

Thought in the mirror; the eminently enigmatic nature of philosophy: a plea for an intercultural dialogue.

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What is philosophy, who actually could confine philosophy to a definition? Philosophy may rather be an enigma. The enigmatic nature as such of philosophy reveals itself in the myth of Oedipus and the Sphinx. The latter, a mythical monster, coming from the underworld, was sent to Thebes to avenge the murder of King Laius, father of Oedipus. Placed on a rock within the surroundings, asking questions to passers-by and devouring those unable to answer them, until such a time that Oedipus unravels its enigma. The enigmatic person that the Sphinx is, never unveils his thoughts, but excels in the art of laying down enigmas. The art par excellence of philosophy, without doubt, is leaving to questions the dimension of their puzzle or conundrum. That is why I find it more convenient here to approach, to encounter it as well as arrive at a simple conformity with it, while safeguarding this eminently bewildering nature. We cannot grasp philosophy, per contra, it is philosophy as such which grasp hold of us. Philosophy is not a pure ideal in which all the elements and all the conditions can be determined a priori by reasoning alone; it is a fact that lasts, constantly developing in the course of centuries, incontrovertibly exerting an influence over the destinies of mankind, same as religion, poetry, art, society, will certainly end only with us. Sartre maintains that philosophy still remains to be done; it is an act, a movement of the mind toward the world, toward itself. A modern author (Jouffroy, preface to the translation of the works of Reid in French) contrariwise, says philosophy is a Science an idea of which is not yet fixed; for if it were so, there would not be many philosophies as of philosophers, there would only be one. We do not see that there are many physics, astronomies; there is only one physics, one astronomy in that the idea of these sciences is determined. Most certainly here is the faultiest of assertions ever made by not an enemy of philosophy, but her friend and an eloquent interpreter of philosophy. I would maintain that philosophy is not a science an idea of which the subject has not yet ceased, or that it is still in search of itself as the same author says; notwithstanding, ever since philosophy exists it has always preoccupied itself with the same subject, always adhered to the same idea, despite the diverse formulas it has used to translate it and which have been mistaken for contradictory definitions. On no account are there several philosophies, but sundry systems of philosophy, which aspire to the same goal created by the same intellectual need, grouping themselves around the same problems and belonging to the history of the same science. Philosophy, as the ancient thinkers would have us understand, is the search for wisdom and wisdom according to the unanimous opinion of the ancient thinkers, is the highest degree of science, perfect knowledge, the whole knowledge of truth, naturally engendering virtue, or manifesting itself by the practice of the good. This idea is well expressed by Cicero¹ when he says: "Wisdom, according to the definition of the ancient philosophers, is the science of divine and human things, and principles which contain these things." *Sapientia autem est, ut a veteribus philosophis definitum est, rerum divinarum et humanarum, causarumque quibus haerent continentur, scientia.* Therefore, knowledge for us consists in discovering the source and the reason of things, in seeing effects in their causes and the consequences in their principles "There is no science of the particular," Aristotle said with abundant truth. Hence this science which encompasses and dominates all others, philosophy, in a nut shell, can be understood as the science of causes and principles. Once more in search for causes and principles, of the final reason, of the supreme foundation of what is or what we believe to be, this idea is also that of the absolute, the infinite, truth in itself, of necessary being, thus understanding philosophy as the science of the absolute, of the infinite, of what never changes, of what is necessary and universal or of what is only, of being qua

¹Cicero, *de Officiis*, Lib.11, c.11.

