

Kant's pedagogical thought and current problems of education

Leonid Kornilaev^{1*}

¹Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University, *Academia Kantiana*, 14 Aleksandra Nevskogo st., 236016 Kaliningrad, Russia

Abstract. Reflection on education has a central place in Kantian anthropology. The human being can only become human through education. In my analysis of Kant's standpoint, I identify the characteristics of education that underlie Kantian anthropology: the exclusive predisposition of humans to education, the duty of a human to be educated, the communicative nature of education, education as a product and goal of humanity, the continuous development of education plans and education as a tool to improve humanity. In interpreting the latter idea, I reveal the specific optimism and pessimism of Kant's pedagogical thought. Further, I analyse the key characteristics of education to transfer Kantian ideas to the present context. I also reformulate current problems in education in comparison to, and with the help of, Kantian pedagogical ideas. These issues are the correlation between Kant's pedagogical anthropologism and the problem of artificial intelligence, the transformation of the teacher-student relationship, extended adolescence, personal growth of the educator, the consequences of education digitalisation, the advantages and disadvantages of using the Internet in education, the effect of an information society on education, and the role of the state in education. I conclude that commitment to Kantian principles in contemporary education is nominal rather than substantial and that embracing these principles is complicated by the pervasiveness of modern technology in human life. Overall, Kant's pedagogical theory is the perfect reference point for an optimistic outlook on education.

Keywords: Kant, philosophy of education, human being, pedagogy

1 Introduction

In the past twenty years, many philosophical publications in English and German have attempted to interpret Kantian pedagogical theory in the context of different areas of his philosophy. Among these works are the contributions of G. Cavallar (2015), J. Giesinger (2011), R.B. Loudon (2011), M.M. Merritt (2011), K. Moran (2009), G.F. Munzel (2012), and a collection of papers edited by K. Roth and C. Surprenant (2011). Notable Russian-

* Corresponding author: LKornilaev@kantiana.ru
ORCID: 0000-0003-4520-3218

language publications include those by E.A. Aksyonova (2015), G.V. Sorina and I.N. Griftsova (2013), and A.G. Myasnikov (2004). A significant landmark in research into the Kantian pedagogical theory was the historical-philosophical debate about the authenticity of Kant's *Lectures on Pedagogy*. The discussion involved T. Weisskopf (1970), T. Winkels (1984), and others. It can be said without any reservation that Kant's pedagogical theory has been studied in detail and effectively reconstructed. I will leave out both the historical-philosophical aspect of that debate and the dispute over the sources to concentrate on the relevance of postulates of the Kantian theory of education to the current social and technological situation. This approach seems productive against the backdrop of exciting reconstructions of Kant's theory.

A fascinating focus for research is the applicability of the principles of Kantian philosophy and the ideas of the Enlightenment to current problems. Education is inextricably linked to all other aspects of Kant's philosophy. His views on education are a useful criterion when applied to problems confronting modern pedagogy. Of course, there is no need to revive and update the Kantian variant of Enlightenment ideas in its entirety and adapt it to the demands of today. Yet some of Kant's ideas can contribute to the formation of a modern intellectual space. Research into education and teaching is always interdisciplinary. Kantian ethics, anthropology, philosophy of history, and political philosophy consider pedagogical problems in greater or lesser detail. This conspicuous interdisciplinarity is rooted in the comprehensive nature of Kant's philosophical system. He gives special significance to education since it is that through which the human being becomes human (*Päd*, AA 09: 443; Kant, 2007, p. 439). Kant's pedagogical theory embraces all aspects of his philosophy.

2 Education as the central element of Kant's anthropology

Before proceeding to analyse current problems of education, I will consider some aspects of Kant's pedagogical theory that are essential for my investigation. The *Lectures on Pedagogy* begin with the assertion, "Man is the only being who needs education" (*Päd*, AA 09: 441; Kant, 2007, p. 437). One can find a very similar statement in *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*: "[t]he human being is capable of, and in need of, an education in both instruction and training (discipline)" (*Anth*, AA 07: 323-324; Kant, 2006, p. 228). These two phrases suggest that the human being is the only one that can be educated or is susceptible to education. At the same time, only humans need education. Unlike animals, humans are born helpless, unable to survive without adequate care. For Kant, care is part of education. Thus, only human beings must be educated because of their helplessness. Susceptibility to education is the exclusive characteristic of humanity. Only by education do human beings become human (*Päd*, AA 09: 443; Kant, 2007, p. 439). Human beings do not exist without education. Hence, education has an anthropological dimension in Kant's philosophy.

Kant calls education a human invention. The quotation where he does so is widely known: "[t]here are two human inventions which may be considered more difficult than any others – the art of government, and the art of education" (*Päd*, AA 09: 446; Kant, 2007, p. 441). Education is born within humanity; it is created by humanity. "All the natural endowments of mankind must be developed little by little out of man himself, through his own effort" (*Päd*, AA 09: 441; Kant, 2007, p. 437). Humanity only becomes humanity by inculcating in itself human qualities. In the course of education humaneness is ingrained in the human being.

