

*Ars docendi* in Anthropocene. A Meditation upon  
the Principles of Comenius's ›Theological Pedagogy‹  
following the Interpretation of Radim Palouš

LANKES: *Mystical, barbaric, bored.*

BEBRA: *You have given our century its name.*

(Günter Grass: *The Tin Drum*)

*Even the most troubled epoch is worthy of respect, because it is the work not just of a few people, but of humanity: and thus it is the work of creative nature – which is often cruel but never absurd. If this epoch in which we are living is a cruel one it is more than ever our duty to love it, to penetrate it with our love till we have removed the heavy weight of matter screening the light that shines on the farther side.*

(Walther Rathenau: *Où va le monde?*)

We live in a strange world, in which *ars docendi*, the art of education, has an extremely difficult task. Not only it has to cope with the rapid development and keep up with the great acceleration of all planetary processes, not only it has to reflect upon all these changes and attempt at incorporating them into its contents and methods – but also, much more regrettably, it must fight today for its mere survival. What should *ars docendi* do to survive? Or, what principles should it follow to fit the world of tomorrow? Does it have a chance against the powers that are threatening it? And how does it have to change? These questions should not be considered merely rhetorical, as they do not call for a self-concerned or reactionary goal of preservation of an obsolete wisdom, but it is in fact the future survival of mankind which is at stake – a mission in which education plays a crucial role. The following text aims at nothing more than to offer a modest and simple meditation upon the acute questions, tracing loosely the thought of Johannes Amos Comenius as interpreted in the works of a famous Czech scholar and a political dissident Radim Palouš.

## 1. *Ars Docendi* as the Art of Giving Time

One of the often described features of the world of today is that its pervasive modern technologies of communication are turning into dangerous weapons in our hands, threatening the very essence of communication and dialogue and replacing it with a self-obsessive monologue and self-presentation. In the world where everything seems to be calculated in advance, exchanged for labour and effort, almost anything can be bought for money and every value becomes relative and emptied of sense, it seems that *it is time that represents the highest value*: not the time we can watch on the clock, not the time as an anonymous and homogenous stream of identical time sequences of modern science, but the time we spend together, the time of sharing, the time we give to others as a gift and the time we can receive from them in return. Because time, just as fruit, only ripens when it is filled with human faith, hope and love, when it is through the very same brought to its fullness. And every moment which was not cared for and pollinated like a flower – is washed away by the stream of time and falls over the edge of a cosmic abyss to return on the day of the last judgement to witness against us.

It is precisely this intimate and highly personal time in which the miracle of education is born. Not as a simple transaction of information, just as when we record a certain amount of data from one computer hard disk to another, but rather as an adventure, in which a new reality is born and created and much more can be gained than we invest. It is an adventure, which denies all mathematics and logic – because in truthful education one plus one does not make two, but always *more than two*. Martin Buber calls this situation *I and Thou*.<sup>1</sup> The French philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas develops this situation further to conclude the meeting of *I and the Other* takes place in an immanent temporality, which can indeed become the time of our redemption, as it can justify our place in the world and our position in being.<sup>2</sup> His Czech contemporary, Jan Patočka, talks similarly about the time of *self-giveness*, which results in *self-finding* as a third and the most important movement of

1 Martin Buber: *Ich und Du*, Leipzig: Insel 1923.

2 Emmanuel Lévinas: *Totalité et infini. Essay sur l'exteriorité*, La Haye: Martinus Nijhoff 1961.

human existence.<sup>3</sup> Education is an event of being, when being unlocks and offers itself to us through its social aspect, through being-together, through the time given as an unselfish gift and gained as a mercy.

So the *first statement* we are going to make is this: If the art of education wants to survive in the world of tomorrow, we have to – first of all – rediscover and learn again *the art of giving time to others*. Otherwise all our pedagogical effort will be just like another Facebook wall post, echoing nothing but our self-obsession and self-importance just like the nymph in the famous Greek story about Narcissus.

## 2. *Ars Docendi* as Pursuing the ›One Needful‹

In his late work *Unum necessarium*,<sup>4</sup> Comenius draws on the famous narrative from the New Testament about two sisters, Mary and Martha, and Jesus visiting their house.<sup>5</sup> While Martha remains somehow ›locked‹ in the reality of everyday life with all the arranging and rushing around the house, preparation of meal and serving the guest, she is “careful and troubled about many things”,<sup>6</sup> her sister Mary comprehends the situation in a wholly different manner – as a chance of sharing with Jesus heart to heart, soul to soul. While Martha remains in the economic perspective of an anonymous time of never ending labour and restless effort, a time which is always *consumed*, according to the ancient prediction “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground”,<sup>7</sup> Mary’s attitude opens a new, deeper dimension of being, with its own temporality and transcendence, which can break through this valley of tears and possibly change this ancient essential

3 Jan Patočka: *Tělo, společenství, jazyk, svět*, Prag: OIKOYMENH 1995.

4 Johannes Amos Comenius: *Unum necessarium, scire quid sibi sit necessarium in vita et morte et post mortem. Quod non-necessariis mundi fatigatus et ad Unum necessarium sese recipiens senex J.A. Comenius anno aetatis suae 77. mundo expendendum offert*, Amsterdam: Christophorus Cunradus 1668.

5 Luke 10:38-42. Quotes from the Bible are given here according to *The Holy Bible, Conteyning the Old Testament and the New [...]*, London: Robert Baker 1611.

