

Unique and universal: the *Bildung* process of individuality by Sergius Hessen

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Abstract

Jedinečný a obecný: Bildung proces individuality v pojetí Sergeje Hessena. – Sergej Hessen byl filosofem výchovy ruského původu, který po Říjnové revoluci emigroval z bolševického Ruska a následně žil v Německu, Československu a konečně v Polsku. Jeho teorie výchovy (*Bildung*) byla v Polsku znovuobjevena v 90. letech 20. století. Vyznačuje ji touha po smíření extrémů individuality a komunity, osoby a společnosti, osobního formování a školské výuky.

Podle Hessenova pojetí ideje *Bildung* je proces vznikání jedinečné osobnosti řízen logikou specifického pedagogického charakteru. Tento charakter vytváří vazbu mezi individuem a univerzálním světem kultury. Obě tyto komponenty nestojí proti sobě, ale komplementárně ustavují osobní cestu růstu vzdělání. Tato cesta je současně typická i výjimečná, není ani nahodilá, ani nutná. Vytváří specifickou pedagogickou koincidence, kterou se snaží náš text vysvětlit.

Keywords: Hessen, *Bildung*, personality, pedagogical coincidence

Klíčová slova: Hessen, *Bildung*, osobnost, pedagogická nahodilost

Introduction

In Polish pedagogy, Sergei Hessen (1887–1950) and his work were recalled in mid-90's of the past century. Political and ideological differences of that “cosmopolitan involuntarily” (Liegle 1989: 87) born in Tsarist Russia led to nearly half a century of oblivion. After escaping from Soviet Russia in 1922, Hessen found refuge first in Germany, then in Czechoslovakia. In 1936 he settled in Poland.

The monography *Osnovy pedagogiki: Wwiedienije w prikladnuju filosofiju*, written in Russian and first published in Berlin in 1923, is regarded as the main work by Hessen. It was translated into several languages: Bulgarian, Polish (published twice before the Second World War, in 1931 and 1935), Serbian, Italian, and Czech. The Czech translation, published in 1936, was considered by Hessen as the best one. What is interesting, Jan Patočka was among his Czech friends.

In the aforementioned re-discovery of Hessen pedagogical ideas in Poland, there are at least three trends. The first one is to remind the author who was completely marginalized during the period of socialism. Five volumes of Hessen's *Selected Works* (1997) and the memories of people who knew him personally, i.e., colleagues and students, (Rotkiewicz 1997) were released. Simultaneously, the analyses of Hessen philosophy of education appeared – in relation to the whole system (Sztobryn 1994, Folkierska 2005) as well as to selected aspects. (Nowacki 1997: 22–47, Ruciński 1997: 62–89) The analyses should be seen

as the second trend of Hessen re-discovery. The third one, in my opinion, consists of the interpretations of Hessen theories in the context of contemporary pedagogy problems as a theory (Pluta 1992, Męczkowska 2006, Witkowski 2013) and practice (Rojek 2013). Some interpretations trigger discussions or even disputes. (Stepkowski 2010: 183–199) This is the proof that Hessen theories are timeless and still vivid in modern scientific discourse, at least in Poland.

I would like to draw the attention of the readers to a concept which is still important, but rarely explored, i.e., the development of individual personality. Although, a few years ago the controversy about the emancipation of entity education ensued, (Folkierska 2008: 141–152) I will focus on something else: how can a person achieve the fullness of humanity through a sporadic and unintentional influence of pedagogical actions? In my opinion, this question fully expresses the nature of pedagogical coincidence which is the main subject of this conference.

I try to answer the previous question in three sections. Firstly, I explain the possible understanding of pedagogical contingency. Secondly, I explore the Hessen philosophical model which concerns the development of individuality through participation in general and widespread phenomena. Thirdly, I compare the model with a school education, which, according to Hessen, leads to a practical introduction to the personal development.

Pedagogical contingency

The problem of contingency is complex and in the pedagogical context it is rarely undertaken. Perhaps due to the fact that considering contingency researchers are focused on such questions as ‘what is it?’, ‘could it be different?’, or ‘if it did not exist, what replacement would it have?’. Such speculations seem to be pointless and far from the reality. But, maybe those are not.

In order to explain the meaning of “contingency”, we should refer to the Latin etymology of the term. The noun *contingentia* means opportunity, possibility, and pure accident. It is derived from the verb *tingere* with the prefix *con*. The second one does not have its own meaning and often indicates *coexistence* of two states (e.g. *con-vivere* – to live together; *con-venire* – to arrive together or to meet each other; *con-sentire* – agree, harmonize). The verb *tingere* means “to immerse in something”; “to fill”; “to dye” or “to color”. To sum it up in a bit poetic way, *contingentia* is like a state of interpenetration of two or more factors, while one of them defines the color of combination. Besides, Latin language has another verb *contingere*, which could be translated as “to move”; “to touch” as a transitive verb and “accrue”, “occur”, “succeed”, “go” as an intransitive. Its past participle *contactus* is a separate noun meaning “a touch”. I believe it is not wrong if I translate it literally as “a contact”.

