

School, ideas and values in the age of tl;dr

An essay

Zdeněk Ježek

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Translated by Graeme Dibble

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7	Foreword
9	Chapter one School, literature, the world
17	Chapter two Theses
23	Chapter three The neutrality of education is an impossible dream of the post-totalitarian ethos
31	Chapter four Simple thinking can be the wrong way of thinking
41	Chapter five Time to be wary of common-sense
51	Chapter six Society cannot be understood directly, only through metaphors
61	Chapter seven Don't stop thinking, start trusting
71	Chapter eight I don't know
77	References and sources

In a world which offers people a flood of information, opinions and viewpoints, what should we trust? Does the education system have the tools to enable us to make sense of this flood? Does the use of common-sense help in the fight against disinformation? And are metaphors such as flood and fight, as were used in the previous sentences, not just linguistic devices which alter the meaning of the whole message and shift perception of it from the rational to the emotional?

The following text suggests ways in which these issues might be addressed. It doesn't offer definitive answers – which would be self-defeating – instead, it focuses on describing some topics which have appeared in discussions on education, their meaning and their relationship to society.

The five deliberately controversial theses have been examined from four different perspectives: education, society, (political) ideology, and (non-academic) literature. The meaning of educational activity becomes apparent within the wider framework of society. Education is perceived as a way of shaping people to become members of society, not merely for the transfer of knowledge. It is closely connected to the issues of values and attitudes, or more generally the ideologies on the basis of which social actors behave.

And why literature? Because it can provide suitable material on various levels: literary works often thematize questions about values, and it is impossible to look at literary history without its social dimension. The fact that the information found in a work of literature is necessarily limited teaches the reader to reflect, create hypotheses and gradually refine them. It also leads to an awareness of our own limits: often we simply lack the necessary information to draw convincing conclusions.

At a time when a large part of our life is being transferred to the digital world, literature can develop valuable cognitive abilities such as concentration and the ability to slow down. With its complex character it is something of a counterweight to the tendency towards the simplification of issues, polarization and the search for easy solutions.

This essay is aimed at a wide circle of readers who are interested in education and different perspectives of the Czech education system. The topics touch more on themes from secondary education, but this is not just a guide for high-school teachers – the issues addressed here have more general relevance.

**School, literature,
the world**

The young man shook his head in disbelief. "It really is such a shame that you are into such horrid boyish fighting. You should be measuring your courage and strength against something else and in a different way. Do you really not have anything more useful and fun to do than wander the streets brawling?"

"And what are we supposed to do?" asked Vilík awkwardly, because no-one had ever spoken to him like that before.

"Oh right, of course!" said the stranger with a slightly scornful smile. "You're like most of the local lads. You read books with fantastic stories, you follow other people's adventures in the cinema – but what about you? Apart from fighting, you'll never achieve anything or experience anything because you'll never get further than the end of your street."

With a mysterious look he continued:

"I know about a lot of wonderful adventures, better than all of your fighting and running off to the cinema. Adventures where you have to prove your courage, intelligence and stamina. Truly wonderful adventures...but you're all much too lazy and not at all the sporty types."

[...]

"An odd fellow," said Jirka deep in thought. "He was practically calling us idiots, but he's right. Look at it this way: We've read books about boys our age – but have we experienced anything similar to what we've read? Apart from some of the fighting, nothing."

"Maybe, but..." objected Vilík, looking at Jirka's torn coat, "They write lots of things in books, but my dad says they're not usually true."

"But they could be true, Vilík," said Jirka brightly. "Only if we want them to be! What did that man say just then, that he knows about a lot of adventures? There's definitely something to it..." [1, pp. 8-9]

In *The Republic* and *The Laws*, Plato considers the role of art in society and comes to a definite conclusion: in comparison with the world of ideas and our world, an artwork which copies events occurring in the real world is on the lowest level. As merely an imitation of an imitation it is not worthy of our attention, which should focus on the original rather than a copy. Moreover, an artwork arouses emotions which lead the person away from rational thinking. This is why most artworks have no place in a community that is governed by reason.

The narrator in Foglar's novel *The Boys from Beaver River* offers a similar argument. Until that point, the main characters had spent their lives just reading about different adventures rather than experiencing them. They are imprisoned in a trap of inactivity because it doesn't even occur to them that they could be active agents of their own lives. The everyday world around them seems too ordinary to them in comparison with the "fantastic stories" in books or in cinemas, which are unattainable

precisely because they are fantastic. The world of stories and the world of life are incompatible, the former cannot be accessed from the latter.

Although characters in adventure stories might not differ from the readers, their actions are fantastic because they are from a story. And so the reader is paralysed: they would do anything to experience adventures like the main characters of their favourite books, but at the same time they consider it impossible. Fiction in the narrow sense of the word – a story which never happened – therefore acts like a self-fulfilling prophecy. The story described in the book never happened and can never happen, because it is described in fiction. If the main character carries out normal, feasible acts, it is their fictional status which persuades the reader that they cannot – or need not – do these acts in their life.

