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# *Ad unum vertere*? Education as *con-versio* from multitude

## What does it mean to "head towards one"?

Western (Euro-Atlantic) culture has been formed with an awareness of its particularity in relation to other cultures and civilisations. The peak period of Greek antiquity brought logical thinking (logos) to the prevailing mythical thinking (mythos). This allowed the world to be looked at from a distance and a complex view to be created. Complexity and universal validity of knowing became a reason and aim of intellectual effort expressed in the notion philo-sophia (Pythagoras circa 580–490 BC). Acquisition of a unified, complex view of the world became an intellectual, cultural and political ideal, inspiring the Western human to a new standard of cultural performance. "Gathering" (Lat. legere) of singularities and their arrangement into a meaningful whole represents the basic motive of intellectual work (the Latin word intellectus comes from the notion intus legere "to read inwardly") and in a broader sense, of each cultural activity. Vertere ad unum is thus legitimised by the very essence of cultural awareness. Epistemological and axiological universalism is based on an axiom that being precedes thinking and it is an objective source of knowledge of values. A mistake (scientific or moral) may occur only on the part of a subject due to a lack of agreement of their intellect with matter.

Our civilisation paradigm is based on a philosophical and religious belief about the substantial equality and value of all people no matter their accidental characteristics (health, wealth, power, social status, moral status, origin, affiliation, etc.). In Greek and Roman antiquity, the perception of human essence had a limited range (only a citizen was a fully valued human , i.e. barbarians, slaves and "inferiors" were not attributed full humanity), only with the epoch of Christianitas is human nature applied entirely in a universalistic manner. The essence of a human being, labelled as their physis in antiquity, as natura in the Middle Ages, and accurately expressed by the

notion of humanitas in the first era of the Modern Times, provides a sufficient reason for a universal value of individual human dignity.

The advantages of universalism can be summarised into several elements. First of all, it is the concept of human nature that is the ontological fundament of human dignity and its ethical demands, regardless of individual differences. It implies general equality of humans, not only under the law, but also "in the eye of God", i.e. in terms of a transcendental, objective and metaphysical view. Moreover, the personal guarantee of God grants human dignity to every individual and is involved in the existential space of everyday life. The right of a neighbour or fellow citizen to equal and dignified treatment is directly reflected in the moral command of responsibility, solidarity and care. On these foundations, the theory of universal human rights was established and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) was proclaimed.

On the other hand, universalism hides within itself an ever-present germ of potential destructivity. In the history of the West, regrettable paradoxes emerge when, in the name of the "universal truth" a factual and inhumane exclusion of certain individuals and groups from the community of those who "deserve" dignitas humana occurs (colonialism, contemporary slavery, exploitation, conquering wars, genocide, pogroms, etc.). The original idea of a noble anthropological universalism is often misused in a degraded form in terms of power and ideology as a means of cultural hegemonisation or in the application of individual or collective power. The universalistic idea of human nature has been caught in a whirlwind of reduction metamorphoses, from which older as well as modern anthropological conceptions have emerged, claiming an unconditional interpretation of the world. The so-called great narratives of modernism (enlightenment emancipation, idealism, historicism, Marxism, Freudism, etc.) proved to be, from a contemporary perspective, homologising, centralistic, hidden or openly violent. Collectivistic approaches or segregation and elimination mechanisms (Nazi eugenics and genocide, Stalinism, regulation practices of communist dictatorships, etc.) have come to the fore instead of a respectful inclusive perspective.

Hellenic cultural hegemony, however, contained also an intellectual "brake", a warning against totalising dogmatism, illustrated by Socrates`s statement in front of the Athenian tribunal: "Neither of us really knows anything fine and good, but this man thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas I, as I do not know anything, do not think I do either. I seem, then, in just this little thing to be wiser than this man at any rate, that what I do not know I do not think I know either"[1]. The medieval establishment of the Biblical religious belief about the created and the knowable ordo mundi, which is the source of objective and general human knowledge, at the same time, required a necessity of intellectual humility guaranteed by the transcendence of the divine Logos. The zeal for the truth and humility of seekers are

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[1] Platón, *Obrana Sokratova*, [w:] A. Bröstl, *Aténsky ľud proti občanovi Sokratovi*, Kalligram, Bratislava 2006, 21d.

the two original elements of the Western dialectics. The misuse of the idea of universalism is still a threatening risk. An intellectual is not only constantly aware of this risk but also cultivates within him/herself an alert system of antitotalisation mobilisation.

