

NOTES ON THE PHILOSOPHY OF HEALTH

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***Abstract:** The teacher, particularly in the humanities and socio-scientific fields, can be characterised as a cultural-educational figure. In modern pedagogy, his principal goal in relation to his pupils is no longer to assist in the accumulation of knowledge, but rather to lead them towards more refined and orderly cognition directed towards an overall understanding of the modern world. Another important task of the modern teacher is cultivation of the synthetic viewpoint and the ability to ask unusual questions and to control responses to unforeseeable situations and problems in life. Another important aspect of the performance of the teaching profession is to help young people seek and find a healthy and sensible lifestyle and inner harmony with the use of philosophical consultation and various alternative methods.*

***Keywords:** school, teaching, health, the philosophy of health, philosophical consultation, value crisis, psychological difficulties*

The search for healthy and responsible teaching

In the teaching profession today we frequently encounter a feeling of rather undervalued personal abilities and indefinable states of anxiety of various kinds. This gives rise to the need to teach and train not merely pupils and students, but also the teachers themselves! The worst thing to do is to surrender to a sense of helplessness and hopelessness – “nothing changes no matter what I do...” We sometimes see a predominating and deep-rooted unhealthy state of mind, a feeling of gloominess, bad moods, and a lack of desire to do anything during the performance of the demanding teaching profession. Situations that are not pathological need not, of course, be overdramatised. There are, however, a great many serious incidents in the teaching profession that expose one to extraordinarily high levels of stress, the result of which is, at the very least, **an unhealthy state of mind.**

The current social position in which ordinary teachers (and university lecturers in particular!) find themselves **does little to give them a sense of their own worth** and importance within society, the principal cause of which is their low pay. Today’s teacher often has the feeling that he has no influence and no control over anything. If the need to have an influence on something that depends largely on the teacher’s own free and

responsible decision is not satisfied, then there can be no stability in his own attitude to his surroundings, to say nothing of its shaping among his pupils or students. The failure to achieve defined goals increases this frustration still further. In such a situation we must ask ourselves why we are in such a (bad) mood, and what are the real causes of the situation.

The **working atmosphere** and the associated **mood of the individual teacher** is extremely important to the successful performance of working tasks of various kinds in education. An understanding of the importance of a good mood and good humour in the workplace can tell us much about motivation and managerial ability, the ability to cope with stress, and other key matters in the organisation of our work. We must first ask ourselves the question as to what is fun about our work, why other things are no fun, and how this situation may be changed.

Fun at work has more in common with our attitude to our work than with the work itself. If we have long-term negative feelings or attitudes, we won't take any pleasure in our work, no matter what this work might be. In contrast, people who actively try to make their work fun will take greater pleasure in it. A good working atmosphere and faith in one's employer and the role of the teaching profession as a whole can also contribute towards a feeling of contentment in our work, make us more creative and far more successful in the performance of our work, and result in us being more well-balanced and generally more satisfied with our lives. Kindly self-assurance, inner harmony and security in life are **important factors to a healthy lifestyle and prerequisites to successful work in education**.

Many problems in the educational system are caused by a shortage of real personalities among teachers. Teaching should be seen as an art based on a deeper understanding of man, which is why the **personality of the teacher** is of such importance.

A true teacher must know how to win the pupil over and win his trust. No teacher can teach something in which he himself does not believe or understand, which is why it is of such importance that there is a harmonious balance in his attitude towards himself, his life values and the "meaning of life". An outline may be given of the enormous amount of advice **on the healthy and harmonious performance of the teaching profession** available in the specialist and popular educational literature. The following **comments and advice** are given at random:

- **the teacher** should, first and foremost, love life, people and the world and have a loving relationship with his surroundings;
- be capable of objective analysis of situations and himself;
- be able to dream of the ideal form of his own work and goals achieved;
- try to take advantage of all possible impulses in the search for answers to topical questions;
- discover, and try to be guided by, his own method of effective action during his work;
- take active and rapid action instead of making constant complaints;
- fight against boredom and stress with humour and an entertaining form of work;
- never make a pretence of tolerance;
- be ready to admit his errors and mistakes at once;

- be prepared to make sensible compromises at all times;
- be guided by the principles of a healthy lifestyle at work;
- express himself clearly and concisely about any problems arising;
- deal with others in accordance with the rules of psychological sophistication, be able to put himself in the position of others, be able to empathise with others;
- continue to educate himself and be everywhere where something interesting or enlightening is happening;
- be unafraid to be himself – to be a personality, an individual;
- think about everything positively and constructively all the time;
- continually look for ideas and advice of various kinds in connection with his work.

