

HIGHER EDUCATION AS PART OF THE SERVICE SECTOR.

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Abstract. In this article, the author discusses the phenomenon of higher education, as it could be seen in the 21st century, when the tendency to focus on the constant people's consumption of products of material and spiritual culture has become very bright. An important question is whether education is now perceived as a tool for a person to know the world and oneself, to reveal his / her creative abilities and spiritual horizons? Or has it turned into one of the utilitarian components of the service sector, having lost its humanistic purpose? Being a teacher of Philosophy at the university, the author reflects on the trends in education and its role.

Keywords:

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The tendency for constant consumption is a striking and obvious feature of modern society. It concerns both spheres of our life – material and spiritual, – and also many aspects of it. If the manifestation of the phenomenon of consumption in the material sphere is more obvious, then in the spiritual sphere everything may not seem so unambiguous. For example, it is the consumption of ‘products’, results, derivatives of the objectified spiritual sphere. This includes books, music, theatrical productions, films, TV-series, and so on. This is something that today is very quickly turning into a phenomenon that we unite with the concept of ‘popular culture’ or ‘mass culture’. On the one hand, this is something that, of course, can enrich spiritually and contribute to the development of each person. On the other hand, it is a way to relax, which is so necessary for all of us, and this is also an entertainment. Let’s also not forget that this can be a sort of escapism and avoiding reality for a person, or an attempt not to act intensively in one's own life, remaining passive and filling days with something pleasant for oneself. It may be a sort of hedonism. The mass embodiment of the spiritual sphere is obtained when the production and consumption of such derivatives of it are put on stream. Mass culture, or rather, its components (these are its products), are designed to entertain people, ‘pull’ us out of the routine life, and help to resist boredom.

Higher education also becomes part of the service sector today. It is designed to satisfy our needs in obtaining knowledge, certain skills and abilities, developing any inclinations, abilities of a person, in revealing and developing a person as such, as well as further adapting one’s life in society. It would seem nothing that new. But at the same time, education should be interestingly ‘delivered’ to students, it should captivate a person. Of course, the desire to make lectures interesting was present before, but for the most part it was based on the erudition and oratory skills of the lecturer, on new and unique information that the lecturer passed on to students.

Today’s world lives in a real endless stream of information and almost everyone has access to it. For example, it is an opportunity to use libraries (including e-libraries) and numerous Internet resources. Under such conditions, knowledge ceases to have uniqueness and value, it has become an ordinary part of people's lives, and an access to scientific knowledge is almost as easy to get as to trivial knowledge. Thus, not just information becomes important for students, but structured knowledge, the ability to systematize it, the method of transferring and presenting that knowledge, as well as the form of presenting information, which should be exciting and interesting. In addition, the key message here is the teacher’s ought. If the way of presenting information is not captivating, then student’s attention would be reduced. However, this is natural. And if we are talking about ‘teacher’s ought’, then this is a consequence of the fact that a modern person really has to perceive the world as an endless stream of information, but they also become a ‘victim’ of the desire for entertainment. In order to fix one’s attention on this or that fact, object or information, one needs a very strong internal motivation, as well as something that will help to break out of such a flow of information and keep this attention. Obviously, an involuntary attention can be held for a short time. A person needs bright points. As many bright points as possible. Arbitrary attention requires additional efforts from a person oneself.

Alvin Toffler called it a consequence of a blip culture. We are talking about the fact that people exchange certain pieces and fragments of information. Toffler wrote: ‘Instead of receiving long, related ‘strings’ of ideas, organized or synthesized for us, we are increasingly exposed to short, modular blips of information ads, commands, theories, shreds of news, truncated bits and blobs that refuse to fit neatly into our pre-existing mental files. The new imagery resists classification, partly because it often falls outside our old

conceptual categories, but also because it comes in packages that are too oddly shaped, transient, and disconnected.¹ And also: ‘Third Wave’ people, by contrast, are more at ease in the midst of this bombardment of blips – the ninety-second news-clip intercut with a thirty-second commercial, a fragment of song and lyric, a headline, a cartoon, a collage, a newsletter item, a computer printout. Insatiable readers of disposable paperbacks and special-interest magazines, they gulp huge amounts of information in short takes. But they also keep an eye out for those new concepts or metaphors that sum up or organize blips into larger wholes.² Toffler also notes that the need to constantly establish one's own understanding and vision of reality contributes to demassification, and this requires some effort and even courage.

