
ABOUT ALGIS MICKŪNAS

Rimgaudas Bubelis

Institute of Philosophy and Humanities, Faculty of Politics and Management,
Mykolas Romeris University,
Ateities 20, LT-08303 Vilnius, Lithuania
Phone (+370 5) 2714613

DOI:10.13165/SMS-15-7-1-01

Algis Mickūnas has taught at universities in India, Japan, United Arab Emirates, Guatemala, Peru, France, Switzerland, Germany and other lands. He started in the universities of these countries international centres of research and studies.

He smiles not the smile of a successful American, as might be the impression at first sight, it is a smile of a Lithuanian from a Kirkliniai village (Pasvalys region), whose passion for life „is not directed inwards to oneself but outwards into the world“.

To share some words about Algis Mickūnas was not an easy decision. I am aware that a poem or a song would be a more appropriate dedication, since cladding this „dancing philosopher“ into a vulgar frame of speech is a defeat in advance. Alas, I am not a poet, rather the opposite. Yet, to refuse this proposition was even more unthinkable, since the presence of this person is so powerful and I am not referring just to myself. I call him my Teacher, I have received from him invaluable things, as I suppose, have my colleagues, too, and many young people in academia.

We met 5 years ago in informal circumstances. At the moment I had no idea that this aged American Lithuanian with a cheerful smile and a leather hat is a prominent philosopher whose works on phenomenology are well known in the world. Then I was only visited by the thought that it would be fun to talk to him more sharing a

glass of wine, perhaps. It was much later that we struck professional relationship, but the first impression of a simple, true, agile and kind person was correct.

So my first contact was with Algis as a person and later as a philosopher and a pedagogue. I cannot call him Professor, and he does not respond to the title. To all in Lithuania he is Algis, and he addresses his disciples by names, often endearing names. He refers to younger colleagues as to his dear daughters and sons, students he calls his dear grandchildren. There is a sense of warmth and paternity, yet not a hint of authority or patriarchal patronizing. This lucid tie without any distorting modifications of personal sympathy or antipathy does not give a place for insiders and outsiders. He is approachable by all, he does not put up a screen of recommendations before him. That is why is always surrounded by the young Lithuanian academia.

When talking about Algis I try to avoid the word „individual“ since by saying „a“ I will have to follow and say „b“, i.e. I would have to look into psychological issues of this individuum. I concur with Algis` comments about himself that he is not a „psychological human“: true, he does not regard highly nor maintain interest into his own personality by others, nor is he overtly concerned with himself. His undemanding attitude to the living conditions, convenience, at his respectable age is remarkable. Five stars have no appeal: Algis confides utterly into the Lithuanian friends who offer him their hospitality. He often goes to lectures or to meetings on foot or by public transport, he often travels to Kaunas to lecture there by train unless someone volunteers to give him a lift. And this is all along Algis` very intensive work on his 4 to 5 annual visits to Lithuania (sadly, his visits get fewer). His days until late night are full of lectures, meetings, conferences, he consults students and doctoral students, talks on his newly published books. He leaves, I fear, fatigued to the limits, though he has never let out as much as a word about it. There always lingers some anxiety that his wife Irena will not consent to his next return to the homeland to work all the routine tasks.

On one arrival Algis had a serious leg injury, he walked with a noticeable limp but he never let out a complaint. To the sympathetic friends he confessed that he has no idea how much it pains him since he has no interest in such things. It was lucky that our doctors took interest in his leg and Algis told humoured stories of his encounter with physicians as of splendid adventure.

Of course, in comparison to Algis` other life stories and traumas this was peanuts to Algis. He has told of his experiences which might impress one as fantasies unless you know the author himself. A boy of eleven he was drawn from his native Krikliniai village by the war, he lived through the horrors of bombing in Germany, was hired by a farmer in the Bavarian Alps, stayed in Displaced Persons` camp, and when he reached America at the age of sixteen he volunteered into the armed forces – and received US citizenship since only US citizens have the privilege of volunteering into the army. At that time he had no inkling that the citizenship may cost him life. He lived through the real hell in Korean war and by sheer miracle managed to stay alive. He was hospitalised in Japan with a shot wound in his head in the vicinity of

Kyoto and spent two years there. He used this time not for the card games, but for practicing bow shooting arts with the Zen master and Jiu-Jitsu lessons. He became Zen master himself. Algis mentioned that when at war he learned that life is always on the brink, he makes jokes saying that the shot in the head is responsible for his craving for philosophy since initially he became a successfully certified engineer. On the scholarship of the Ministry of Education of Germany he studied in Freiburg and Cologne Universities with the professors Geraldas Kreyche, Leroy Lemker, Eugen Fink and Ludwig Landgrebe. He recollected that the latter was not scared by the nazi ban to communicate with the university professor Edmund Husserl, a philosopher of Jewish descent, and he made visits to the teacher in the broad daylight.

