Edukacja Filozoficzna 78/2024
ISSN 0860-3839, eISSN 2956-8269
DOI: 10.14394/edufil.2024.0035

On the Ideal of the University*

Tadeusz Czeżowski

After hearing the beautiful speeches, full of praise, I feel a slight dizziness. To regain my balance, I ask myself who and why is being praised. So, praise is given to rulers to endear oneself to them. Fortunately, I hold no power, and there is nothing to fear from me. Praise is also given to those from whom something can be gained, but I do not possess any goods to distribute. Finally, praise is given to those whom one likes; thus, I believe that this is how I can explain today's ceremony. I wish to confess that I care deeply about human kindness and respect, and I strive to deserve them; if I can receive them, I seek to reciprocate with sincere and deep gratitude. Therefore, I thank our University from the bottom of my heart for the precious medal as a visible sign of my connection with the University; I thank all the older and younger colleagues and friends who contributed to the beautiful Commemorative Book that I received today; I also thank the Scientific Society in Toruń, of which I have the honour of being a member, for publishing it; I also thank those who organized today's ceremony, those who attended and spoke, and finally, those who, unable to be with us now, sent written wishes and expressions of friendship. I also value the bonds of mutual trust, kindness, and understanding that connect me with people of different convictions, as I believe that with goodwill, what unites us is more important than what divides us.

Ceremonies like today's are, in a sense, a summary of one's accumulated life experiences; with this thought, I ask you to grant a little more of your attention to reflect on matters that have always been particularly dear to me.

I wish to speak about some issues regarding the role and activities of universities, as I envision them. I have been fortunate to be connected with the university from an early age, first as a student, then working in its administration as the Sec-

* T. Czeżowski, *O ideale uniwersytetu*, in: T. Czeżowski, *Pisma z etyki i teorii wartości*, Ossolineum, Wrocław 1989, pp. 237–243.

retary of Jan Kazimierz University in Lvov, later as an official in the Department of Higher Education at the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Education in Warsaw, and finally as a professor at Stefan Batory University in Vilnius and Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń. I have observed up close the transformations that universities have undergone over the past few decades, from the Polish university system before World War I, when it was still under foreign rule; I actively collaborated in organizing higher education in the newly established Polish state, and worked with students in two different and, in many respects, contrasting centres. This has provided me with a basis for much reflection on the organization and activities of higher education institutions, especially universities, and I wish to share some of these reflections with the esteemed audience today.

Our universities have undergone a long process of transformation before my eyes and are undoubtedly facing further evolution. This evolution is, in fact, occurring worldwide. It is driven by numerous causes, of which I will mention a few here. The first is the so-called massification of culture, which is manifested in our field as a significantly increased influx of young people eager to learn and who undoubtedly have the moral right to do so, while the existing facilities are often unable to accommodate them. Secondly, the tremendous expansion of science, with the emergence of ever-new specialized fields, research methods, discoveries, and an overwhelming flood of scientific literature, has meant that the traditional university system and its methods of operation have long ceased to be adequate, necessitating the search for new structural forms. Finally, the relationship between science and other areas of social life has changed. Science is increasingly involved in solving problems arising from the complexities of social, political, and economic relationships, and its applications are becoming more diverse and increasingly dependent on emerging needs. All these factors culminate in an atmosphere of general anxiety gripping humanity in the face of the cultural and civilizational changes that are taking place before our eyes and are signs of the birth of a new era. This anxiety particularly affects the youth of many countries, who sense the emerging shape of the world more than consciously understand it. Yet, even in this new configuration of relationships, we must recognize the characteristics that are permanently inherent to the university that enable it to fulfil its tasks, and thanks to which it remains an indispensable component of modern culture.

The fundamental assumption of the university structure is its dual role as a research institution and a professional school, preparing students for so-called academic professions that require mastery of scientific methods. This dual role was inherent in medieval universities from their inception – an excellent embodiment of this was the figure of the precursor of the university idea, Abelard. However, this role was later lost as universities lagged behind the development of modern science. Hugo Kołłątaj clearly recognized and reinstated this dual role when, in his reform of the Kraków University and the University of Vilnius on behalf of the Education Commission, he gave them the character of scholarly societies. Later, after Kołłątaj, Wilhelm von Humboldt, the organizer of the University of Berlin in 1811, implemented the same idea, contributing to its widespread acceptance across Europe. Yet, this seemingly indisputable assumption has been challenged from two sides. On one hand, various types of higher professional schools have emerged, with a tendency to integrate them into common organizational frameworks with universities. A poor beginning in this direction in our country was the 1920 framework law on academic schools, whose negative consequences persist to this day despite numerous reorganizations; these common organizational frameworks burden universities, lowering them to the level of higher professional schools, primarily at the expense of research tasks. On the other hand, research institutes that focus solely on research are thriving in competition with universities, attracting highly qualified staff and funding, thereby weakening the creative potential of universities.

