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The Ethical Limits of Contemporary University Transformations?

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Abstract

The article raises the question of the ethical limits of contemporary university transformations. It is caused by a concern about the future development of the university, when on the one hand, the ongoing transformations are necessary as a response to the challenges of the new sociocultural reality and on the other hand, they harbor the menace of the loss of the university’s specific character. The menace comes as a consequence of the fact that the university can no longer exist exclusively on the basis of the professor’s professional culture. New economic conditions of the world (pragmatism, commercialization of all structures) have opened the doors for corporate culture. How can the university sustain the balance of two cultures? The article proposes seeking an answer to this question in the sphere of university ethics.

1. Introduction

The question raised in the title of this paper is the most vital among those that have to be addressed by the contemporary classical university. An active theoretical and practical work in the field of contemporary university’s transformations is a response to the changing social context (Barber, Donnelly, Rizvi, 2013; Readings, 1996; Bathmaker, 2003; Webster, 2012 etc.), which sets new requirements for higher education. The transformations are carried out in the name of creating a university that is relevant to contemporaneity, and, therefore, that differs from its existent classical model. All types of universities, including research, corporate, entrepreneurial, professional, science and technology ones, are examples of transformations of the classical university. There is one common

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feature among numberless and limitless changes: new emerging university models embrace the marketing laws modus operandi, and are coming over, to a various degree, to a commercial basis of functioning. One cannot deny the necessity of transformations, in the course of which the university responds to sociocultural, science and educational challenges of the present day. However, the question arises as to whether these transformations can really be limitless. If there are limits to university changes, where and how can we find them?

The hypothesis that is proposed in this paper for discussion directs the research attention in the quest of limits to transformations of the contemporary university into the sphere of ethics.

The aim of the paper is to substantiate the transformations of the contemporary university and its self-identity search in the context of ethical problems of the lofty university profession. The goals of the paper are: 1) to argue the ethical problem as a limit to university transformations and as a way to ensure the continuity in the development of its classical idea, its criteria and its mission; 2) to define the content of the Idea of the university that is relevant to the present time in the context of the ethos ideas of the really proper, and concretize this question in connection with the main characteristics of classical ethics; 3) to argue in favor of the identification of the contemporary university in its necessity and possibility of combining two applied forms of ethics, that is, the classical ethics of the university profession and the corporate business ethics. Both of these forms of ethics claim their rights to existence on equal grounds, and each puts in a claim on expressing the university’s essence.

2. Scope and methods of research

The problem field of the paper is determined by addressing the following question: will not the transformations of the university lead to its loss of its specific nature as a social structure with a special values-fraught predetermination in society and culture? And will not corporate ethics come to dominate in the university to such a degree that it may result in turning it into an economic corporation? This problem question makes us turn to a quest for such limits of transformations which would not allow the university’s specific nature to disappear. Russian researchers have already posed this question (Moskvina, 2014, pp. 36-42; Rozov, 2014, pp. 26-35; Ruzankina, 2014, pp. 29-33; Zinevich 2014, pp.37-43; Senashenko, 2011, p.99 etc.). However, it is expressed only in a theoretical form, and so far it finds no solution in the university’s modernization practices. This conclusion can be confirmed in the reasoning of the participants of the Round Table Discussions organized in summing up the extended meeting of the editorial board of the journal “Vyssheye obrazovaniye v Rossi” that took place in 2012 at Moscow State University of Printing named after Ivan Fyodorov (“The Idea of the University: challenges of the contemporary epoch”, 2012, pp. 35-63).

Theoretically, the question posed above about a search for limits of transformations of the classical university can be connected with solving the question concerning the very possibility of transformations of classical structures. Can classical structures be transformed in general? This is a question of principle for every sphere of human activities. Particularly frequently this question arises in artistic creative work. Alongside with addressing the question whether it is possible to transform or interpret classical art, whether anyone can be allowed to interfere in a classical work of art with thoughts and actions which are dictated by contemporaneity, there are softer variants: to what extent are interpretations as transformations possible and where do the limits of interpretations lie?

The hypothesis advanced in this paper can be reduced to the idea that the limits of transformations lie in the field of ethics. The necessity of such an approach to defining transformation limits is outlined in the draft of the “Declaration on Ethical Principles of Scientific Activities” prepared for CIS member states by a group of researchers from the Institute of Philosophy of the Russian Academy of Sciences (Apresyan, Kubar, Yudin, 2011). This question has been elaborated in the study textbook “University Ethics” by Prof. B.I. Bakshtanovsky, 2014).