I hope that this linguistic analysis familiarized the unfamiliar term “contingency”. It is worth mentioning that Enlightenment philosopher Gottfried Leibniz introduced this concept to the vocabulary of modern philosophy. He is known for *Essais de théodicée sur la bonté de dieu, la liberté de l’homme et l’origine du mal*, first published in 1710, with the central question of the theodicy – the nature of evil: “Why is there something rather than nothing?” (Leibniz 1969) Transferring this question on the ground of pedagogics, we might ask: “Why

is education rather than there does not exist?”, or: “Whether and why education is necessary?” Referring to the “poetic” sense of contingency, the same could be expressed in the question: “What is the source of a specific color of education and the person who has experienced it?”

Undoubtedly, these questions are not clear enough. Another German thinker as well as pedagogue Johann F. Herbart explained the problem in an easier way. During the inaugural lecture of the academic year 1802/1803 at the University of Göttingen, he conducted the following linguistic and at the same time pedagogical experiment: “Let each of you look back on your own youth and remember how he (or she – D. S.) was raised and what he (or she – D. S.) noticed while the other were raised. Only a few of you will avoid thinking about teachers and tutors with love or disdain... In particular, mistakes which caused suffer or being more or less educated, or even distorted, remain in us steadily... Therefore, we should ask about the impact [of education – D. S.] on your life: was it the spirit of time or if your education did help to overcome the spirit, the barriers connected to it, and finally, would you perceive yourselves as worse than other in case of no education?” (Herbart 1887: 282)

With these words, the young professor encouraged his students to think of what people would they be without education or if their education had a different form. Would they be the same people or someone else? Moreover, what was necessary during their education, what was non-necessary, i.e., accidental, and what had an impact on these accidents?

Not only does the quote from Herbart explain the problem, but also it shows its significance. It is interesting that such a complex matter is the subject of a first lecture for students who are not only beginning to study, but also consider taking on the teacher profession. Moreover, Herbart encourages them to explore their personal experiences in order to understand the importance of education in the individual way of life better. Therefore, at least two conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, Herbart wanted young students to understand their self-determination, that is, who they are becoming through upbringing, learning, and teaching.

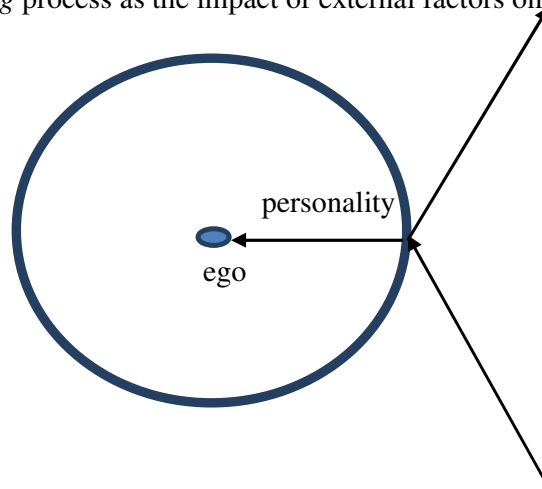
Secondly, he wanted them to draw appropriate conclusions in relation to the pupils, which would depend on their will in the future. In this context Herbart’s call addressed to the future pedagogues should be quoted: “Not too much education!” It should be understood as a requirement: pupils have to be given the freedom which teaches them how to manage themselves and their development sometimes in a better way than professional teachers would do. This freedom is by no means unimportant. Quite the opposite: it is more important than the intentional pedagogical actions. The freedom is a foundation for what pupils will become.

Shaping the individual personality through the *Bildung* process

On this background, I will try to reconstruct Hessen’s model of shaping an individual’s personality, i.e., individuality. The problem how the individual personality (individuality) is shaped can be considered as a common subject of all Hessen’s works – starting from the early ones, i.e., philosophically oriented, to the later works those were focused on analyses and comparisons between the changes in pedagogical systems in different European countries as well as in the world. In classical pedagogical terminology, this problem is expressed by German term *Bildung*. Not only was Hessen familiar with this term, but also with a long German philosophical and pedagogical tradition (he studied and received his

doctorate in Germany). He translated the term *Bildung* in Polish “wykształcenie” that equals to “result of education” or “to be educated”. Hessen also used the following diagram referred to physical deliberations (Hessen 1997: 108):

Diagram 1: *Bildung* process as the impact of external factors on *ego*



Both vectors outside the circle are the forces affecting concentrically and centrifugally the subject. The central point can be described as the philosophical self/ego. The purpose of this ego is to attract and concentrate the forces, that is, the line indicating to the center. The process of concentrating is somehow synonymous with shaping the personality. Its scope (circumference of the circle) is the same as the force of ego’s response to the external impulses. As shown in the diagram above, some of these impulses are attracted and incorporated, and some are rejected. What is the criterion for acceptance and rejection? Does the subject act here randomly or is it guided by a principle? If it follows the rules, then what kind of rules is it?

