

ARTICLE

Philosophy across boundaries

Luca Maria Scarantino 

DIRIUM – Dipartimento di ricerca e innovazione umanistica, Università degli Studi di Bari “Aldo Moro”, Piazza Umberto I, 70121 Bari, Italy

Email: luca.scarantino@uniba.it

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Abstract

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The World Congress of Philosophy is an open tribune for scholars from all areas of the world, all faiths, all genders, religions, languages, and nationalities¹.

This is not a time to exclude, to divide, or sever intellectual and academic bonds, nor is it a time to distance or isolate ourselves from our colleagues. It is rather a time when we, as scholars and particularly as philosophers, are called on to assume a historic function – the function of securing permanent scholarly exchanges across political boundaries, of building wide-ranging academic networks, and essentially of making sure that cultural systems, and human civilizations, remain mutually permeable.

This critical task, which in my view is going to define one of our key responsibilities in the long-term, can be seen as a response of the ongoing transformations of our world.

We observe around us, on a virtually global scale, an intense wave of concurrent crises – military, economic, political, technological, environmental, and cultural. For a large part of humanity, much of these concerns have hardly ever been unfamiliar. Yet we sense that present geopolitical conflicts, social unrest, and growing economic inequalities are shattering critical social bonds, including public trust, to an extent that might disrupt the political and social orders we are familiar with.

It is probably safe to say that despite our diversity, we share a common taste for mindful, well informed, and knowledgeable participation in the public sphere. Yet public spheres are visibly changing. Unsecured and uncertain knowledge circulating through the web, a flood of fake news, conspiracy theories too numerous to mention,

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countless cases of hate speech that proliferate in the cyberspace show a rise of persuasive strategies successfully grounded in emotional bonds, or emotional communities, rather than in the objective analysis of facts.

While these phenomena have always existed, at present they seem to be growing to unusual proportions. The plenary program of this Congress reveals an attempt to use theoretical tools to address these lived realities of our time. While we remain respectful of the fact that we 'do' philosophy in many diverse ways, it appears today that to achieve significant understanding of such realities, several dimensions of philosophical activity will prove to be particularly relevant and useful.

First, we do expect philosophy to develop historically informed critiques of the cultural and conceptual frames that are deeply embedded in contemporary political, ethical, and scientific discourses. For lack of this historical dimension, an informed assessment of cultural transformations becomes problematic, or at best limited.

Second, as philosophers, conceiving our work as exclusively focused on our own discipline has become much less justifiable. For philosophy to remain culturally relevant, there is a growing need for us to dismantle the disciplinary barriers that have secluded our fields of investigation from other disciplines in the humanities, from the arts, from other methods of social analysis, other forms of science, and other spiritual traditions. Too often philosophers only read philosophy, and too often philosophical works, even if academically valuable, are exclusively read by philosophers. This was not the original idea of philosophy as a fully scholarly yet publicly engaged activity – not necessarily through political action, but as an intellectual commitment inspired by a long-term vision of the models we would like our cultures and societies to be inspired by.

Third, and most fundamental perhaps, we believe that to be able to make sense of the cultural, social, and political complexity of our world, philosophy – and Western philosophy in particular – needs to take a durable cross-cultural turn.

Philosophy as we mostly know it no longer suffices to make sense of cultural dynamics that have become too entangled to be deciphered from within a single cultural horizon. Linguistic unity, national economies, borders, instruction, food, fashion, and of course technology are becoming increasingly blurred in a world where political, economic, military, technological, and cultural powers seem to be converging towards a limited number of global forces. Differences are still there, of course; and they are likely to be there to stay. But thinking in terms of a single culture, of one's own culture, is no longer effective in a world where ideas, languages, habits, information, and styles circulate across the continents and constantly merge into one another. A more inclusive set of philosophical concepts is required to unravel the complex logics of our time, to understand their historical roots, and to effectively address them.

In our view, therefore, it is time for our philosophical communities to acknowledge cross-cultural inclusiveness as an irreversible orientation in contemporary philosophy; to give proper value and recognition to the philosophical heritage and methods of a plurality of human civilizations; to reassess the philosophical motives in the so-called 'oral and spiritual traditions' that the Western canon has often relegated to a lower rank than 'philosophy'; and to incorporate these different traditions within our standard academic assignments – in the Departments of Philosophy, at least in the ones that still exist.

