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**Closing the Fractures of Our Souls:  
Philosophy and the Meaningful Life**

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**Abstract**

This article starts by unveiling the root of the prejudice against the Humanities and Social Sciences, often regarded as soft-sciences, which fails to understand the significance of their focus in “essentially contestable concepts”. On this ground, we elaborate a perspective of how the humanities, i.e., the “usefulness of the useless”, can be the basis of an integral education that goes beyond mere professionalism and envisages a wisdom that pertains and promotes the integral human being. We give examples related to this from history and the arts realm, and specifically we try to clarify how philosophy can contribute to an authentic or meaningful life, understood as an existence not alienated to shallow values.

**1. Unveiling the root of a prejudice**

The fracture between the humanities and the so-called “hard sciences” separates both groups supposedly on the bases of methodological rigor, exactitude, and objectivity – as if the humanities lacked these same requirements. Such a mentality forces a separation between the natural sciences, understood as “hard sciences”, and the social sciences, labelled derogatorily as “soft sciences”. Their softness is conceived as a kind of incompetence to produce certain valued features. Very often the “hard sciences” brandish the application of a purely scientific method, as if there was one, and if so, as being the only methodology that could be applied to whatever kind of subjects one may be interested in clarifying (Feyerabend 1993). Moreover, such clarification would be of a higher rate and even somehow indisputable. In the same framework, the production of testable predictions, controlled by experiments that can refer to quantitative data and be unequivocally expressed by mathematical models is also claimed as a mark of superiority distinction (Cole 1983). Such features grant accuracy and objectivity, as well as a broader consensus, along with a faster pace

of development that can propitiate intrinsic technological exploration, thus having a stronger economic impact than the humanities, which seem useless.

All the claims above referred can be responded appropriately. The fact that the humanities are prone to intricate disputes is just an expression of the fact that they embrace what we can define as “essentially contestable concepts” (Gallie 1956a, 1956b, 1964). For example, to the concept of education has been given many tentative definitions, none of which completely satisfying all the parties involved (Cabanas 2002). Such concepts refer to the qualitative and evaluative notions for which humanities are fertile ground: justice, goodness, freedom, but also slavery, evil, fascism, etc. Although this does not mean that the issues related to the humanities are uninteresting or irrelevant, even if Wittgenstein would (in his first phase) proscribe them by stating that the issues that we have no experience of are meaningless problems, thus concluding as follows: “What can be said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent.” (Wittgenstein 1961/1968, p. 53). This suggests that the problems of our lives, or philosophical problems, which many times coincide, will just vanish away, because they remain unconsidered. An attitude that resembles the ostrich sticking its head in the sand.

It is worth recalling here and now the very closing of his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1961/1968, p. 129)

The correct method in philosophy would really be the following: to say nothing except what can be said, i.e. propositions of natural science – i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy – and then, whenever someone else wanted to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his propositions. Although it would not be satisfying to the other person – he would not have the feeling that we were teaching him philosophy – this method would be the only strictly correct one.

My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them – as steps – to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.) He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright.

What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.

Therefore, we should remain in silence about the essence of education, freedom, happiness, and love. Still, we could ask Wittgenstein one question: “If he throws away the ladder, meaning philosophy, how can he then get down, or even go further up?” Only two years later, after the *Tractatus*, which was supposed to be already published as *Philosophicus*, he gave us his response by writing the *Philosophical Investigations* (1963). Thus, he did recuperate the ladder, because contrary to what he first thought. In the *Tractatus* [“Logic fills the world: the limits of the world are also its limits.”], logic does not fill the world, nor even science, neither literature and poetry – which can be considered the desperate ultimate trial to grasp its meaning – even when considering the case that we could afford Jorge Luís Borges’ infinite library, with all the

possible books that could be written, by using all the words that could exist arranged in all the possible alignments we can imagine (Borges 1998). Indeed, the definition of an infinite set is that one of its parts must be also infinite, besides at each moment that goes by, new events and new stories are being engendered – and it will remain so until... who knows?

Returning to our previous topic, we can now better understand that the world is, more certainly, filled with “essential contestable concepts”. Those that irradiate polysemy and reject dogmatism, skepticism or eclecticism as proper attitudes to approach the wide myriad of meanings they may produce (Garver 1978). Taking care of distinguishing “essential contestable concepts” from those that can be proved as just merely confused, we can identify them by several features: they are evaluative, delivering value judgments (Baldwin 1997); they are internally complex (Benn and Gaus 1983); as a whole to be considered, being their elements passive of alternative descriptions, that could receive different weights or interpretations, under the pressure of psychological and sociological factors (Mason 1990); and changing with circumstances as they are open-ended and vague by nature; further such transformations are not predictable; and while failing to achieve the best expression, some could be said to be better than others, although they may receive even better formulations in the future (Swanton 1985). Noticeably the disputable and incompatible nature of each expression is recognized by the parties; and they realize the criteria for repudiating the given expressions; as they are also recognized as not being solvable by reasoning argumentation although being all expressions supported by sound arguments and/or evidence (which makes us conclude they should be reputed as antinomic)<sup>1</sup>. While, perhaps, indefinitely the parties dispute the correctness and superiority of their stated interpretations, thus they use to have intentionally aggressive and defensive usages. Nevertheless, albeit being understood as open-ended, or even because it, such issues sustain an ongoing fruitful concept development.

