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# What is an education?

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## What is an education?

Aslanbek Naziev<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

*What is an education? Not so long ago in the Soviet Union and Russia was recognized the following answer to this question: "Education is the socially organized and regulated process of continuous transference of socially significant experience from previous to following generations. The main way to receive an education is to take a course of training in the system of educational institutions". But about twenty years ago, suddenly it became clear that such interpretation of education has significant defects.*

*A similar answer to the proposed question was given here by panelists on ResearchGate. Most of them were in agreement that "Education is the transmission of civilization". But when this writer asked if they believe that the transmission of civilization with the help of war can be considered as a kind of education, no one answered, and the debate was cut short.*

*These remarks show that the obvious answers to the question are not as good as they seem. Meanwhile, in the early nineteenth century, it was suggested the much more acceptable definition of education. This was done by Hegel. In our paper, we recall this definition, demonstrate its advantages over the others, and explain its relationship with the other key parties of the human community, namely, with the culture, the human freedom, and the morality.*

### 1. GENERAL REMARKS ON EDUCATION

We begin with the remark that there exist rather different conceptions of education, although this is not seen from the answers published here. I will examine two of these conceptions.

Not so long ago in the USSR and Russia, we have approximately the following definition of education: "Education is the socially organized and regulated process of continuous transference of socially significant experience from the previous generations to the followings. The main way to receive an education is to take a course of training in the system of educational institutions."

According to this definition, education was the process of transmitting and receiving. And what we were seeing in the most of our classrooms were in excellent accordance with this formulation. "Who is not ready to the lesson? Who did not prepare their homework?", — asked a teacher. Visible on the faces of the students is a mixture of astonishment and sympathy to the stupid teacher. "What is he saying? What homework? We came here to receive a transfer. Have you a transfer? If "Yes" — give it to us! If "No" — leave us alone!"

It is very doubtful that we would like to continue this sad story. So, we must find another definition of education. Fortunately, there exists one, and I remember it soon. But at first, let us ask, what was the goal of the so defined "education"? Oh, that was a quite interesting goal, imagine, **the all-rounded development of personality!** How can this goal be derived from the cited definition of education? In no way! But so we are all arranged in Russia! As Piotr Chaadaev wrote in his *First philosophical letter*, "...every new idea we have is not a development of the previous one, does not follow from it, but flies to our head God knows where from!"

In the literature were already mentioned defects of the all-rounded development as a goal of general education [1]: it is non-historic, non-real (it is not real to develop all sides of personality particularly because not all of them are known) and non-verifiable (it is impossible to verify whether all sides of personality were developed or not). But we can add to this list of defects one more defect which, in our opinion, is more significant than all mentioned taken together [2]:

**all-rounded development of personality is dangerous, both to the individual and to the community.**

In order to understand this, remember: several years ago almost every week we learned about new discoveries on the human gene map. We learned then that there exist the gen of alcoholism, the gen of cruelty, the gen of suicide... And this means that there exist peoples having the genetic predisposi-

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tion to alcoholism, to cruelty, to suicide ... Can we, after learning all of that, proclaim as before all-rounded development of personality the main goal of general education? No! Quite the reverse, we must hardly think which sides of individuality are worth to develop and which are not. So, we must find another definition of education and another goal for it.

## 2. HEGEL'S CONCEPTION OF EDUCATION

Now we turn to another conception of education, namely, to the Hegel's one. Hegel examines the notion of education in his work "Philosophical Propaedeutic". It is quite interesting that this examination he included in the part of his work named "Duties of the Individual to Himself". Just so! Not a transfer to be received but a duty, and not merely a duty but the duty of the individual to himself. Let us cite.

"Man, as an individual, stands in relation to himself. He has two aspects: his individuality and his universal essence. His Duty to Himself consists partly in his duty to care for his physical preservation, partly in his duty to educate himself, to elevate his being as an individual into conformity with his universal nature."

Compare this goal,

to elevate human's being as an individual into conformity with his universal nature,

with another goal,

all-rounded development of personality,

(which, as was said, was considered as the main goal of general education in the USSR and Russia). One could think that these two goals are identical. But those who are acquainted with set theory easily see the difference: all-roundedness corresponds to the operation of the union while universal human nature (all-humanness) — to that of the intersection. And Hegel is talking about the intersection, not about the union. General education must care about qualities common to all people. Isn't it clear? We must live in the community, so the main our care must be about what is common to all members of the community.

Thus, we see that Hegel was much more penetrating and more far-seeing than we are. Abilities, he said, one must elevate rather than develop, and elevate not in the direction of our please but in the direction of all-human nature.

Now, the question arises naturally: what is this all-human nature? There exist different answers to this question ("Several have defined man as "an animal which laughs" (Bergson 2009)) but most of the thinkers believe that this is reasonableness (the presence of reason, of mind, of intellect, ability to think, rationality). According to this point of view (and to Hegel)

*education is the elevation to the reasonableness,*

or, as Hegel himself wrote,

making man's rational side becomes his guiding principle.

We cite (Hegel, *ibid*):

"Man is, on the one hand, a natural being. ... Secondly, he is ... rational being ... The animal stands in no need of education, for it is by nature what it ought to be. ... But man has the task of bringing into harmony his two sides, of making his individuality conform to his rational side or of making the latter become his guiding principle."

Because this is written while considering the notion of education, it shows that the notion of education is in close connection with the two other sides of human community: that of culture and that of human's freedom.

