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## PHILOSOPHY AND HUMAN UNDERSTANDING

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### *Some preliminary difficulties*

It is perhaps not so easy, on first consideration, to believe that philosophy could be an instrument for attaining mutual understanding among different peoples, since it is usually thought of as the field in which discrepancies are the norm, rather than the exception, and in which controversies seldom take the form of a friendly dialogue. But even more serious is the difficulty arising from the fact that to appeal to philosophy is to appeal to a rather indeterminate entity, for a commonly accepted definition of philosophy itself can hardly be found even among philosophers. Something that is considered genuine philosophy by a certain school or tradition may well be considered bad philosophy or not even philosophy at all by thinkers with a different orientation. Most analytic philosophers, for example, consider metaphysical investigations of the traditional kind to be vague and uncritical speculations that hold no water; on the opposite side, metaphysically oriented philosophers often claim that analytical work is just a marginal descriptive exercise, which does not reach the core of what deserves to be called a philosophical inquiry. As is quite clear, all this has nothing to do with accepting or refusing individual solutions to specific problems, but expresses rather an intellectual attitude predetermining the conceptual space within which a certain problem can or cannot be formulated as being philosophical. In other words, this means that we are confronted with different paradigms of philosophy that are in general mutually exclusive or at least difficult to reconcile.

From this point of view, it seems that science, rather than philosophy, might constitute a ground for promoting understanding among people, because its concepts, laws, theories, and methods are shared by the whole scientific community (as well as being accepted by non-specialists), independently both of the different cultural traditions to which scientists belong and of their ideological or religious convictions. This is undeniable; but it is simply a consequence of the fact that science treats matters that do not concern issues regarding the global orientation and experience of reality that are central to people's worldviews, and that constitute the core of their disagreements and struggles. Science does not *solve* such controversies, but simply *ignores* them, and leaves their disruptive potential intact. Hence we must try to better understand what is meant by philosophical discord, and see whether this can offer us unexpected help in our search for human understanding.

A first step in our investigation consists in relating the different or contrary attitudes that appear in philosophy to differences in the *traditions* that philosophical inquiry has followed in different countries. This, however, does not clarify the issue completely, as one major question remains unanswered, namely, why does each of these intellectual attitudes claim to be the genuine expression of philosophy proper? It is sometimes said that this is because there exists a common philosophical root, with respect to which all

philosophies are connected: this root is constituted by ancient Greek thought which, according to this way of thinking, constitutes or should constitute the model of all philosophising. But, needless to say, such an answer could not help us very much, as there is little in common, as far as the style of philosophising is concerned, among e.g. Democritus, Plato and Aristotle. Thus even ancient Greece offers us an array of philosophical paradigms, rather than a single model. One must in fact recognise that every age, every historical moment, has its own philosophy, understood not as a particular system, but as a way of philosophising; and that that age inevitably tends to evaluate other philosophies according to its own standards and criteria. A more serious difficulty, however, is that even if we were to accept that some kind of 'genealogical chain' might enable us to identify philosophy as starting from Greek origins, this would amount to considering philosophy as a peculiar and specific characteristic of but one cultural tradition, namely that of the West, with the consequence that no genuine philosophy could then be found in other cultural traditions (a thesis that has been actually maintained by several scholars).

Against such a 'reduction' stands a position expressed in the well-known saying that 'every man is a philosopher'. This claim, however, though it points to a background common to every form of philosophy, may result in an additional ambiguity. Indeed, taken literally, it sounds quite general and superficial, as it appears to underestimate the importance that must be accorded to professionalism and technical competence in philosophical matters. On the other hand, it may be considered more positively if it is understood as expressing the view that the philosophical attitude corresponds to some primitive need in man, being deeply rooted in his nature. If we submit the claim to closer scrutiny, we find that it hints at the fact that each and every one of us has his own global vision or worldview, his general perspective on his place and role in the world and society, his ultimate beliefs regarding the meaning of life, and his beliefs about values, duties, final destiny, and so on. If this is true, philosophy in a proper sense could be seen as a disciplined investigation and development of such themes, as a specification of them, and as an effort to answer the questions involved.

In such a way, if philosophy is considered as being essentially characterised by its thematic domain (or domains), it turns out that the specific 'language' in which and through which it may develop is rather immaterial: critical-systematic, symbolic, poetic, artistic, and mythological languages would all be on an equal footing. Are we ready to accept this consequence? Is the mode of expressing one's philosophical attitude really immaterial to its being philosophy in a genuine sense? It is not easy to provide a direct answer to this question, and we need to go into some detail before we can evaluate this point correctly.