The *sine qua non* of education and the development of the natural endowments of a human being is communication between people. Humans cannot educate themselves; humans are educated by other humans. For education to happen, both the educator and the student must be human. Education is always a human-to-human relationship.

Moreover, education has the potential to perfect humanity. “Human beings are what education makes of them” (*Päd*, AA 09: 443; Kant, 2007, p. 439). According to Kant, humans are restricted by education, and transformations brought about by it are the only way to alter human nature. Kant believes that “with education is involved the great secret of the perfection of human nature” (*Päd*, AA 09: 444; Kant, 2007, p. 439).

Education is not a ‘once and for all’ immutable process. It changes constantly. Despite its fluidity, education is a natural process capable of affecting the condition of humanity.

Education is therefore a necessary and inextricable process in the life of humanity. Created by humans to inculcate in themselves human qualities, it is an ever-changing process that is subject to transformations. Below I will regard education as a combination of these anthropologically focused characteristics.¹

3 Kant’s pedagogical optimism and pessimism

The possibility of improving human nature, which is contained in education, is evidence of Kant’s pedagogical optimism. “It is delightful to realise that through education human nature will be continually improved, and brought to such a condition as is worthy of the nature of man” (*Päd*, AA 09: 444; Kant, 2007, p. 439). From generation to generation, education will try to take a form consistent with the ideal of humaneness. This progress is often described as attaining inner freedom through normative education (*cf.* Munzel, 2012). For Kant, this ideal is real. It is neither “a beautiful dream” nor a fantasy (*Päd*, AA 09: 444; Kant, 2007, p. 440). This understanding, however, raises the questions as to how we can be sure that these expectations will be fulfilled and whether there are sufficient reasons for hope. Kant proposes the following consideration as the sufficient reason: if a system is internally consistent, it is not impossible.

There is also evidence for Kant’s pedagogical pessimism. Firstly, education is confined to human generations: educators were once educated themselves, and, by definition, they are farther from the ideal than their students are. Consequently, the ideal of education is unattainable, its very process has serious limitations and its potential remains untapped. Kant conjectures: “Were some being of higher nature than man to undertake our education, we should then be able to see what man might become” (*Päd*, AA 09: 443; Kant, 2007, p. 439). Secondly, “the problem of moral education for our *species* remains unsolved even in the quality of the principle, not merely in degree, because an innate evil tendency in our species may be censured by common human reason, and perhaps also restrained, but it will thereby still not have been eradicated” (*Anth*, AA 07: 327; Kant, 2006, p. 232). In Kant’s philosophy, the idea of moral autonomy, which suggests the possibility of achieving the moral state independently, stands at variance with pedagogy, which presupposes moral education.²

Kant’s system encompasses arguments for both pedagogical optimism and pedagogical pessimism, which co-exist in his pedagogy. As will be shown below, the reason for this may lie in the irreparably contradictory human nature.

4 Current problems and the Kantian theory of education

I will try to analyse how the Kantian pedagogical theory would work today and see which of its aspects do not stand the test of time and thus must be reformulated or removed from the agenda.

¹ The anthropological interpretation of education is not the only way to construe it. For instance, M. Kuehn (2011, p. 56) emphasises the importance of a cosmopolitan interpretation of education as an integral part of the practical aspect of human life.

² Attempts to defuse this conflict have been made by K. Moran (2009) and A. Cohen (2011).

Education is losing its stability. The rapid development of technology calls for dramatic transformations of pedagogical strategies. Completely disoriented, humanity is not capable of treading the right path towards perfecting human nature. The relationship between the educator and the student is changing. In a global information space, the educator is not the sole bearer of indisputable knowledge, and the competencies of the teacher are constantly tested and questioned. The ideal of humanity, which the educator imparts, has to encourage the student to make the correct moral choice. Yet this ideal is dissolved in the countless streams of information. An educator of the older generation is powerless in the new reality, whilst one of the younger generation may not always be able to adapt to new conditions. Constants are becoming elusive in education. The information flow will only grow and expand in the future, and it is hard to predict how values will shift. The educator's system of values may become unstable as the teaching professional is exposed to information flows and influenced by people with different ideals. The multitude of uncontrolled waves of information creates a personality of a most unexpected configuration rather than one that is whole and independent. A space of unsupervised education emerges. Technically, educators still exist. But their efforts are under pressure from various flows of information targeted at the student. And this information often cancels out the work of the educator. As a result, the student may grow into an anxious, disoriented, and unpredictable personality. The digital era precludes any forecasts of pedagogical outcomes.

Another problem of education has been articulated in the current discussion on expanding the legal definition of childhood. School and university education is taking longer to complete; the human being is being treated as an adolescent, a subject in need of care, for a few more years than before. This change requires amendments in pedagogical doctrines. It may well be that advances in technology are causing people to become more infantile. It is unclear whether the new personality is compatible with the goal of Kant's pedagogical theory and moral philosophy or what perfecting human nature means today.