There are principally two basic interpretations, a radical one and a moderate one, that can be considered the answer to the posed question of what it means to "head towards one". The radical interpretation understands universalism as a principle/norm of an intentional or implicit totalisation and as an apology of normative and indoctrination impacts. It results in a form of totalitarianism, supported by a unifying ideology, governed from one centre. In education, this interpretation is manifested through normalisation, directive education, curricular centralism, social levelling and homogenisation of behaviour. The moderate interpretation of universalism presupposes a principle of unification, or "gathering" of experiences and opinions from multitude toward complexity, purposefulness, meaningfulness, or form. In education, this interpretation applies a certain teleological approach, focused on identified values, emphasising the ascendant educational process. Education is perceived as formation, acquisition of a form (Lat. formare, Ger. bilden), intentional abandonment of dispersion and amorphousness, toward a predicted higher quality of knowing, experiencing and acting. Certainly, not even the moderate interpretation of universalism is freed from the threat of misuse of power and manipulation. After all, due to these reasons – as a reaction to abusive treatment of ideas in our culture – the requirement of pluralism emerged.

## Ex uno plures

Pluralism (Lat. pluralis, multiple, diverse) is a term encompassing attitudes, directions and theories that emphasise irreducible multiplicity and diversity. They are based on an assumption that an experience is too complex to be fully comprehended by a single view, single theory, derived from a single basic principle.

Pluralism, however, does not question the possibility of truthful knowledge and evaluation (that would be scepticism, relativism or agnosticism), it only points out that more complex themes imply multiple knowledge and evaluations, while it does not mean that some of them are necessarily incorrect. The concept of pluralism was introduced by the American philosopher William James in his work A pluralistic universe (1909) and since then it has spread to many fields where this problem occurs. In philosophy, first of all, ontological pluralism, then epistemological and axiological pluralism, are distinguished. Ontological pluralism is natural for us and it is the most commonly spread opinion: reality is composed of many essences, the being of the world is not just one (Parmenides) – even with various levels of emanation (Plotinus), but there are many beings, beginning with the Absolute being in the hierarchy of existences up to inanimate things. Reality itself is multifaceted, diverse, varied, differentiated. Oriental theories provided Plato with dualism (the world of ideas vs.

material world), which also had a great influence on the initial Christian perception of the world and the human (gnostics, manicheists, heretics – theories of "the evil world and the evil body"). Slovak philosopher Ladislav Hanus sees a residuum of Platonic dualism in spiritualism, which is encountered even at present (devotism, supranaturalism). Representatives of spiritualism underestimate time, history, the physical body, nutrition, citizenship (as well as thinking, philosophy, literature, culture…). They ironically call those who do not share supranaturalism liberals, dandies, heretics – "this piety supranaturalism is returning at present"[2]. Descartes of modern times also found himself in psycho-physical dualism. Leibnitz attempted to overcome it (monads and pre-established harmony). Modernism, however, wanted to overcome scholastic metaphysics by setting new metaphysics that reflected the will of human beings to recreate the world to their image – it regarded voluntarist projects, resulting in universalistic (monistic) interpretations of the world and totalitarian, violent social forms. Postmodernism, in contrast to modernism, adopted pluralism as its major canon. Next, epistemological pluralism may be discussed: pluralism emphasises the multitude of various approaches, views and perceptions, resulting particularly from the limited possibilities of a human being. Experience is complicated and complex; a single theory, a single view derived from a single principle (gnoseological monism) does not suffice. Likewise, the evaluation of various phenomena and facts often cannot be definite because it depends on the viewpoint of an evaluator, on a situation, education, etc. (axiological and cultural pluralism).