The above is merely a selection of general advice and exhortations, for our work as teachers to be more successful and more satisfying of our needs.¹

2. Dynamic balance in the teaching profession

The teacher is, above all, a specialist in dealing with people, for which reason an excellent knowledge of modern man is a prerequisite for the teaching profession. In teaching the humanities and social sciences, in particular, it is essential to realise the fact that today all of us are exposed to “explosions” of considerable magnitude (e.g. population, information, technological, ethnic, social and religious explosions, etc.). In the teaching profession we are feeling an absence of progress in theoretical and applied ethics to an increasing extent.

A certain structural flaw can be seen in the complex management of society as a whole (including its system of education and teaching). This is important in view of the fact that it is rare for the “explosions” mentioned above to have positive results. One unintentional result are **emotional excesses** (i.e. adrenaline experiences and interests) that distort rational thought, from the neurotic confusion of the individual to collective belief in various irrational principles to which we pledge blind allegiance of various kinds.

Authorities on the human mind and others engaged in this area, such as **teachers**, who have to teach correct habits and attitudes, so long as they have not themselves fallen captive to mass culture and the cheap forms of entertainment that are now ubiquitous. In the performance of their profession, teachers today must allow for the fact that our lives are accompanied by greater rush and anxiety and a large number of conflicting pressures. The human organism responds to these stressful and chaotic situations with defence and alarm mechanisms. It is useful to prepare our organism for stressful situations in advance, so that it responds to them less violently (allergic reaction). The teacher’s ability to cope with crisis situations and stressful situations can be trained. Not all stress is, however, unhealthy.

The principal goal of schools is to prepare us for life within society. As we do not, and never will, live in a “greenhouse” we must be prepared to overcome obstacles on

¹ Compare with R. RYBÁŘ, Harmony or Chaos in the Teaching Profession. In E. ŘEHULKA (ed.) *Teachers and Health 4*. Brno: Nakl. Pavel Křepela, 2002, pp. 231–238, ISBN: 80-902653-9-4.

our path through life. The important thing in the life and work of a teacher is, however, the approach he adopts to life's obstacles and difficulties, what he actually does, and how. It is not that things as such are exclusively positive or negative, but rather that our attitude makes them so.

Of course everyone reacts to situations in their own way. The first highlights the size of the obstacles, the second searches for a culprit, the third is angry with himself, the fourth (who may be recommended as a model) refrains from moaning and doesn't blame anyone, but begins to think about the problem and what may sensibly be done. The first thing we might do when **faced with an obstacle** (of which there are far from few in the teaching profession) is to ask the question "what can we do about it?" The most dangerous thing in the world is life itself, since it is full of pitfalls of various kinds, but each of us is willing to face this danger for the reward of life. It is essential to learn to live with danger, and school should prepare the pupil for life's various forms of danger, though it is hardly necessary to seek them out in the form of "adrenaline entertainment".

Conflicts played out **in the school environment** may also be "adrenaline situations". The general hustle and bustle, the excessive demands placed on the profession, and the inability to fulfil given tasks may all contribute to the **level of mental stress** imposed on the teacher. Stress manifests itself in a negative manner principally because we, unlike animals, try to hide our feelings rather than displaying them. Holding back our emotional responses for a long period of time can, however, have negative manifestations through the autonomic nervous system in the form of stomach ulcers, high blood pressure, and so on. In all these cases we are not, of course, talking about mental or psychological illness, but merely a failure to adapt to the conditions of life. **Conflict** does not generally build up within a person of its own accord, but arises from contact with others. In the foreseeable future, unfortunately, it looks like we will be living **in a society** of increasingly rude, inconsiderate, aggressive and lonely individuals. Such an atmosphere will, in all probability, have a considerable effect on the behaviour of the majority of people.

Schools and their teachers will have to prepare their students for this stressful situation, though they will first have to cope with it themselves.