6 Luke 10:41.

7 Genesis 3:19.

determination. Mary decided to attach herself fully, with her whole heart and mind to what she considered the most precious – to *love*, an event where time is no longer consumed and lost, but *given and gained, invested and found*. And we are told she has chosen “that good part, which shall not be taken away from her”.<sup>8</sup> We could hardly find a more suitable paradigm for education than this 2000-years-old story.

So the *second statement* we are going to make is this: If education wants to survive in the world of tomorrow, it has to attach fully to this ancient archetype, leaving the way of Martha and choosing the way of Mary. It has to stay in a close contact and fertile dialogue with this deeper dimension of being and personal time, which can be opened only when we feed it with the fuel of our self-investment, self-giveness and self-sacrifice. It requires using all our strength and passion, because, as Martin Buber would say, the fundamental word *I and Thou* can be pronounced only with the whole of our being.<sup>9</sup> It bears no compromises. Or, as Palouš would put it, it is both our personal salvation, and the salvation of our fellow-beings, and the good destiny of the whole creation, which is at stake,<sup>10</sup> because – according to Comenius – the time of light is coming, calling everybody who has ears fit for listening to choose the way of light.

### 3. *Ars Docendi* as Giving Attention, Care and Love

One of the features of the world of today is what we could label the ›educational sell-off‹. *Any* information can be reached *anywhere* on the globe, while *anybody* can offer his or her ›knowledge‹, ›wisdoms‹ or ›attitudes‹ publicly without any restrictions and deliver it directly to our pockets, eyes and ears, which literally happens in *no* time. And thus knowledge becomes as cheap as internet connection, wisdom as cheap as an opinion in an internet discussion, attitude as cheap as a last video of a popular Youtube influencer

8 Luke 10:42.

9 Buber: *Ich und Du*, p. 7.

10 Radim Palouš: *Komenského Boží svět*, Prague: Státní pedagogické nakladatelství 1992, p. 120.

selling a new shiny make-up while performing bicycle tricks. We are being bombarded with knowledge, wisdoms and opinions. We stumble over it on every step. We are overfed with it. In such condition, it is no surprise that our knowledge, wisdoms and attitudes as teachers cannot impress anybody anymore. Regardless of our skills in didactics, new teaching methods, interactive education, the latest trends in the schooling system – it is a mission impossible and lost in advance to compete with the world of new media and on-line entertainment, to fight with it for people's attention, to repeat over and over again the boring truth how education is necessary etc. Who cares about wisdom when he has *panem et circenses*?

Moreover we have to resist the pressure of our governments and the whole establishment, which aim to turn the process of education into a calculated and controllable mechanism, serving the purpose of fabricating a new army of *Fachidioten* to occupy the positions prepared by the system. Let us not pretend we can win this fight with conventional weapons: every day we witness rather a complete conformation and destruction of the traditional educational system through the newly imposed laws and regulations in order to reach ›objective and measurable results‹ of education.

›Objective‹ and ›measurable‹: How much is a university lecture worth? How much is a graduate leaving university worth? How much is a book, a painting, a composition? How much is a human life saved through the hands of a doctor, a psychiatric, a priest? And how much is a human soul saved? How much are people, books, or ideas, which gave our life a wholly new direction? Are there any measurable results in education? Are there any objective and assured methods? Or is it rather the case that being unlocks itself to us exactly according to the level of our consciousness of being – and education is the very event, a moment of unexpected insight, when things miraculously start to fit one another? If I look back at my life, I have to admit I feel fully obliged to people I have met on my way to make me who I am now, and to God, or the Providence, who have sent them to meet me, to fill my heart and soul with ideas and information I needed exactly at every step and every stage of my life. Every human represents an individual, original and unique type of humankind, in whom being manifests itself in an individual, original and unique way, and all that happens in a time which is also unique, irreproducible and unrepeatable – a time of truthful education. *Ars docendi* can only

hope to offer the assistance to this event, to witness this revelation. Who can dare to measure that?

And so the *third statement* we are going to make is this: If education wants to survive in the world of tomorrow, it has to do the right opposite than it is doing today. It has to stop imitating economic processes, conforming to the demands of the market and competing with the virtual realm of entertainment. Let us admit once for all – this fight is lost, because its result has been decided in advance. If education wants to have even a smallest chance against powers that threaten it every day, it has to rely on the use of a non-conventional weapon: the one Comenius calls *unum necessarium*, the only thing needful, the original mission of education, which is to give attention, care and love through the gift of time shared with others. This is a purely and uniquely human capacity, in which we can hopefully trace the reflection of God’s image in us, the unselfish love and compassion that cannot be reproduced, imitated, replaced or supplanted by any other means.

#### 4. *Ars Docendi* as Assuming Responsibility

Waters around us have grown, we are drenched to the bone, times they are a-changing and in this miserable condition we dare to try answering the question ›What should we do to bring education into the age coming, the world of tomorrow?‹ We are doing so in all modesty and humility, and therefore we have to admit we would never find enough courage to start our exploration had we not good companions, who can shed at least some light on our way through.

For the purpose of this paper, we are drawing on the work of a great Czech scholar Radim Palouš, who, standing on the shoulders of another giant of thought, Johannes Amos Comenius, elaborated an original philosophy of education for what he called the “World-Age” – the new age of humanity being born, eventually replacing the modern era and the “Euro-Age”.<sup>11</sup> Significantly for our purpose, Palouš deals all these issues not just thematically,

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11 Radim Palouš: *Světověk neboli 1969. Hypotéza o konci novověku, ba o konci celého eurověku a o počátku světověku*, Prague: Nové cesty myšlení 1989.

as distant fields of academic research, but also existentially, as one who is interested in them deeply and personally, so that they become living, colourful and plastic experiences, and also responsibly, as norms and values we can attach to.