Whatever the case, one cannot say that they are useless lost statements, as something that we “must pass over in silence”, not even that they are irrational, since on the contrary, they point out to us the limits of our rationality. Still, they must not either be taken as the monsters that arise when rationality falls asleep. When our rationality passes over them in silence, it suffers a sort of blindness to what is, too many times, essential, although being contestable. It is not the case to say that “what is essential is invisible to the eye” (Saint-Exupéry 2003, p. 64), meaning invisible to rationality allowing us to go on drifting as a mystic. Our rationality sees very well what is an “essential contestable concept” and there is no reason to dismiss any of

<sup>1</sup> Cabanas (2002) consider as an antinomic subject those issues where we can have two opposed principles, being both valid.

them. They are challenges that we ought not to ignore, under penalty of mutilating our rationality, by introducing a spurious fracture in our souls.

Returning to the above-mentioned claims made by the “hard sciences”, as it is well known, the experimental method also cannot be applied to all matters of our human condition, as the Humanities’ cannot support a definitive clarification. Besides what the mathematical based experimental methodology unveils, in proceeding as it does, by lifting the veil, it veils something else from reality. As Boventura Sousa Santos stresses, “Mathematics provided modern science not only with its preferred analytical tool, but also with a logic of investigation, as well as a model of representing the structure of matter itself. According to Galileo, the book of nature is inscribed in geometric characters; and Einstein did not think otherwise” (1992, p. 15). The main consequences of this are that knowledge results in the ability to measure, and complexity suffers from a reductionistic approach. Furthermore, there is an arbitrary preference for the formal cause that ignores intention, which makes possible the prediction of reality, that is preferred above all things, due to its allowance for manipulating and transforming reality in order to satisfy our practical needs. Thus, the “hard sciences” are just a mechanistic, utilitarian and functional approach to reality. They certainly have wonderful outcomes, as our technological civilization testifies, but they are not the exclusive approach to our experience and they can neither cover all our reality.

Modern science is not the only possible explanation of reality; and there is no scientific reason whatsoever that it should even be considered better than the alternative explanations of metaphysics, astrology, religion, art, or poetry. The reason why we give priority today to a form of knowledge based on the prediction and control of phenomena has nothing to do with science. It is a value judgment. The scientific explanation of phenomena is the self-justification of science as the central phenomenon of our contemporaneity. Thus, science is autobiographical.” (Santos 1992, p. 41).

We will not further draw on the issues pertaining to the surpassing of the dominant paradigm by a post-modern one, but we want to stress the main point that establishes a conditioning context.

It shares the nature/human beings dichotomy, which amounts to a mechanistic view of nature, to which it contrasts, as one might expect, the specificity of human beings. This distinction, which was crucial for the scientific revolution of the sixteenth century, led in turn to others, such as those between nature and culture and between humans and animals, culminating in the eighteenth century in the celebration of the unique character of humanity. The line thus delineated between the study of humanity and the study of nature remained a prisoner of the cognitive priority assigned to the natural sciences, since although, on the one hand, a biological determinism of human behaviour was denied, on the other hand, biological arguments were used to establish the specificity of the human being.” (Santos 1992, p. 21).

Such a fracture has been disputed and discarded by the emergent paradigm, that has led us to conclude that “The dichotomy of natural and social sciences no longer has any meaning or utility. This distinction is based on a mechanistic conception of matter and of nature with which

it contrasts, it is presumed obviously, the concepts of human beings, culture, and society.” (Santos 1992, p. 31). Presently, the

(...) suppression of the natural sciences/social sciences dichotomy tends, therefore, to revalue the humanities. But for this revaluation to take place, the humanities need themselves to be profoundly changed. What there is in them of the future is that they have resisted the separation between subject and object, and that they have preferred to understand the world rather than to manipulate it. Their genuine core was, however, often trapped in mystifying preoccupations (dreamy esotericism and empty erudition). The ghetto into which the humanities chose to retire was in part a strategic defence against the assault of the social sciences that triumphantly wielded the scientific bias. But it was also the result of the void they felt, once their space had been taken over by the scientific model. [...] The humanistic conception of the social sciences, as the catalyst of the gradual melting together of natural and social sciences, places the person, as author and subject of the world, at the very centre of knowledge, but, unlike what happened in the traditional humanities, it places what we today call nature at the centre of the person. There is no human nature because all nature is human. It is therefore necessary to look for global categories of intelligibility, not concepts capable of melting down the frontiers into which modern science has divided and enclosed reality. Post-modern science is an admittedly analogical science that knows what it knows less well through what it knows better. I have already invoked the textual analogy. Other important basic categories of the emergent paradigms are, to my mind, the analogies of play, of drama, and even of biography. Today the world is natural or social, tomorrow it will be both, and will be looked at as if it were a text or a play, theatre or an autobiography” (Santos 1992, p. 35).