The teaching profession is itself one of the most dangerous occupations on a scale of the frequency of stress and conflict situations. Teachers are also the kind of people who put aside their unfinished work for another day evening after evening, and this itself makes them less happy than people working in other professions who see the immediate results of their work. The educational, scientific and research work of the teacher is endless – it is a "long-distance run". This is one reason why **teachers** are often permanently unsatisfied people. This negative feeling can, however, also be the motor for further activity, the hidden impulse that keeps pushing them forwards. They may also realise that they are something akin to **optimistic pessimists**. For this reason **we need** the power of self-reflection, a daily moment of peace and quiet for contemplation. If today we hear such frequent calls for ecology in nature, then we must also learn to cultivate the **ecology of the human mind** on a similar level.

Meditation can help us to relieve stress and tension. We can let our inner mind express itself by means of the passive observation of the source of our own thoughts,

letting us become more free and less dependent on our own fears. In **therapeutic practice** we can begin from the hypothesis that our body is not ruled by the subconscious, but rather by the conscious. We can endeavour to enter consciously a state of relaxation or other levels of consciousness by contemplation or meditation. If we manage to combine all the positive relaxing and hypnotic elements by means of continual persuasion, we can teach ourselves how to control the seemingly uncontrollable.

Mental strength training may be **another effective method**. This approach should show us problem or stressful situations in their broader philosophical contexts and support our creative fantasy. We should try to make a realistic assessment of every situation, differentiate fact from conjecture, and propose new solutions different to those that have already proven unsuccessful. The final results of our efforts are, of course, always dependent on our determination and the amount of energy we are prepared to expend. The important thing is to uncover the true causes of our frustration or depression.

It is essential to realise the following **to achieve the balanced and harmonious performance of the teaching profession**:

- 1) the initiative must come from us, we must first convince ourselves of the correctness of our approach; we must never let ourselves be forced or ordered to do anything;
- 2) the right time must be chosen for everything we say; the success of everything lies in the ability to communicate, to find an alternative solution to suit the given situation quickly.² [2]
- 3) we must learn to be active listeners to our students, i.e. to know how to listen and respond to their problems and questions; to know how to look at things through their eyes;
- 4) it is important not to hurry the achievement of a particular goal; to divide one's study programme into clear and logical sections;
- 5) to check thoroughly that our version of things has been understood properly; to analyse thoroughly the causes of any breakdown or interference in communication;
- 6) to keep orders to a minimum, it is preferable to ask or request, to seek positive stimuli for mobilising students into action;
- 7) give out praise readily, but be sincere, no superficial flattery, always choose kind words, as the way to those close to us leads through honest recognition that comes straight from the heart; he who knows how to praise will be followed by the whole world, he who does not travels the world alone;
- 8) be able to admit one's errors quickly; make it obvious that we are sorry we have made a mistake, but also mention the fact that no one is perfect;
- 9) don't be economical with humour; try to approach all obstacles happily; laugh more often, as humour is a great healer; avoid being overcritical, because if we are always criticising something or someone, then we will also be frequently criticised;

² R. RYBÁŘ, Seeking a Healthy Balance for Creative and Responsible Teaching. In E. ŘEHULKA (ed.) *Teachers and Health 5*. Brno: Nakl. Pavel Křepela, 2003, pp. 300–311, ISBN: 80-8669-02-5.

- 10) never give up, even if faced with failure; learn how to encourage oneself all the time; don't be put off by temporary failures, but try to be an "optimistic sanguine", though one with a firm hold on certain moral principles.

3. Health and alternative educational processes

The issue of illness and health might be summed up in the words "getting better means becoming better morally". Recovery from illness depends to a large degree on the personality of the ill person, to a lesser extent on the personality of the doctor, and least of all on the drugs used. Illness is not just a collection of coincidences, but has deep roots in the most varied spheres of human existence – in far more delicate spheres than the ordinary material (physical, chemical) world around us.

Everything in the world and in life is interconnected... If a person (patient) becomes aware of the order of nature and the values of moral behaviour, and thereby of life, a great many things suddenly become clear to him and he can stop worrying about the side issues that have previously exhausted his mind, and the fundamental and truly valuable things will be revealed to him. This is where the **connection between morality and health** is shown to us. A superficial, consumer-orientated or immoral way of life may be the trigger to each serious illness. The feeling of joy and happiness associated with an infusion of positive energy coming from the fulfilment of the natural order of life, which is always primarily a state of mind, may, in contrast, prove the best means of defence and immunity to every illness.

