ART OF LIFE AND VITA ACTIVA

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Abstract

The article deals with H. Arendt's concept vita activa regarding the connection between philosophy and existence. Existence is treated as a unit story to be inscribed in the spiritual background (Hintergrund) of coexistence. Philosophy as a school of existence (ex-sistus) is also a techne of this existential inscribing. According to the author, life is a stream that we order when inscribing its events into a mobile existential story that emerges in the spiritual background. The author of an existential story is creating its hero, which inspires a rebirth of the author. Such modi as birth and death are interconnected factors of existential creating. The death gives the wholeness to the existential creation and (re)birth gives mobility that characterizes not only the story from birth to death, but also the spiritual background in which this story is inscribed. According to the author, the birth and the death are analogous but not similar. They both interconnect in the creation of the existential story. The author develops these questions with the help of conceptual apparatus of existential phenomenology (Heidegger, Husserl) which is applied in the interpretation of H. Arendt's conception vita activa. The aim of the article is not only the interpretation of H. Arendt's thinking, but also the development of the phenomenology of culture as an existential creation.

Keywords: *vita activa*, *technē* of life, existential story, spiritual background, birth and death.

Introduction

The antique concept of philosophy as love of wisdom presupposes a nurture of the art (technē) of life. Philosophy was not only an interpretation of texts, but also a spiritual training that guided one's inner development. If we believe Plato's version, Socrates did not write on principle in order to avoid a text as an interruption of the stream of communication. In Phaedrus Plato pays our attention to the ambiguity of a text: it heals as a pharmakon, inviting to take part in the spiritual context, and poisons by blocking memory, which opens the contemplation of divine eidos for Plato. True life for Plato is a return to the place, from where we have sailed being in the water of forgiveness and concealment. Thus a question con-

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cerning the relation between a text, remembrance and life emerges. Life is to be treated as coexistence, participation in an existential interaction, which develops in our environment of the texts, i.e. in the spiritual context. My first thesis is the following: the art of life has been nourishing in the spiritual context, where we exist interpreting texts. In other words, interpretation of life as a text in spiritual context allows nourishing the hart of life.

While interpreting a text we involve both ourselves into the co-existential context and the phenomena to be described into our life. In such a way these phenomena take part in the creation of this text. Herewith we create ourselves, our life story, which emerges in the environment of the spiritual co-existence. The art of life is inseparable from the creation of our history, which we are creating not by describing the facts of life, but interpreting phenomena as the factors of the coherent existential whole. The phenomena have been inscribing into the existential whole created by us, where we become heroes. Existence, being the whole of harmonic events created by us from birth till death, demands mastership, knowledge of techne, otherwise our life becomes a jumble of incoherent episodes, where only the supporting actors who do not become heroes participate. While living we write our own existential story, the hero of which is forming us, the masterful writers. Thus the conception of the art of life (techne ton bion), that arose in the antique philosophy, covers Heidegger's existential project (Heidegger, 1993) and Bakhtin's author's and hero's conception (Бахтин, 2000). Herewith it can help to develop the model of culture as an existential creation. Here the life and the text are not to be contradistinguished, but considered as two poles of a human creative interaction. Existence develops between the flow of life and the text to be written: life becomes ours, after we have inscribed its events into the coherent whole of our aims, senses, and images. On the other hand, this whole has been expanded every time. Life provides not only mobility for the existential project created by us. Life also guarantees an existential cocreation: on the one hand, we are writing our history together with other participants of existence, on the other hand, the co-creation emerges in the environment, which is expanded by it. Following Husserl (1952), I call this environment spiritual. That is why our mastership (technē) is required not only by the existential story written by us, but also by the spiritual environment created by us.

