

The Teacher as an Authority: Between Heracles and Gregor Samsa

Michal Černý

Abstract

This study analyses two models of authority in the perspective of philosophy of education – one associated with the Herculean myth and its romantic re-reading, and the other with Latour's interpretation of Gregor Samsa concerning teaching. The study analyses two models of authority and attempts to point out a particular crisis in the understanding of authority in the context of critical perceptions of modernity.

Keywords

Latour; Kafka; Heracles; myths; authority; romanticism; education; philosophy of education

Introduction

This study focuses on deconstructing the understanding of the teacher as an isolated authority, which is supposed to be a kind of romantic reading of the Greek hero who alone overcomes all the difficulties and saves the world. He contrasts it with the notion associated with Latour and his interpretation of Gregor Samsa (Kafka 2009), who can radically change perspective but cannot save the world (Latour 2021, 2). The theorem that the teacher should be the authority is rarely challenged publicly (Elliott 2009). This problem is analysed from the perspective of the philosophy of education.

The Christian concept of the teacher is often worked with as an ideal and archetype of Jesus Christ as teacher and authority. A good teacher should be like him, and although such an ideal is impossible to achieve, it is essential to strive for it. This model took a strong shape in the 18th and, mainly, 19th centuries and represented a specific ideal model of the catechist.

Against this model, we can contrast the second Weberian ideal type, namely the Gregor Samsa from Kafka's novel *The Metamorphosis*, which is interpreted in a specific way by Latour (2021). This model anticipates the need for a radical change of perspective, abandoning some traditional ideas about how and what teaching in schools is constituted (Šíp 2019, 55–7), and a fundamental transformation of what it means to be an authority. While for the first conception, which we will refer to in this study as Herculean, it is a fundamental identity-shaping principle of the educator, it is almost dangerous in the second conception (the Gregorian).

The connection with the technological revolution (Floridi 2014, 167–8; Benedikter and Fathi 2021), with a change in the concept of authority, will be essential to our study, which has transformed the world in which education occurs and can occur. We want to emphasise at this point that this is a discourse systematically developed by Pope Francis and followed by Pope Leo XIV. (Francis 2024; Cernuzio 2025). Both popes speak of the transformation of the world in the context of the technological revolution, which has brought about change in the realm of technology and transformed the entire social reality. Technologies are accelerating and changing the world's complexity, dynamics, and globalisation, so seeking new forms of conceptualising the phenomenon of authority is necessary.

The Herculean model

Typical of Near Eastern mythology are the narratives of heroic epics, in which we can see several dominant characteristics, the explication of which is essential to this analysis. The roles of the heroes feature personalities endowed with divine strength or power, but at the same time, possessing specific human characteristics. Thus, Gilgamesh is two-thirds god and one-third human; Achilles (Ἀχιλλεύς) is invulnerable beyond the heel; Heracles (Ἡρακλῆς) is the son of Zeus and Alcmena. This structure of a certain partial divinization is essential.

As Skalický points out, if we analyse the psychological narratives that justify the existence of religion, the dimension of the superiority and subordination of man will be present in them (Skalický 2003, 158–60). It is essential to these mythological narratives that the divine qualities of the hero enable him to perform great heroic acts (Stuhlemer 2017). These great deeds are subsequently the source of their authority and respect. It is essential to point out that many of these narratives are conceived as a form of challenging comfort and formal order (Gilgamesh becomes famous when he exceeds the expectations of his office, Heracles must deal with the challenges of Eurystheus). Authority consists of performing heroic deeds against the banal world's ordinary order. Heracles, after all, is the only one who can join the gods on Olympus. In Christian terms, we might say that he sleeps himself. Self-salvation and self-assertion lie at the heart of this myth.

Thus, one becomes a good person or authority in three steps:

- 1) Deification, in a process of a certain divinization, in which he acquires an aspect of power and glory that is inseparable from society. The key point is that with this type of hero, it is not easy to say why they are heroes or to emulate their achievement; they are unique through a form of favour from the gods that is rationally unavailable and unanalysable. In the modern narrative, we would speak here of the presence of a particular personal charm or charisma that is unavailable to others, unearned and impossible to possess.
- 2) Individual acceptance of a task, the performance of great miracles, and commitment. *Heroic virtue* is linked to the actual construction of the myth in which the individual overcoming obstacles and achieving a goal is the focus. Heroic epics do not question the existence of a readily available single explicit goal to be achieved; in principle,

everything is clear from the outset and at the same time, set up to be just beyond the capabilities of the ordinary person.

3) Isolation plays a crucial role in Greek mythology; it can be from the rejection of the environment, betrayal or just one's own story. The key point, however, is that the hero does not need anyone to achieve his goal. The goal is his own; it is what he possesses, what is within his power to achieve.