Our duty on this planet is to work for a healthier and happier environment and living conditions. We may, therefore, be guided in our actions by at least a few basic recommendations of "**secular ethics**" – principles of general human spirituality:

- 1) people and human values are always more important than material interests and things;
- 2) money and a consumer way of life can never guarantee anyone peace of mind;
- 3) human feelings are not directly connected with any specific religious faith or ideology;
- 4) all our traditions should lead us to love and understanding;
- 5) all hate and coarseness supplant love and kindness;
- 6) the world is a multicoloured flowerbed, which is purposeful and beautiful;
- 7) all people are connected by the principles of secular ethics or the values of humankind and humanity.

The issue of alternative educational processes is also important to us in connection with the above. **The teacher** should on one hand guide his pupils toward self-discipline on the level of physical existence, while acting on them on the mental level by continually undermining all their fixed ideas about the world, including their ideas about his own (the teacher's) authority. **The pupil** should himself realise that affiliation with authority is always a mere illusion, with the diminishment of one's own life being the price to be paid. The teacher should indicate to his pupils that the path

to true interpersonal understanding is not mere knowledge and the perfect use of the language code in general use, but rather the ability to go beyond it and recognise its merely official function. **True cognition and knowledge** is obtained during a “mental jump”, a lateral view of the issue in the act of decoding the information received. The former mere receiver of information suddenly becomes the source of information, rather than a mere assembly in the act of communication.

In an educational process of this kind the teacher should push the pupil away from the sphere of abstraction and conceptual formulation towards the specificity of his own experiences. It is essential to realise that the personal experience of life and the world is complex, indivisible, individual, and incommunicable. Every interpretation or reading on the part of the teacher is an open system that encourages the pupil to find new mental states that break down every closed framework of ideas and cognitive system.

This demands that the pupil perceives everything specifically and reacts spontaneously. It demands that we do not let a non-personal system of ideas and rules, serving the purposes of control by others as an end in itself, be imposed upon us. It means treating every language code merely as a code, and not as a reality. It is important to accept and formulate terms and values merely as reference points and means of communication, in order that we do not fall victim to uncritical fanaticism and that we retain the ability of objective reflection and self-reflection.

The result of an educational process conceived in this way is, first and foremost, having a certain perspective and detachment, a sense of humour. It also means the pupil being able to say something of his own, something entirely personal that he hasn't lifted from somewhere else. The **relationship between teacher and pupil** should, on the methodical level, be about continual situational provocation, during which all the taught formulations accepted from the outside are rejected. The pupil should not feel the need to agree, the need to comply, or he will be unable to discover anything about his individuality or “otherness”.

This **alternative method** is in fact a persistently repeated challenge to take part in the world, to be capable of taking a direct insight into the secrets of the world and the essence of being. It comes from deep personal experience, which is not based on any intellectual message or devotion.

Certain educationalists and their pupils are today permeated by a feeling of powerlessness resulting from the fact that they are incapable of making any true qualitative change in their lives. The principles outlined above for the given educational process can offer the chance of compensation for the feeling of powerlessness and frustration in life resulting from two of the most frequent negative social phenomena of today – aggression and selfishness – which seriously impair our physical and mental health.³

³ Compare with R. RYBÁŘ, *Teachers, the Zenist Educational Method and Psychosocial Health*. In E. ŘEHULKA (ed.) *Teachers and Health 6*. Brno: Paido and Masaryk University, 2004, pp. 679–685, ISBN: 80-7317-093-X.

4. The philosophy of health as a philosophical approach to life

It is also important for the teacher that his attitude towards himself, his life values and his meaning of life is in harmonious balance. The **greatest danger** to the healthy and harmonious performance of the teaching profession is the **contemporary ethical relativism and the process of dehumanisation**. Not all human activity in contemporary society is in any way beneficial or universally propitious. On the contrary, the atmosphere of post-modern pluralism and the relativism of everything and everyone would sometimes seem to be a frequent source of conflict and frustration. Life is beginning to seem like something of a chaotic collage. In such a situation all human feelings and values become mutually incommensurable conglomerations of divergence, for which reason there would seem to be an increasing need for a new coherence in life, guided by the endeavour for and pleasure derived from seeking and finding a deeper order and meaning.

It is, then, increasingly important for teachers to begin to consider a “theory of life” or the art of living – to find their life’s purpose and meaning. The teacher should lead his pupils **towards more refined and orderly perception and thought**, directed towards an overall understanding of life and the world, a **“philosophical approach” to the world**. Such a holistic understanding of life and the world, the cultivation of a synthetic viewpoint, the ability to ask oneself the cardinal questions of today and look for relevant answers to them, while coping with one’s reactions to unforeseeable situations and problems, can also help in finding inner harmony and a healthy lifestyle.