The personality becoming, according to Hessen, involves the participation in super-individual tasks-purposes. This participation is always a specific activity of the subject. Thus, Hessen uses the term “task-fact”. Education is a complex process of shaping oneself by taking part in what is universal or general. So, being a person means to give up oneself and to sink in what is common and universal. (Hessen 1997: 71) This understanding is totally in contrast to what it might seem at first glance from the above presented diagram.

From the previous considerations it follows that the creation of individual personality (individuality) involves two extremely contrasting or even contradictory “elements”: individuality and universality. The possibility and what is more, the need to reconcile these two components of *Bildung* process is expressed in strictly philosophical doctoral dissertation *Individuelle Kausalität*. (Hessen 1909) Apart from the context in which it had been written, i.e., the controversy about the possibility of formulating empirical judgments a priori (that is, with no experience, what seemed impossible), the young philosopher Hessen explained that there had to be correlation between the individual and the universal. In contemporary philosophical language it can be expressed as the relationship between the part and the whole. This relationship is to interpret as some kind of contact by which a person acquires its unique identity. This is just an event that gives a specific color to a human person.

Of course, the “youthful” study (Hessen was only 21 years old when he defended his doctorate in Heidelberg with Heinrich Rickert) cannot be treated as a synthesis of everything Hessen wrote. However, it contains a kind of intuition, which is helpful to understand not only his thought but also to later pedagogical analyses.

Hessen is primarily interested in transcendental generality existing in mind only, because it legitimizes cognitive forms in the phenomenal world, i.e. the reality. This world can be described using both empirical sciences and the humanities. In this context, Hessen proposes the non-contradictory principle related to the first and the second image of the reality. According to him, the personal causality is understood as total and final, not as “some” or next to another. With this causality, every single being is involved in a certain overriding sphere (Latin: *in-dividuum*). However, it is not typical participation as a part of something, but rather participation in the transcendental necessity. From the perspective of mind in the phenomenal world, the necessity excludes randomness which stems from ignorance of the conditions and the imperfection of human actions.

After these abstract statements, we should move to pedagogics. I think this transition helps to understand the foregoing. According to Hessen, pedagogics understood as science develops cause-and-effect relationships with no randomness, while education still goes on its own. That is why we have to deal with the conflict between the final causality of teaching and contingency, which results from the imperfect implementation of pedagogical actions. The latest leads to dialectic, known since Kant, between freedom and coercion in education. This dialectic gives a specific color to the pedagogical thinking (one of the meanings of contingency), which is not able to avoid imperfections.

***Bildung* process as duality of the individual and universal**

As I reconstructed the meaning of the pedagogical contingency, in the last stage I would like to point out its presence in the later Hessen’s work. The set of dissertation *Structure and Content of Contemporary School* on education systems is my point of reference. In this work Hessen developed a philosophical theory of teaching with the mentioned principle of duality. (Witkowski 2013: 447–495)

At first glance, the previous analysis seems to be far from everyday practice, especially the educational one. However, only a cursory reading of monograph *Struktura i treść szkoły współczesnej* (English: *Structure and Content of Contemporary School*) (Hessen 1997) leads to the conclusions that it is not so. The monography had been written just before World War II, but it was published after 1945.

Hessen presents the outline of general didactics covering the whole of education, i.e., from kindergarten to university. A careful analysis of each of the stages of education and various forms of educational institutions, which fulfil the requirements of full and finished education, is based on the idea of a uniform school. This concept does not mean the same school or the same model of education for everyone, but quite the contrary – education which fulfils the individual needs. This education (German: *Bildung*) is ordered according to the method of structure. It consists of three elements:

- (1) the principle of the whole, called the principle of a specific whole,
- (2) the principle of hierarchy, and
- (3) the principle of autonomy. (Hessen 1997: 34)

The three principles reflect like a mirror the duality of the individual and the general in becoming an independent personality. In accordance with the deliberations presented in the previous section, the individual should be understood as “the becoming of the subject”, which is achieved by the *ego* accepting and identifying itself with the universal (for Hessen these were mainly the cultural values). Of course, it does not mean the annihilation of the *ego*, but such integration that will result in perfecting the *ego*. As it is known, the Latin word *educere* means elevating to a higher level of perfection by moving from being uneducated to education; this meaning is also conveyed by the German term *Bildung*, which contains the word *Bild* (“picture”, “image”).