M. Aurelius (1983) wrote for himself, but it was not the registration of the fights of the defensive wars of his empire against barbarians. Often episodically in a tent between the fights, writing was a part of existential becoming for him. Everything that threatened the borders of his existential empire had to be inscribed riskily into the life's story, in order to transfer its borders. Existential imperialism, as topic of Levinas (1984) philosophizing as well, requires creative mastership. Otherwise the borders of our existential project will be abolished by barbarous components we encounter every day. The mastership of the author, who is creating a story, is analogous to heroics of its actor, with every new phenomenon barbarism becomes a part of a hero's life, which determines not only a fur-

ther course of events, but also a new link with the past phenomena already inscribed into the story. Hero in this case becomes a factor of author's existential becoming. Herewith this factor changes his entire spiritual environment. The borders of the author's existential project, his/her spiritual environment and hero's story do not coincide, instead, they have been defining every time anew when the territories limited by them are merging. Existential creation is a constant exit (ex-sistus) from the spiritual borders to be defined: during our life we are preparing ourselves for the great exit, after which our existential whole will further be inscribing into the empire of the spiritual environment. We should search the content of life's art namely in the technique ($techn\bar{e}$) of this great preparation.

Spirit (bsychē, spiritus, Geist) forms when we as the authors of our existential project are influenced by the heroes to be created and we become the heroes to environment's co-creators. The analogy allows applying of Bakhtin's model of author and hero in the description of social reality: we are taking part in the creation of the spiritual environment ana ton logon. i.e. thanks to the tension between the linguistic existence and the existential language. This tension, analyzed in other works (Kačerauskas, 2007), emerges from creative activity of existential participants as co-creators of the spiritual environment. We shall see how it could be linked with Arendt's conception of vita activa. Social interaction as a modus of the creative activity allows considering also God as a phenomenon of the coexistence: God emerges as a factor of interaction between the linguistic existence and the existential language, a line of contact between the spiritual environment and the existential whole, when the borders of the existential environment (logos) are transferring. The technique of our exit (exsistus) as life-art is being formed in the existential environment where we were born earlier than we emerge in a physical way. In this sense we are passive participants of our environment. Levinas connects passivity with suffering in the presence of social transition. Speaking in a metaphoric (metaphoreo means to transfer) and Christian (transferring Levinas's thought) way, we learn life-art in the environment of Christ's suffering, which is filled with tension between our birth and death, passivity and activity. We become heroes only being involved into the movements and revolts, i.e. being born in the environments full of intranquility.

The ideas of Christianity in late antiquity are to be connected with theories of the Stoics and Epicure, while they are connected with Plato's thinking. While Christianity was spreading across the whole empire unimaginably fast, it turned Christians into the heroes, who expanded the borders of the spiritual empire that were to be transferred into barbarian territories. Baptism in a river used to mark the beginning, the birth for heroic life in new time. According to Habermas (1994), that is how modernity emerged: this concept was first mentioned in the late antiquity in order to mark Christian ideas. Baptism involves into modern Christian community which seeks for inspiration in the Script (*Logos*). This spiritualizing is connected with temporalization in a new time and embodiment, while describing new boundaries of social body. After baptism we are taking part in creation of new (modern) spiritual reality: the hero of

Christian life, created by us, creates his author, who becomes a factor of a community's creation. Plato's doctrine of participation (*methexis*) coalesces here with the idea of the singularity (*Einmaligkeit*) of birth and death, while doctrine of embodiment (incarnation) has been transferred to a new spiritual environment, where it marks belonging to spiritual community (Christ's body), although it kept the rudiments of physical rebirth (Resurrection of the bodies).

Therefore the content of the notion «spirit» has been changing under the influence of Christian impulses of the divine creation. My second thesis is the following: our activity emerges as the creativity in the spiritual environment, co-creators of which we are. I shall illustrate this thesis by interpreting H. Arendt's conception of vita activa. The third one follows from the first two by expanding them: philosophy as the art of life is a factor of cultural creativity. Philosophy matures and forms our life during our living. In this sense it constantly moves as interaction between a thought and life, when we become ourselves. By creating the heroes of our life story, who form us, we are taking part in the creation of the spiritual environment, which is one of our births as well. The circle (mutual interaction) of becoming of us and the spiritual environment allows speaking about spiritual imperialism: the existential creativity as a conquest of new territories and transferring of empire's borders. My interpretation of vita activa will be based on this warlike conception² of creativity, which is related to the conception of realization as temporalization, naming and embodiment. However, first of all I shall analyze, referring P. Hadot (1991), the antique attitudes of Plato, the Stoics and Epicure towards the interconnection between philosophy and life.