The solution proposed by Kant is well known. Each human generation should devise education plans, hoping that the next generation will be closer to perfection (*Päd*, AA 09: 445; Kant, 2007, p. 440). Education plans are the responsibility of humanity, not of an individual. Kant formulated the basic principle of such a plan: "children ought to be educated, not for the present, but for a possibly improved condition of man in the future; that is, in a manner which is adapted to the idea of humanity and the whole destiny of man" (*Päd*, AA 09: 447; Kant, 2007, p. 442).

How does the fact that education is for the future agree with current uncertainty? Two fundamental principles of Kantian pedagogy are still valid and very likely to remain so. Firstly, this is the possibility of a better future for humanity; it does not disappear as times change. Within Kant's optimistic vision, humanity can improve, but this progress requires mitigating the negative effect of the state's involvement in education. It is equally important to create a popular demand for education, which can be met using the Internet and new technology. Secondly, this is the idea of humanity as the reference point of education. Kantian cosmopolitan education must not be confused with the cosmopolitan values promoted in the current globalising world (Cavallar, 2015, p. 118). For Kant, cosmopolitanism is not a repercussion of universal interdependence. It is rather a consequence of moral autonomy becoming universal for all humans. Thus, cosmopolitanism and hope for a better future are central to education plans devised by a given generation.

Some signs of these plans becoming a reality are visible today. There is evidence of good progress in the current condition of humanity: enshrining the concept of human dignity in law, growing tolerance, protection of human and particularly children's rights, the universal adoption of the rules of war, struggle against violence, caring for the environment, etc. Yet, it is not clear whether these phenomena have arisen from the implementation of education plans. Most human progress has not been achieved peacefully through educating new

generations; it is primarily a product of great tragedies, wars, the development of nuclear weapons and associated threats, and environmental problems.

Amongst the most acute problems of humanity are the digitalisation of society and the advance of new technology. The consequences of these phenomena are many, and they cannot but affect education. A significant and unpredictable factor influencing education is the Internet. It is interesting to consider “the web” from the perspective of Kantian pedagogy. According to the German philosopher, human beings should be educated in such a manner that they become worthy of human nature. Humans must be educated “to the good” (*Anth*, AA 07: 325; Kant, 2006, p. 230). But it is not clear whether such education is possible in the age of the Internet. While educational concepts of a civilised society seek to instil the good, the uncontrollable and unmanageable Internet and virtual reality often encourage anti-human values. The Internet is developing, and its influence on various aspects of human life still requires further investigation. In particular, it is essential to understand whether the web can be made to serve the education of all humans; whether the Internet is the aggregate of education that will advance the “education of the human race, taking its species as a *whole*” (*Anth*, AA 07: 328; Kant, 2006, p. 233); whether the Internet and modern technology are an obstacle on the way to the “ultimate end of humanity” or a means to attain it. Although all these questions are yet to be answered, there is a strong need to bring the Internet to the aid of humanity in promoting human qualities and facilitating education.

Our knowledge of what the human being is is incomplete. However, we extend human qualities to children and even to artificial intelligence. In creating artificial intelligence in the likeness of human intelligence, humans try to impart human traits to the former. And fostering human qualities is nothing other than education. Machine learning is being extensively debated now. But since we do not know what the human being is, we instil in artificial intelligence our uncertainty and contradictoriness. AI systems capable of educating a living human may appear soon. Artificial intelligence will be able to transfer human inconsistencies to a human being and instil humaneness in humans.

5 Conclusion

Problems of education are closely linked to the central question of Kantian philosophy: “What is a human being?” and this is at the core of any pedagogical or educational theory. The answer to this question determines where we have to move and what educational ideal we have to attain. Education is the creation of humans by humans. But we still do not understand what it means to make a human human. Although pedagogy has to deal with anthropological problems, human nature still puzzles us and often seems contradictory. At the level of ethics, humans try to determine the essence of the good and the bad. Yet, they are unlikely to produce a final answer because of fundamental human contradictoriness. What we hand down from generation to generation is not improvements but our inconsistency.

On the one hand, modern society has implemented to a certain extent a model based on Kantian principles. This success, however, is nominal rather than substantial. Many national educational programmes display a commitment to personal growth and character-building and the cosmopolitan education necessary for a responsible member of the human race. Although states might be slow to put these intentions into practice, these principles are almost always implied and postulated. On the other hand, uncontrollable streams of information make pedagogical efforts inconsistent and erratic. As a result, both educators and students grow alienated, isolated, and indifferent.

Questions about overall progress in education remain open. They concern the work of generations on educational plans, our advance towards the ideal, and the possibility of a happier life in society. Kant was looking for answers to all these questions, but, for us, they remain rhetorical. Although Kant’s pedagogical theory with ethics at its heart is the eternal

reference point for an optimistic view of education, the question about the practicality of such an attitude remains unanswered.

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