Let me be clear in this regard. I am not arguing in favor of a diluted, all-embracing version of philosophy that would give up its disciplinary uniqueness. This is not what we want, and the theme of this Congress is not Philosophy against boundaries. Boundaries are critical intellectual tools that frame our understanding of the world, and therefore shape it. By inviting us to practice philosophy across boundaries, the Steering Committee of the International Federation of Philosophical Societies is rather hoping that these boundaries be conceived as functional tools, none of which is beyond the possibility of being dismantled, rather than as rigid divides. If we look at the history of our discipline, we notice that the scope of philosophy itself is anything but rigid. By widening our gaze to the complex tangle of human civilizations from the antiquity to today, we are therefore facing a historic opportunity to reassess the sense, the scope, and the boundaries of philosophy as a distinct and unique discipline.

Expanding the canon and the scope of philosophy requires a careful reappraisal of the relations between philosophy and other forms of science, of spirituality, even of religion. Consider, for instance, the inextricable relationship between philosophy and religion in many traditions of thought – including the Western one. Consider what tremendous philosophical insights these traditions provided on causality, subjectivity, and on the eschatological dimension of human life, which forms the ground of moral feeling. Consider the incalculable developments that philosophical analysis may draw from addressing non-Western linguistic systems, including non-alphabetic ones.

Other disciplines have advanced in this way. The development of many studies on cross-cultural exchanges in the ancient world, from the Bronze Age on, have utterly changed the limits and methods of historical research. Historians have explored the large number of exchanges that took place across the Eurasian continent and the Indian Ocean in the forms of trades of goods, beliefs, myths, and most likely also ideas. By considering oceans, all oceans – as complex human habitats since the very early stages of human civilization, this branch of historical studies introduced new approaches and concepts that have prompted new domains of historical research. To some extent, philosophy seems to be taking a similar path, albeit with some reluctance, a general lack of self-confidence, and certainly a lot of anxiety.

Exchange requires openness. Philosophers are aware of this, and they have often described this openness in terms of generosity, magnanimity, benevolence, and more recently as *vulnerability*. It is indeed by making ourselves deliberately vulnerable to others' views, ideas, and beliefs that we will be able to deepen our understanding of the world and become more aware of the cultural and human complexity of our surroundings. A cross-cultural approach is not just about studying other traditions; it is primarily a more profound sensitivity in examining human relations – it is, to recall the theme of the last Congress, learning to be human through permanent and mutual interaction with diverse human beings.

We touch here at a core process of civilization as most cultures have conceived it: as an ongoing reassessment of our own beliefs and epistemic patterns, a never-ending work on our personal and social self, in short as a constant conversion that makes it possible for each of us to be open to the stranger, to understand and receive those unlike us into our own world, and by so doing to expand the boundaries of our selves, and enlarge our comprehension of reality.

Learning to see through our neighbors' eyes, becoming increasingly cognizant of their sensitivities, or at least doing our best to expand our understanding of the

world – are, to us, useful tools for transcending boundaries and for learning to be decent human beings. In the words of our late friend and colleague, Thai-Muslim Professor Chaiwat Satha-Anand, who very recently passed away, one of the tools philosophy has to confront the danger of a *globalization of indifference* is our capacity to make ourselves vulnerable, which also happens to be the moral ground of a culture of peace.

To view philosophy as an education towards mutual vulnerability seems to me neither delusional nor naively utopian. On the contrary, this deeply human and at the same time cultural dimension is the core drive of the historical relevance of philosophy – and possibly a powerful antidote to the threats of discontinuing philosophy courses and departments we observe in different areas of the world.

Please let me emphasize once again the connecting function that scholars are likely to play in a multipolar world – a role that consists of bridging intellectual communities across political and cultural boundaries. Philosophers will be on the front line. Today more than ever, a combination of humanistic education with technical knowledge, along with a widely cross-cultural view of human societies, is critical to ensure full freedom of choice, full citizenship, and prosperity, to the younger generations. Among the ‘world crises’ we are going through, there is undoubtedly a crisis of democratic order – not in the exclusive sense of political regimes, but as an inclusive social order that ensures equal participation to all members of a community. To pay tribute to the intellectual tradition of Italy, this idea of philosophy actively educating feelings and attitudes was also core to Antonio Gramsci’s elaboration on cultural hegemony within a human society. The risk we are facing is, in my view, a return to a pre-modern social organization in which educated, enlightened elites coexist with vast masses in a lasting state of civil subalternity, political subjection, and to some extent economic servitude.

We hope that the program of this Congress would substantiate these initial and roughly presented claims – and I would like to thank our hosts, the Mayor of Rome Professor Roberto Gualtieri, his *Assessori* Miguel Gotor, Alessandro Onorato and the Municipal administration of Rome, including our friends at Zètema, Rectress Antonella Polimeni of Sapienza university along with Professors Emidio Spinelli, Marco Mancini, Fabrizia Giuliani, Mario De Caro, Francesca Gambetti, the Italian Philosophical Society, and the entire philosophical community of Italy, for having made this historic gathering possible. Thank you.