

For the Record

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Why are we holding *UNESCO's Philosophical Encounters* and why have we chosen the question "What do we not know?" as the topic of the first one of these meetings? It is in order to respond to these two questions that Judith Schlanger has asked me to write a few lines. She added—for the record. What record, I then thought to myself, if—as I am sending her these pages—nothing has taken place yet? Unless it was the intention, the idea so to speak, that was to be recorded. What seemed to me to be premature, then appeared to come rather late, i.e. to explain, after the event, as if going backwards, the reasons for the creation of the *Philosophical Encounters* and the choice of their first theme. We know that in the legal profession the summaries of the discussions that precede the adoption of a law allow us to understand its spirit; on this basis, could one not imagine a chronicle of ideas kept by whoever that would illuminate the life of the organization? Perhaps something similar is lacking in the history of an institution like UNESCO. Everything is being preserved in it, as if in a gigantic, impenetrable memory, because it never fell to anyone to preserve the thread of the original intentions. Whatever fate the future may have reserved for *UNESCO's Philosophical Encounters*, given their experimental nature, I will attempt here to describe the intentions. For whatever purpose it may serve!

The *Encounters* hope to provide a concrete answer to the question of the place of philosophy in UNESCO. This question has been asked many times since the early years of the organization, when it created a program under the title "Philosophy and the Humanities." According to a little file note dating from 1947, the aim of that program was to make philosophy accessible to the man in the street. It was based on the idea that only the free exercise of thought could defend us against the dark forces of dogma and tyranny. The War had happened only a few years back. Later

the program was entrusted to Jeanne Hersch. Thanks to her we have *Le droit d'être un homme*, a detailed anthology, illustrating that over and above the nations, there was the diversity of knowledge, of cultures, epochs, languages, and institutions that characterize our human condition, a calling to be universalist. The tone for UNESCO's philosophy program had been set. The rest is a matter of characters, circumstances, and inspiration.

However, the question the place of philosophy in UNESCO remained open, that is to say both its *raison d'être* and its place, side-by-side or in connection with, the actions that the organization took in the field of culture. Beyond the demarcation disputes that are typical of all bureaucracies, the philosophers themselves, for whom the definition of their discipline is never fixed, were the source of considerable difficulties. The practical consequences of this uncertainty are not at all negligible. It is a matter for the philosophers themselves to reflect upon the organization that invited them to do this at a round table, astutely entitled "The Right to Philosophy from a Cosmopolitan Viewpoint" (1991). On this occasion Jacques Derrida spoke with a certain solemnity about UNESCO itself, about the organization as a whole, as a philosophical event. The existence of this organization, he said, originates in fact from a philosophical position since it is engaged in recognizing and putting into practice "something like philosophy," a certain philosophy of rights, of human rights and of world history. The notions of human dignity, equality, and universality that legitimated this commitment have a philosophical history that is enshrined even in the language of its Charter. And what is there to say about the founding idea according to which peace between mankind rests upon the progress of what they know about each other. We may even go so far as to say that the most radical critiques that have been made of the organization, like that by Benedetto Croce, were also based on a philosophical approach. Since then, the implementation of the mission that it has been assigned, calls for a sharing of culture and philosophical knowledge.

Do we know how ideas travel among men? They move this way and that and take shape between them depending on the occasion. Those who are interested in retracing the evolution of UNESCO's philosophy, discover that it has always vacillated

between two paths, because these are—and since ancient times—the two paths of philosophy. Is it to bring together and to transmit culture and philosophical insights or is it to share the questions, from then on since philosophical, of all knowledge systems and of all cultures? The temptation of totality and the virtues of dialogue are all part of philosophy; they testify to the desire to *comprehend*. Michel Serres defended, at a UNESCO forum held in 1992, the idea of universality as the white sum total of a thousand colors that result from the communication of knowledge and of cultures. He did not speak of philosophy but of education; as a philosopher he pleaded for a reciprocal learning process.