Palouš's name is well known in academic circles and the wide public, as he left an unforgettable trace in academic and civic life. He is mostly associated with the famous philosopher and one of the original Charter 77 spokesmen Jan Patočka, who became his lifelong teacher both officially at the Charles University, and later also unofficially in illegal home seminars organized since the 1950s during difficult times of the communist regime.<sup>12</sup> When Patočka died in 1977 after a stroke he suffered as a result of an exhausting interrogation by the State Security,<sup>13</sup> his students decided to conceal his manuscripts, drafts and notes from the state authorities and to work to have them published at least as a *samizdat*, a small number of unofficial copies written on a type-writer.<sup>14</sup> Palouš was entrusted with the part of Patočka's literary legacy dealing with Comenius. He accomplished his task in 1980 – 1983, when he managed to publish unofficially 3 volumes of Patočka's Comeniological writings, which comprised about 1.700 type-written pages in total. One copy of these writings was smuggled to the West and handed over to Professor Klaus Schaller at the University of Bochum, who was then able to publish it as a part of his – today classical – Comeniological edition in 1981 and 1984.<sup>15</sup> These later became the basis for the complete edition published by Věra Schifferová between 1997 and 2003.<sup>16</sup>

12 Věra Schifferová: *In Memoriam Radim Palouš*. In: *Acta Comeniana* 29/LIII (2015), pp. 221–230.

13 I.e. Státní bezpečnost, the Czechoslovak secret police.

14 Samizdat is an unofficial publication available only in a small number of copies and disseminated among fellow-dissidents. One of the significant means of cultural contact, work and education and a source of uncensored information in the times of the Soviet Occupation. Palouš: *Komenského Boží svět*, p. 7.

15 Jan Patočka: *Gesammelte Schriften zur Comeniusforschung*, ed. by Klaus Schaller, Bochum: Comeniusforschungsstelle im Institut für Pädagogik der Ruhr-Universität Bochum 1981; id.: *Jan Amos Komenský (II). Nachgelassene Schriften zur Comeniusforschung*, ed. by Klaus Schaller, Sankt Augustin: Academia 1984.

16 Jan Patočka: *Komeniologické studie. Soubor statí o J. A. Komenském*. První díl: *Texty publikované v letech 1941–1958*, ed. by Věra Schifferová, Prag: OIKOYMENH 1997;

Though undoubtedly an act of personal courage and commitment, this was in fact but a small part of the great adventure of Palouš's life. Since he finished his philosophical studies, Palouš could not find an appropriate occupation due to political reasons. He thus decided to pursue his studies in natural sciences to become an assistant of analytical chemistry at the University of Pedagogy in 1957. His work in the field of chemistry and didactic of natural sciences involves publishing of more than 50 magazine articles, cooperation on more than 10 didactic movies and 10 school textbooks. In 1977 Palouš signed the Charter 77 Manifesto. He was removed from the university immediately and had to find an occupation as a worker. However, he continued teaching and lecturing unofficially and privately in his own apartment to influence a whole generation of students, including the future president Václav Havel. In 1981, in the time of the highest tide of communist persecution of dissidents, Palouš became another official spokesman of the Charter 77, replacing the Catholic priest and future bishop Václav Malý. In 1988 Palouš was instrumental in the foundation of the Czechoslovak Helsinki Committee for human rights and in 1989 he became a co-founder of *Občanské fórum*, the first democratic political platform in Czechoslovakia. In 1990 he was elected the first rector of the Charles University after the Velvet Revolution.<sup>17</sup>

In his rich philosophical work Palouš was interested mainly in three issues: philosophy of history, philosophy of education and Comeniology.<sup>18</sup> Both formally and subjectively, these issues are somehow intertwined in Palouš's thought, as one naturally proceeds from the other, one naturally opens and unlocks the other two. Also, each of the issues represents the care for a different dimension of time – the past, represented by Comenius, the present, represented by the philosophy of history and Palouš's interest in finding a name for the world we live in, and future, represented by philosophy of education. We are persuaded this temporal scheme of Palouš's work is not accidental,

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Jan Patočka, *Komeniologické studie. Soubor textů o J. A. Komenském*. Druhý díl: *Texty publikované v letech 1959–1977*, ed. by Věra Schifferová, Prag: OIKOYMENH 1998; Jan Patočka, *Komeniologické studie. Soubor textů o J. A. Komenském*. Třetí díl: *Ne publikované texty*. Ed. by Věra Schifferová, Prag: OIKOYMENH 2003.

17 Schifferová: *In memoriam*, p. 226.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 224. <https://doi.org/10.5771/9783896659576-75>, am 21.07.2024, 02:11:17



and that it is always this unity of the past, the present and the future we have to seek if our expression as teachers aims to be authentic.

However, Palouš's work seems to be still inspiring for one more appreciable reason. Just as his teacher Patočka, Palouš in his life proved a great deal of a deep sense of responsibility, personal courage and civic engagement, showing us that *all theory is grey*, if it is separated from the *tree of life growing ever green*: existential decision and personal action to stand for the things we believe and say – just according to the famous line by Dostoyevsky reprising in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century philosophy over and over again: “I am more than all others responsible for all.”<sup>19</sup>

And so the *fourth statement* we are going to make is this: If education wants to survive in the world of tomorrow it must understand that it is – primarily – our attitude and view of the world that needs to be transformed to fit the world of tomorrow and education itself has to become the means, the tool of this transformation. Without such transformation and its appropriate outer expression in responsibility, all philosophies and wisdoms of the past will remain an empty talk, if not even another pile of rubbish in the outlet store labelled *education sell-off*.