Such a construction of authority is strongly reflected in teachers' ideas as authorities in the period since the beginning of Romanticism. Romanticism returns to Greek mythology and rediscovers a hero who must be followed. That or whether one perishes is not important; what is crucial is a form of *κένωσις* and self-sacrifice, an inner turmoil and emotional outburst to accomplish the task. In this educational understanding, one often sees that the teacher should be a role model and that teaching is not a job but a mission. After all, the word mission in German (Mission), Italian (missione), Swedish (uppdrag), Greek (αποστολή) and other languages refers to some external (divine) justification for action that cannot be avoided, as the biblical story of Jonah demonstrates.

In the context of the philosophy of education, the key message of this perspective is this: education aims to find a specific mission, to profile a uniquely autonomous personality equipped to overcome obstacles to achieve its life mission. Problems or obstacles in the world are only certain retarders that slow down the process of reaching the goal. Authenticity here lies in achieving an external, enduring, explicit goal. The good life does not take great account of the self and one's needs and emotions (psychologically, we can see here a form of disconnection from experience), but of the heroic virtues that lead to achieving predetermined goals.

This conception has many advantages, which are strongly represented in the educational landscape. First, it simplifies a world that has become illegible and opaque to many people through its complexity (Beck 2009, 76–80). This model allows both to accept authorities that can be followed and trusted, and makes available simple solutions and an externally constructed task. This means that on the one hand, it places high demands on the person (“do not sulk, do not complain, and do not work”), but at the same time, it essentially absolves the person of responsibility. Thus, we can see the same mental structure that Pope Francis referred to as clericalistic in the Church, albeit sometimes with less power-discursive factors (Loffeld 2024, 138–43).

This model also encounters significant limits – our world is complex and complicated. The notion of an individual heroically solving climate change or geopolitical tensions alone is nonsensical (Bělohorský 2021, 290–8, 320–5). The fixation on the actions of the individual and isolated acts as expressions of heroism fundamentally mismatches the reality of the world we inhabit. As Bauman points out, many former virtues are today's vices and therefore do not reflect the complexity and mutability of (Bauman 2013).

Real problems can only be solved by deep collaboration with a willingness to rethink one's views, attitudes and practices. The significant ethical challenges of the contemporary world are

not solvable at the individual level but are social. This does not mean that the individual does not matter, but rather that predetermined goals and individualistic ethics do not lead to results, but are maladaptive behaviours. However, we are likely to ask what the authority of a teacher should look like. In that case, many of the population will demand just a Heracleian teacher.

The Gregor Samsa model

Bruno Latour offers a fundamentally different model when he retells Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (Kafka 2009). Latour says that we have come to see the transformed Gregor Samsa as an anomaly that does not belong in the world. To cease to be human and become a bug does not belong in the order of things. The family proceeds by locking Gregor in a room, trying to hide him from the eyes of the world, hoping that something will change, that he will come back to his senses.

Latour says that we mostly read this narrative as the family being the “normal” one and Gregor being the “weird” one who should be normalised or pushed out of the public space. The situation is different, says Latour – the world we inhabit has changed so much since the emergence of modernity that transformation is the only thing that makes sense. We must change ways of looking at the world, perspective, ontological models, and narratives; we must not remain trapped in mental models that no longer apply and cannot apply today. Gregor's family is getting worse, crisis piles on crisis, but the parents will not ask themselves whether they should change too; they would rather live in a culture of decline than radically question the need for ontological transformation (Latour 2021, chap. 1).

The fact that Gregor climbs the ceiling and leaves a trail behind him is not an ornament of the story. Gregor must undergo an ontological transformation and view the world differently. Crucially, he does not force anyone else to transform; he merely offers his example and authenticity as a path of reciprocity and search. This bug needs others; without them, it will die. This transformation is driven by the need for a different perspective on authority in a changing world (due to technology). We are facing problems – hyperobjects (Bělohradský 2021, 290–8) – that we cannot respond meaningfully using traditional forms of authority.

Gregor did not choose his task, nor was it handed to him by the gods; he did not do it alone. His story is the story of a form of critical reflection on banality (framed in Kafka's form of employment), which at some point proves to be completely untenable. Gregor does not shout; he has no heroic virtue; he invites a change of perspective (μετάνοια).

In the Christian tradition, μετάνοια is often interpreted in a fundamentally simplistic way – it is supposed to be a rejection of the bad life and an embrace of the new good one. John the Baptist is key to understanding what μετάνοια is; he does not tell people what to do after being immersed in the Jordan. John is a prophet of critical discernment, of judging the present life, and the future is the task here that all Israel has in common. A prophet is never a prophet for himself – even the least accepted – his relationship to the people constitutes Jeremiah's identity. The goal of the prophet is the conversion of the people.