Antique philosophy

For Socrates, philosophy is maieutikē technē, i. e. it is an art of giving birth for the ideas, which were matured in the discussions of the participants of a dialogue. The role of a philosopher is here only to help interlocutors to formulate these ideas on their own. In Plato's dialogue Meno (1999), a young uneducated slave is able to divide the area of a square into two equal parts after being questioned by Socrates, who forced him to contradict himself. He succeeded after «these notions have just been stirred up in him, as in a dream» (1999: 85c). Furthermore, Plato asks: «is this spontaneous recovery of knowledge in him recollection?» (1999: 85d). I would interpret it as the birth of a slave for a new community that is philosophical, where the knowledge emerges in crossfire of the guestions, i.e. in the spiritual fight. Remembrance (recollection) of the ideas is not transference of them as constants³; on the contrary, it is their trial in the middle of the life's battlefield. This allows rising an assumption about interaction between philosophical ideas and life: the ideas gain their place in the spiritual environment being influenced by a life story created by us and, vice versa, we follow them in order to reach our existential whole. I shall come back to this precondition after analyzing Meno in the standpoint of the author's and hero's interaction.

Like other early (and intermediate) Plato's dialogues *Meno* is doubtful because of its authority. There was a question in *Meno*: what is a virtue; and the ideas of remembrance and of interaction between wise spirit and virtue arouse. Who is the author of these ideas: Plato, Socrates or all the interlocutors (including Meno, his slave and Anytus, who later contributed to Socrate's death)? The above-mentioned Bakhtin's conception of interaction between author and hero presupposes that the question of idea's authorship is related to the question of a hero. The hero of the dialogue, Socrates is constantly ironic: contrary to the sophist Gorgius, he does not know what the virtue is. I shall come back to this irony later. What is important here is that Plato's theory of ideas, the part of which is doctrine of remembrance, was formed under the influence of the philosophical intranquility of his dialogue hero (Socrates); and this philosophical intranquility was embodied by Socrates' irony. On the other hand, the latter requires a spiritual environment, which consists of the considerations of other dialogue participants, who are inspired by Socrates' irony. Therefore, Plato's ideas were developed in dialectic coupling, which consisted of two circles. The big circle is that one of the dialogues of authors' and the main hero's ideas. The small circle is one of the hero's considerations. A dialogue in this case is an authored (as well heroic) text, with the help of which the spiritual context for the development of the philosophical ideas was created.

Let us get back to Socrates' irony. By stating that he does not know anything, Socrates presupposes an auxiliary role of a philosopher. Disregarding that, a philosopher helps creating the environment of thought's intranquility, spiritual context (where the ideas have been remembered) which forms an individual soul. In this way an interlocutor was born for the philosophical dialogue. In other words, he emerges anew as a member of a thinking community, being anxious about the question of virtue (in *Meno*). Being born in the context of Socrates' questions, he has been inspired for new insights. *Meno* ends with an aporia: although the practice of virtue is related with the mental education⁴, it is an idea that has been inspired by God ignoring the mind⁵. How is this aporia to be solved?

The inspiration or spiritual madness (mania) is mentioned as well in Phaedrus, where Socrates' «bosom is full» and interlocutors (Socrates and Phaedrus) call one another as demonic. The participants of the philosophical dialogue are united by inspiration, «condition of madness» (1996: 266a), which helps to concentrate on «all things in common» and arise towards "true being" (1996: 249c). Therefore the participants in the philosophical environment should acknowledge that they do not know anything, i. e. to be born anew in order to expand the borders of their intellectual empire herewith the spiritual environment after they had been inspired by a flight of thought. This happens after the great and small circles of the author and the hero merge. Although the author separates himself from his «sons» (written texts), this namely allows him to take part in the inspired dialogue with them. Madness as un-reason means spiritual intranquility as un-easiness, when the empire's borders fall down after barbaric madness, after which these borders transferred even further. This is how

«all things in common» are born in the dialogue between the author and heroes. «All things in common» is the whole of ideas, which is maturing spiritual (inspired) environment for our existence, which again is *ex-sistus*, exit beyond borders inscribed sometime. Mastership is an ability to be the author of existential project to be inscribed into spiritual environment. This is a school of exit, repetition for the great exit, after it our story becomes integral («all things in common») and as such it will be inscribed into spiritual environment, where it have to be reborn for new life. This «rebirth» allows speaking about existential incarnation, which emerges in the boundaries between Platonic and Christian embodiment.