Accordingly, educating means shaping one’s image or better still one’s form. In Hessen’s opinion, educating/shaping one-self is being achieved when the subject (*ego*) fulfills the tasks set for him or her. However, these cannot be just any educational tasks, those of the kind sometimes given to the students to take up their time. Along with John Dewey’s theory it can be said that the necessary characteristic of the tasks used in the *Bildung* process is a triple connection with experience: firstly, the source of school teaching stems from life experience; secondly, schools create a specific experience based on scientific knowledge; thirdly, school learning opens the opportunity for learners to create their own experiences, resulting from the synthesis of the two previous kinds of experience. (Dewey 1997: 25–31) Now, however, let us come back to Hessen’s concept of education as the forming or shaping the uniqueness of the personality of an individual person in order to discuss briefly the three above mentioned components of the method of structure.

The principle of the whole (totality) has two aspects: “the commonality” and “the individuality”. They must be properly implemented in various institutional forms of education. The principle of the whole is the opposite of total approach, i.e., the uniformity and the strict implementation of educational goals defined by one ideology. The principle is focused on the whole structure and not the content. Hence, the educational system is not able to teach everything needed in life. However, it is obliged to prepare for it by ticking the horizon of pupil’s life and activity.

According to the principle of hierarchy, the higher education shines through into the lower level and vice versa – the lower into the higher. The higher level is both the overcoming and maintain of the lower one in the sense of *Aufhebung* from Hegelian dialectic.

The principle of autonomy is the third element that is, a growing independence of the subject in what he or she does. Hessen distinguishes three levels of activities which constitute the formal aspect of education: fun, heteronomous work (teaching-learning), and a creative work. Moving one to the next, a pupil gets not only other competencies but also becomes more independent and responsible for his or her selves. Thus, he or she shapes his or her unique personality.

Despite the contemporary critical voices concerning the public and uniform school education, it does not have to lead to the uniformity of students, but quite the reverse – the

same educational content and the same tasks have the potential to differentiate the personality of the students. The necessary condition to discover and activate this potential is the teacher who possesses adequate skills. First of all, they should be able to balance the social and individual tasks of educational institutions. Searching for this balance between guaranteeing individual development and fulfilling the social expectations is by no means a menial task in the professional pedagogues' work, but actually the very essence of the *Bildung* process and the main ability they should master. Due to the fact that it is in the school where the student's unique personality is exposed to the universal educational content and thus it is formed. It is also the main sense of the frequent contemporary demand that education should be adapted to individual needs.

Opposite to what is commonly believed even by pedagogues, this individualization does not consist in creating special programs for each and every student (which would be impossible and actually opposes the idea of public education). But in directing the *Bildung* process of each learner in such way in which they could choose themselves the "colour" (also a contingency sense!) through the meeting (one of the above mentioned senses of contingency) with the educational contents and which they would consider their own. According to this point of view, an educated person is someone who has allowed education to form him and the education has left its mark on him – in a scientific way of thinking, noble character and even in his way of speech.

This mark does not mean he is a slave and needs to free himself as soon as possible (emancipation), but sometimes a coincidence (another sense of contingency!) allows the subject to become itself. Nowadays when the education is treated as a preparatory step for a career and not as the creation of oneself, this meaning of the *Bildung* process is becoming less and less understandable and irrelevant to the life of today.

Conclusion

It is difficult to summarize in a few sentences the concept of Sergei Hessen. My reconstruction aimed to show some mechanism in its structure. Although education relates to a particular individual and confronts him or her with more or less random content, it is a way to the development of personality, which is non-accidental. Returning to the Herbart's lecture, it can be concluded that we are those who become in the process of *Bildung* – not as a product (the object), but as a subject. Although it is pure conjecture, other content would lead to the same thing – we would be the same people who we are, but with other thoughts and ideas.

In this context arises a justified doubt whether there is any causality in pedagogy that would provide unchangeable rules to the pedagogical way of thinking and acting. This is the final question that in my opinion is implied by the phenomenon of contingency presented in this article. In compliance with the transcendental empiricism approach devised by Hessen in his early philosophical treatise *Individuelle Kausalität*, the *Bildung* process is characterized by a specific causality. Its specifics by no means stem from the nature of the laws and rules that regulate it, but from the duality of the order which has to be respected by this causality.

Pedagogy, as a science, has the task of formulating the laws which in an obligatory and a definite way explain the phenomenon of upbringing. However, it does not mean that the upbringing is conducted according to these laws. Thus, in the pedagogical causality, we face

a dissonance between the formal and logical (pedagogy) side and the actual state (upbringing). Nevertheless, this dissonance is only apparent because, just as personality is, a direct (i.e. not mediated by anything) unity of the unique and the universal, so the Bildung process is characterized by necessity and randomness at the same time.

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