In this regard, it is also appropriate to recall Erich Fromm and his work ‘Escape from Freedom’, where he noted that ‘the one side of the growing process of individuation is the growth of self-strength.... The other aspect of the process of individuation is growing aloneness.’³ That is, on the one hand, individualization is always self-knowledge and the search for one's own path, including the path of development, the disclosure of one's own personality, but on the other hand, it is separation from others. After all, we become more different from each other, and, therefore, more alienated or estranged. Because the other one is not like me. And this causes an anxiety of a person. And, of course, such a barrier is more difficult to overcome, because it requires a free look at the other person, recognition that this Other has the right to their own individuality, which may be so different from mine.

Another important feature of a person in the modern world is that their attention is often scattered, they gradually lose the ability to concentrate on something. Here is how Fromm wrote about it in his other work ‘On Disobedience and Other Essays’: ‘The ability to concentrate has become a rarity in the life of a modern person. On the contrary, it seems that he does everything to avoid concentration. He likes to do several things at the same time, such as listening to music, reading, eating, talking with friends.’⁴ The rhythm of life is accelerating, and people have a desire to make the most of it and spend as little time as possible on it. And in this regard, the ability of a person to concentrate their attention on several problems at the same time is very much appreciated, as if they are trying to follow this both at work and also in their usual everyday life. But doesn't this desire to concentrate on several things at the same time mean an inability to really concentrate on any of them? As if a person is busy with only one thing, they begin to feel uncomfortable, especially when it comes to daily activities that are familiar to us – eating, walking, and so on. This inability to concentrate on living life in the present moment makes people neurotic, makes them feel anxious and perceive the sudden silence as uncomfortable. Therefore, they strive to fill it with some kind of noise or background. This kind of distracted attention and lack of real concentration leads to the fact that a person is distracted from their own life, from what happens in it, as well as from the very course of this life. How often do students pick up phones during lectures and seminars? Of course, perhaps the whole point is that the teacher is not so talented and does not present the material very excitingly. But after all, we can often see people on their phones when they communicate with each other, and when they eat, and so on. Perhaps the point is just this scattered attention and dispersing it to different things, instead of concentrating on one thing?

Education also adapts to this feature, offering interactive lectures, presentations, video excerpts, cartoons, etc. This approach has many advantages: easier assimilation of information, increased interest on topic. The problem may arise when students are unable to perceive information in a different, ‘traditional’ and classical form.

Or maybe education should change over time? Of course, changes are normal, all living things develop over time. But an important question is what is the quality of these changes, and in what direction are they taking place? After all, adapting to the movement of time is completely healthy and natural. But on the other hand, is it right to treat students as consumers of information and knowledge, who only need to be attracted and whose attention needs to be kept?

We can consider similar educational trends in the subject of philosophy, which is taught as an obligatory subject in almost all Russian universities. This means that it is not an elective subject for students. Despite attempts to unify philosophy and place it in a strict framework, as a university discipline, it retains its most important and organic properties, such as: self-criticism, the pursuit of truth, as well as the rejection of

¹ Toffler, A., *The Third Wave*. P. 166

² Ibid.

³ Fromm, E. *Escape from Freedom*. Pp. 24-25

⁴ Fromm, E. *On Disobedience and Other Essays*. 243

dogmatism, standardization and frozen forms. It not only gives the student a certain set of knowledge, but also aims to encourage reflection, makes it possible to directly ask basic existential questions, the answers to which contribute to the formation of a more mature and holistic worldview, develops critical thinking, logic, argumentation, and the ability to discuss. One of the consequences of philosophy's focus on itself and the motivation for a person to do this, is to raise questions about values – both individual and social.

Economic crises, political changes and other transformations in society provoke social conflicts, fluctuations and instability, including in the moral sphere. In my opinion, the term 'existential vacuum', proposed by the Austrian psychiatrist and psychologist Viktor Frankl, very accurately characterizes the state of a person in the late 20th – early 21st century '... I turn to the detrimental influence of that feeling of which so many patients complain today, namely, the feeling of the total and ultimate meaninglessness of their lives.

They lack the awareness of a meaning worth living for. They are haunted by the experience of their inner emptiness, a void within themselves; they are caught in that situation which I have called the 'existential vacuum.'⁵

This is how Frankl denotes the state of a person who has become lost, has lost the vector of movement, has been left without reliance on values and any strong social attitudes and models. He sees the reason for the emergence of an 'existential vacuum' as the decline of universal values, removal from the traditions of their ancestors and lack of understanding of what serves as a guide in their own lives. All this leads to a misunderstanding by a person of their goals, meanings and desires, with a formally large freedom of choice.⁶ The spiritual component of the life of an individual recedes into the background, the usual values meaning lose their original signification, and there is a bias towards the satisfaction of material needs. What we call the desire for possession and consumption becomes a kind of response to this inner emptiness that needs to be filled.

