

UNESCO, Philosophy, and Human Rights

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It is highly important for UNESCO to discuss, at least once a year, issues that constitute the fabric of the dialogic dimension of our time – a time which appears less and less inclined towards dialogue and the exchange of ideas but which rather focuses more and more on empirical simplifications of an increasingly technological nature. An international agency like UNESCO needs to reserve for itself regular opportunities for such reflection and debate, and do this out of vocation as well as from purpose.

Because of its epistemological structure and through its critical and ontological tradition, philosophy is intimately linked to the reasons for human existence and coexistence. There is no “human” life that is not caught up by at least three fundamental questions: *What am I experiencing? Why is it there? For whom?* It is the search for answers to these questions that drives us and our innate desire for knowledge. We cannot accept being in the world without knowing what surrounds us, without knowing how to establish a relationship with our environment. Curiosity provides both the impulse and the implement in this search for truth. Truth, however, needs constant validation and verification, which only critical analysis is able to provide through the tool of Hegelian dialectics driving its epistemic and pragmatic dynamics, thus explaining purposes and actions that guide us through the labyrinth of life and society. So sustained, we can pursue our ethical and political goals in pursuit of a world where nature and culture live in harmony, where reason and feelings are in balance, where love and hatred are merged with each other, where good and evil neutralise each other, where war and peace daily coexist in our cities, often in our own homes.

Were there not at least an annual opportunity such as this to reflect upon the great themes of our time and life, our world would be deprived of a soul. For our world needs to be modulated for the humans that we are, gods with no attributes or doctrines, gods in their endless modes like the God of Spinoza: *Deus sive natura*. A world, therefore, that is itself nature: an inextricable blend of the natural and the artificial that has become our native habitat.

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UNESCO was created out of this very perspective. After the great crisis of the first half of the 20th century involving notably two horrific wars that were for the first time truly “world” wars, thinking people everywhere realised that the world had witnessed the defeat of reason which had gone hand in hand with the defeat of a culture of mediation. The tools to overcome real oppositions (Kant) as well as dialectic oppositions (Hegel) had been brutally cast aside. After the failure of the League of Nations and the atrocity of Nazism, it became obvious – even without any need for critical reflection – that diplomacy and treaties no longer sufficed to guarantee a world of peace, cooperation and prosperity. In the new post-war environment, peace took on a new guise. No longer the sole result of diplomatic covenants and political imposition, it became, more fundamentally, a cultural, even existential value that was to involve people – and foremost the younger generations – before governments.

A love for culture thus became necessary. Culture – and its lexical synthesis: *philo-sophia* – meant all that the brutality of war had destroyed or sidelined: Education, Science and Culture. Each needed to be given a new impetus: Education in all its facets, from the very early stage of basic literacy upwards; Science, as an engine of growth and development and no longer as a source of terror and death as at Hiroshima and Nagasaki; Culture, as a powerful plurality of expressions, both a vector and prism for relaying and refracting countless cultural identities that find their value in their own diversity.

UNESCO was born at that particular stage of our history, when human culture was suffering its own failure and defeat. It was created as an intergovernmental agency, but more fundamentally as a cradle for the bringing to birth of a new culture, conceived to be the science of a new dawn and bearing the name of Philosophy. It was this new culture and science that was called upon to enlighten the dark valleys of ignorance, and to illuminate, in their whole beauty, the summits of scientific and technological achievement. The deep places wherein lay the horrors and blunders of our daily life might thus be exposed to the uplifting vision of the peaks of artistic, scientific and literary creativity.

This is indeed still the task of our time: a time still beset by uncertainty and error, where the rhetoric promoting a culture of democracy and peace is no longer sufficient to secure its lasting implantation, and where on the other hand the rationale behind the move towards economic and environmental balance is overcoming the rather paternalistic idea of a solidarity derived from neo-colonial roots.

No universal culture of peace can henceforth disregard the need for education that leads to true and long-lasting sustainable development. The goal of securing perpetual peace cannot anymore remain just a passionate appeal, as it was for Immanuel Kant over two centuries ago, given the recognition that, as Kant himself recalled, for arms manufacturers and dealers “warfare is a better business than peace”. As long as a *miles perpetuus*, a soldier on permanent service, or a mercenary, was at work, he added, there would be no perpetual peace. Let me add that, as long as there is a collusive silence and *omertà* among nations and their leaders over arms trade and trafficking, there will be neither sustainable development nor durable peace.

Philosophy is not just an ideological superstructure of UNESCO. It is the very soul of its existential and civil vision. It is not by chance that UNESCO is the only UN agency that works through national commissions, which can be seen as the ontic categories in which the ontological structure that inspires and supports its philosophy is embedded. I would not go as far as to claim that UNESCO is the real home of philosophy, but I will certainly hold UNESCO as providing the philosophical paradigm for addressing the current existential need for sustainable development, hence for active peace, that characterises our world.