The topic of difference that prevents a human being from exhausting the wealth and depth of being by reason is as old as philosophy itself. For example, a clear rational distinction between being itself (existence) and a being accessible to reason (essence), which should guarantee imperfection and plurality of knowledge, can already be found in Thomas. In the early modern times, the significance of differentiation started to subside in favour of the power of autonomous reason. The tradition of humanistic and enlightenment reliable rationality (universality), however, proved to be naively optimistic in the mid-20th century, mainly after historical experiences with war and totalitarian regimes. The seemingly guaranteed scientific indestructibility of the human spirit (from Hegel to Marx or Husserl) met strong scepticism and a massive resistance to uniformity and homogeneity, totality and structure of thinking, in which individuality and an individual, difference and originality, marginality and personal declaration ceased. Beginning with Heidegger and his ontological differentiation (Sein/Seiende) through the more socially-tuned theories of the French "philosophers of differentiation" (J. Derrida, M. Foucault, G. Deleuze, F. Guattari) and other postmodernists (J. Lyotard, K.-O. Apel, R. Rorty, G. Vattimo and others) the so-called "grand narratives" of modernism, along with their ideological justification of social cohesion and progress, are deconstructed and disarmed.

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[2]  L. Hanus, *Princíp pluralizmu*, Lúč, Bratislava 1997, pp. 38–39.

According to Lyotard, in the postmodern age, grand narratives or meta-narratives (mainly enlightenment) lost their persuasiveness and thus a crisis in metaphysics in philosophy with its claim to universal validity occurred. These narratives, however, hit fractures that were brought to the unifying dialectics by phenomenology of the other/Other (incomprehensible, unknowable, hidden, unrecognisable, mysterious…). And thus, in the very bosom of modernism, paradoxically, a requirement of postmodernism appears: the fracture and distance of the subject from the reference, unification and orientation structure of being. Postmodernism does not require a historical or meta-historical base, it is satisfied with temporary self-understanding in the background of a minimal, "little", historically situated horizon of sense. On the other hand, postmodernism does not represent any "clear alternative" to modernism because it constantly moves in the horizon of meanings that modernism has historically abandoned. The difference between them resides rather in "lightening up" and dissolving the emancipation dynamics that made modernism an epoch of a unified image of the world[3]. The idea of difference frees an individual from the necessity to adapt his/her own identity to the identity of majority culture and society, which, supported by legitimation mechanisms, unifies all thinking and acting to generally set templates of normality, using all the means of a more or less hidden physical, legal, political, ideological and moral manipulation. Postmodernism breaks down this cultural continuity and social monolith into fragments in the name of pluralism, relativism and diversity.

If the ambivalence of universalism was pointed out above, then in the case of pluralism, ambivalence appears to be its obligatory building element, which is reflected both in its advantages and limitations. General pluralism of life philosophies in particular and tolerance to differences in opinions and life styles enable free choice of values and criteria of acting, without the pressure to submit to the dominant and selective imperative. Every individual is incomparable to another individual, since their own individuality offers sufficient means for realisation of meaning. Otherness is not understood as abnormality but as a legitimate status of every human being. A palette of many differences creates diversity, variety and multiculturality in a society. Unlimitedness, or flexibility and variability of norms, rules and modules, contributes to action-based, mobility-based and situation-based orders and solutions.

