reconstruct our global society and its educational systems to serve the realization of this potential and the flourishing of true humanity. This was a vision that, according to our reading, was strongly held by Comenius who referred, as an Enlightenment man, to schools as potential “factories of light”. Ironically, it was the Enlightenment that seems to have muddled our understanding of true humanity by separating the rational mode of thinking from the existential, ethical, and aesthetical approaches to reality. So, what the pandemic is doing, it seems to us, is hitting home the necessity of re-evaluating what our true humanity is and requires and setting it in the center of our societal and educational efforts. In effect, it communicates the necessity of a new Age of

29 Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 174.

30 Victor Frankl. *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*. (Rider & Co. 2011).

Enlightenment that would discover our highest human potential and ways to realize it, beyond the dualism and deconstruction introduced by the original Enlightenment project.

The desire for transcendence is uniquely characteristic of humans. As Fromm put it, the Biblical story of Adam and Eve, their tasting of the fruit of the tree of knowledge, and their subsequent expulsion from Eden, can be seen as an allegorical representation of historical facts. Fromm sees this story as depicting man's loss of his original home in nature and his animal lifestyle to which he can never return. He has to find a new home and that he can only do by creating a distinctly human world and by becoming truly human himself. Human birth, that of the individual as well as of the entire mankind, signifies having to irreversibly leave behind the definiteness of animal instincts and to enter into the uncertainty and openness of human existence. Human beings have, thus, the dual character of having fallen out of nature but still being in it, of being partly divine, partly animal, partly infinite, partly finite.³¹

De-politization and the lack of interest in civic wisdom

The modern critic of politics and the democratic man is expressed through the idea of the end of history. In a consumer society, humans search for material satisfaction. Kojève says these kinds of human beings end up as "healthy" automata, doing sports, art and eroticism.³² It is common to picture an ideal world in terms of absence of evils, especially material want.

In this artificial end state, humans are no longer interested in politics or civic wisdom. That means, humans are no longer interested in questions of common good. The essential meaning of the Western tradition is civic wisdom. Or as Kant puts it: "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end." Habermas points this out in his last book that this core meaning has to be kept alive. This ability to act for the common good is the foundation of civic wisdom. If we lose our political orientation, we lose our interest in civic wisdom. Habermas argue that this would be the end of our tradition as we know it.³³

This understanding of the end of politics is closely connected to the lack of interest in the human essence. In the realm of the modern social order, politics has become administration and experts, claiming to act in accordance with science, turn the political discussion away from values towards facts. This will remove the ethical aspect of political caring – mostly the care for others, but eventually also the care for oneself. The consequence might be that people with ethical virtue or political wisdom would care for those interested in technocratization and politics as science. The lack of severity of the Corona pandemic might prove the validity of the social order based on technocratization and scientism

31 Erich Fromm. *Sane Society*. (Routledge, 1955).

32 Alexandre Kojève. "Letters". In: Leo Strauss *On Tyranny* (University of Chicago Press 2000), 255.

33 Jürgen Habermas. *Auch eine geschichte der philosophie*, (Suhrkamp Verlag 2019).

in politics. If this is the case, the pandemic will not change the system or our mindset but tighten the knot of modern science and political administration.

Transformation of the political mindset

Still, the pandemic highlights the question about civic wisdom. Has humanity the civic wisdom to handle the situation for the best for all human beings? To answer this political question, we need to reawaken the questions of nature, the essence and the understanding of man, which are connected to the issue of the common good. The pandemic may re-politicize our society, both in terms of awakening to nature and the political administration of the pandemic. We may also experience a growing interest in the quest for civic wisdom and highlighting of global and even cosmological perspectives on life.

This civic wisdom has a deep level of emergence connected to cosmology and an existential identity which is transcendent and spiritual in nature. In the Platonic view, a good life is not possible without civic wisdom that will search for values and ethical purposes in a cosmological perspective.³⁴ In this view, an ethical change in human behavior cannot become a reality without a worldview that includes these spiritual essences of human beings. Habermas clarifies this traditional understanding of theory. “*Only as cosmology was theoria* capable of orienting human action”.³⁵ If theory is supposed to have something to say about human self-formation, it cannot do away with its cosmological content. “Theoria had educational and cultural implications not because it had freed knowledge from interest. To the contrary, it did so because it derived *pseudonormative power* from the concealment of its actual interest.”³⁶ In the light of this interpretation, cosmology is part of reasoning. In the sixties Habermas may not have believed in the necessity of these metaphysical aspects of theoria, but in his latest book “*Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie*”, he is arguing more closely for conversation with transcendence. Slagstad, in his interpretation of Habermas’ latest work, presents metaphysical speculation as part of human rationality.³⁷

If such cosmological knowledge exists, we do not know, but we know we need to keep these questions alive. If not, the market will be our standard of human values. In a cosmological perspective, the logical assessment will pertain to the difference between truth and falsehood, between good and evil or beauty and hideousness. These distinctions are part of the rational sphere. In our view, the cosmological perspective contains both ontology and epistemology about question of knowledge, skills/deeds, ethic/virtue and aesthetics. All these domains have metaphysical or cosmological perspectives that constitute a necessary ground for experience, knowledge, or good practice.