The Hebrew term navi (נָבִיא) refers to the interaction of humans and God; the prophet is seen as if he were only a mediator. Honesty in mediation measures the authenticity and purity of the

prophet. It is characteristic of the Jewish tradition that the rabbi does not typically assume the role of the analyst, nor does he relinquish his position as an authority figure. Instead, he is known to employ a method of inquiry that involves posing questions or presenting riddles. The notion of truth is not objectifiable in itself; instead, it is revealed through lived experience and a sincere pursuit of truth, which is not the exclusive domain of authority. This perspective is typical of Kafka and his works.

Pope Francis spoke of the relationship between education and critical thinking (Francesco 2024). We believe he was emphasising precisely this capacity of *διάκριση* to be able to assess a situation from a perspective other than that of a particular self-narrative. Critical thinking does not cling to one view or perspective but considers and assesses multiple options, a counterpart to the linearity of being in the Heracleian narrative. Such a procedure relativises the easy (a priori) constituted categories to some extent. Meaning emerges in which one has a stake. Vocation is not a question of the external voice of God, but of authenticity to oneself. It should be noted that Latour's Christian intellectual background is reflected in his conception of authority, as discussed by Gregory Samsa. In contrast, Kafka's work is inspired by Judaism. The concept of authority in their field completely differs from how it was conceived in Greek mythology. Rather than drawing attention to itself, authority shows the way to others. Like an isolated romantic hero, it is not isolated but refers beyond its ego and interests.

An authority that suddenly cannot be a tool for simplifying or making the world more transparent does not have ready-made solutions, nor does it create the traditional model of certainty that is usually expected of educational practice in psychological and pedagogical contexts. It can be argued that an essential feature of Christianity is uncertainty – a belief or trust in one's ability to discern, seek, find, fall, and give up – but this is often not easily grasped in the space of the school (Groot 2006). Thus, key critiques will come both from positions of efficacy and the psychology of certainty, but also from critiques directed towards a form of elitism.

This model relies heavily on a consistent trinitarian concept – Jesus is always acting in the Spirit with the Father, emphasising that he is doing the Father's will, that whoever sees him sees the Father. Jesus thus does not appear as “de deo uno” but as the Son, assuming relationality with the Father. This relationality is dynamic and linked to the transformation that made the incarnation possible. The act of *σάρκωσις* presupposes a dynamic movement of change. The Spirit “blows where it will” (John 3:8) as it manifests the life of the Trinity.

Conclusion

The transformation of authority in a technologized and complex world is a central theme in the philosophy and theology of education. Conversely, it is noteworthy that these phenomena receive comparatively scant attention within this theoretical framework. The present study proffered a particular conceptualisation of teacher authority, exemplified by two Weberian archetypes: a model associated with the charismatic personality of Heracles. He conceptualises authority as an undeserved external gift that rightfully belongs to him as a person who leads

others. A leader of this kind must be able to make decisions and offer solutions that are easy to understand. In contemporary society, undergoing a significant transformation, he proffers a paradigm of a more straightforward and more comprehensible world, wherein individuals can ascertain their place through his charisma and to which they can allocate (part of) their responsibility.

The second type is Gregor Samsa, an authority striving for transformation, change, and critical discernment. This form of authority is not driven by personal ambition or the pursuit of individual recognition. Instead, it is characterised by a commitment to facilitating a collective exploration, rather than imposing a definitive solution. The concept of authority in this context does not signify a personal endowment. Still, it is a social role that aims to facilitate a pivotal moment in modern society: the emancipation of the individual, their authenticity, and their responsibility to the collective.

This analysis has demonstrated that, despite the first type being strongly favoured in society as a political leader and educator, its conceptualisation does not permit it to respond to the demands of the complex world we currently find ourselves in. Romanticism represents a highly productive form of narrative. However, a narrative that constructs the world with too high a degree of simplification to work with it in education. It is the task of teachers to change this authoritarian paradigm, because only if they can abandon it, if they gain the courage not to be Heracles, can their educational action be meaningful, leading to the formation of autonomous, critically reflective democratic citizens who are aware of their fragmentation and grow into the whole of humanity.

The fundamental question pertains to the potential for these two ideal types to cooperate or complement each other. It is hypothesised that, to a certain extent, this is indeed the case. Such cooperation necessarily implies the ability to distinguish and identify elements or specific time slots that require Heracles. Concurrently, it permits the cultivation of a more expansive perspective and the capacity to engage with hyperobjects, as facilitated by Gregor. The second question pertains to Hercules's capacity to maintain his identity within such an arrangement and whether the expulsion of this kind of individualistic authority signifies its internal decomposition. Nevertheless, this question must be left to psychological rather than philosophical (philosophy of education) considerations.

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doc. RNDr. Michal Černý, Ph.D.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0384-8974>

Masaryk University

Department of Information and Library Studies

Arne Nováka 1/1, 602 00 Brno

Czech Republic

mcerny@phil.muni.cz