The humdrum lives of the two main characters, Vilík and Jirka, are filled only with boring schoolwork, brawling and wandering the streets, when in steps the figure of Rikitan like a *deus ex machina*. He is ten years older, a student of medicine, and he selflessly devotes almost all of his spare time to the boys. Under his guidance the two boys radically change their behaviour, values and what they experience each day, and begin to live a life they had only read and dreamt about before. The issue of the relationship between life and literature appears regularly in the story and real life is always understood as better – for example, when the main characters discover who the mysterious Green Monster was: “It was a nice detective story and yet quite true at the same time – not just taken from some fantastic story.” [1, p. 137]

At the end of the extract the two main characters touch on – albeit briefly – the theme of veracity in a work of literature, art and the media in general. If the story of the boys from Beaver river had come out a few decades later, the penultimate paragraph could have been seen as a postmodern joke and undisguised self-questioning. From the very outset, the writer Jaroslav Foglar urges the reader not to read books and not to trust them. Therefore, it’s impossible to even believe a novel which leads us to this mistrust. Foglar – probably unconsciously – began his narration with a variation on the so-called liar’s paradox, but his intention was educational in this instance: in the subsequent pages he formulates the ideal of an adolescent boy and constantly urges his readers to try to live up to this ideal. When writing his novels he began with specific things he had experienced as a Scout leader, which is perhaps why he didn’t think they were “fantastic stories” but more a faithful depiction of reality.

One symbol for the start of the twenty-first century could be the phrase “disinformation explosion”.¹ We have increasingly seen a weakening of the traditional institutions which guarantee truthful information – education, science and the media.² Language itself has also been undergoing changes – the expressions such as “traditional” or “truthful” that were used in

1 In 1994 the punk group *Visací zámek* already looked at this theme in a song of the same name from the album *Jako vždycky* (*As always*). In particular the passage “it’s better not to know / than become a victim / of this curse / of our century” seems quite visionary thirty years on. Cf. [2].

2 Studies from the Public Opinion Research Centre at the Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences show a gradual decrease in trust in the media over the past twenty years. Cf. [3].

the last sentence have acquired an emotional charge, they have been redefined, and the conventional positive connotations and associations they once had have been relativized, especially in recent years.

The status of authorities has also been radically transformed. Today, academic discussions are often reported in the media and different opinions are presented to the general public, but one which is not sufficiently competent to choose between them. The value of scientific consensus has been eroded by the publicly expressed dissenting views of scientists who may have less support for their opinions in the data or evidence, but who have a sufficient media profile to allow them to present their viewpoint to the whole of society.

What, of course, is not new is a section of society's lasting distrust of scientific knowledge and science as a set of methods, procedures and instruments. This historically deep-rooted doubt (reaching back even to the witch trials of the Middle Ages) plays a significant part in the calls today to verify information and distrust authority merely for being an authority.

The new means for sharing information made it possible to begin to think about the absolute democratization of knowledge, with great emphasis placed on the popularization of science. Naturally, there is an unexpected problem in trying to fulfil this enlightened ideal as it puts pressure on the individual to form their own opinion on a wide range of issues – we have here the oxymoron of the lay specialist who can work with information from areas they are completely unfamiliar with.

Over the past two centuries, many aspects of scientific knowledge have definitively moved away from the kind of knowledge a person is capable of gaining through the senses, and conclusions are often arrived at which are counterintuitive and whose validity has still not been experimentally verified. At this point, science comes into conflict with “common-sense”, which is often presented as a functional tool in the search for truth. Similar methods fail in the same way – Occam's Razor or the principle of simplicity and elegance – for it has not been the case for a long time that the simpler solution has a better likelihood of being the correct one.

The importance of this issue was plain for all to see in 2020 when the world was confronted with an unprecedented problem – the spread of a highly infectious disease, which for a short period completely changed how society functioned in almost every country in the world, whilst the long-term consequences are still not clear. What at first appeared as a purely medical problem had a very obvious social dimension in the background. When faced by a threat, society often questions the value of a democratic system and favours authoritarian tendencies, which seem more responsive from the perspective of solving crisis situations.

The goal of the Czech education system over the coming decades is to respond to these changes. The first lengthier stage was when it was important to know facts; the second shorter period was when it became necessary to know how to search for them; and now the third stage is when students and people in general will have to be taught how to classify information, judge its relevancy and understand it in the appropriate context.

At the same time, of course, is the need not only to evaluate the information itself but also its sources, as it is often necessary to choose “who to believe” in addition to “what to believe”. However, this is not a defence of argumentation ad hominem (or ab auctoritate), but a necessity for people if they are to avoid succumbing to the influx of information while maintaining the practices of (critical) thinking.³ In addition to logic, argumentation and semantics, an important role is played here by the level of literacy.

Internet users often use the abbreviation tl;dr – “too long; didn’t read” – to indicate an unwillingness to focus attention on a longer text, with a preference given to shorter messages. While the length of a text doesn’t correlate to its depth (the basis of any ideology is the reduction of key ideas to a snappy slogan), even if a metaphor is short, its analysis will always be longer and the ability to understand a dense text is therefore inextricably linked to the ability to work with information.

Throughout history, literature has been seen as having a didactic influence. With the exception of the period focusing on art for art’s sake, where attention was focused on the artwork as a distinct artefact existing essentially outwith society, a book is understood as a carrier of values. Reading, therefore, can have a positive or negative effect depending on the values the text represents.

From this perspective, attention is focused on the adolescent reader. The teaching of literature is probably part of the primary and secondary levels of all education systems, and in the case of a compulsory general education, no-one can avoid its influence (at least in countries with a Western cultural link). Reading books is – unlike Foglar’s advice for the main characters of *The Boys from Beaver River* – recommended from early childhood as a simple way to improve cognitive, communicative and social skills. The use of books as educational material obviously begs the question whether all books are equally suitable for educational use.

The school – at least in Czechia – is meant to be an apolitical, secular and neutral institution, which should help develop students’ thinking and enable them to formulate their own opinions on the basis of verifiable facts. This is not to say it is an institution without values or that it avoids issues regarding values. Education should develop mental abilities as such, it should present problems and teach students ways in

3 The word “critical” has been deliberately placed in brackets because in its essence and with its methods “critical thinking” is nothing more than thinking itself. It is more of a pragmatic pleonasm emphasizing the need to think consistently rather than differently.

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