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Idealism in Education. Tradition and the Present. Selected Approaches and Implications

Introduction

The goal of the paper is to present the selected opportunities of applying the project of philosophical idealism to shape, understand and interpret education as such. Since the ancient times to the present, the identity of education – as seen in philosophy, social sciences or humanities – often changed rapidly. The identity of idealism has evolved from the project of holistic and systemic approach to reality to partial project which treat the idea as an existing being of sort but rooted (in time and space) not outside the subject but within it.

Idealism in ancient times

According to G. Reale (2005: 66), one can identify five stages of evolution of the term *eidōs* in Greek thought: first, in the pre-Socratic thinking, it is used in its common meaning as the form of that which is. Second, for Plato, it is a technical term used as a synonym to “idea” (Platon, 2010). Third, Aristotle uses the word *eidōs* to name the form of the immanent thing understood as a being and, at the same time, primary substance (Aristoteles, 2010). Then, with the renaissance of Platonism, the approaches of Plato and Aristotle become reconciled. Platonic ideas are considered the thoughts of God and form is understood as the reflection of these ideas in the matter. Finally, Plotinus keeps this distinction: ideas exist in the eternally existing Mind, whereas forms are in the soul.

Later, ancient idealism was reflected in the Christian concept which assimilated this idealistic philosophy to a large extent for the purposes of its own philosophical system; the system where understanding human soul as an immortal form of the everlasting Idea of God was dominating. The main assumption of idealism understood in such a way was the holistic and systemic project of the reality as such, in its different dimensions: ontic, epistemological, axiological, anthropological. This entirety was inseparable and logically interconnected. This state of things was also reflected in the existing education system which tried, more or less, to reflect this view of the reality. The project was integrated around the axis of either the eternally existing idea, eternally existing mind, the Absolute or God. The real Self of the subject is not

material and biological but, first of all, spiritual. According to the ancient idealists, it is the spiritual element, however understood, that constituted the core, the meaning and the essential content of the reality as such. These external ideas have their own ontic, inner order and are not subject to any changes or modifications. Neither those originating from some other ideas, nor those generated by the mind which studies them. This permanent and unchanging order is reflected in education which also should, in its basic foundations, reflect this permanent order.

Idealism in modern times

New thoughts on idealism, however in a slightly different project, emerged with the new strength in German philosophical thought by Kant (1724–1804), Hegel (1770–1831), Fichte (1762–1814) and Schelling (1775–1854). Following the Platonic idealism, they too assumed that thought precedes being.

Hegel (1999) made an attempt to synthesize the whole hitherto philosophical thinking and created his own original philosophical project. The starting point of his concept is the spirit (idea) which manifests itself in the subject “Self”, first subjective, then objective and, finally, absolute. Hegel built a holistic project and the object of cognition is the spirit as such:

“The knowledge of spirit is something the most concrete and hence the most important and the most difficult. *Know Thyself*, this absolute command in itself nor where (...) it was said, does not mean mere *self-knowledge* of the particular abilities, character, drives and weaknesses of the individual but rather knowledge of the true in man as well as of the true in for itself – the essence of itself as spirit” (Hegel, 1990: 399).

For Habermas (2000: 26) “Hegel sees the modern age as marked universally by a structure of self-relation that he calls subjectivity (...) When Hegel delineates the physiognomy of the new age (or the modern world), he elucidates «subjectivity» by means of «freedom» and «reflection»”.

Then Habermas (2000: 27) shows the main ideas emerging from Hegel’s understanding of subjectivity. These ideas are: individualism, the right to criticism, autonomy of action and idealistic philosophy itself as autonomous thought structure that grasps the self-conscious idea. As a principle of subjectivity, individualism determines the formations of modern culture, science, art and education (Hegel, 2010). Habermas notices that Kant replaces the substantial notion of reason, typical for the metaphysical tradition, with the reason dissipated into moments, the reason the unity of which from now on is only formal (Kant, 2010).

A new impulse for the idealistic reflections comes from phenomenology. This extremely complex and multi-layered philosophy originated from the refusal to accept the positivistic view of the world both in its ontic and epistemological layer. According to Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) reducing reality to mere biological or social idea, as advocated by the positivists, Marxists or socialists contradicts not only that what is obvious but also the common reason so much praised by the 19th century materialistic-empirical philosophy (Husserl, 1987).