There are many reasons that can be given to support the surpassing of the divide between the hard and soft sciences. Be aware, for instance, of climate change and the reducing of biodiversity that imply human factors as significant drivers (Nature 2005). These are just an example of the colossal global problems we will not be able to address without taking in consideration humanities’ knowledge, or, in a word, its wisdom. This emphasizes why the “soft sciences” are as important as the others, while demonstrating that the artificial fracture introduced among sciences is a nefarious prejudice. Its consequences go far beyond the eye and spontaneously meet the needs of for instance, the present global situation, marked by the rise of famine. Although we are able to produce enough to feed the world population, this is impossible due to the consequences of the civilization of incompetent and criminal waste that is being promoted by the hypermediated and spectacularized consumerism (Llosa 2012; Lipovetsky 2007, Reis 2014; Reis 2007). We can add here the spread of wars and terrorism coming from fundamentalist groups and states (Chomsky 2016), not to mention the demise of democracy engulfed by populism and the manipulation of financial powers, resulting in the collapse of social cohesion by means of rampant individualism and “sonar ethics” (Gervilla 1993), that allows anything and the thought that “you are safe if you are not caught”. All this brings forth a plethora of problems rooted in the same caesura in our souls. A caesura that is potentialized by the schizophrenic alternation of the workaholic/entertainment regimen. It functions as a link between all the referred dimensions because it is at the heart of the

civilization of performance (Lyotard 1984)<sup>2</sup> engendered since the Modern era and widened by the spread of capitalism, now going neoliberal, globalized and deregulated.

## 2. Humanities and Wisdom, or why Amnesia could be Fatal

We will start the analysis of this topic by considering History, inasmuch it will endow us a framework to peel into its core, as memory is the ground of identity. Throughout history, there have been many warnings about the importance of remembrance, of not forgetting (although perhaps pardoning), resisting the skid into amnesia, which is the mother of all human catastrophes.

As many others before him, George Santayana said in 1905: “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” Winston Churchill has become more famous by stating the same, because he had a better means to broadcast his views and spoke in critical times, when ears were very attuned. Unfortunately, Aldous Huxley disappointingly recognized “That men do not learn very much from the lessons of history is the most important of all the lessons of history.”

To consider the lessons history offers, one needs to learn from information, more than information, from knowledge and more than from knowledge from wisdom that has been – literally – piled up throughout human history to be rapidly forgotten.

As for a paradigmatic case that conjugates history and the unfathomable nature of *in illo tempore* wisdom, we have chosen the book most published of all times: the Bible.<sup>3</sup> The biblical narrative of the Babel Tower can be a very interesting case, because of its surprisingly interpretative outcome. The episode occurred after the flood, which is meaningful *per se*. On the one hand, we have the supposed motives: corruption of the race; idolatry from the kings themselves; wide spread wickedness; and warfare raging stronger among humans. On the other hand, we have the consequences: the flood could be seen as the biggest punishment ever imposed on mankind by God; somehow comparable to a father beating his sons to death, sparing only a few. The flood is a brutal event, not comparable to the result of the Babel Tower; on the contrary, we would say at least that it has a pedagogical culmination.

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<sup>2</sup> “It was more the desire for wealth than the desire for knowledge that initially forced upon technology the imperative of performance improvement and product realization. The “organic” connection between technology and profit preceded its union with science. Technology became important to contemporary knowledge only through the mediation of a generalized spirit of performativity.” (Lyotard 1984, p. 45).

<sup>3</sup> We used the Rainbow Missions, Inc. (1991), English Version.

The whole earth was of one language and of one speech.<sup>4</sup> It happened, as they journeyed east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they lived there. They said one to another, "Come, let's make brick, and burn them thoroughly." They had brick for stone, and they used tar for mortar. They said, "Come, let's build us a city, and a tower, whose top reaches to the sky, and let's make us a name; lest we be scattered abroad on the surface of the whole earth. Yahweh came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men built." Yahweh said, "Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is what they begin to do. Now nothing will be withheld from them, which they intend to do. Come, let's go down, and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech." So Yahweh scattered them abroad from there on the surface of all the earth. They stopped building the city. Therefore the name of it was called Babel, because Yahweh confused the language of all the earth, there. From there, Yahweh scattered them abroad on the surface of all the earth. This is the history of the generations of Shem. Shem was one hundred years old, and became the father of Arpachshad two years after the flood." (Genesis 11, 2-11)

Having recovered from the cruel catastrophe of the flood, mankind promptly started industriously building a tower aimed to reach the sky. The irony is evident in the words of God when He contemplated the arrogant enterprise. "Behold", sounds like "be amazed", "nothing will be withheld from them", they think they are capable of the most intrepid deeds. Nevertheless, God's reaction was now very different, he could send lightnings and thunders to wreck the tower, as a father would reprehend their sons. But no, He confused their languages.