Is any service capable of such filling? Should it strive for something like this, or is it enough that the service performs its function, responding to this or another human need? And again, the question arises – should education be part of the service sector, or does it involve something more?

Of course, education in itself will not 'cure' a person from the existential vacuum, crisis and other manifestations of existence in our periodically stormy life. And itself it is not a ticket to a happy and joyful life. But education is designed to contribute to the formation of a thinking human personality, which is able to set goals for itself in life and realize them, reflect, avoid possible manipulation of consciousness, realize one's own responsibility for free actions, and so on.

If the goal is to achieve material and moral comfort in the absence of any desire to develop and master new social, spiritual and cultural spaces, then this does not save from the appearance of an existential vacuum, which in a lighter form manifests itself in boredom and, as a result, in a new thirst for consumption, in a more severe version, it can degenerate into a depressive state of a person. A reflective person who does not try to escape from oneself into entertainment or fill time with routine and some strained deeds will feel this existential vacuum even having achieved a state of material well-being. This feeling of lack of something more will lead to the understanding that material well-being does not bring feelings of happiness and complete satisfaction with life, despite the constant retransmission of this talking point in the media. In addition, it will give an impulse to a closer examination of their own personal values and aspirations. In such cases, a person goes beyond the usual, begins to search for something more, sometimes they are even able to refuse the accumulated material wealth, realizing that it did not bring them the expected happiness, which will cause an undoubted misunderstanding of others. An example is the phenomenon of downshifting.

The spiritual component of life is a necessary condition for the development of society, the continuation of its normal functioning, and it requires a careful attitude towards itself. For its preservation and development, our society (to the world community as a whole) should pay attention to the ideas of involving a person both in social life and in the processes of reflection and self-knowledge, responsibility, and focus on dialogue. This must be understood both at the level of an individual and at the level of the state, and, in this way, there will be a gradual overcoming of the features of an alienated person and an alienated society. Of course, an important problem that causes crises and conflicts is the mismatch of values and perceptions

⁵ Frankl, V.E. *Man's Search for Meaning*. 110-111

⁶ Frankl, V. E. *Suffering from the meaninglessness of life. An actual psychotherapy*. 7.

of values by governments of different countries, different societies. Probably, the idea of promoting Personalism itself sounds like a utopia. But not a utopia - the embodiment of the ideas and values of personalists, at least by individual individuals, for example, teachers, educators, statespeople, and so on. The French personalist Emmanuel Mounier repeats Nietzsche's idea that a person in the process of being must overcome oneself and their weaknesses, because it is precisely such constant overcoming that is an important part of the process of becoming, involving, active life and development of a person, revealing their talents and abilities, gaining own integrity⁷.

In the middle of the 20th century, personalists emphasized that humanity is experiencing a crisis of both moral values and a crisis of the Person as a whole. And this is extremely relevant now, in our days. And the meaning of the personalistic teaching is to help a person not only preserve oneself, their integrity, but also change oneself for the better, resist falling, decay and absurdity. Emmanuel Mounier supported the idea of support in a society based on free and involved individuals, but he also spoke of the need for discipline in society, which, however, becomes useless in the absence of spirituality.

Spirituality is a condition for the development of society, which has practically lost its significance today. This word seems to have become synonymous with backwardness and can only be adequately perceived in the context of Eastern mystical practices. But if we take into account that a person is not only a body, but also a spirit and soul, then spirituality becomes not just a word. And for its preservation and development, involvement, independence, responsibility, dialogue should be cultivated – qualities worthy of a real responsible person. By and large, this is all that education should be aimed at, in addition to the supply of information and the intellectual development of a person.

And here the special role of philosophy is manifested, which allows a person to link together their own views, beliefs, values, helps to reflect and critically comprehend reality and their own self, to understand the connection between freedom and responsibility, and develops inquisitiveness. The formation of a holistic worldview leads to harmonious development and the formation of a conscious, mature and responsible personality, as well as respect for other people. In fulfilling its critical function, philosophy will serve as a kind of filter for beliefs and principles.

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⁷ Mounier E. *What is personalism?* /# Translation from French. I. S. Vdovina