Algis volunteered to come to Lithuania, though he could easily spend his carefree life as a professor in Athens, in the state of Ohio where his family is situated. Himself, however, as a Zen person, he is not attached to America nor his possessions there as strongly as other Lithuanian immigrants, who cannot separate from their belongings and their love for the homeland stays as an ideal.

I witnessed Algis' happiness on obtaining his restored Lithuanian citizenship, how deeply significant this was for him. There was a moment when he lost his Lithuanian side, he forgot the language of his parents when smarter fellow-Lithuanians in America taught him to take his Lithuanian country boy's nature out of sight.

Now after circling the cosmic orbit he returned to his homeland, himself again becoming a Lithuanian. He returned with full hands of gifts. I see his work in Lithuania as a duty, that Algis, despite of all, carries out not as a burden but spreads around as his passion without sparing himself.

„A human without a world is vanity“ – it seems that Algis has said this or something similar with his typical cheerful smile on his face.

As a teacher I would like to learn from Algis many things, though these are perhaps things that cannot be studied. They are not pedagogical techniques nor methods, they are not approaches, but a vibrant attitude with love to the others. His interaction with the audience is very new to us and it cannot fail to fascinate. He attacks a most serious philosophical issue as in a play, as in a dance but it is not a trick to divert our attention: Algis truly dances in his lecture following the partners capacity to make thinking steps and leads firmly into the direction they have to move.

Algis keeps his simplicity under any circumstances, in communication with anyone, in reading lectures to any audience, any world university. At the ceremonies of receiving Doctor Honoris Causa Algis (the name has been granted by three Lithuanian universities) stood among our dignified professors and academicians as a country simpleton who happens to drop in on the occasion by chance. To tell the truth we and our students are astounded by his demeanor, but this fact is more telling about ourselves: how self-important we seem to ourselves covered by titles and names.

Abroad, Algis in full sincerity happened to introduce himself as a Lithuanian *compensito* (spanish villager). As a villager following the plough he deals with the world vigorously, vitally, straightforwardly.

Algis' as a lecturer's pedagogical flexibility, ability to adjust to the audience, to its level of enlightenment and the readiness to accept the subject he is delivering, captivates. More than once I happened to note how he focuses not on the ones that take in his subject easily as is the habit with us, but on those who need to make a special effort for understanding. I have never once noticed him show a slightest dissatisfaction at a silly question, he can open the heart of the matter in a manner of a joke if the audience is in no position to see it otherwise. This can be unattainable without empathy, and to put it in simple words without love for people, no matter how bright or dim they may be. This love perhaps is given to the teachers by calling.

Algis is the initiator of serious academic discussions, sometimes he acts as a provocateur. Discussions make him feel as a fish in deep water, his mind is enviably agile, he is capable of improvising while building a rational construct. When stating his thesis he is not aiming at criticising the interlocutor since he is no authority to himself. If in his argument sequence he happens to identify the discrepancy, he is apt to review his own position.

Algis' stand towards reality supports his words, to him the world has to be lived through, not speculated, rationally or otherwise constructed without any „earthly involvement“: perhaps this is inseparable from his Zen Buddhist (as he calls it) position and approach.

We find it contraversial: a Lithuanian villager's world view, though this villager be educated in America and Germany, though he spent a couple of years in the young days in Japan, cannot become Zen Buddhist in a natural way. But, to listen to Algis, there is no controversy between Lithuanian villager's and Zen Buddhist's world views. In his opinion Lithuanian „earthly“ and „sunny“ world view is very much akin to Zen, it minds cosmic rhythm and circular movement, it does not focus on the future and on the goal. Zen is a good method to understand oneself as a Lithuanian. Algis has mentioned himself that it is „necessary to find a teacher who does not overemphasize the words or meanings but quietly leads you to the human „centre“, relieves one from concentration on self through the deepest insight.“ Only at this stage of the insight the doubled naturedness of a Western individual who clings to self as to a wicked charm is cast off.“

The fact that Algis does not stop learning while teaching himself protects him from growing hardcore old man and his philosophy from turning into a dogma. I have witnessed one of his epiphanic moments. Once during a long winding discussion on the fundamental laws of philosophical logics Algis undermined my arguments to the extent that in keeping my position I appeared to be in controversy, but as if stricken by the lightning he stopped silent, I asked what happened and he mumbled: „It seems I found one *arche*“.

Due to Algis I may also have found an *arche*, without which I was wondering lost in the forest of the logical schemes. I, however, remain thunderstricken still, I am not capable of taking in all that Algis opened to me.