Without communication, no organized endeavour could be carried out and the dispersion of the nations also naturally occurred, because at once they did not understand each other – as they still do not. Mankind would like to knock on heaven's door and to simply present themselves to God saying "Behold, here we are, we came into You and all Your might by means of our own strength!". So, what represents the language confusion? Not a reprimand, but subtle humorous irony, with pedagogical charge, once it is bound to make one wonder. Maybe God was saying: "Do you want to come to Me? Do not weary yourselves by making towers, and just try to bring understanding, consensus and peace among yourselves."

What message could not be taken from such passage for the benefit of our times, where wars and terrorism swarm, while the fabric of our civilization is being ripped apart on behalf of a masked pure greed for resources? If, as Puehringer (2015) has shown, the dominant conceptual metaphors in Angela Merkel's crisis narrative subordinate policy-making to superior "market mechanisms", which are attributed with human and natural characteristics, it is also a fact that the same Angela who held a speech on January 17<sup>th</sup> at the Davos Economic Forum, stating that politicians must free themselves from the control of the economic realm. Assuming such an orientation means, at least, recognizing that economics has been dictating to politicians their role and decisions as well as the intention to counter it, we have better perspectives from now on.

<sup>4</sup> Take notice that despite enjoying a single language, before the Deluge mankind was not able to live peacefully, although being "one people".

While speaking about politics, it would be beneficial to mention Pericles as an Ancient Greece statesman model, from the fifth century BC, the Golden Age of Athens. Being an inspiring orator, and reputed strategist, Pericles had such a profound and good influence on Athenian society that he was named by Thucydides as the “first citizen” of Athens. Besides, Thucydides (2.65.4) states that the people of Athens “again elected him general and committed all their affairs to his hands, having now become less sensitive to their private and domestic afflictions, and understanding that he was the best man of all for the public necessities.”

Aside from stimulating Athenian democracy, Pericles promoted the arts and literature, and thus converted his city into the educational and cultural centre of the Ancient Greek world. Moreover, he launched the construction of some of the most important architectural achievements that we can still contemplate; the Acropolis and the Parthenon. With this, he not only beautified the glory of democratic Athens, but he also gave employment to the population. At the same time he warns the people about the

(...) projects whose success would only conduce to the honour and advantage of private persons, and whose failure entailed certain disaster on the country in the war. The causes of this are not far to seek. Pericles indeed, by his rank, ability, and known integrity, was enabled to exercise an independent control over the multitude – in short, to lead them instead of being led by them; for as he never sought power by improper means, he was never compelled to flatter them, but, on the contrary, enjoyed so high an estimation that he could afford to anger them by contradiction. (Thucydides 2.65., 7, 8)

It is worthwhile quoting some of Pericles words, in order to understand the kind of politician he must have been.

Our constitution does not copy the laws of neighbouring states; we are rather a pattern to others than imitators ourselves. Its administration favours the many instead of the few; this is why it is called a democracy. If we look to the laws, they afford equal justice to all in their private differences; if to social standing, advancement in public life falls to reputation for capacity, class considerations not being allowed to interfere with merit; nor again does poverty bar the way, if a man is able to serve the state, he is not hindered by the obscurity of his condition. But all this ease in our private relations does not make us lawless as citizens. Against this fear is our chief safeguard, teaching us to obey the magistrates and the laws, particularly such as regard the protection of the injured, whether they are actually on the statute book, or belong to that code which, although unwritten, yet cannot be broken without acknowledged disgrace. Further, we provide plenty of means for the mind to refresh itself from business. We celebrate games and sacrifices all the year round, and the elegance of our private establishments forms a daily source of pleasure and helps to banish the spleen; while the magnitude of our city draws the produce of the world into our harbour, so that to the Athenian the fruits of other countries are as familiar a luxury as those of his own. If we turn to our military policy, there also we differ from antagonists. We throw open our city to the world, and never by alien acts exclude foreigners from any opportunity of learning or observing, although the eyes of an enemy may occasionally profit by our liberality; trusting less in system and policy than to the native spirit of our citizens; while in education, where our rivals from their very cradles by a painful discipline seek after manliness, at Athens we live exactly as we please, and yet are just as ready to encounter every legitimate danger. [...] We cultivate refinement without extravagance and knowledge without effeminacy; wealth we employ more for use than for show, and place the real disgrace of poverty not in owning to the fact but in declining the struggle against it. [...] In short, I say that as a city we are the school of Hellas; while I doubt if the world can produce a man, who where he has only himself to depend upon, is equal to so many emergencies, and graced by so happy a versatility as the Athenian. (Thucydides 2.37.1-3; 2.38.1-1; 2.39.1.; 2.40.1.)