being. These are approximately the terms ordinarily used by two great philosophers of antiquity, that is to say Aristotle and Plato. The two philosophers, so to speak, did not as such propound our penetrating with feeble intelligence in the abyss of the infinite and to fathom its depths as well as its darkness, but were out to show the place this idea occupies in all our thoughts, the value it gives to our knowledge and to throw light on it through our internal phenomena of the soul as well as the conditions and the external forces of nature. What constitutes the subject matter of philosophy is incontrovertibly truth in its inexpressible completeness, in its most highly elevated, most pure or in its final degree of unity of certainty. But truth, generally speaking, can only manifest itself to us by thought; for what we do not conceive, what does not fall in any way on our intellectual faculties does not exist for us. Consequentially if we know the conditions and principles of thought, then we know the most highly elevated truth, for it is thought that is the rule of what is. Now thought does not exist in an abstract way; it is nothing other than ourselves considered as thinking and intellectual beings, otherwise said as minds, self-knowledge. All the definitions of philosophy as such express the same idea nay with different words and under more or less reflected forms. By offering as a goal to our researches, truth in its more perfect state, in its most absolute character, seeming at the same time close to us by degree and ends by showing it as enveloped in the innermost recess of our soul, as buried beneath our consciousness. It is this goal, so to speak, all systems pursue; it is this idea that all philosophical schools that have left a trace in history have toiled to attain and realise. Whether we, in fact, cite a system, or a school of some importance which does not aspire to discover the most hidden depth of the nature of things, the final foundation be it knowledge, existence or the two together. Firstly, the vast systems of the east present themselves followed by those of Greece where reason more calm, more self-masterly to itself, having no claims like those of the east to unveil at once all of the mysteries of the absolute; it recognizes limits, perceives obstacles, practising itself as a human faculty which is freeing itself from the hindrances of custom, and also wishes to go as far as its nature permits.; but the term of its effort is always the same. Ionians, Pythagoreans, Eleatics, disciples of Democritus, Empedocles, Anaxagoras, all without exception, all the Greek philosophers since Thales to Socrates,² searched for the why and how of the universality of things, they pursued a principle which could account for all Phenomena, those of thought as well as those of the external world. It is not my place here to explain how they arrived at so different results it suffices to note here that the diversity of the solutions does not jeopardize the identity of the problem. And did Socrates, considered in the sense of the word as the author of an intellectual revolution, change the goal of philosophy; did he propose another goal to the work of human reason? No, the reform introduced by him was based solely on method; his express intention was that man searches for the reason of things in his own thought, in lieu of searching for it outside himself, for it is through thought that he arrives at truth. He never to confine his investigations with the narrow domain of psychology or moral. Never has the Delphic maxim presents itself in his mouth as a limit imposed on the infinite horizon of science. The proof is certainly that he himself is after everything a metaphysician; his interrogations, definitions, are always directed almost to a metaphysical result, as the determination of primary ideas, as the demonstration of the existence of God by final causes as his doctrines about spirituality and immortality of the soul. This same method enters the hands of Plato, his disciple, became the theory of ideas including not only metaphysics, but also physics in the sense of the ancients, in a word the substance of all truth, the basis of all human knowledge. It is useless to recall what is philosophy to Aristotle, the creator of metaphysics, the genius of method, the

² Several works are published on ancient philosophy including the seminal works by Edward Zeller, *Die Philosophie der Griechen in Ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung*, 3 vols 1844- 52; H.Diels, W.Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 1954; P.Kucharski, *L'idée de l'infini en Grèce*, *Revue de Synthèse*, 34, 1954; Sachi, *Storia della filosofia greca*, 4 vol.in -8, Pavie 1818-1882; W.K.C. Guthrie, *A history of Greek philosophy*, vols 1 and 2, 1962 and 1965.

encyclopaedia of all known sciences in antiquity; what is for the stoics, the epicureans, and the school of Alexandria. Everywhere and in some goal we search for it in a speculative or practical way in the name of truth or the sovereign good; philosophy presents itself as a science not as such or such a science but that which contains and supports all which gives them all their title of legitimacy. The goal of philosophy, whether we search for it in definitions or in systems, has therefore never changed.³ It is today what it was in the XVII and XVIII centuries, what it was in the middle age, in Greece, to the people of the East etc. What it will always be, that is to say human knowledge in its final depths, first principles, first causes of what is, truth in its absolute and immutable character or at least in a most elevated form that it can offer to man and truth, as we have already remarked, can only be communicated to us, can only manifest to us generally by thought; the study of thought or the human mind, the knowledge of reason by itself and consequently, the most complete delight, the most free development of its forces, is the immediate goal, or if we can say so, the next matter of philosophy.