## 5. *Ars Docendi* as the Art of Survival in the ›Strange World‹

In 1990 there was a conference in Prague entitled *Homage of the Charles University to J. A. Comenius*. Prof. Zdeněk Kučera opened his speech with these words: “What a strange world do we experience today!”<sup>20</sup> It is not just a miserable sigh upon a then-present condition of the world, nor a rhetorical figure to introduce a shallow lamentation on erosion of morals. In fact, it is a profound ontological statement, a sort of diagnose of our day, human condition. Wherever we look, whatever we do, what field or what level of human activity we decide to research, we can repeat these words over and over again and they will still be valid. And even more than that – every moment they are becoming more and more urgent.

19 Fyodor Dostoyevsky: *The Brothers Karamazov*, The Gutenberg Project 2016, p. 329.

20 Zdeněk Kučera: *Teolog univerzality Jan Amos Komenský*. In: *Pocta Univerzity Karlovy J. A. Komenskému*, Prague: Karolinum 1990, pp. 202–208.

We do not have to be academic scholars to understand that over the last few decades, the world has changed dramatically and keeps changing at an exponentially increasing speed. We all know it, we all feel it, we all experience it on various levels of our existence. It has become a part of our understanding of being in the world, or, more prosaically said, a part of our everyday nightmares, anxieties and frustrations. Ask a university professor or a simple peasant or a factory worker – the ›strange world‹ is something with which we all have an experience.

Indeed, this is the totalitarian nature of the ›strange world‹: it is not located ›somewhere there in the big bad world‹, because then we would be able to avoid it by living our small average lives in a small average world like hobbits of Tolkien, it is not even lurking somewhere behind the corner as a wicked dragon, because then we would be able to kill it or stay out of its way. On the contrary, the ›strange world‹ has already come to our doorstep, encircling us and threatening both the very essence and the very condition of our human existence and thus involving mercilessly even the last native of the smallest village on Earth. This ›strange world‹ has a phenomenal structure of an invisible total war: all the planet is being attacked, while the attacker is still escaping our sights. Why? Because it's me, it's you, it's everybody who has exchanged the illusory feeling of prosperity and material comfort for a piece of ourselves. It's me, it's you, it's everybody who is so much afraid of pain, sacrifices and obstacles of life, that we rather chose the easy way and a wide gate. It's me, it's you, it's everybody, but *I more than all others*, and therefore God will "judge [...] every one after his ways".<sup>21</sup> Not according to an anonymous order, not according to a universal law, but he who is the creator of all things visible and invisible will hold each of us personally responsible for each our particular thought, word, or action, bearing in his providential mind also things we were supposed to say or do – and we did not.

Significantly, the global or universal nature of this ›strange world‹ feeling represents an important datum on its own. Though in a negative way, it demonstrates a certain level of unity compared to the total fragmentation of the global community. The consciousness of an upcoming disaster, however still vague or ambiguous, is something we all have in common as humans

now – and possibly something we will all have to share and deal with in future. Hans Jonas took notice of this negative common ground of our human condition and suggested to turn it into a positive motivation. He called it *heuristics of fear*, which should become a motor of our future actions. According to Jonas, a fundamental shift in the very nature of humanity has taken place. In the past, people were able to kill other people, even eradicate whole nations or kingdoms, and destroy vast areas of land due to their violent and irresponsible behaviour. In the course of the turbulent 20<sup>th</sup> century, humanity has gained access to such technical means it is now capable of committing suicide as a whole, and more, it is capable of terminating life on our planet in general, and even more, *it is capable of destroying the whole planet as a condition of preservation of future biological life*. The major issue is that while being more powerful than ever and having the future of the whole planet in its hands, humanity has in fact never been weaker – stripped of every certainty it had been provided by mythical, religious or philosophical metanarratives it is now left with bare hands. Jonas suggests the new ethics should be regulated by the *heuristics of fear*: extreme awareness of our new historical situation should give birth to a new responsibility out of fear we could spoil something up to the point of no return. Therefore every human activity should be subordinated to the *heuristic of fear* so that nothing is done without having future survival of mankind in mind.<sup>22</sup> If we will not be able to become willingly brothers in peace, we would have to become – against our will – brothers in arms.

And so the *fifth statement* we are going to make is this: if education wants to survive in the world of tomorrow, it must – before all – teach to survive, which means to have the future survival of humankind in mind in all our thought, words and actions. In fact, it means to adopt a certain eschatological viewpoint and to be realistically open to the fact that the story of the world, as it is being written right now, may not have a happy end, but – and this is important – only when our naive optimism in immanent realities of the world is suspended like this, a new hope can be born, a hope which relies on values that are transcendent and cannot be destroyed by any means. This dialectic of

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22 Hans Jonas: *Das Prinzip Verantwortung. Versuch einer Ethik für die technologische Zivilisation*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979.

›being-in-the-world‹ yet ›hoping in spite the miserable condition‹ is a purely human capacity and the proper content of education.