Limitations of this paradigm result from the same presuppositions as its advantages. Above all, the ontological fundament that would ensure existential dignity for every human being regardless of circumstances and particularities gets lost here. As a result, there is an absence of a unified moral command, or a moral rule that would make us/force us toward responsibility, solidarity and care for the other. Every act of this kind is left rather upon a situational, emotional or conditional setting (mood), or legally conditioned (unsympathetic) duty. Relativism as a cultural axiom ceases to be

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[3] Cf. A. Rajský, *Nihilistický kontext kultivácie mladého človeka. Filozoficko-etický pohľad*, TUT/Veda, Trnava 2009.

relative (facultative) itself, it becomes prescriptive (so-called "dictate of relativism") and takes people to secondary global homogeneity. It means that the idea of pluralism cannot avoid a paradox. The paradigm of plurality is at present a unified approach in perception of the contemporary world and events. However, a generally accepted pluralist approach confirms an existence of a unified image of thinking, even though at a metaphilosophical level. It is an autocontradiction: affirmation of absolute plurality of various regional philosophies uses a metaregional horizon that fulfils a function of continuum. The paradox of the paradigm of radical plurality resides in its universal character. If we accept the assumption that every exclusive claim comes from an illegitimate promotion of the particular to the universal, then this is done by the paradigm of absolute pluralism: one approach in thinking is promoted to a universal model of philosophy and culture in general. Absolute diversity of philosophical conceptions (as well as educational conceptions and all humanities) is unsustainable.

## Polyphony as a philosophical metaphor

A certain starting point for the search for a common denominator of various philosophies may be the fact that even original forms of philosophy are not spontaneous creations of the human spirit. All great philosophical systems are born out of a mutual dialogue and in a mutual dependence, regardless of whether they confirm or refute each other or form a new synthesis. There is an osmosis relationship among them (H. Urs von Balthasar: *Truth is Symphonic*). In this perspective, Plato presupposes Parmenides and Heraclitus, Aristotle is unthinkable without Plato, and Thomas Aquinas without Augustine and the Dionysus of Areopagite. Humankind thinks symphonically, or polyphonically. The basic intuitions of great philosophers are often a synthesis of ideas of other thinkers.

Thus, philosophising actually helps to keep the torchlight of the search burning that could otherwise be extinguished either by resignation or reduction to ideology. Philosophical activity is therefore in the centre between the resignation and the titanic claim of knowledge of all secrets of existence. It is an art of avoiding a temptation of all philosophical systems that would like to build a stable and closed roof as a crown of their constructions. Genuine philosophising is therefore implied in all philosophical conceptions whose common denominator is *inquietum cor* (Augustine, Confessions I, 1). In other words, authentic philosophy cannot avoid the question of difference between the cause of the world and the existence of the world.

However, the plurality of various philosophical conceptions does not mean a pure multitude of mutually incongruent systems. As Hanus reminds us, the Latin term *pluralitas* consists of the root *plus*, that is, more. It is actually comparative in regard to *multum*: from the etymological perspective, plurality is therefore more than a simple sum of several elements. For this reason, he proposes to translate the word *pluralitas* as "moreness", not an indicative – a statement of multitude, but as an "ethical imper-

ative"[4]. The principle of pluralism, the real differentiation of *esse/essentia*, is actually the principle of "moreness": existence is more than a set of phenomena or facts; rationality is more than a certain number of various rules of thinking and communication; philosophy is more than a system of certain statements. Language, thinking and existence itself assumes an appropriate act (*a priori*) that is a source of its formal intelligibility (*a posteriori*). Therefore, philosophising cannot be reduced to sole analysis of the formal structure of language: philosophy cannot avoid the secret that is related to people in the depth of their being. Philosophy asks what the soul of every human search, knowledge and effort is. It can be deduced from the real difference *esse/essentia* that this base cannot be grasped and determined in an exhaustive way by our formal descriptions, definitions and argumentations, although every affirmation implies it as its necessary assumption and its part. This fundament, however, is not an object of the present paper.

## The "organic pluralism" of Ladislav Hanus

In his work Princíp pluralizmu [tr. Principle of Pluralism] (the manuscript 1967 was kept in a drawer for 30 years) the Slovak philosopher of culture and a dissident intellectual partially followed the personalistic thinking of J. Maritain and R. Guardini, however, from the perspective of the development of Western thought, he even overcame them in a way. Hanus clarifies that pluralism is not only a theoretical position, it is an existential experience, related to the freedom of a human. He distinguishes pluralism as a) an idea concept, that is, a worldview approach, and b) a program of acting, while a connection of both aspects creates pluralism as a principle by which constituting of the worldview as well as the method of practice is governed. Pluralism is not a discovery of the contemporary age, it is a result of a thousand-year-long historical struggle against exclusive monisms, a result of a reflected experience and its validation.