For phenomenology, especially as represented by Husserl, real world is not only the world of matter, biology or genetics but it is, first of all, the world of spirit which can be read using intentional and intuitive cognition. Thus, everything that is given through and for our cognition has its sense which, on the one hand, is the sense of knowing an object and, on the other hand, is established in the person who explores this object. Phenomenology breaks down the traditional cognitive structure dividing the world of epistemology into object and learner. They are not isolated objects of reality but they always operate in a context, in some of their own or someone else's life-world and in the surrounding world of multiple contexts (Husserl, 1982).

Along with the phenomenology, other, hermeneutic thought was maturing, with a triad by Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911): experience – expression – understanding. For Dilthey (2004: 95): “The infinite richness of life unfolds itself in individual existence because of its relations to its milieu, other humans and things. But every particular individual is also a crossing point of contexts which move through and beyond their particular life and possess an independent existence and development of their own through the content, value and purpose which they realize. Thus they are subjects of an ideal kind.”

Implications for education

Resulting from ontic assumptions: the world is both temporal and spatial. It is characterized by existential diversity. The world of spirit infiltrates the world of matter and otherwise. Any reduction of reality, e.g. to its solely material or biological dimension, and the consequences thereof are a mistake. Such an ontic structure of reality should be reflected in the curricula and structure of education, where this diversity should be present.

Resulting from epistemological assumptions: ontic diversification of reality “forces” diversification of the cognitive ways to explore it. Thus, cognition as such becomes, in the first place, spiritual experience of the reality with the dominant role of intuitive search for the truth as such. In this paradigm, the projects of systemic presentation of reality are replaced with partial, fragmented or perspective references. Thanks to discovering the idea of intentionality, that what is being known is always, in some sense, the one who explores. In the dimension of concepts, senses and meanings, the world becomes a derivative of the temporal-spatial contextuality of life of the subject in its diversified dimensions.

Resulting from axiological assumptions: the change of the identity of the idealistic paradigm in philosophy led to the breakdown of the projects of orthodox meanings of values and ethical perspectives in both culture and education. Idealistic formula of the objective world of values is replaced by individualistic, existential, contextual and perspective formulas.

Resulting from anthropological assumptions: humans are seen mainly as a derivative of idea in its diverse forms and shapes. Later, during the modern phase of idealism, man is a subject characterized by wide volitional, intellectual and cultural-social aspect. The subject is actively engaged in creating its cultural reality. The subject becomes the agent of its own actions and primary creator of its own

identity. But in the idealistic formula, the subject is not totally alienated from different surrounding systems both in micro and macro scale. It is part of them, even though in the idealistic approach, the subject is the one who consciously co-creates them and tries to maintain control over them.

One of these systems is education which is understood as the environment where identity of the world as such and, first of all, of human as the creator of his own identity is revealed. As dependent on cultural and social reality in time and space, education becomes a kind of ideal being with certain degree of self-consciousness of its own value and needs. This self-awareness permeates both discovering individual educational needs and the whole legal and administrative system of the educational law.

Summary

Idealism seems to be a constantly present and relevant form of describing reality. It has evolved from the holistic and exhaustive systems of explaining and translating the reality to ideas emerging from the cognitive activity of learning subjects both individually and collectively. The latter approach, emphasized in modern and postmodern times, becomes of great importance for education. In this approach, the role and responsibilities of the subject in education process increase significantly as the subject becomes the first investigator and interpreter of the studied reality. In this context, education is not only a passive recognition of reality but it becomes – according to, for example, idealistically understood phenomenology – the act of co-creating this reality in its semantic and symbolic aspect.

The main purpose of education realized in the idealistic spirit is to encourage students, seen as researchers, to discover the truth. The teaching-learning process should help students to fully realize their individual human potential. As a social institution, school should ensure that students have access to knowledge locked in cultural messages and heritage, so that they can find their own identity and gain skills and competencies to protect and develop this heritage (Gutek, 2003: 31).

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Abstract

The paper present selected approaches to ancient and modern idealistic thought and its ability to influence how we think about education. Idealism has evolved from systemic understanding and interpreting reality to more subjective forms where an idea is rooted within the subject, its consciousness or self-consciousness in the first place. It turns out that idealism understood in such a way can still inspire the way educational activities are viewed. This refers in particular to the following categories: subjectivity, individualism, cognition, understanding, surrounding world, experienced world, mutual infiltration of individuals and systems.

Keywords: idealism, education, change, phenomenology, hermeneutics, subject, individualism, cognition

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