One more exceptional example of the importance of the humanities can be drawn from the educative importance the Ancient Greeks gave to dance and music. This is particularly relevant when it comes to considering the development of aesthetic sensitivity, which relates to an inner kind of equilibrium we should highlight here. Plato, in particular, “believes that the education in music meaning the unity of melody, poetry, and dance, is important, because rhythm and harmony penetrate deeply into the inmost soul and exercise strong influence upon it” (Stamou 2002, p. 5). It was assumed that music inspired a soul *ethos*, and an equilibrium, that Plato equals to an education in virtue: “Athenian: Now the vocal actions which pertain to the training of the soul in excellence we ventured somehow to name ‘music.’” (Laws, p. 273a)

For Aristotle, the primary goal of the liberal arts – music, writing and drawing – primary goal was virtue, as well as relaxation, and thirdly to be an agent for moral education, namely to produce an adjustment of emotions and enjoying things correctly, as well as to induce an adequate temperament and “finally, music can function as a means for the purification of such excessive feelings as exalted excitement or strong feeling of pity or fear. This function is to purge the excess of passion and leave the person with normal feeling” (Stamou 2002). This last function relates to the formation of character or *ethos*, while different harmonies may affect the human soul in different modes.

The above conception of music also appears to define the pharresiastes paradigm applied to Socrates, as Foucault has incisively discussed considering the dialogue of Nicias, Laches, two renowned Generals, and the philosopher (Foucault 1999). First, the same Laches recognizes to Socrates a special profile<sup>5</sup>:

(...) when I hear a man discussing virtue or any kind of wisdom, one who is truly a man and worthy of his argument, I am exceedingly delighted; I take the speaker and his speech together, and observe how they sort and harmonize with each other. Such a man is exactly what I understand by “musical,” – he has tuned himself with the fairest harmony, not that of a lyre or other entertaining instrument, but has made a true concord of his own life between his words and his deeds” (Laches 188c, 188d).

This passage draws on an essential philosophical feature: the coincidence with the *Logos* and the *Bios*, what one says and what one does, that reveals the true sense given to philosophy in Antiquity: philosophy was meant to be a way of life (Hadot 1995). In this respect, the generals have to conclude that Socrates expresses such harmonization:

(...) there is a harmonic relation between what Socrates says and what he does, between his words (*logoi*) and his deeds (*erga*). Thus, not only is Socrates himself able to give an account of his own life<sup>6</sup>, such an account is already visible in his behavior since there is not the slightest discrepancy between what he says and what he does. He is a ‘mousikos aner’. In Greek culture, and in most of Plato’s other dialogues, the

<sup>5</sup> Which anticipates the subject of our final section once more.

<sup>6</sup> Take care that this refers to nothing less than an “examined life”.

phrase 'mousikos aner' denotes a person who is devoted to the Muses – a cultured person of the liberal arts. Here the phrase refers to someone who exhibits a kind of ontological harmony where the logos and bios of such a person is in harmonic accord." (Foucault 1999, p. 42)<sup>7</sup>

However, we should notice that such harmony must not be taken in a metaphoric way. It really refers to a harmony that induces an *ethos* of the soul's equilibrium. Such a conclusion entails that it is of the most educational importance: it constitutes an open criticism to the current common curricula, whose basic education gives no more than a marginal space and role to the liberal arts – not to mention what happens to the more specialized case of Higher Education.

As Nuccio Ordine explains when considering *The usefulness of the useless* (2013) utilitarianism, the subordination to the laws of the markets is killing the joy for knowledge and the access to the wisdom, indispensable for living, that only the apparently useless humanities can provide. Along with Ordine, we want to recall that the authentic essence of life coincides with the Good (which consumeristic democracies have always considered useless) and not with the useful; an assertion that relates to the fact that perhaps capitalism, as we know it, does not have any interest in improving human life. Wisdom and the creative act that underlies the humanities are in themselves unrelated to the aspiration to profit, to the monetarization of results. The aspiration to profit more likely instils arrogance, presumption and insolence and a kind of blindness to what is found outside of its scope, transforming everything in a resource, as a means to make money. A predatory attitude that is consuming our world, disrespecting the environment (air, water, land, resources and biodiversity), with no mercy destroying the ecosystem, and with no sensibility to ecojustice (Martusewicz, Edmundson and Lupinacci 2011). This occurs precisely with the man that has no music in himself and is capable of suggesting that a debt in pounds be traded for the same amount of pounds of meat due by the indebted (Shakespeare V, I, 83-88):

Since nought so stockish, hard and full of rage,  
But music for the time doth change is nature.  
The man that hath no music in himself,  
Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds;  
Is fit for treasons, stratagemas; and spoils;  
The motion of his spirit is dull as night  
And his affection dark as Erebus.  
Let no such man be trusted.