## 6. *Ars Docendi* as Giving the ›Strange World‹ a Name

The feeling of the ›strange world‹, however, did not come out of the blue. The conditions for it were being prepared for centuries, in which the European spirituality exchanged the ›knowledge as wisdom‹ for ›knowledge as power‹ of the modern scientific worldview. The ›strange world‹ is thus the fruit both of the modern scientific worldview itself, and of the crisis of the very same drowned in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century bloodbath of two world-consuming wars and the rise of the most draconic totalitarian regimes the humanity has ever seen. All philosophy and theology of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is in fact just a one ceaseless attempt to find a proper name for the ›strange world‹.

It would be perhaps superfluous to remind us of the history of this search now. It has been known to Edmund Husserl when he came with the idea of *Lebenswelt*.<sup>23</sup> It attracted attention of Martin Heidegger, who warned about the dehumanizing power of technique.<sup>24</sup> It provoked thought of the above-mentioned Hans Jonas, who urged us to adopt *new responsibility* and *new imperative*.<sup>25</sup> It was the key issue for Thomas Kuhn, who largely criticised the discontinuity of scientific development.<sup>26</sup> It was essential for Emmanuel Lévinas, who thought the crisis to be the result of driving *the Other* out of the European philosophical discourse.<sup>27</sup> Existentialism or postmodern thought can be seen as a reaction to the ›strange world‹ experience. And we could go

23 Edmund Husserl: *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie. Eine Einleitung in die phänomenologische Philosophie*, Beograd: Gesellschaft Philosophia 1936.

24 Martin Heidegger: *Die Frage nach der Technik* (1953). In: id.: Gesamtausgabe, I. Abteilung: *Veröffentlichte Schriften 1910–1976*, Band 7: *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, ed. by Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann, Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann 2000, pp. 5–36.

25 Jonas: *Das Prinzip Verantwortung*.

26 Thomas Kuhn: *Die Struktur wissenschaftlicher Revolutionen*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1967.

27 Lévinas: *Totalité et infini*. 5771/9783896659576-75, am 21.07.2024, 02:11:17

on and on with scholars and works that have already become an integral part of classical philosophical *canon* – mentioning not all the literature and other artistic expressions that speak on its own. In his famous novel *Die Blechtrommel* Günter Grass has given the 20<sup>th</sup> century three names: *mystical*, *barbaric*, *bored*.<sup>28</sup>

However, despite this effort, we have to admit *we have not found the proper name yet*. We have inherited this task from the 20<sup>th</sup> century without any notable progress. Or, maybe it is one of the very symptoms of the day that it actually bears no name we would all be able to identify with and to agree upon. On one hand we realize that finding such a name would be undoubtedly very useful and urgently needed. On the other hand we also realize the uneasiness, ambiguity and maybe even controversy of the process. According to ›prehistoric‹<sup>29</sup> material of the Old Testament, giving names is primarily a divine activity and it is closely related to the creation.<sup>30</sup> Later, the competence of giving of names is transferred also to humans.<sup>31</sup> However, it is this very competence which becomes our stumbling stone – the improper use of language plays role in the story of the fall.<sup>32</sup> The competence is finally misused in the story of Babel, which in the end leads to total corruption or confusion of language.<sup>33</sup> The problem of language as the competence of ›giving names‹ is thus known to humanity literally from ever. The word has a power to create and move the universe, but also to harm, to damage and to destroy it. That is why authors like Comenius seek the salvation of humankind always in relation with the improvement, repair, or emendation of language. In a different light, but with a similar intensity the issue has been treated by philosophers: to give something a name means actually to *create* it, to *define* it, thus to give it a *definite* shape, let it enter our reality, our consciousness, our everyday horizon, but – at the same time – exposing it to ambiguity of language and discourse.

28 Günter Grass: *Die Blechtrommel*, München: Luchterhand 1959.

29 A term coined by a Czech biblical scholar Jiří Beneš to denote the first 11 chapters of Genesis. Cf. Jiří Beneš & Petr Vadura: *Pradějiny*, Prague: Kalich 2010.

30 Beginning with Genesis 1:5.

31 Genesis 2:19.

32 Genesis 3:3. In fact, the whole story of the fall begins with Eve distorting the divine prohibition from Genesis 2:17.

33 Genesis 11:1-9. <https://doi.org/10.5771/9783896659576-75>, am 21.07.2024, 02:11:17

Therefore, finding a proper name for the ›strange world‹ is highly desired, but we also somehow feel the task should be approached with an utmost care and responsibility. Several remarks come to our mind concerning the issue. First, once a phenomenon is given a name it can be called upon, it can be referred to, and thus it can be treated and dealt with. Name is a sort of a key. Thus finding a proper name already implies a solution. Second, finding a name for the crisis means to summarize, embrace or encompass it as a whole, so that we could speak of it in its universality and demonstrate its all-involving nature. One of the fundamental problems of today is that the discussion is fragmented and we can see only very limited cut-outs of the whole. The academic world is thus in urgent need for an integrating concept for all contemporary and future discussions. No longer should we melt our powers in a ceaseless critique of various separated fields of human existence – it is necessary to show how they relate to the whole, otherwise the critique, never mind how witty, becomes pointless. Third, if the concept is supposed to become efficient, it has to seek to reconcile, to find a non-allergic relation between the two major superpowers of humanity, science and religion. Or, the concept has to represent an appropriate model upon which mutual understanding between humanities and natural sciences can be built. The only truthful answer to the consciousness of a common threat is burying the hatchet and promotion of cooperation in pursuing common goals. Fourth, the concept should be somehow timeless, to embrace the past, the present and the future. The wisdoms of the past should be rediscovered in the present day to unlock and open our future horizons.