I believe the difference between a higher professional school and a university should be linked to the difference in educational goals: a higher professional school primarily aims to educate standardized professionals, while a university focuses on cultivating creative individuals – which, of course, does not mean that there are no creative individuals among graduates of higher professional schools, as this also depends on individual abilities, nor does it mean that university graduates cannot become good professionals; there will be both creative individuals and those who, lacking a spark of creative talent, will still acquire a solid education, though in a different manner than at a higher professional school. The teaching methods at universities differ from those at higher professional schools: the latter generally follow a strict programme, while universities should – at least in theory – feature a variety of methods and programmatic flexibility, and to maintain uniform knowledge levels among graduates of different universities,

it is sufficient to set examination requirements, as was the case in our pre-war universities, particularly in the humanities and mathematical-natural sciences faculties. Due to the educational goals of higher professional schools, students are burdened with mandatory classes, especially various exercises, while at universities, students should be given more freedom, with an emphasis on their active attitude, self-directed learning, and guidance in this direction. Lectures on so-called auxiliary subjects, where textbook knowledge from readily available books is presented, are often unnecessary; students should consult textbooks and master the material through their own work. Likewise, excessive exercises combined with lectures as review sessions, where students are guided step by step, are also unnecessary; they consume time that could be better used for independent student work.

I used the phrase "creative individuality," which now needs to be refined. Creators come in various forms, and so do individualities. Therefore, it is important to agree on what types of creative individuality can and should be the goal of university education. People differ from each other in temperament and abilities, which from a young age lead to differences in inclinations and preferences; we are naturally drawn to what we can do smoothly, effectively, and effortlessly, while we tend to avoid tasks that are cumbersome, difficult, and laborious. The university receives young people who have already been shaped and selected to some extent through primary and secondary education; the university further educates them, primarily – though not exclusively – intellectually. Educating individuality means comprehensively developing its potential, with creativity achieved through fostering independent thinking; a person will not be creative if they merely adopt established patterns of thought. On the contrary, a unique, independent perspective on reality and a well-reasoned personal opinion are signs of a creative mind. To achieve such independent thinking, three things are required: intellectual culture, moral culture, and aesthetic culture.

Intellectual culture: It is provided by the university in the chosen field of study, not only in terms of subject knowledge but, more importantly, by immersing students in scientific research methods that require precision in formulating and justifying scientific statements – this precision being a crucial component of this culture. University education should also offer insight into the general theory of science through the study of philosophical sciences, particularly logic in its broadest sense, which includes the logical theory of language and methodology

of sciences. The intellectual culture developed through such education makes the person who has acquired it sensitive to truth and falsehood, the correctness of thought, and logical errors; it awakens – one could say – "logical conscience," which is the basis for self-criticism as well as criticism of others. This criticism serves as a shield against the often distorting influence of emotions and ambitions, prejudices, and superstitions they provoke. It guards against the temptation to use dishonest rhetorical tricks, sophisms, or insinuations, thus instilling integrity and righteousness in thinking. It allows one to rise above what clouds objectivity with biased elements and to overcome dogmatic obstinacy. It provides the ability to understand opposing positions and opens the path to rational tolerance, which seeks not to destroy the opponent but to win them over. In this way, intellectual culture is linked with social culture. It elevates people above their divisive differences and connects them through bonds of universal human solidarity.

However, scientific training, grounded in intellectual culture, also fosters other social virtues and moral qualities. These are especially: (a) perseverance in overcoming obstacles, which counters discouragement and indifference, (b) systematicity in work, as opposed to casualness, involving consistent and methodical effort according to a carefully considered plan, (c) precision – the opposite of superficiality – meaning thorough attention to detail without leaving gaps or oversights, (d) diligence – the opposite of carelessness – entailing taking responsibility for the completion of tasks that need to be done, (e) integrity – the opposite of deceit – meaning avoiding presenting pretence and clichés as valuable things, and closely related to this, (f) modesty, a brake on vanity and the desire for cheap success, (g) courage of conviction, which does not yield to authority but seeks the truth, even if it requires overcoming laziness, comfort, and involves sacrifice, loss of benefits, and exposure to persecution and hardship.