Pluralism has two basic tasks: 1) towards multitude (to see, accept and assess all plurality elements of a community), 2) towards unity (to lead multitude to unity – to "integrate" it). Unity stated here is not a totalitarian, homogenising, centralistic unity (a unity of the "herd" or a "state of termites"), it is an organic unity. The only legitimate means to reach such a unity is a means that is exclusively human, "decent to a human", and that is a dialogue. Through dialogue it will be possible to reach for "multitude in unity, unity in multitude"[5]. On the contrary, the highest enemy of pluralism is voluntarism – violence whose consequence is uniformisation of the other "underneath". In an integrated plural society, diffuse multitude, particularism, subjectivism, isolationism and individualism do not take place. Hanus's organic pluralism reacts to the

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[4]  L. Hanus, *Princíp pluralizmu*, Lúč, Bratislava 1997, p. 33.
[5]  Ibid., p. 33.

problematic antimetaphysical "modern period", in which fragmentation into pieces, disjunction, detachment prevail – according to him, late nominalism reaches its peak, with the loss of the whole and of unity, when a-personal rationalism and empiricism reduce a human being to an object. Hanus could not have reflected the differentiation of modernism and postmodernism (cf. F. Lyotard), in which postmodern authors blame modernism for paranoia (creation of modern utopias of life – violently totalising – as the manifestation of fear, paranoia – fear of God, nature and heteronomy…), however, they could not avoid "postmodern paranoia" themselves (fear of everything unifying, great narratives, voluntarism, universalism of any kind). Hanus's criticism of the "modern period", from my point of view, refers rather to what is "post-modern".

Pluralism is situated in the middle position between etatism (monism, collectivism) and individualism ("liberalism", solipsism). In Hanus's theory, the socio-political level is closely connected with the anthropological and ethical level. "Every worldview may be reliably evaluated by recurring it to its notion of a human"[6]. With regard to a particular human being, Hanus notes that a person defends him/herself against merging with a collective body as well as against his/her own isolation[7]. For this reason, Hanus rejects both extreme individualism/liberalism and collectivism.

"An individualist rejects and refuses any attachment: political, state, economic, as well as private, family…, moral and religious"[8]. An individualist or a liberal is without any bounds and duties "to any positive counterpart" and, thus, they head toward "the emptiness of nihilism"[9]. Eventually, "they cannot handle the achieved state of boundlessness"[10]. In case of liberalism/individualism, plurality is kept in its multitude, shattered chaos. Individualism refers to the negative concept of freedom – it understands it as boundlessness. Hanus stresses the need of a positive concept of freedom, free bounding. On the other hand, Hanus, together with Guardini, rejects collectivism and blames it for objectification of the human being:

> It is much easier to think in categories of objects than in personal categories. And it is easier to work in them. They are smoother, handier. Biological categories are more handsome than mental ones, mechanical are more handsome than biological ones. […] They can be checked, they can be placed within the already prepared. All notions of a set and measure, quantity and relationship, causality and order can be exactly outlined, they always agree. However, this is radically changed when the moment of a person is added to the notion. As if something ungraspable, disturbing, even explosive entered the concept. The notions and measures are suddenly struck by a movement. They are no longer that certain. All of the categories need to be revised![11].

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[6] Ibid., p. 81.
[7] Cf. ibid., p. 82.
[8] Ibid., p. 77.
[9] Ibid., p. 78.
[10] Ibid., p. 78.
[11] Ibid., p. 83.

| Individualism | Pluralism | Totalitarianism |
|---|---|---|
| "A human is overly adult" | "Complexity of a person" | "A human is overly childish" |
| Fails before the phenomenon of multitude, fragmentation | Mezotés | Great purge, uniformity |
| Mismanaged multitude – leads to anarchy | As a personalistic virtue | Centralism – leads to tyranny |
| Exposition to radicalisms | (fragile search for balance) | "Great simplification" in contrast to complexity of freedom |

A metaphor of the "organic pluralism" is the category of home (oikos) that expresses care (solidarity), personality (a unique and loved You) and commitment (ethos of co-existence) at the same time. It provides both freedom (authenticity, identity) and safety.