And so the *sixth point* we are going to make is this: If education wants to survive in the world of tomorrow, it has to take on this search for the proper name of the world of today. Of course, the ›proper name‹ here is a metaphor, which stands for a concept to embrace the crisis as a whole and demonstrate its all-involving nature, to make everybody understand it is not *a crisis*, but *our crisis*, to enable mutual understanding between science and religion, natural sciences and humanities, to involve both the crisis and its solution and to leave nothing behind. However, in this search, we must conform to the fact we may be not authorized to achieve victory yet, as we may be still metaphorically standing under the tower of Babel. Therefore, the search must be done in the atmosphere of humility and modesty, so that we are all the time

aware of limitedness of our knowledge and our human position – which is a gnoseological viewpoint often emphasized by Radim Palouš.

## 7. Ars Docendi as the Art of Being Taught.

### Challenging the *Anthropocene* by Comenius's ›God-World‹

Can *Anthropocene* become the proper name and the integrating concept we are searching for? We would be happy if it could. However, walking in the footsteps of Comenius and Palouš, we have to raise one, but serious objection. *Anthropocene*, as it was coined by natural scientists, aims to denote the epoch of human impact on the planet Earth, which is claimed by many to be more than significant in many ways.<sup>34</sup> In this sense, *Anthropocene* is a period of human activity, which has been substantially altering and reshaping the face of what we call ›nature‹ and which has become so notable its impact can be compared to that of ›normal‹ natural processes. Up to this point there is nothing to disagree with. If the term remains within the framework of natural science, we can leave all the discussion to natural scientists, as it exceeds our competence as philosophers.

But once the term aims to permeate the language of humanities, we have to ask: does not the term imply the subject-object scheme, the very same that actually stood at the root of all the ruthless exploitation of the planet? Is the term *Anthropocene* not the child of the same understanding of the ›world‹ as ›object‹ of human activity, though reverted? Is it not before all a statement about ›humans changing the planet‹, a statement that – though in a negative way – affirms humanity as *maitre et possesseur de la nature*? If we look at *Anthropocene* from Comeniological perspective, the problem seems triple: First, it is *anthropo*-centric, accenting only the human activity itself and urging to use the same human activity to put out the fire of the current ecological crisis. Second, it operates fully in the framework of modern science and its view of nature as an ›object‹ of ›human activity‹. And therefore, third, it reduces the complex relation between humanity and the world to a purely causal nexus.

34 Colin N. Waters (et al.): *The Anthropocene is functionally and stratigraphically distinct from the Holocene*. In: *Science* 315 (08 Jan 2016). Online: <https://science.sciencemag.org/content/351/6269/aad2622> (5.9.2019).

*Nota bene:* We do not want to claim here the term *Anthropocene* is wrong, we believe in its generally positive motivation, which is to urge, to mobilize, to ignite an action, a movement towards a better treatment of our environment. In this sense, we understand any positive impact it could bring is highly desirable and practically justifies the means. However, we aim to demonstrate that if we want to give the current world a proper name and find a real and sustainable solution, the problem far exceeds the simple cause-effect equation of modern science.

The quintessence of Comenius's ontology is the view of the world as a "great organic unity", where "every being is somehow dependent on others", refers to others, "exists thanks to others – just like a tree is a unity of all its branches, trunk and roots".<sup>35</sup> For Comenius, everything in the world exists "in order to ...": the world is created "in order to become a visible sign of God's intention, in order to make space for a paramount mission of humanity, in order to begin the marvellous drama on a good world".<sup>36</sup> The essence of the world is its inner *liveliness*, which means everything in the world has sense, given by its participation at the whole, everything has its proper task and mission and everything in the world is essentially intertwined, so that the essence creates "an organic whole, of which nothing can be separated".<sup>37</sup>

Radim Palouš explains the difference between Comenius's worldview and the worldview of modern science like this: Modern science is interested in ›objective knowledge‹, which means it aims at getting rid of all ›subjective‹ aspects of the cognitive process. In Cartesianism, the subject (*res cogitans*) is radically separated from the object (*res extensa*) in order to acknowledge the ›thing itself‹ (*Ding an sich*). But for Comenius, a thing can never exist ›in itself‹, because existing ›in itself‹ is equal to *decline*, a movement towards *non-being!* Things exist only when they participate at the divine order, which, at the same time, enables a deep mutual comprehension among beings, a sort of a ›sympathy‹. Therefore, according to Comenius, world is not just a giant

35 Palouš: *Komenského Boží svět*, p. 20. (English transl. by D. Vik)

36 Ibid.

37 Jan Patočka: *Komenského názory a pansofické literární plány od spisů útěšných až ke všeobecné poradě*. In: Jan Patočka: *Komeniologické studie. Soubor textů o J. A. Komenském*. Druhý díl: *Texty publikované v letech 1959–1977*, hg. von Věra Schifferová, Prag: OIKOYMENH 1998, S. 223–270.



machine, functioning according to an anonymous mechanism – rather it is a living organism, with its own ›subjectivity‹ and ›consciousness‹, where all the members, all beings, are bound together by their common *telos*, imprinted as a seal by their creator, which is – to exist in a “happy, good and durable way”,<sup>38</sup> or to play their irreplaceable role in the event of being and the story of creation.