However, intellectual culture alone is not sufficient to shape a complete personality; it must be complemented by moral culture and aesthetic culture. Both remain closely linked to intellectual culture. I have already mentioned that scientific training also develops certain social virtues and moral qualities; furthermore, it cultivates sensitivity to the beauty of research subjects and the beauty of scientific theories themselves. Culture in both of these areas is developed by fostering moral and aesthetic attitudes; these attitudes involve the readiness to make moral and aesthetic judgements, meaning to perceive what is good and beautiful,

just as attention is the readiness to perceive what exists. Culture is knowledge and skill. Moral culture is possessed by those who understand what is good and what is bad, and can evaluate one's own and others' behaviour accordingly, while striving to do good and avoid evil. Similarly, aesthetic culture involves knowledge of what is beautiful and a concern for beauty in action and throughout life – beauty being order, moderation, and harmony.

Creative personality, in the outlined sense – active, not passive, pioneering new paths rather than merely following established ones – is needed in every social domain, especially in leadership positions. Creative personalities should first and foremost be university professors and docents because only such individuals will be able to nurture creative personalities among their students. The role of a professor encompasses three main responsibilities: research, teaching, and administration. Depending on their interests and abilities, one or another of these responsibilities may take precedence, but none should be neglected. I do not delve into well-known details because I want to focus on one issue that I consider worthy of attention due to tendencies already noticeable before the war, which occur more often and more clearly today. When does a student cease to be a student and become ready for scientific work? The answer seems simple: when they obtain their diploma. However, the issue is not so straightforward institutionally. Various types of supplementary studies have emerged, such as doctoral programmes, which can be seen as extensions of university studies. It is understandable that a mature but novice researcher needs and seeks guidance from their academic supervisors, but the important issue is what kind of guidance this should be. The answer seems simple: helpful but not restrictive. In the past, there may have been times when this help was insufficient; a professor would review a candidate's completed dissertation for a doctoral degree and their role was limited to approval or critique. Today, there is a tendency towards the opposite: supervision often takes on part of the tasks that a beginning but scientifically mature researcher should solve independently. This primarily concerns the doctoral dissertation, its topic formulation, and development. The main topic of a doctoral dissertation is an essential element of the work and, as such, should be the responsibility of the author. The professor's role here is merely supportive as an experienced senior colleague, who can offer advice if, for example, the candidate cannot access necessary literature or lacks the experimental apparatus. Is the issue perhaps too difficult? Let the young researcher find out for

themselves by facing failure and potentially abandoning the topic; this is also a useful and educational trial. I recall a recent example where a professor was firmly opposed to the topic chosen by a doctoral student, claiming it would not yield results. However, the student persisted, and the result was an elegant dissertation. I consider it entirely inappropriate for a professor to forbid a doctoral student from working on a particular research topic simply because the professor intends to pursue it themselves – whether it be a historical figure, event, social phenomenon, etc. Research topics are free and are not proprietary; dealing with a subject someone else has explored is not plagiarism. Authorship only becomes relevant once a topic is framed as a research question; thus, formulating the research question is an act of creativity. As mentioned, framing the research question is the doctoral student's responsibility and is an indicator of their independence. And, above all, it is wholly inappropriate to impose a topic and research question on a candidate, as sometimes happens when a professor wishes to use doctoral students as assistants in their own research. I consider such behaviour to be a restriction of the freedom a doctoral student deserves, and in such cases, it is difficult to determine to what extent they are independent. The professor's help during the writing of the dissertation should primarily involve discussing the issues raised by the doctoral student, either directly in conversation or at seminar meetings; under no circumstances should the professor impose their own ideas. Requiring corrections or revisions also has its limits, exceeding which may turn the dissertation from an individual work into a joint work of the author and their professor. It is even worse when such demands undermine the completion of the dissertation, as there are regrettable examples of this. If a dissertation is to serve as evidence of the doctoral student's abilities and achievements, it fulfils this role with its errors, not when it is polished by the professor. It is then the task of the reviewers to assess the dissertation's value and point out the deficiencies that the author should address before submitting it for publication, thus acknowledging their debt to the reviewers.

Eventually, there comes a time when a young researcher not only becomes fully independent as a scholar but also begins to surpass their professor in knowledge and achievements. This is natural; the progress of science involves the new generation surpassing its predecessors. However, this is also a critical moment in the relationship between the student and the professor. The professor must understand and accept this situation, and if they possess enough inner substance –

or simply wisdom – a lasting and close relationship with the student can develop, the kind of relationship that fosters a research school, the highest reward that can come to a teacher.

It is time to conclude these reflections. I may be exposing myself to the objection that I am painting an idealized picture, far from reality, and indulging in fantasy. To this, I would reply: let us not dismiss dreams, for they often contain a potential correction to an imperfect reality.