34 Plato, *Protagoras* In: Plato in Twelve Volumes, Vol. 3 translated by W.R.M. Lamb. Cambridge, MA, (Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1967.) URL: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0178%3Atext%3DProt.%3Asection%3D361d>.

35 Jürgen Habermas. *Knowledge and human interest*. (Polity Press 1971), 306.

36 Habermas, *Knowledge and human interest*. 306.

37 Rune Slagstad, (2019,19 desember) Habermas’ nye verk kommer til å bli diskutert i åreis framover. URL: <https://reportasje.vl.no/artikkel/1247-habermas-nye-verk-kommer-til-a-bli-diskutert-i-arevis-framover>.

In the current historical situation, we face two essential problems regarding the predictability of the future. There is abundant evidence demonstrating that we as humanity have arrived at a historical bifurcation point. At such a juncture a system has exactly and only two choices: to reorganize itself into a completely new regime or to become annihilated. As the future represents a total reorientation of the current developmental pathway, it cannot be predicted. But it can, and need be influenced. It is at such a turning point that accommodation creativity encounters an opportunity to align human with transcendence. We humans have the potential of consciously bringing about a future so glorious we cannot picture it at the outset of our efforts. It is impossible to imagine an oak looking at an acorn, but if one can imagine the general nature of potential and transformative change, one will plant and care for an acorn, and watch an oak emerge from it.

If we, for instance, look at the UN 2030 goals, they involve naturally a lot of work and change. But underlying them is the notion of the oneness of the human family and the sense of solidarity and compassion that follows from that realization. If we have not internalized these, the 2030 goals become just an arduous to-do list. But with them present, it is quite natural to pursue a certain social order. We do not know if, as such, building a Scandinavian style welfare state is more difficult than the kind of good-for-the rich system that prevails in many southern countries. The UN goals become hard work, lacking ethical change. Of course, one could say that ethical care is always non-entropic and, thereby, requires greater exertion and effort than unethical behavior.

Human openness to change varies greatly from one field of life to another. When it comes to the educational system, religious beliefs, or world governance, we easily put up with models and solutions that are 300-3000 years old. To change these fields, we need political wisdom combined with confrontations from nature. Challenges by nature, as in symbolic stories of the Great Flood or St George and the dragon, refer to the way in which the unconscious products of evolution bring out expressions of creative agency in those who are conscious participants in the evolutionary process. The pandemic might be such a natural confrontation. The digital spring did not change educational values, or ethical purposes in the system. If we imagine that we already have arrived in the light, we will reduce changes to adaptation and assimilation. But the pandemic and its mutations are not over yet.

Final remarks

It amazes us that none of the teacher education programs which we are familiar with deal with the issue of human nature as an essential content area. In fact, they do not deal with the topic at all. We are preparing people whose task is supposedly to help young people advance in their human becoming, and we do not have them reflect on what a human being is. Thus, we end up actually training idiots (in the ancient Greek sense of the term) and circus animals, rather than educating humans. In our societal discourse and practice, too, we have a fixed notion of human beings thriving most in circumstances of maximal

material wealth and freedom of needs, and then we just focus on the means to deliver these goods.

Furthermore, and this is an important realization for the work of schools, the world is not created as a ready product. In fact, the world needs to be recreated constantly. There is clearly a need for humans to act as creators so that the world could reach out for the highest aspirations in humans. It is not only the question of the essence of man that has disappeared, but also the question of what really exists. In teacher education, the focus is on the future society, with no interference from nature. And teachers are supposed to “create” pupils that are supposed to fit into the predictions of the future. It is no longer the new generation that creates the society by interacting with the world, but it is the idea of the future society that new generations must fit into. The pandemic is a true proof, that this kind of prediction is impossible. We do not know how the external world or the human internal world will unfold. But beyond that limitation, conceptualizing the future as something that happens to us – in contrast to something we create – would reduce us to adaptive animals, and deny us a central hallmark of our humanity.

Here, one can note that natural changes, like a pandemic, may act as catalysts to help people in general become more oriented towards civic wisdom and our true humanity. The natural world represents an order and a potential meaning that was not created by man but needs to be discovered by her. Hopefully the pandemic reality will create a new mindset in the science of education because only reality may change human thinking, and metaphysics or transcendence is part of that reality.

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