From this perspective the term *Anthropocene*, as presented by natural science, it is in fact nothing but a tip of the iceberg, stemming from our reductive understanding of the world and our reductive self-understanding in the context of world. If we can use a simplifying metaphor here, natural science says: ›We have entered the period of the *Anthropocene*, which means: by excessive exploitation of nature we have broken a well-tuned machine of ecosystems and their subsystems, linked by sophisticated causal chains, which we should now try to repair, if we want to preserve our environment as a condition of biological life. Maybe we can succeed, maybe it is too late. ‹ And, of course, it is true in its way. But according to Comenius the whole issue is put in a completely different manner: The exploitation of nature and breaking its natural laws is preceded by an immeasurably greater problem, which is losing the original harmony and breaking the divine order by reducing the world and the nature to a mere object, a machine, a condition of biological life, rejecting our role of workers and keepers of God’s garden<sup>39</sup> and forgetting the whole of creation, working together to give the whole salvation story a happy end.<sup>40</sup>

According to Comenius it is this breaking of the divine order, which is in fact the root of the present-day crisis, including the ecological and environmental crisis – and therefore a truthful solution must always start with our attitude to the world and our self-understanding in the context of this world. It is not enough to restore the nature, as if we were to repair a broken machine (moreover, we are leaving behind the fact it is impossible, because such a restoration would require 100% knowledge of how it really works, a

38 Johannes Amos Comenius: *Johannes Amos Comenii Opera Omnia*. Vol. 12: *Didactica*, Prague: Academia, p. 85.

39 Genesis 2:15.

40 Cf. Romans 8:22: “the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.”

god-like position, which is not within our reach). The emendation has to start from the very root we have at hand and it must seek not only reparation of a part, but elevation of the whole creation. Nothing is to be left behind, because

“every little herb, every little pebble, every fine powder we have in front of our eyes are visible signs of invisibly present Divine power, which sustains them in being [...]”<sup>41</sup>

In other words, the *Anthropocene* as a concept of natural science denotes just a small cut-out of the contemporary crisis. Because, according to Comenius, if ›nature‹ is a ›living organism‹, we have to take into account not only human activity altering the nature, but also the reverse process: ›nature‹ is not just a dumb and passive recipient waiting for a human action. It somehow interacts with human beings, it responds to our activity, it aims at re-establishing the original harmony, it wants to *teach us* and if something goes wrong in our attitude to it, it is prepared to *give us a lesson*. And since there is an invisible, yet present *sympathy* among all members of creation, nature is giving us a lesson just according to our mistreatments. In the thought of Comenius, says Palouš together with Klaus Schaller, the whole world is a ›subject‹ of knowledge,<sup>42</sup> and therefore, Palouš adds, we indeed live in the ›age of education‹,<sup>43</sup> in which the world itself has risen against the proud and self-assured attitude of humankind and “against all expectations it has become a school”:

“a school of history with all the punishments in the form of *world wars*, *world crises*, totalitarian political frenzies [...], and the school of nature with all ecological disasters”<sup>44</sup>

And so the seventh statement we are going to make is this: If education wants to survive in the world of tomorrow, it has to understand the role of the world, nature, human history and the whole creation as a school and the time we have here as the time of education. *Ars docendi* has always its reverse side: it is the art of being taught, or rather, being open to being taught – taught by the world which is harmonic, analogic, *sympathetic* in the original sense of the

41 Johannes Amos Comenius: *Centrum securitatis to jest Hlubina bezpečnosti* [...]. In: id.: *Johannis Amos Comenii Opera Omnia*. Vol. 3, Prague: Academia 1978, p. 483. (English translation by D. Vik).

42 Palouš: *Komenského Boží svět*, p. 119, footn. 15.

43 Ibid., p. 111.

44 Ibid., p. 110. <https://doi.org/10.5771/9783896659576-75>, am 21.07.2024, 02:11:17

word: all members of creation feel or suffer together (*sym-pathein*), because they are bound with common destiny and common future.

## 8. *Ars Docendi* as Bringing Out and Waking Up the Desire

Many interpreters of Comenius have pointed to the fact that Comenius's thought is uneasy to grasp, because – seen through the lenses of modernity – it is a mixture of science, philosophy and speculative theology, disciplines which we had learned to strictly discern. We can surely agree with that, however, we can ask together with Palouš: does it – regardless its problematic consequences – necessarily mean it is completely wrong?<sup>45</sup> Of course, separation of these disciplines has brought about a giant leap in the scientific development and technological progress, elevating our capacities as humankind to previously unimaginable heights. On the other hand – it also brought about a giant gap between these possibilities and our consciousness. The technological progress literally gave us power to move mountains and to command wind and rain, as Communists used to say, but – at the same time – humanity has never been more powerless. Stripped of every certainty, every hope, every moral ground it is now standing in the midst of events which it does not understand, with bare hands, naked, afraid and forsaken. The technological progress has unleashed demons which it is not able to cast out on its own. Was Comenius not prophetic in his effort to maintain the unity of knowledge and morals, science and religion?

From Comeniological perspective the issue is thus much more complex than repairing the nature by ordering everybody to sort the waste, not to use plastic dishes and to replace diesel engines with battery-powered cars. It is the restoration of harmony of the whole creation, which is at stake. All ecological education will be in vain if it does not go hand in hand with the transformation of our attitude to the world itself and transformation of our self-understanding as a part of this world. The word which comes to our mind here is *repentance*. Not repentance as a purely personal and temporary relief from the burden of consciousness, but rather repentance in the original sense

45 Ibid., pp. 12–13. <https://doi.org/10.5771/9783896659576-75>, am 21.07.2024, 02:11:17  
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of the Hebrew verb SHUV (שׁוּב) – turning away from something wrong and harmful and, at the same time, turning towards something new and better, which we could describe as the ›change of attitude‹. Or in the original Greek sense of METANOIA, ›change of thought‹.