The cruelty implied in the Merchant's proposal reveals the lowest spirit of our capitalism and the obsession for profit, that wants to make itself to be paid in human meat, and, in fact, too

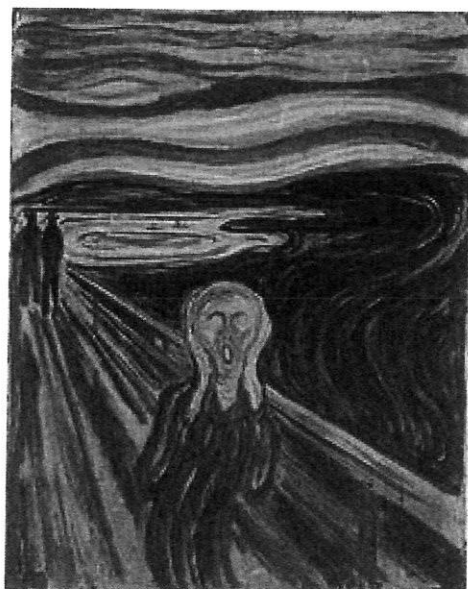
<sup>7</sup> We cannot accept this principle as nothing more than an ideal, once we personally envisage that a man or a woman free from defects would be a terrible thing to be contemplated and handled. Perhaps worthy of idolatry... Nevertheless, fortunately, there many men and women worthy of praise.

many times, it succeeds to doing so. What is at stake when such a spirit conquers a school is that it risks its perversion, once “the school that focus in the market risks to be converted itself in a Market” (Ordine 2017, p. 27), by abdicating from cultivating the free, autonomous and critical spirit, able to give free course to its *curiositas*. Consequently, it has become crucial and urgent that we strive for a more human kind of school.

The school must always consider as an objective that the young person leave it with a harmonious personality and not a specialist. In my opinion, this applies, in a sense, even to techniques, whose students will devote themselves to a totally defined profession. The first thing should always be to develop the general capacity for independent thinking and judgment and not the acquisition of specialized knowledge. (Ordine 2017, p. 28)

Precisely, a Knowledge Society, as being driven by the exponential production of knowledge, creativity, innovation and change claims for it. It also suggests the introduction of Arts, History and Philosophy into the curricula, from the lower to the higher levels of schooling. Due to the absence of these subjects, education deprives itself of some essential teleological underpinnings: perfectibility, freedom of thinking and acting, a critical spirit and even happiness. Meanwhile, our democracies will loose the possibility of counting on proactive democratic citizenship, which the European Union has recently set as one of its major educational aims (Council of Europe 2016).

We would like to give a last example from post-modernity by, somehow anachronistically, reflecting upon a famous painting from Edvard Munch.



“The scream” by Edvard Munch 1893 (Source: <https://pixabay.com>)

The work of autobiographical meaning, could be taken very differently in times of the post narcissistic wounds, namely the loss felt by mankind on being the centre of the universe, a supernatural elected being, a self-commanded rational being, and the spring of all meaning. What is more, in times when metanarratives that could conjure meaning in our lives were wiped out, in times when the *Ab alio solutum* has been rejected, and prosaically swept out our quotidian life, such scream could mean much more than a neurotic episode of someone of depressive nature. It could convey the deep feeling of absurdity when no hope of sense remains and only a *vacuum* extends ahead of us. There is no science, no technology, no Tower of Babel to cope with such loss.

We must take care that the humanities are taken as an intrinsic component for developing the University as an institution concerned with the formation of the sense and sensibility encompassing – beyond instrumental reason (Horkheimer 2012) – the aesthetic, ethic and even spiritual *ethos* related to human dignity, as an educational teleological core. We are living in crucial times that demand the acknowledgment and the awareness regarding the intertwined nature of all kinds of scientific interest, in order to guarantee emancipation, and the survival of the human race and even the earth. We should also be concerned with how various forms of human knowledge relate to each other and how education should focus on personological flourishing prior to all sort of specialization, so it can help everyone find the life meanings we all crave for; and, at the same time, it can help our instrumental reason to be more creative and humanistic.

It came to our knowledge that, understood as a liberal education, some universities are already starting first year courses with a first year with a program composed of History, Literature, Philosophy, Arts, Science and Mathematics. It seems they are somehow recovering the liberal arts that

(...) have been those discipline suited to the *liberalis*, the free man. [...] The *liberalis* has interests outside of the practical world, outside of the world of work. It is in this sense that we still retain the notion that a liberal education ought, somehow, to make students high-minded: as professionals, doctors, lawyers, [engineers,] civil servants, and military officers that are held to a code higher than what is required of general population. And it is no coincidence that the university is responsible for producing most of them. The liberally educated person properly exercises his or her freedom for ends that reach beyond mere self-interest; his concerns include more than economic survival. This is one of the reasons why we continue to look to the university as one of the chief, indeed, one of the last, publicly recognized conduits of liberal virtues upon which liberal democracy depends. (Topping 2010, pp. 150-151)

We should keep in mind that liberal arts are oriented toward the fundamental human ends, which are propaedeutic to cultivating human's freedom and happiness, to develop one's own ability to think critically about one's own profession, one's own role as a father or a mother or

a son or as daughter and a sibling, one's own citizenship rights and duties, and one's own life... The Humanities prepare us to reflect upon human ends, which is more than simply reflecting upon efficient causes or mere problem solving (Topping 2010) that is not to be discarded, but to be inserted into a unified curriculum from where the sciences can produce a higher meaning.