Christian embodiment and rebirth are inseparable from suffering, from the Passion. Birth in spiritual (inspired) environment, which appears earlier and continues longer than us, gives passive meaning to existence: we were born before our physical birth and we rebirth later than we die physically. On the other hand, the spiritual environment is the space of our creational activity, in which we are changing and which we change while inscribing our existential story within it. Therefore passivity and activity are two poles, and due to their anxious interaction our existential project emerges as a part of the spiritual whole. As Levinas notices, another side of passivity is suffering, although he tries to avoid Christian meaning of the Passion (bringing rebirth). Our participation in creation of our story from birth till death is full of such existentials as anxiety (Angst), fear (Furcht) (Kierkegaard, 1952), disposedness (Befindlichkeit) or de-distancy (Entfernheit) (Heidegger, 1993), all of which only push us towards the creational intranquility.

Philosophy for Socrates is giving the art of birth, which is full of tension and intranquility: during thinking, we are re-born and at the same time renew the spiritual environment, by which we are inspired. Therefore philosophy being passive is a factor, which activates environment and presupposes the mutual interaction between soul and spirit. Philosophizing as passive contemplation becomes an impulse of movement towards itself. This movement is possible only in the environment of the creative interaction between soul as a part and spirit as the whole. In other words, philosophizing allows us to be born anew, herewith giving birth to environment of our thought and action. It is environment of a spiritual fight, where our birth is determined by death. Thus life's art, technē tōn bion (ars vitae) is also a technique of the renewing of the whole of life, i. e. of the existential creation.

Existential creativity is inseparable from mortifying of the old living whole. Plato's thoughts, which have influenced Christian attitudes, had matured being influenced by the thinking of Pythagoreans. Pythagoreans raised the conception of body as a soul's grave (soma - sema) and were anxious about life's way (bios pythagoreios), which included also mortifying of the body. That was the preparation for the exit from the body, which was a significant, but temporary part (to be mortified), of a rebirth cycle. Having taken them from the Pythagoreans, Plato passed the conceptions of rebirth and embodiment together with a doctrine of participation (methexis) in a divine idea over to Christianity. But unlike Pythagoreans

he did not propose to mortify the body, which is an important factor for remembrance of the divine idea (in other words, spiritualizing the environment), even though senses are deceptive. Aristotle in *Nicomachean ethics* (1990) propagated the middle way, which would wisely combine the sensitive cognition and the voice of mind. As mentioned above, it is a dynamic (*dynamis*) way of realization (*entelecheia*), which requires our creative attempts. Heidegger realized our mortality (*Sein zum Tode*) as a factor of existential creativity. In all cases philosophy as an art of life develops in the environment of interaction between passivity (mortifying) and activity (creativity) or of tension between spiritual embodiment and body's spiritualization.

Birth (as well as death) is a factor of our existential creation. The figure of a philosopher as a midwife brought up by Socrates means our constant rebirth in the spiritual environment, which we create together with a background (*Hintergrund*) of our private heroic narrative. Our existential story and its background make up «all things in common», i. e. the existential whole, which requires our *technē* of philosophical life. Birth and death in the background of the existential creation are analogical. We do experience neither birth nor death. Despite that, they emerge as phenomena which direct and give wholeness for our existential narrative. They appear *ana ton logon*, i. e. according to *logos* of spiritual background, which provides existence with structure of unit narrative from birth till death. Life does not match with existence as birth does not with death. Existence is harmonious (although full of tension) narrative, heroes of which become not all participants of life.