In many of his texts, Radim Palouš reminds us of the original meaning of ›education‹, which comes from the Latin ›e-duco‹, i. e. ›to bring out‹.<sup>46</sup> The task of education is thus to bring humanity out of its everyday condition and situation, to transcend it, to enable it to take a more general look at it from above. In Latin translations of the Old Testament, the word ›educio‹ stands for the Hebrew verb YATSA (יָצָא), which is theologically one of the strongest verbs. We can also translate it into English as ›to bring out‹, but this bringing out is always associated with the radical change of human condition – both of an individual or of a group of people or even a whole nation. It is always a powerful divine activity, which the Lord performs himself or through his messengers, and which includes the change of human condition from a deadly one towards a lively one. It is exactly this Hebrew verb which plays a crucial role in the exodus of Israel from Egypt, the house of death, into the Promised Land, the land of life. It is indeed this verb that plays role when Israel thirsts in the desert and Moses brings out water from a mountain. Education always has this aspect of ›saving‹, i. e. bringing out from sorrow to happiness, from loss to victory, from a hopeless situation to a new hope, from death to life.

One particular biblical story comes to our mind including the strong verb YATSA. It is when Abraham, then called Abram, doubts that he will ever have children with his wife Sarah. In turn, God *brings Abram out* into the nature and says:

“Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them [...]. So shall your offspring be.”<sup>47</sup>

The story is literally endowed with meaning. Notably, it begins with doubting Abram being *brought out* by God, who wants to somehow change his perspective. Then he is shown the sky and he is told: count the stars if you can. It is as if he has been said: look at how small you are and how little you

46 Ibid., pp. 62–63.

47 Genesis 15:5. <https://doi.org/10.5771/9783896659576-75>, am 21.07.2024, 02:11:17

know and how limited you are in your human position. Why do you think then your condition cannot change?

And this is exactly the perspective we want to emphasize in education. In everything we do, we have to be – at the first place – aware of the impossibility to reach the absolute knowledge or final evidence. Our search and exploration is never finished and never exhausted. On one hand this recognition leads us to a greater humility and on the other hand it brings a very specific dynamic to the process of education. The impossibility of perfect and finite knowledge does not become the root of scepticism or agnosticism, but the source of the vital force, which we sometimes call ›hope‹ or ›desire‹.

When I heard the story of ›Abram and the stars‹ for the first time, I remember I was impressed, as it reminded me of my own experience. As a small child I often watched the night sky full of stars in the mountains in the middle of summer. Billions of diamonds were shining from above! I can still recall the overwhelming feeling of humility and littleness – and at the same time a noble feeling of being a part of a greater harmony and unity – and finally a strong feeling of hope and desire which was somehow born out of the two as a dynamic effort to integrate them or to bridge them. I believe it is indeed this hope or desire, which is the very principle of knowledge and education, or – vice versa – truthful education is the process where this hope or desire is born.

We deliberately say born (and not, e.g., achieved), as its inception has a phenomenological structure of *revelation*. We cannot say where does it come from and where does it go. We cannot explain it in objective terms. We cannot reduce it to a mere product of a situation or a psychological projection. There is always more in such event than any special science can find with its refined methods. Simulating or reproducing such situation is beyond the question of our will, power or ability. We can just simply say it *is* or *happens* and all we can do is to speak of it in a metaphoric way – thus Plato speaks about a flame to light the fire within our soul,<sup>48</sup> while e.g. Lévinas speaks about *désir métaphysique*.<sup>49</sup> Towards the end of his life Comenius wrote the renowned creed:

48 Plato: *The Seventh Letter*, transl. by J. Harward. In: *The Internet Classics Archive*. Online: [http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/seventh\\_letter.html](http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/seventh_letter.html) (15.01.2020).

49 Lévinas: *Totalité et infini*, p. 20. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:hbz:5:1-65771-p0057-9>, am 21.07.2024, 02:11:17

“I therefore give thanks to my God, who wanted me to remain the man of desire [...]”<sup>50</sup>

We could barely find a more suitable expression of what we are suggesting here. Desire, in this sense of the word, precedes knowledge, fuels it, keeps it working, opens hearts and minds and orients it towards future. Truthful education can only hope it can offer assistance, a helping hand in waking up this desire.

And so the *last statement* we are going to make is this: If education wants to survive in the world of tomorrow, it has to attach fully to its original mission – to teach *repentance* as the ›change of thought and attitude‹, it has to bring us out and above our everyday life and condition and it has to wake up the thirst, the desire for knowledge as a part of the life in truth. The age of education, understood as a special science of didactic, a methodical teaching of facts and information, is over. It is very likely a time will come soon, when such technical means will be used on a global scale that educational process will not require human assistance, eventually making the institutional education completely useless. We firmly believe *ars docendi* has a chance to survive only if it takes on the full responsibility for the *only thing needed*, which is *care for the soul*. And thus: education has to become theology again.

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50 Johannes Amos Comenius: *Unum necessarium*. Quoted in: *Johannes Amos Comenius: O sobě*, ed. by Amedeo Molnár & Noemi Rejchrtová, Prague: Odeon 1987. S. 290.