#### *Philosophy as the horizon of the whole*

It seems appropriate to characterise the conceptual horizon of philosophy by seeing it as an inquiry that tries to adopt 'the point of view of the whole'. This means, first, that nothing can be considered alien to philosophical investigation (nature, man, God, freedom, death, law, art, science, and so on), but also that every individual subject of this inquiry should be investigated 'as a whole' and not simply from some particularised point of view. So, for instance, the philosophy of man cannot be identified with psychology, sociology, cultural anthropology or linguistics, each of which considers man

from a specific and restricted angle. Nor can it be seen as the sum of these particular disciplines, but rather as the attempt to afford a global image of man in which the information provided by these sciences (and several other as well) can be harmonised and receive a *sense*, taking into consideration at the same time other aspects of human reality that are not the subject matter of scientific investigation. Moreover, this image is intrinsically related to other branches of philosophy, in the sense of both being influenced by and influencing them. In this way, a philosophy of time is different from, for example, relativity theory, although it must take the content of relativity theory into account. It has to investigate general conceptions of time which may count as tacit presuppositions or as implicit consequences of relativity, even if they lie outside the domain of interest of the theory itself (which is a theory of *physics*).

Once this is accepted, we see that a plurality of methods can be adopted to realise this 'point of view of the whole'. Only one condition seems indispensable, that is, the effort to be explicit. It is clear that this effort can attain very valuable results if it is performed by means of the powerful tools of the *logos*, i.e. according to the various levels connected with careful conceptual and logical analysis, with accurate and testable interpretations, with cogent arguments offering sound justifications of the asserted statements. This, by the way, shows that analytical philosophy can be encompassed within this conception of philosophy in general, provided that it is considered as a valuable *method* of philosophical inquiry, and not with the pretension to exhaust the whole of philosophy. Indeed we are not entitled to reject other methods of philosophising, which, by the way, can be found within Western philosophy itself: let us only mention the philosophical pregnancy of certain Platonic myths, the powerful insights into the depth of the human soul contained in certain pages of Dostoyevsky, and the pessimistic worldview that inspires the poetical work of Leopardi.

#### *The 'implicit philosophy' of different cultures*

What we have said about the 'implicit philosophy' of every human being (which can give rise to an 'explicit philosophy' under suitable conditions) can help us to understand that such a philosophy may be possessed in a quite similar way by a community of human beings and, in a broader sense, by a culture. Indeed, it is well known that humans tend to form groups of the most different sorts on the basis of the common acceptance of certain goals, ideals, norms, etc.; and the less artificial or ad hoc the group is, the more this basis is constituted by general ideas concerning the world, man in his relation to nature and to other men, moral obligations, religious beliefs, and so on. In other words, human communities are always rooted in some 'implicit philosophy', a philosophy that is often more highly articulated and even richer than the implicit philosophy of any single individual, at least because it mirrors to some extent the contributions of many individuals.

When we speak of *cultures*, what we have said so far becomes twice as obvious and decisive, for the elements that enable us to identify a culture are almost all of an 'ideal' nature. As a matter of fact, a culture is determined by a great many 'elements', such as its customs, social hierarchies, institutions, laws, norms, public ceremonies, and religious rites. But these are by no means simple 'facts of life', or isolated bits of behaviour; they all carry and express some 'meanings', and the set of such meanings constitutes a kind of net that is the expression of a certain worldview, of a certain *conception of the whole*,

that is to say of a certain ‘implicit philosophy’ in the sense described above. It is this basic and often implicit philosophical core that characterises every culture, that gives it its identity vis-à-vis other cultures, provides behaviour within it with a meaning different from that given to similar behaviour in other cultures, and explains the importance and value uniquely attributed in that culture to specific acts or facts. Moreover, it is this core that not only oversteps the individual, making him an active participant in his culture, but also oversteps the culture’s configuration at any one time, giving it that most characteristic feature which we call *tradition*, a kind of stability that is compatible with a slow historical evolution.

The said core remains in general latent and implicit. Only from time to time does some great personality appear who explicitly considers certain basic constituents of the core and gives them a voice, digs out the general views of the world and life that are shared by the majority of his community, and indicates values that are typical of it and, on occasion, criticises them. When this happens, we can say that a real *philosophy* is being proposed; and it makes no difference whether this philosophy is expressed by a poet, a sage, or a professional philosopher.