### 3. Philosophy and the meaningful life

How much could be learned from the Socrates summoning to consider that "The unexamined life is not worth living" (Apology, 38a 5-6), especially when we can imagine what a society of non-examined lives would be? Unfortunately, nowadays it is perfectly common to live an unexamined life; to live uncritically more or less subjected to automatisms and routines. It is possible to live, without actually taking care of the people we are, while being sloppy to develop the competences and perspectives we might be able to. Thus, it is to be expected that a society of non-examined lives could emerge and that it would "result in an uncritical, unjust, dangerous world" (Elder 2007).

Western ancient philosophy, taking Socrates as the epicentre, has developed a reflexive practice of existential clarification, with ethical implications. As Pierre Hadot, has so incisively expounded, for the ancient Greeks and Romans:

(...) philosophy was a mode of existing-in-the-world, which has to be practiced at each instant, and the goal of which was to transform the whole of the individual's life. [...] Philosophy thus took on the form of an exercise of the thought, will, and the totality of one's being, the goal of which was to achieve a state practically inaccessible to mankind: wisdom. Philosophy was a method of spiritual progress which demanded a radical conversion and transformation of their individual's way of being.

Thus, philosophy was a way of life, both in its exercise and effort to achieve wisdom, and its goal, wisdom itself. For real wisdom does not merely cause us to know: it makes us 'be' in a different way. [...] The ancients knew that they would never be able to realize wisdom within themselves as a stable, definitive state, but they at least hoped to accede to it in certain privileged moments and wisdom was the transcendent norm which guided their action.

Wisdom, then, was a way of life which brought peace of mind (*ataraxia*), inner freedom (*autarkeia*), and a cosmic consciousness. First and foremost Philosophy presented itself as a therapeutic, intended to cure mankind's anguish" (Hadot 1995, pp. 265-266).

It should be noted here that, as Foucault (1999) so precisely explains, the "Socratic dialogue is of a special nature; in it the listener is led by the Socratic logos into 'giving an account' – *didonai logon* – of himself, 'of the manner in which he now spends his days, and of the kind of life he has lived hitherto?'" (Laches 187e, 188a). This is very different from the confession of sins, as we can find in Christianity, but rather ask for a rational accounting of a person's life and, more precisely, to present the logos that gives form to a person's style of living (Foucault 1999). This opens a breach that points out the eventual aesthetic nature of the process, although

within the Platonic orientation, tonic is always placed in the ethical domain. Nevertheless, it is not so easy to separate the two realms completely.

The first sort of parrhesia analysed by Foucault related to the field of politics and courage was the issue of personal relationships between sincere human beings, connecting the *logos* (truth) with *bios* (life). This does not mean that to live up to the higher expectations of an examined life – and in the case of Socrates to die accordingly – exempts one from having courage. Socrates cross-examinations involve a specific relation between truth and existence. In a way, as Foucault devises, Socrates plays the role of the oracle in Delphi, as he openly offers himself for consultation. Moreover, as the oracle was enigmatic, so Socrates requires the effort that pierces our common condition formatted by daily routines, assumptions and prejudices, i.e., the recognition of one's own ignorance. Such personal existential transcendence, a personal disclosure of our current way of living, takes effort, and humility – it is, perhaps, the first step of a conversion process. Between the Stoic and the Cynic Socratic heritage, where parrhesia will become more a question of the relation between the *Logos* and the *bios*, this entails in the first case assuming a private analysis or a serene conversation among friends, and in the second case, above all a caustic denouncing unveiling of the political arena, we would like to also recover the Platonic “attempt to determine how to bring the political parrhesia involving *logos*, truth, and *nomos* so that it coincides with the ethical parrhesia involving *logos*” (Foucault 1999, p. 44).

The extent of such options are far reaching, though we would like to circumscribe them to maintain the paths of personal (re)construction, more or less introspective or conversational, as well as the political intervention, which could be more aligned with the wide clinical parrhesia role envisaged by Slorterdijk (1987). All three modes request what Deleuze and Guattari (1994) expected from philosophy: that it be a creative process of thinking anew, introducing an inflection into the repetition of the concepts available. Furthermore, this means a critical stance of questioning, to go beyond “doxology” and “misology” and dare to rip Chaos, thus producing a world of meaning or, if you like, a meaning of the world. Philosophy introduces us to looking at things as if it was for the first time, freeing us to accept the challenges of delving into the questions stemming from our needs, desires and interests.

Breaking out from the ground of the creation of concepts, to philosophize seems impossible without undergoing a critical thinking process. However, such a process would be more the emanation of successive approaches that unfold “a quest of the soul”, through which a dispositional competence is acquired. A competence that is defined by the Critical Thinking Community (2016) as follows:

Critical thinking is the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skilfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action. In its exemplary form, it is based on universal intellectual values that transcend subject matter divisions: clarity, accuracy, precision, consistency, relevance, sound evidence, good reasons, depth, breadth, and fairness.

It entails the examination of those structures or elements of thought implicit in all reasoning: purpose, problem, or question-at-issue; assumptions; concepts; empirical grounding; reasoning leading to conclusions; implications and consequences; objections from alternative viewpoints; and frame of reference.