Analogy of birth and death is also possible because the creative renewing is inseparable from the learning to die in the teachings of Pythagoreans and the Stoics. We are born every time when we think about our existence to death, naming death a spiritual background. Although we do not experience death, the latter emerges as an imaged reality, analogical to fiction in the literature. Used in the development of philosophy as life's art, the conception of interaction between the author and a hero allows considering philosophical works as literature, although not all works are close to Plato's dialogues, which are to be interpreted in this way. Philosophy and literature are analogical not only because they both are the works of human creation (culture). Philosophy as an art of life is techne of phenomena's selection and grouping into «all things in common» between birth and death. In other words, it is techne of the turning of chaotic flowing life into existential narrative. Existential creation is more than inscribing of facts into a diary, it is inscribing of phenomena, which interact each other, into our spiritual background, where we constantly rebirth herewith renewing our environment. Therefore analogy here means the participation of interactions in our spiritual environment, which we expand with the help of these phenomena. The vault of spiritual environment created (given birth) by us is based on the poles of embodied fiction and spiritualized body. Removing of the body would abolish the tension of phenomena's interaction, therefore would impoverish (despiritualize) our creative environment, which is always a field of fight. That is why neither

Plato nor Aristotle or Epicureans⁶ ever advised to mortify the body as an analogical participant of the spiritual environment.

The body is a component of creative life, of our spiritual environment. Both birth and death are inseparable from the body, although herewith they are the factors of our becoming in a spiritual background. We are born and reborn by changing the whole of spiritual background, which we inspire by new existential story. The act of baptism embodies renewal of spiritual Christ's body by its new participant. Baptism is the birth of a child as a participant of the environment to be renewed (inspired), as well as the rebirth of the parents as spiritual environment's participants. Herewith baptism is an inscribing into metrics, creation of a text. Without it, our story would not develop; during inscribing this story, we name, spiritualize and embody our spiritual environment, where we are constantly reborn. We create our story as an interaction between living and thinking in the spiritual background. That is the interaction between *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*, where we are learning to die by living.

Vita activa: interaction between living and thinking

Time has come to talk about H. Arendt's conception, which I will interpret in the context of the existential creativity. H. Arendt's *vita activa* includes work, production and action (*Handeln*). Work emerges here as cultivation, falling into the spiritual environment. Production emerges as *Her-stellen*, exposition in the general environment. Therefore action as creative mobility is inseparable from passivity, being in the background of creation.

We are taking part in the political life, herewith we are creating it. Existential creativity has been supported by us as animal laborans and politikon zōon Therefore we have a fight's world, which pulsates by interaction between the personal and the public life. Here K. Schmitt (1963) is to be remembered, for whom politics included the war state. Ch. Mouffe (1993) continued this thought: our political environment is a live background of a thought's fight. In the context of existential creation we talk about intensive spiritual environment, inspired by which we fight back our existential whole. Tension between private and public planes fills up the spiritual world created by us, where the inspirations are embodied and bodies are spiritualized. This happens as a fight between a part (our existential story) and the whole (spiritual background) when we fight back the new phenomena over and over, as well the territories, which compose with previous «all things in common». This imperialism presupposes our existential rebirth as a challenge for the spiritual background, which borders are constantly being exploded.

H. Arendt speaks about impoverishing of polyphonic environment, when only one aspect dominates in mass society and variety of perspectives diminishes in political life. Therefore, it is important to be anxious about the spirit of fight and environment full of tension in order for our constant to be reborn within it. It corresponds to Mouffe's anxiety about

saving manifold and colorful public life, in which we are fighting for our identity, i.e. we are writing our story.

Therefore only private life robs the human's things as audible and visible reality in the common world of things, which differ and bind, i.e. it robs "all things in common" to be created by us. Differences and bonds give a meaning to our *vita activa* as the creational existence, which unfolds in common spiritual world of a body and a thought, private and public spheres, things and God. *Vita activa* appear as intranquility (*Unruhe*), *nec-otium*, *a-scholia* (1960: 21), which stimulates to search for a new harmony of spiritual world as the environment of our becoming. For a creative *homo faber* the world becomes a place for realization of phenomena, when we embody our goals and spiritualize the body's heroic movement towards death.

«Von solchen Heldentaten ist allerdings faktisch in dem täglichen Kleinkampf, den der menschliche Körper um die Erhaltung und Reinhaltung der Welt zu führen hat, wenig zu spüren; die Ausdauer, deren es bedarf, um jeden Tag von Neuem aufzuräumen, was der gestrige Tag in Unordnung gebracht hat, ist nicht Mut, und es ist nicht Gefahr, was diese Anstrengung so mühevoll macht, sondern ihre endlose Wiederholung. Die "Arbeiten" des Herkules haben mit allen Heldentaten gemein, daß sie einmalig sind» (1960: 92).