#### *Philosophy as the self-consciousness of cultures*

According to the above outline, the ‘explicit’ philosophy of a given culture gradually emerges, adopting particular basic themes, preferred domains of inquiry and methodological standards. In this way an explicit philosophical tradition consolidates the implicit depository of past wisdom and speculation, and at the same time provides an inspiring source for further investigation. Every active philosopher inside this culture, while being influenced by this tradition, makes his own contribution to it, and thereby enriches it and deepens the understanding of its ‘eternal problems’, perhaps giving new answers to traditional issues and providing the possibility of uncovering new problems. In this sense ‘explicit’ philosophies may be understood as stages in a continuous process of the *self-consciousness of cultures*. Not only because, in the variety of their positive contributions and criticisms, they bring to light and submit to critical analysis, as well as deepen and expand upon, the values, goals, and dimensions of meaning which inspire their culture, but also because they express the way in which cultures are confronted with the changing conditions of their existence in the natural world and in history. If philosophy, as Hegel once said, is one’s time apprehended through thought, nothing could be a better expression of this claim than the idea of philosophy being the self-consciousness of cultures.

This idea, by the way, helps us understand the fact (which is quite often stressed as evidence of the futility and lack of soundness of philosophy) that philosophy is a set of many irreconcilable doctrines all of which claim to be true, and that no philosophical problem has received a universally accepted solution through the whole of history. Such a fact is not to be seen as a kind of scandal of reason, once we understand that the different doctrines reflect different moments and forms of self-consciousness that a given culture attains when confronted with changing conditions in the course of its history, or that different cultures are led to manifest at various historical times.

There is more. The intrinsic ideals, conceptual frameworks, and existential attitudes that inspire a culture are not at all one-sided or monochromatic: among them variety and tension are no less frequent than unity and harmony. This is why one and the same cul-

ture usually also expresses a variety of philosophical doctrines within the same historical context; this happens because different components of its spiritual core are brought to consciousness, made explicit, and stressed by philosophers with special attention and vigour.

### *The conditions for a transcultural dialogue*

The above reflections provide us with some indications regarding the possibility and the conditions for a transcultural dialogue. They do not differ very much from the conditions for an interpersonal dialogue: the first requirement is an effort of sympathetic understanding with respect to the values, parameters of judgement, and ways of approaching existential problems which are fundamental to the other perspective, and which may well be at variance with our own. We must be ready to admit that these values etc. cannot be wrong, or naïve, or old fashioned, if they have the force to permeate the world of our interlocutor, inspiring his conduct, giving meaning to his life, and orienting his most vital choices.

It must be admitted that a sympathetic attitude to such a divergent perspective seldom arises in the context of an immediately friendly contact with the person having it; the first and immediate impact of our exchange of ideas tends rather to produce a reaction of isolation and self-defence on our part. But a positive attitude to our associate and his perspective becomes possible once we make explicit the points of difference that create an opposition between us; and in such a way we become able to evaluate the reasons for them. At this stage we are ready to compare and understand, for we no longer perceive these differences as the expression of some obscure and latent hostility, but rather as projections of a different personal or cultural background, that certainly also contains several components that are interesting, respectable, and even valuable for us as well.

It is clear that this process of understanding has all the basic features of the intellectual attitude of desiring to clarify and obtain self-consciousness that we proposed to call philosophy in the most genuine sense. Hence philosophy appears at this point as the most powerful and at the same time indispensable tool for interpersonal and especially transcultural dialogue. Indeed, while a current of human sympathy may often help us in establishing excellent relations with another person, despite several discrepancies between the worlds of our respective personal convictions, such a psychological support becomes negligible when we are confronted with an abstract entity such as an alien culture. In this case almost everything must pass through the filter of an intellectual investigation that is primarily of a philosophical nature.

Still, not any kind of philosophical penetration will by itself result in a positive dialogue. As a matter of fact, philosophical analysis and argumentation have usually been used as tools for criticism, refutation, and the elimination of rival doctrines; and we cannot say that in our time such a use of philosophy has come to an end. There are essentially two reasons for this attitude. One is that philosophy is often used as a tool for ideological struggles, and therefore becomes affected by the attitude of intolerance and aggressiveness that is typical of ideologies. The second resides in the fact that philosophical doctrines, especially when they are concerned with the central issues of human existence, are often conceived in absolute terms; that is, each of them claims to be the only true perspective on the whole of reality, while other doctrines cannot help being, at

best, only partially true, i.e. true to the extent that they are able to approximate the statements, principles, and methodological requirements of the absolute doctrine.