It seems though that critical thinking is a metacognition process, by which one strives to improve one's own patterns of thought and to achieve autonomous thinking,

(...) according to which spirit imposes itself its own law (nomos); thinking is its own ground thus managing each step it makes [...] This principle is decisive, since it implies that it is allowed to the one who things to get away from the facts, it allows him/her to make a distance, necessary for examination, analysis and evaluation, meaning that it is possible to criticize when needed, i.e., it prevents us to, due to brutal evidence of reality, capitulate. In short: the principle of independence is an absolute condition for the effects of autonomy to be manifested" (Gojkov, Stojanović and Rajić 2014, p. 592).

Therefore, critical thinking requires one to be free from the ego and social centric ways of approaching subjects. However, a human atavism is widely recognized: when left to itself, human thought often tends to establish beliefs without questioning, or rather, tends to uncritically assume those absorbed from an established social-cultural identity. Among the most common mechanisms of producing deceiving beliefs we can distinguish prejudice, hasty generalizations, fallacies, self-deception (rationalization and "wishful thinking") and narrow approaches.

As the main consequences of these processes, we produce errors, misconceptions, and distortions, as we

(...) have been socially conditioned (indoctrinated) into their beliefs. They are unreflective thinkers. Their minds are products of social and personal forces they neither understand, control, nor concern themselves with. Their personal beliefs are often based in prejudices. Their thinking is largely comprised of stereotypes, caricatures, oversimplifications, sweeping generalizations, illusions, delusions, rationalizations, false dilemmas, and begged questions. Their motivations are often traceable to irrational fears and attachments, personal vanity and envy, intellectual arrogance and simple-mindedness. These constructs have become a part of their identity" (Elder & Elder 2004, p. 3).

We can count on the atavist propensity of human thinking for spontaneously producing and surrendering to formal and informal fallacies. In addition, our predisposition to "rationalization" that comes from our constant struggle to make sense of our own world and which, far too often, in order to elude anguish and remorse, while trying fiercely to maintaining self-respect, we have created a highly rational rank of "explanations" to emotional and motivational factors to justify our self (ego). We seek "good reasons", although false, to support behaviours and failures. In short, under the Freudian theory, "rationalization" is a defence

mechanism consisting of justifying and explaining controversial behaviours or feelings in a seemingly rational or logical manner in order to avoid the reasons underlying them.

Furthermore, we should count on our tendency for what is known as “wishful thinking”, the simple process of making wishes for reality and rationality, therefore taking decisions or following thoughts based upon desires rather than on facts or considered reasons (Bastardi, Uhlmann and Ross 2011). In such a case, beliefs are formed according to what is pleasing to imagine instead of relying on rationality. Wishful thinking is a powerful mechanism to self-deception. It can produce a “spiral” of phantasy (Booker 2011, p. 1).

Philosophy is a crucial realm for not only getting familiar with critical thinking, but also to venture to practice it, to really essay to plunge into subjects with a critical attitude and, in consequence, gaining a natural sense of thinking critically, which entails an autonomous, and therefore

(...) self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored, and self-corrective thinking. It requires rigorous standards of excellence and mindful command of their use. It entails effective communication and problem-solving abilities and a commitment to overcome our native egocentrism and sociocentrism (Elder & Elder 2006, p. 4).

Moreover, critical thinking must be applied with sensitivity to the elements of thought – e.g., questioning issues, interpretations of information, inferences, concepts, assumptions, implications and consequences, viewpoints, purposes – while following some standards: clarity (by elaborating or exemplifying); accuracy (by checking and verifying); precision (by being specific, detailing and exact); relevance (by ascertain relations and implications); depth (by considering the difficulties and complexity); breath (by considering alternative viewpoints); significance (considering the importance or centrality); logic (by verifying coherence); fairness (by avoiding vested interests) (Elder & Elder 2006). Critical thinking includes a set of competencies that we have deduced by comparing the proposals of Kurland (2016), Olin (2015) and Elder & Elder (2006): rationality, self-knowledge, honesty, open-mindedness, discipline and reflexivity.

Furthermore, it must be noticed that critical thinking, and the issues discussed above, create concepts that refer mutually to each other: to create a concept, one must produce a kind of “robbery”, which introduces a deviation of meaning that expresses the subject’s genuine relation to the problem he is experiencing. This means that one takes a fresh look at the world – at life itself –, which can only happen through a critical approach. Conversely, critical thinking is always responsible for initiating a dynamic that inevitably leads to a creative movement through which it can give way to a personal and original concept creation.

Elder & Elder (2004, p. 5) distinguish between fair-minded people uncritical persons and skilled manipulators, giving us a warning about this struggle, originated in “in illo tempore”, which we do not know how it will end although we should be tenaciously determined to undertake and strive for more humanly and just societies. Such a saga must feed on what the humanities have to offer; it must feed on the achievement and tragedies of history, on literature’s imagination, on the wings of poetry, but also on paintings that could devise us an alternative gaze, and on the music that is at the core of our beings and our lives, which are nothing more than a dance with time. As for philosophy, it must have become clear by now that its theme “is the authentic life. What is an authentic life? Such is the question of the philosopher.” (Badiou 2016, p. 11)

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