In November 2009, sixty-one years after the founding of UNESCO and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the city of Palermo hosted the World Day of Philosophy. In the heart of Sicily, a land where good and evil have never found their equilibrium, philosophers and scholars from all over the world discussed the forms and modalities of the encounters and clashes between rights and power. It was an event of absolute relevance to the contemporary world. Indeed, I hold as a fundamental fact – and which is perhaps even constitutive of all philosophical reflection – the nexus linking knowledge and coexistence, reflection and action, θεωρεῖν and πράσσειν. In our present-day world, where the Babel of ready-made knowledge coexists with a derisory, pervasive wrangling that reveals both inter-subjective and social incommunicability, the existential and ethical link between *being* and *existing* (*Dasein*) can only be re-established through the centrality of the νόμος. Only a set of clear and distinct rules, strongly and closely tied to traditions and customs, can guarantee a fair balance between λόγος and ἦθος, between reason and behaviour.

However, current trends seem to be heading in the opposite direction. Our era presents an outrageous desire, almost a pathological need, for a personalisation of the rules that would ensure personal wealth and influence. Historians of the last century, and perhaps of the previous ones too, would see in this phenomenon a drift of political power and of law. The abuse of πράξις and the fragility of rules, along with compliant attitudes and the abandonment of moral rebellion (the rebellion that nourished the struggle for human rights), are now broadly prevalent or, at the very least, lead the way to indifference. We are witnessing the tragic reversal of a history that has known both casualties and heroes, and a sequence of both painful defeats and notable victories.

The different generations of human rights advances, as critics roughly describe them, teach us one thing: the pathway to human rights has been very long. From the French Revolution to the present day, at each stage new advances have been made. The so-called “third generation” of rights, the most recent step forward, has brought into focus the “rights of solidarity” as they are termed: the right of self-determination of peoples, the right to sustainable development, the right to ecological balance, the right to peace, the right to the protection of the environment and the right of peoples to the control of their country’s natural resources.

This new development marks a significant turning point in the era of human rights, one that leads from the individual to the collective, from persons to peoples. The solidarity right invokes – though we may wonder whether it obtains – the recognition of the right to social and international solidarity for the most disadvantaged communities of this world – still, may I recall, comprising the great majority of humankind.

In this way the *Other* may hope no longer to be the barbarian, as in the 1904 poem of Konstantinos Kavafis “Waiting for the Barbarians”. That *Other* becomes instead the very mirror of our own lost or perhaps just unknown identity, and the compensation for formerly denied liberties is an indication that we can no longer go along with a spoliation of natural resources and elementary rights, but expect a fair recognition of the human person and of his or her civil and political rights. The *Other* is coming to be seen as the unexplored dimension of each of us which waits to be revealed and to find in the *being* the truth of its existence.

Of similar nature is nowadays the path to a fourth generation of human rights, the generation of *new rights* that encompass issues such as genetic engineering and modification, bioethics, new technologies applied to biology and to communication, the right to choose one’s life partner through to death, regardless of his or her gender, the right to decide how to live and how to die, with the only condition being that of feeling at peace with oneself and with God. These rights, and many others, are still extremely sensitive topics; in some cases they cover still unexplored territories that, sixty years after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, may continue to

divide rather than unite. These are themes and areas where opinions currently seem to prevail over actions, and where ideologies and doctrines often take precedence over the fundamental ontological and ethical theories of humanity – and I would like to recall that the word *theory* stems from the Greek word θεωρεῖν, whose meaning combines vision and reflection, seeing as much as meditating. This is why we must focus on a critical observation of concrete behaviours and customs rather than sticking [to] with doctrinal and ideological impositions. We have to avoid the manipulation of vulgar propaganda, and rather consider the different scientific positions without the presumption, even the hubris, of invoking law to deny life. It is law that stems from life, and which finds in life the regulation for its own performances, [and] never the contrary.

Debates and reflections in Palermo revolved around these topics. Lectures and talks engaged the themes of cultural diversity and philosophical dialogue, the State, citizens and power, human dignity, civil community and public authority, alternative law, multiple identities and civic liberties, philosophy, chaos and law, sciences and power, new spaces of power and cradles of civilisation, and the inter-subjective dynamics of power: recognition, prestige and authority.

Above all, reflection was focused on the philosophical dimension of law in relation to the exercise of power. On the one hand, the law as *ius* expresses the power of will that belongs to a legal or physical person, the embodiment of the ratio cogitandi et agendi. On the other hand, this power is implemented through a set of legislative acts, the *lex*, whose goal is to regulate behaviours and actions and to establish authorities and functions.

Power stands, not without problem and contradiction, in between these two moments of the judicial system, *ius* and *lex*. Its range of action depends on the distance between the two. If the distance is short, then power is clear and strong, legitimate and legitimated. But when the distance grows larger, then power becomes unclear and weak, it turns into chaos, or ushers in the prelude to it, and gives rise to serious risks of delegitimation and non-democratic outcomes. The action of government is only possible, no matter what its form, time and place, when the ethical and political balance of rights and power is perfectly even. In any other case, it is the law of the strongest that will be enforced. Here is, I believe, where a “fifth generation” of rights should be established in the shape of the right to see our neighbours doing their appropriate duty. Because of its reciprocity, this set of rights should open the way to a fairer and better-balanced society, where every right should correspond to a duty, and every duty to a right.

Our era, which has so vigorously sought the enforcement of rights, and often of certain merely presumed rights, has shut out the culture of duties – or, perhaps better expressed, it dissimulates it. The ethic of duty is the cultural precondition of a power that recognises and respects all human rights.