## Con-versio from multitude

Hanusian "organic pluralism" connects and integrates multitude (a human being as an individuum in plurality of those similar to him/her), which is its quantitative dimension, with organicness (a human being as a person, a human-in-relationship-with-others), which is its qualitative dimension[12]. Development of a person takes place by a gradual and purposeful interweaving of quantity with quality and this activity is called education. Education of an individuum to a person[13] takes place predominantly in a family and afterwards, in broader interpersonal communities in which the basic plurality relationship, dialogue, is present[14].

The term con-versio connects a movement, turnover, change (vertere) with the dimension of a community (the prefix con, similarly contained in the word com-unio, community). The emphasis on the prefix con- is implied by a community and dialogical approach of this change. The Czech philosopher Radim Palouš identifies particularly education with the process of conversion. In his work Čas výchovy (1991) [tr. Time of Education], he explains education as a turning point in the self-understanding of a human being and the resulting understanding of the world. "Education is techné tés periagogés, an event that through tearing out from everydayness reveals our everydayness as such a thus, it reveals hiddenness of the hidden, mysteriousness of the mysterious and eventually, subordination of the preordained"[15]. Palouš refers to Comenius's perception of education as emendatio rerum humanarum, as a correction of human things. According to Comenius, people live in chaos, disorder and sin, therefore, school is supposed to help them to correct their straying, to encourage

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[12] Cf. J. Maritain, *L'educazione al bivio*, Editrice La Scuola, Brescia 1993, p. 22.
[13] L. Hanus, op.cit., p. 95.
[14] Cf. ibid., p. 113.
[15] R. Palouš, *Čas výchovy*, SPN, Praha 1991, p. 34.

them to a turning point A turning point, conversion, takes place in the direction from the fragmentary, the partial, the individual and the meaningless toward the whole, the truth of the entire life, the meaning. "Only when a human crosses the individual and the partial and understands them as such, then a real correction may occur. Therefore, the entire human life needs to be perceived as a training, as a school"[16]. Conversion of a human being is a fundamental element of education; the educated is situated in an event of a release from "sinking" into worrying self-provision and they are turned toward what is preordained to them as humans[17]. Similarly to the myth about a cave, the turning point of the imprisoned slave takes place in a painful manner – the educated is forced to turn around, rise, walk in the darkness, even if their senses and limbs defend themselves from this process in many ways. They do not find "conversion" for something pleasant – they are painfully led forth, up a steep path, to the exit of the cave. However, the very educatio (lead forth) needs to be preceded by their own conversio.

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[16]  Ibid., p. 39.
[17]  Cf. ibid., p. 61.

### *Ad unum vertere*? Education as *con-versio* from multitude

**Abstract:** The complexity and universal validity of knowing became a reason and aim of intellectual effort expressed in the notion philo-sophia. The advantages of universalism can be summarised into several elements: the concept of human nature, the ontological fundament of human dignity, and their ethical demands, regardless of individual differences. On the other hand, universalism hides within itself an ever-present germ of potential destructivity, when, in the name of the "universal truth," there occurs a factual and inhumane exclusion of certain individuals and groups from the community of those who "deserve" dignitas humana. Slovak philosopher of culture Ladislav Hanus in his work Principle of Pluralism defines "organic pluralism". Hanusian "organic pluralism" connects and integrates multitude, which is its quantitative dimension, with organicness, which is its qualitative dimension. The development of a person takes place by a gradual and purposeful interweaving of quantity with quality, and this activity is called education, or con-versio from multitude.

**Keywords:** universalism, unity versus plurality, polyphonic truth, Ladislav Hanus, organic pluralism, education as conversion

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