Needless to say, such an attitude is not only a serious obstacle to a real understanding of other doctrines, but it can lead, even under the most favourable conditions, only to an understanding without dialogue. In order to attain the level of a dialogue one must abandon, at least to a certain degree, the claim of absoluteness for one's own philosophy, and appreciate that it too is relative to one's own culture. In other words, not only do we need to consider philosophies as the self-consciousness of cultures, but we also need an additional self-consciousness of philosophy itself which leads it to recognise this very fact and, hence, its being culture-dependent.

### *Cultural relativity versus cultural relativism*

Is cultural relativism a precondition for a transcultural dialogue? The answer must be partially affirmative and partially negative. It must be affirmative in the sense that a certain measure of cultural relativism favours the elimination of claims to privilege that might otherwise lead a particular philosophy to see itself as the supreme court that judges other doctrines, worldviews, and the like. This, however, does not mean that cultural *relativity* (that is, the *fact* that any philosophy is relative to its cultural environment) can by itself open our minds to alternative philosophies. In order for this to happen the *consciousness* of this relativity is required, as well as the consciousness of the fact that it entails that the different cultural expressions are of equal dignity. For if one is embedded in one's own culture but still believes oneself able to make absolute judgments, or is conscious of being culture-dependent but considers one's own culture as the only legitimate or most perfect one, one will not adopt an open attitude towards other cultures. This is what we consider the 'reasonable measure' of cultural relativism that can and must be accepted if our aim is to develop a transcultural dialogue.

This measure (which justifies the partial affirmative answer to our initial question), however, cannot be overstepped, since transcultural dialogue also requires an overcoming of cultural relativism itself. Indeed, as long as we believe that only the philosophy of our own culture expresses *absolute standards*, we cannot rely on those standards in our attempt to understand the philosophies of other cultures; but also, if we believe that even the intellectual *tools* of philosophy are *totally* culture-laden, a kind of cultural solipsism becomes unavoidable, and transcultural dialogue is equally blocked. Therefore, extreme cultural relativism is no less pernicious than cultural imperialism.

Fortunately the real situation is not that bad, for there is a common ground for intercultural as well as interpersonal understanding, and this is *humanness*, which is the 'genetic' condition of every culture and the basis of all its aspects. In fact we can consider every culture as the special way that groups of individuals sharing a common humanness react to the historical and environmental conditions in which they find themselves. Of course, in each culture this humanness has been led to express and develop only a limited number of the constituents of its extraordinary genetic richness, depending on how it has been stimulated by the concrete conditions characteristic of the different historical and environmental situations it has been submitted to, and this explains quite well the differences between the various cultures. But this does not mean that other components, which remained less developed, have been eliminated.

We can therefore deduce, first of all, that a respectable quantity of such components have developed in a rather similar way in different cultures, as a consequence of the similarity of the external conditions they happened to be confronted with. But, second, we can also understand that even those components or constituents of humanness that were especially developed within one culture, while being little stressed in another, cannot remain completely alien and incomprehensible to the latter, for they too have germinated from 'human seeds' dependent (though perhaps in a non-obvious way) on its roots as well.

Among such seeds and roots there also exists, in particular, the 'critical' sense, the need for intellectual clarity, the desire for explicitness, the quest for reasons, i.e. the constituents of the philosophical attitude. A very precious characteristic of this critical orientation is that we can also direct it towards ourselves, and ask for the foundation of our own basic tenets. The result of this is often the elimination of dogmatism and an attitude of sympathetic open-mindedness towards other systems of ideas and values; and this constitutes the first step towards a transcultural dialogue. Therefore, we can see that the sharing of a common 'humanness' is a necessary, objective, and, so to speak, ontological precondition for this dialogue, in spite of all the diffidence that several philosophers feel towards admitting the existence of something like a 'human nature', which to them appears too metaphysical. This 'fact', however, is not sufficient, as long as its presence is not made conscious and articulated by means of philosophical reflection. This suggests to us, in conclusion, not only that different philosophies are the expressions of the self-consciousness of different cultures, but also that *philosophy as a whole*, understood as the very attitude of such a self-consciousness with all its applications, plays the role of a human message of universal range.