Sum total, sharing, communication, reciprocity—since the current director general of UNESCO decided to create the *Philosophical Encounters*, the essential points, raised again and again, have been made about the place of philosophy in UNESCO. And to be sure they remain forever relevant. The project of UNESCO's *Encounters* has not cease to be made more precise, overturned, and completed many times over; it was made the object of a circulation of complicity and friendship, in such a way as to have already appeared as a genuine result. Can we imagine a space, as empty and stable as a verified method, open to lively exchanges that would determine reason and tenor each time these come into play. UNESCO's *Philosophical Encounters* were created in order to open an international and interdisciplinary space for exchanges that can respond to the constant questioning of the place of philosophy today. And is there a new role of the philosophers at the center of this forum through the advance of philosophy? It is not a new, but a very ancient role. This space of exchange is intended to make public the work of philosophers.

People will come here to talk, question, answer and question again. To talk freely, well, that is the difficulty. Never mind if words (more even than what is written) decide, from misunderstanding to forgery, to develop a life of their own; too bad also for those who do not have the time to lose because there is nothing more to learn. It is not useless for questions and answers to be contemporary, however volatile they might be. Contemporary and free, even free from themselves to change on the way. Like the expression on a face, the tone of a voice or the accompaniment of a

gesture. Afterwards we should have a book about this—"yet another one," the printed example of a route among so many other possible ones.

Everyone will be invited by everyone else, scholars from all branches of knowledge, each liberated from his specialist language by his giving his ear to the other person and vice versa; the philosophers determined to leave for a while their mortifying obsession with themselves seriously in order to reflect and discuss no less seriously; foremost amateurs of knowledge like the rest of us. The first question of "What do we not know" has thus offered itself to inaugurate the *Encounters*. Being a question common to all, it re-establishes equality. Creating a community of intelligence, it opens up the universal chance of dialogue. Let us consider that question as a mascot, as the directing principle or the precursory symbol of our *Philosophical Encounters*.

"What we do not know" takes in reverse the essentially philosophical question of "What do I know?" to which the philosophical position demands the answer: "nothing," in order to marvel all the more at so much knowledge. At the other edge of so much knowledge, an edge in flux because knowledge is always in the process of evolving, there is the *terra incognita*, what we do not know. Vaguely what we no longer know and what we do not know yet, what we refuse to know or dream about, what we have always known until we did not know it anymore, what we envisage through the chiaroscuro or what some know and others don't, and this poses once more the question of sharing. To talk jointly about what "one" does not know presupposes in fact the power to pool the questions. Insofar as cooperation occurs in the world of international exchanges, it is most often understood as being the means of sharing results; here it is a matter of sharing, "on the other side," the questions.

We could pretend, for the sake of the order of things, that the idea of UNESCO's *Philosophical Encounters* preceded the choice of the theme. It was not like this; the initial idea is inseparable from our question. To the displeasure of the geneticists of ideas, this one was without parents, born from disorder. The spirit of "anti-directive" departure and arrival, so to say seems to have been to preserve this creative disorder.

The question of “What do we not know?” throws our certainties into disarray, turns the established order upside-down. It audaciously explores the infinity of possibles, tests the limits, articulates hopes, threatens anxieties and superstitions—even the most sophisticated ones—which dwell on those frontiers. But also being humble, it will remove the power and abolish the dissymmetry between speaker and listener. You perhaps know what I do not know. What we do not know reunites us in our mutual desire to know. Finally, to introduce a touch of irony, it prefigures and appeals to a common language. On the edge of the serious there is a smile—devoid of all contempt, without distance and hauteur. It is a light-hearted smile—the primary tool of communication, of intelligibility, which delivers us from our solid attachment to ourselves. The *Philosophical Encounters* would like to take place under the portents of audacity, humility, and happy irony that philosophy can sometimes offer.