Whatever other people's claims may be in their contribution to the development of philosophy, Greek Philosophers will have always played a major role in the development of this discipline. What we find questionable is the attempt we find in some modern western philosophers to retrieve Greek philosophical thought within the framework of western or European ethnocentrism⁴ whereas what is clearly admirable in Greek philosophy is its resolutely panthropological or universalistic perspective. By intentionally confining philosophy in an ethnic framework is in fact, to betray the Greek philosophical project, which ab initio defined itself as a project for man and for every man. More precisely every project of a rational ontology is a project for the logos, but the logos is neither Greek nor barbaric, the logos is human. Immanuel Kant, by wanting to remove the rational ontology project from metaphysical projects it was his express concern to restore it to the field of freedom, the constant search for the real, of the imperative of rigor and intellectual honesty in the search for universal values. The role of philosophy is accurately to define the epistemological framework in which dialogue of all the human cultures is possible.

At the level of the univocity of the meaning of words, I am of the opinion that a philosophy that claims to be rational or rationalistic the search for truth should be of prime importance and every utterance contained therein should be potentially acceptable by every free mind and the sufficiently informed, it is in this condition that philosophy will be considered as the ideology of a positive globalization or one that maintains or respects the equilibrium between identity and differences among humanities and their cultures. The foundation of the communicability among different human languages is not a hypothetical planetary monolinguisism accompanied by the mental impoverishment of

³ See the *Sophist* of Plato, *Metaphysics* of Aristotle, *Summa Theologica* by Aquinas, *Les Méditations* by Descartes, *Théodicée* by Leibniz, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* by Kant, *Der Logik* by Hegel, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* by Schopenhauer, these are, among others, the apogee of philosophical texts. Each epoch reconsiders in its own strange way the manner in which to envisage questions. Philosophy is henceforth a modulation of the theme introduced by the Greeks. Beyond philosophical systems, philosophical constructions elaborated in the course of centuries, there is the same and ultimate question: "what is?". Therefore every philosophy, since Greek antiquity, is, in the primary and original sense, a gigantic effort on the attempt to say "is", or as Heidegger would have us understand, to "put Being in language".

⁴ Cf. amongst others, L. Lévy-Bruhl's *Les Fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures* (Paris, 1910), and *La mentalité primitive* (Paris, 1922, 4th reprint, 1960), according the view of this thinker black people of Africa have no philosophy or view of life of their own. Their way of thinking is primitive, even barbaric. Compared to the west it is childish and a pathological deviation from (western) thought.

humanity, but rather the identity of the semantic content of words in different languages. It is the identity of the intention of meanings carried by words in different languages that eases communication among people. At the heart of every language, intercomprehension is possible because the rapport of every word to the thing it signifies was collectively fixed and that the individual speaker cannot arbitrarily change it. It is equally this emotive character of language in relation to things it expresses that is the mainspring of the multiplicity of languages and hence a multiplicity of different words to signify things. Thus, the reality which, in some African languages we call "muntu", is called $\mu\alpha\tau\eta\rho\omega\sigma$ in Greek, called Mensch in German, "homme or personne humaine" in French etc. If the language of cattles is the same the world over (they use the same signs to mean the same things), it is thanks to the incontrovertible fact that they are in want of free creativity which man possesses. It is the free creativity of the human mind which allows him to create specialised languages to express his ideas, the state of things and ideas. And it is the conventional character of the relation between words and things established by every human group that give way to many languages as human groups living in relatively isolated communities. The problem is to know how inspite of the great diversity of human languages intercomprehension by means of translation and interpretation is possible. How comes it that the word "muntu" means the same thing as anthropos and the words Mensch and homme? Aristotle's response should be that it is because these nouns though belonging to different to languages signify a reality having the same definition to different people that uses them in their languages. All these nouns express something which is conceived by all these people as a reasonable bipedal animal. If we are seeking for the unity of the human mind, it is therefore at the level of the identity and the universality of the content that diverse people give to words that we must look for. It is at the level of meaning, of $\sigma\eta\mu\alpha\tau\eta\sigma$ (signified) that we must look for it. But on the other hand, the diversity of languages or the diversity of expressions being generally a hindrance to immediate universal communication, constitutes at the same time the sign of the freedom of human nature and its spirituality (thanks to the essentially emotive character of language) and equally represents the richness of the human intellectual patrimony. In my opinion therefore, Philosophy is a space for communication between cultures, implying that no culture as such should claim this philosophy for itself alone. In actual fact this philosophy or ontology Aristotle was seeking for is an objective which has never been totally attained for no language can completely attain it alone. While Aristotle assigned to philosophy the study of $\tau\eta\sigma\ \epsilon\iota\varsigma\ \tau\eta\sigma\ \epsilon\iota\varsigma\ \tau\eta\sigma\ \epsilon\iota\varsigma\ \tau\eta\sigma\ \epsilon\iota\varsigma$ of being qua being that is universal par excellence or $\tau\eta\sigma\ \alpha\lambda\eta\theta\epsilon\iota\alpha\varsigma$ he thought that this science should be unique for all humanity. The philosophy we are talking about here as an ideal space for communication between different cultures remains an attainable objective and that other cultures can contribute to its development. I have always been convinced that a philosophy that denies the universalistic character of philosophy is a denial of fact itself. Still inter-cultural dialogue is only real and worth the trouble only when the interested parties have each something to place on the table. If non western philosophers only mimic and repeat western philosophers with what will they claim participating in intercultural dialogue in globalization? Personally it is exactly because I believe in the universality of the human mind that I believe also in the possibility of a philosophical project common to all humanity contrary to forms of thought that sinks more and more into ethnocentrism. Yet each interested party in this project must present on the working table with the maximum of original elements from his or her cultural land that is as such more representative and more authentic.