This hypothesis finds its justification in the fact that the content of the subject of ethics, the universal morality, has been built on the basis of the laws, activities and behavior of human beings, which have been historically tested as favoring life ensuring processes. Morally right or ethical is that which supports life and prevents death. This is the ethical arche, eternal and absolute, on which ethics rests, and which is not liable to transformations. It is on this basis that the solution of the main and leitmotif problem of good and evil is possible. Ethical values are the sphere that should be considered as the limiting boundary to which interpretation of classical structures is possible. In different spheres, this borderline assumes various forms. Thus, in an artistic work the limiting boundary may be determined by the creator’s taste because it gives life to a literary text, musical piece or painter’s canvas. The taste of the author
of an interpretation-transformation does not allow a classical work of art to break down, to leave the life of art’s real artistic creation. Taste as an ethical category ensures the life of classical works of art.

When classical structures of the university are considered, this question, obviously, should be addressed in a similar way: if we want to save the classical university, then it is ethics and its principles of preservation of historical heritage that must help to achieve this goal. But what keeps the university alive? What does not allow it to break down as an educational institution and turn into an economic corporation?

3. Results

3.1. “New universality”. The contemporary statement of the question about universal morality

The contemporary range of problems changes its character and content in the direction of reflexive comprehending of the notion of universal morality as its subject. It is connected with constructing the “new universality”, when nations and peoples of the world as well as professional, cultural and other vital regions have become interconnected on a global scale. The universality of any separate region – a country, a nation or a culture, as it seems, is losing its seclusion, and gives up the principle of basing itself on a separate substance and its own arche. The borderlines of the separate are erased; everything becomes engulfed in global interconnectedness under the action of the new principle of constructing unity, the principle of communication. The ontology of the social reality is fixed today in the notions of “communicative action” (Habermas, 1983), “space of flows”, “network society” (Castells, 1996), “liquid sociality” (Bauman, 1998), which all speak of globalization unity. However, on the other hand, intercultural communication of different countries of the planet, global links of the professional world as well as communicative and interdisciplinary interactions in science and education testify to the emergence of globalization universalism not as an absolute unification obliterating all national, cultural and professional differences, but as a social and cultural world that has a new content. The configuration of this world is formed from new social structures which appear at the world communication junctions and borderlines. They are based on spontaneous, nonlinear interrelations of various sociocultural spheres that are nonprognosticated in their development. This configuration displays a new principle of world division. In the world’s new geographical, cultural, science-educational and professional configuration there appear “interregions” which were not observed in the past: “interspheres” or “intermonde” (Waldenfels, 1997), “intersubjectness” or “interpersonalness” (Rubinstein, 1957, p.54), “interexistence” (Batishchev, 1986, pp. 20-27). The universal assumes a new character: it does not emerge any more on single substance and on a single truth of existence. It rejects the classical unity based on substance, a single principle of construction and a logical and rational arrangement of the picture. The universal unity is presented now in the image of mobile, nonlinearly directed and kaleidoscopically interwoven as a “tangle of playing kittens” or “macaroni in a pan” (Nordstrom and Ridderstrale, 2002) communications. The contemporary universum is the universum of many things; it is a unity of plurality, when many are presented in an organic single bond. “Multiple identity” is a notion that came as a response to the new – communicative – character of the present-day social reality. The specific nature of communication as an ontological connection consists in the fact that it does not demand the elimination of cultural, professional, mental and other differences. They cannot be “checked with algebra” and with single logic, for they immanently contain distinct qualities and are saturated with them in the unity of the “new universality”. The universality of plurality is not a unity that is totally bonded with substance, as it was asserted in the classical thought, but it is a liberalized communication of the plural. Different bases distinguish the principle of construction, the specific nature and character of classical and contemporary social ontologies. Difference is what society keeps as a unity of plurality. It disappears when social institutes are not distinguished because the very possibility of communication disappears.