A philosophical approach to life enables us to see each situation in its broader contexts, with perspective or detachment, and supports creative fantasy in the resolution of the majority of the problems facing us. A philosophical approach, lying in the fulfilment of the natural order of life associated with the feeling of pleasure and positive suggestion, leads to a change in the state of the mind, not merely the attainment of a temporary improvement to the health or the maintenance of the present quality of life by means of the administration of expensive artificial drugs.

During the course of teaching and education the teacher should lead the pupil to seek his own lifestyle by continually breaking down fixed ideas about people, life and the world. He should cultivate the pupil’s ability to express himself in all his uniqueness and help him in the search for and creation of the right conditions for a **“mental leap”**. This means escaping from the closed circle of communication and ideas, allowing entry to higher levels of awareness and vision. The result is renewal of the direct relationship to life based on the immediate experience of reality and the capability of profound personal communication.

We can also **care for our own psyche** by reading and **contemplating** selected philosophical or spiritual texts. If we teach ourselves to control our consciousness with the use of rational thought, if we are capable of giving it instructions, then we will be able to control the seemingly uncontrollable. We can overcome problems and look at things laterally, from a new viewpoint, by means of continually convincing ourselves with the use of positive axiological-literary elements and methods of self-reflection.⁴

⁴ Compare with R. RYBÁŘ, Introductory Notes to the Philosophy of Health. In E. ŘEHULKA (ed.) *The School and Health for the 21st Century*. Brno: Paido, 2005, pp. 106–112, ISBN: 80-7315-119-7.

Reading philosophical works, such as Confucius, Plato or Kant, can help us rid ourselves of feelings of anxiety, and sometimes provides more help than anti-depressants. The combination of contemplation with cognitive therapy, for example, with the use of spiritual declarations leading to self-knowledge, can reduce the chance of remission for people suffering from chronic depression. People can begin to look upon their negative feelings as mere states of mind that can be cast off. In choosing appropriate declarations – aphorisms, proverbs, quotations and adages – we can be guided by various areas of life or by types of therapeutic focus.

We might, for example, choose a quotation from the German irrationalist philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer as a **motto summing up all thought about human health** – “Health outweighs all other blessings so much that one may really say that a healthy beggar is happier than an ailing king.”⁵

We can proceed in our search for “positive declarations” (with an ethical or philosophical message) **according to areas of life or topics of thought**. Let’s consider the **topic of life**, for example, as seen in the light of a quotation from Hippocrates: “Sad is the life permeated by the icy wind of greed”.⁶

Or we can take a **therapeutic direction**. Should we be suffering from **apathy or resignation**, we can use a quotation from Confucius – “Better to light even a small candle than to damn the darkness.”⁷

And we can move forwards in this way, and perhaps begin to write our own therapeutic aphorisms. But more of that another time...

POZNÁMKY K FILOZOFII ZDRAVÍ

Abstrakt: Učitele, zejména humanitních a společensko-vědních oborů, je možno charakterizovat jako kulturně-osvětového činitele. V moderním pedagogickém pojetí jeho hlavním cílem ve vztahu ke svému žákovi není napomáhání k hromadění jeho vědomostí, ale vedení k jemnějšímu vnímání a utříděnějšímu poznání, které směřuje k celkovému chápání dnešního světa. Důležitým úkolem současného učitele je pěstování syntetického pohledu, schopnosti klást neobvyklé otázky a zvládat reakce na nepředvídatelné životní situace a problémy. Ve výkonu učitelského povolání jde také o pomoc mladým lidem při hledání a nalézání zdravého a rozumného životního stylu, vnitřní harmonie za použití filozofického poradenství a různých alternativních metod.

Klíčová slova: škola, učitelství, zdraví, filozofie zdraví, filozofické poradenství, krize hodnot, duševní nesnáze.

⁵ M. FRANK (ed.) *A Small Horologe of Wisdom and Madness*. Prague: Nakladatelství KMa s.r.o., 2007, ISBN: 978-80-7309-530-7.

⁶ M. FRANK (ed.) *A Small Horologe of Wisdom and Madness*. Prague: Nakladatelství KMa s.r.o., 2007, ISBN: 978-80-7309-530-7.

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