Realization, embodiment and spiritualization occur here as cultivation, which requires our heroic endurance for fighting back a new spiritual environment. Arendt mentions infinite repetition for cultivation of yesterday's chaos. Our work is cherishing of life's technique in order to realize death. Arendt does not say anything about the coupling of life and death, which provides mobility¹⁰ to our world. We prepare ourselves to die by inscribing death as a real phenomenon into our life's story, into bio-graphy¹¹, by means of our works we become ourselves. Existential analogy (coupling) between writing and life allows speaking about context of the spiritual world to be created by us, i. e. about the coexistence towards death.

Conclusions or Existence as Creation

Philosophy as the art of life presupposes existence as creation. We exist while we, with the help of philosophy, inscribe phenomenon of life into the existential story created by us from birth until death. Thus life's stream assumes an order, which is analogous to the spiritual background, where our existential project is being realized. Analogy here means mutual interaction in the whole of the linguistic existence and the existential language, in which we revive every time while herewith renewing it. Both birth and death are the factors of the existential creation: death provides the wholeness to our existential story and birth (revival) provides mobility and newness, when it is inscribed into the spiritual background of the coexistence.

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References

- Let us remember Heidegger's existential truth as aletheia, i.e openness. True, according to Heidegger, this truth is to be sought in the thinking before Socrates, actually, before Plato.
- ² Com. Aristotle's entelecheia as realization and dynamis as mobility in Metaphysics (1924).
- Aristotle in Metaphysics interprets Plato's ideas as the static units.
- ⁴ «All other things hang upon the soul and the things of the soul itself hang upon wisdom, if they are to be good» (Платон, 1999: 88e).
- ⁵ «Virtue is neither natural nor acquired but it is an instinct given by God to the virtuous. Nor is the instinct accompanied by reason» (Платон, 1999: 99e).
- Body, for Plato, is a medium, in which an idea is recognized; body for Aristotle is a factor of happiness; for Epicureans it is a factor of friendship.
- Mit dem Wort Vita activa sollen im Folgenden drei menschliche Grundtätigkeiten zusammengefaßt werden: Arbeiten, Herstellen und Handeln» (1960: 14).
- ⁸ «Eine gemeinsame Welt verschwindet, wenn sie nur noch unter einem Aspekt gesehen wird; sie existiert überhaupt nur in der Vielfalt ihrer Perspektiven» (1960: 57).
- «Nur ein Privatleben führen heißt in erster Linie, in einem Zustand leben, in dem man bestimmter, wesentlich menschlicher Dinge beraubt ist. Beraubt nämlich der Wirklichkeit, die durch das Gesehen- und Gehörtwerden entsteht, beraubt einer 'objektiven', d. h. gegenständlichen Beziehung zu anderen, die sich nur dort ergeben kann, wo Menschen durch die Vermittlung einer gemeinsamen Dingwelt von anderen zugleich getrennt und mit ihnen verbunden sind, beraubt schließlich der Möglichket, etwas zu leisten, das beständiger ist als das Leben» (1960: 57–58).
- "Geburt und Tod setzen die Welt voraus, nämlich etwas, das nicht in stetiger Bewegung ist, etwas, dessen Dauerhaftigkeit und relative Beständigkeit An-

- kunft und Aufbruch ermöglichen, das also jeweils schon da war und nach jedem jeweiligen Verschwinden fortbesetzen wird» (1960: 89).
- **Oas Hauptmerkmal des menschlichen Lebens, dessen Erscheinen und Verschwinden weltliche Ereignisse sind, besteht darin, daß es selbst aus Ereignissen sich gleichsam zusammensetzt, die am Ende als eine Geschichte erzählt werden können, die Lebensgeschichte, die jedem menschlichen Leben zukommt und die, wenn sie aufgezeichnet, also in eine Bio-graphie verdinglicht wird, als ein Weltding weiter bestehen kann. Von diesem Leben, von dem bios zum Unterschied vom zōē, hat Aristoteles gemeint, daß es 'eine praxis ist' (1960: 89–90)