I also want to say that philosophy is not only a way of thinking but it is also a way of being in time. Best of all even if it was only a way of thinking, but then philosophy should be aga in a way of thinking in time.No philosophy does develop far from this concept. Every philosophy is thinking about time. The generic human universality is a truth that does not preclude historical cultural relativity. Man's being is not identical in space and time such that in the final analysis, the concept of wisdom must submit itself to the outlines of this historical relativity not in the sense in which philosophically speaking each context must define its rules of wisdom, but in the sense in which each

context must adapt itself to its constraints. Human wisdom is in dissociable from its milieu. The philosopher thinks the particular through the universalisable contour of concepts and methods. It would be hence erroneous to regionalise this conceptuality for the pretexts of idiosyncrasies or authenticity. I want to say that philosophy is one and universal, "la science et la philosophie s'adresse à tout le monde, même aux turcs", Descartes noted. I maintain that philosophy knows no colour, nor geographical regions. Africa is a region of humanity let alone the Caribbean that distinguish themselves by their natural and cultural peculiarities, therefore their rapport with philosophy must respect this regionality if their rapport with philosophy in the African not to mention the Caribbean space is ambitious to generate wisdom.

Philosophical tradition has a long history and the late comers ought to make all the effective little effort to conform to the rules of rational and scientific thought worthy of the name. In other words, thinkers, especially those from Africa ought not to look for a way of concealing their impotence and personal mediocrity under the mantle of things such as Negritude, Africinity and bantuity⁵ to shy away from scientific rigor or philosophical rationalism. The methodological rules recognized by the rationalistic tradition in philosophy should be respected as well as the rigor of empirical sciences for it is this respect alone that will give credibility to non-western philosophical products. By respecting these rules, non western thinkers could return to the linguistic, literary and other sources of their people, it is then will they be able to produce something original and as such emancipate themselves from the obligation of mimicking and repeating western thinkers.

When all is said and done in this day and age philosophy has become a very specialised and diversified discipline. Its history is long and prestigious, its corpus is enormous and ramified, its methods are complex and numerous, every field of research is filled with works and divergent positions. Its field warrants much work and rigor. Yet where there is a clash between cultures in the contribution to the development of philosophy, dialogue should be given a chance. I think the UN's call for dialogue among civilizations for the development of scientific knowledge is very timely for philosophy too.

⁵ Towa in *Essai sur la problématique philosophique dans l'Afrique actuelle* (Yaoundé, Editions Clé, 1971) and *L'idée d'une philosophie négro-africaine* (Yaoundé, Editions Clé, 1979). According to Towa this philosophy is simply a projection back to the past. Progress is therefore only possible if traditional African thought is rejected. The assimilation of Western science and technology is much more important.