Now we turn to the consideration of these two phenomena (in their connection with that of education, naturally).

## 3. SCHWEITZER'S CONCEPTION OF CULTURE

The first and most deep investigation of the notion of culture was made by Albert Schweitzer in his remarkable work "*Kulturphilosophie*" [4].



In the following citations, one must take into account that Schweitzer himself in his 1923 German edition speaks about 'Kultur' while his English translator uses words "civilization" and "progress".

Now, according to Schweitzer:

"Civilization (read: culture) is ... twofold in its nature: it realizes itself in the supremacy of reason, first, over the forces of nature, and, secondly, over the dispositions of men."

Which of these two addendums of civilization (culture) is more significant? The latter, though it is the least open to observation. Why? Because the supremacy of reason over the forces of nature can lead mankind to the situation in which men and whole nations will have abilities to destroy each other, and then only supremacy of reason over dispositions of men will give to mankind a chance to prevent the catastrophe.

This latter and most significant addendum of culture is natural to call spiritual culture (while the former — material culture). So, according to Schweitzer,

*spiritual culture is the supremacy of the reason over the disposition of men.*

Noting that

the supremacy of the reason over the disposition of men

is identical with Hegel's

making man's rational side becomes his guiding principle

(what Hegel called education) we can say:

*education is the formation of the spiritual culture of personality, that is, the formation of the supremacy of reason over the disposition of men.*

#### 4. SOCRATES' CONCEPTION OF HUMAN'S FREEDOM

Now consider the role of education in the solution of one more problem of importance, the problem of human's freedom.

Many people do not see here any problem. They merely think that freedom consists in the absence of limitations. But already Socrates calls the man fulfilling all his desires not free but slave — slave of his wishes. Actually, the absence of limitations is by no means freedom but its ugly opposite. Genuine freedom is inconceivable without limitations. Every task requires applying of concentrated efforts in the necessary direction and, therefore, cutting off all that prevents to applying of these efforts. About this excellently says Austrian writer Ilse Aichinger in his remarkable story "Bound man" [5] (in the essence, repeating in art form cited earlier words of Hegel about Vocation):

"... flying is possible only for those who keep himself in a check. ... bonds rescue from the fatal advantage of free limbs which causes men to be worsted."

Serious reflections on freedom frequently are substituted by emotions. "Why God did not give us the freedom to fly as birds?" But is it the real limitation of human's freedom? No! The man is not the bird, he needs human's freedom, not that of the bird.

It follows one must distinguish the freedom of the bird, the freedom of cattle, the freedom of man. So, what does it mean to be the *free man*?

To find the answer to this question let us first think about the bird. It is clear that bird's freedom consists in the living without limitations according to bird's nature. Analogously, cattle's freedom consists in living without limitations accordingly cattle's nature (manifestations of this cattle's freedom are every day demonstrated on the TV screen). And precisely in that manner human's freedom consists in living without limitations according to human's nature. This nature, as we already seen, consists in spiritual culture, that is, in the supremacy of the reason over the disposition of men. So,

*human's freedom consists in the ability to be guided, without limitations, by the reason in his beliefs and intentions.*



Remembering what is said earlier about education, we see that main goal of education may also be expressed as follows:

*to educate means to teach a human being to be the free **man**.*

Take into account: human beings **must learn** to human's freedom and they can learn it in only one way — by developing in themselves the ability to subordinate their beliefs and intentions to the voice of reason.

## 5. MORAL EDUCATION AND MATHEMATICS TEACHING

The working definition of morality was discovered — can you imagine? — in the second half of 20 century only. This was done by Russian mathematician (sic!) A. D. Aleksandrov [6]:

*“Morality, said Aleksandrov, may be defined in short as an organic compound of the three components: humanity, responsibility, and devotion to the truth”.*

Perhaps, one can argue whether all is taken into account in this definition, but, probably, no one would deny that these qualities are essential components of morality. Let's make sure, that the learning of mathematics decisively contributes to the formation and development of each of these three qualities.

With the devotion to the truth, everything is pretty obvious. To be devoted to the truth, it is necessary first of all, to know the truth. But what means 'to know'? — 'To know' means 'to be convinced with the help of proof' (Aristotle).

So, the devotion to the truth involves the need for the proof that just is formed during mathematics teaching. Thus, the last of the components of morality is directly connected with the need of proofs forming while teaching mathematics.

Responsibility, in short, is performing of commitments. Clearly, it is inconceivable without the habit of man to constantly make sure that his words and deeds comply with these obligations, that is, explicitly or implicitly, to prove to himself that this correspondence holds. As we see, the second component of morality also is in direct relationship with the teaching of mathematics.

Finally, — humanity. Alexandrov himself wrote:

*“The moral teachings, especially Christianity, have put forward as a general principle the love and service to others. However, in many cases, this is not enough, because you need to understand what people need, what need this person. Loving mother could harm their children, thinking that make better for them (the most, we can say, a common situation). Similarly, people with the best intentions can produce health tips without having to understand or, say, feed the hungry, bring it to death....*

*People always judge what is happening, about other people, their actions, and often make their judgments, their sentences. But any such judgment could be justice, morality, only if it receives sufficient objective justification.”*

Thus, the third, and the last, component of morality also is directly related to the traits of the personality formed and developed in the process of mathematics teaching. So, all three components of morality are directly connected with the need of proofs which is formed and developed in the process of mathematics teaching.

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