The new notion of universality is important for the theme indicated in the paper’s title as it shows the direction of the search for bonding ontological basis from the perspective of classical structures and within the framework of nonclassical thinking simultaneously. In all cases, the ethics system comes forward as such basis. However, the subject of classical ethics is universal morality with its single substance, common principles and basis. Under the conditions of the new notion of universality this subject is seen in its multi-variety bonded by communicative relations. How is this theoretical reasoning interpreted in the reality of the present-day university?
3.2. Communication of professional and commercial university structures of the contemporary university

Any area of culture, including the university, distinguishes itself and is distinct from other cultural spheres on the basis of a normative value system of basic professions. For the university such a system is academic and research activity. Following the classical criteria in Wilhelm von Humboldt’s definition, the university has been carrying out its basic activities in regime autonomous from the state and society. Therefore, its moral-value aspect has been entirely based on the specific nature of one kind of activity – that of professorial and instructional. This kind of activity was characterized as a high status profession. One high status profession formed its university ethics and was its universal basis. The university did not divide its fundamental and absolute basis and did not subdivide it into various applied or “small” kinds of ethics (Bakshtanovsky, 2014), which, in the conditions of university autonomy, had no need for entering the sphere of the university area.

However, contemporaneity is changing the situation. The university continues to be autonomous, but the understanding of autonomy has essentially changed. To a great extent, the present-day autonomy coincides with the state’s noninterference in the sphere of its full-value financing. The division of universities into separate groups, such as “leading”, “world-level”, “professional”, “research”, “entrepreneurial”, “corporate” etc., testifies to a different approach of the state to their financing, and initiates universities to come over to the regime of self-financing. This perspective on the university autonomy introduces into the university economic and commercial activities. This, in its turn, means that the contemporary university and university ethics are now based on two components: on professional, that is, professorial, and on commercial activities. This situation speaks about the breaking up of the universal basis. As a consequence, there appear applied forms of ethics. In which of these ethics forms should one look for transformation limits? With the appearance of a complicated university structure, the single ethical arch disappears, and, in connection with that, it becomes difficult to answer the question concerning the ethical set of problems: what is good, evil, justice, responsibility etc. There is its own understanding of the “basis” in each component of the multiple universality. What are the foundations of their existence? Communication? Competition?

Numerous empirical observations allow us to draw a conclusion that communication of the basic university profession and commercial activities represents a “new universality”, which corresponds to the present-day notion of the “university”. However, a number of questions arise. Does the “new universality” take into account the plurality of ethical paradigms? If it does, in this case, what place in the university morality is taken by the ethical system of the basic profession, that is, the professorial activities? How do commercial activities, which are not the university’s distinctive features, conduct themselves in ethical respect? Do they give a possibility for a new self-definition of the professor’s activities, which appears in the communicative atmosphere of commercialization?

All questions may be resolved in understanding that in the present-day university the traditional university ethics has come across the corporate ethics. Historically, these two forms of ethics were constructed on different foundations: the ethics of the “high status” profession and the ethics of corporations. If the first one is based on creative service of science and spiritual mission, the second form of ethics is characterized by business entrepreneurship and bureaucratic organization in the name of profit. The present-day university finds itself in a situation when there are two cultures coexisting in it: the professional culture characterized by its orientation to the training of university students with the aim of achieving professional qualification and the corporate culture, which performs a managerial-regulatory function.

Is an organic unity of these two cultures possible? Can there be a university ethics as a sum of these two forms of ethics?

The introduction into the contemporary university of a commercial corporate basis brings down the university autonomy, and the professor’s freedom in his or her activities appears to be more restricted. His or her mission in serving science is reduced and delegated to the ethics of a business enterprise. And “service to science” is transformed into “work for science” (Bakshtanovsky, 2014, p.16). Teaching is that field of professional activities where the ethics of service to science must predominate.
4. Conclusion

Thus, are there limits to transformations of the classical university? The hypothesis formulated at the start of this paper already implicitly presupposed the rhetoric character of this question. It contained in itself a positive answer, even though it oriented us to substantiating the area where one must look for the stated limits. The authors’ position is that this area is the ethics of professional activities specific to the university, that is, the ethics of professorial activities. Therefore, a communication of professorial and corporate cultures in the contemporary university is the reality, which must be unconditionally reckoned with. But which of these cultures preserves the university’s life? Certainly, the professorial culture and professor ethics. The corporate ethics is what allows the university to undergo transformations under the influence of new conditions of existence. The professor ethics sets limits to transformations in order to preserve university’s life and its noble mission of serving science. Only unity as communication rejecting any domination of professional or corporate ethics (in present-day literature it is referred to as “university ethics”) can ensure the continuity between the classical university and those university forms that have grown nowadays around it. It is the realization of the principle of continuity and inheritance that preserves the university and prevents a possibility of turning it into an economic organization.

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