

The Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Filosofici: A Liberal Transversal Institution¹

Paul Ricœur

I am happy to be associated with the public tribute offered by Unesco to the Italian Institute for Philosophical Studies and its president. He is a patron for the present time, who has risked so much for an incomparable cultural enterprise and who has managed to attract collaboration without ever compromising his integrity. He has succeeded in being both a CEO and a project designer at the centre of a huge enterprise. As an old French academic I was myself very intrigued at first and glad to be part of that extraordinary leader's dreams, risks, reasons, projects. I would like to tell you what I learnt in more than 15 years of week-long visits to give seminars there.

First of all, the underlying intellectual model, which I venture to characterize, with all the difficulties connected with the word, as a *liberal* one, in the moral and political sense of the word. And here I would like to say that I argue in favour of the word *liberal*, which is nowadays corrupted by its economic and commercial use. It has to recover its full meaning, which was political and cultural right from the start; with those two poles, individuals and their freedom of thought, expression, teaching, publishing, and on the other hand the duty to the greatest number, in the idea of a solidarity that runs through society from top to bottom. For me the Institute is the institution that embodies this intellectual model most brilliantly; and it was not without emotion that each time I would climb the great staircase made of lava from Vesuvius – and every year with a bit more difficulty – and would pass the declaration, the homage paid to the poets, intellectuals and philosophers who in 1799 were victims of their attachment to the liberal idea in opposition to the Bourbons. And it is that legacy that intellectually I found, repeated and constantly reinvigorated by the Institute.

That model is expressed in the conception of an organization based on the *transversal* character of culture. I say transversal rather than interdisciplinary, in a sense that still remains sadly limited in the university field. And, as the rector, Madame Michèle Gendreau-Massaloux, has stressed, it is there that this institution is truly

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complementary to the university, complementary and without any kind of spirit of competition or jealousy. I emphasize that word *transversal* because it is the hardest thing to achieve in the university whose division of knowledge is in the end an extension of the division of labour. There it is a concept that is the reverse of the division of labour, the underground division of a project of the scientific and humanistic disciplines based on the departmental diversity of teaching. Indeed this transversal programme runs through the human sciences, from their model in the natural sciences to its model in the hermeneutic tradition, about which I will shortly say a word.

But it does not simply link the human sciences together, linguistics, demography, history, etc., but also the human sciences to the sciences of nature. And here I would like to mention a figure whom we miss among us today, Professor Prigogine, who seems to me to be the symbol of that transversality, between the sciences labelled hard and those called human. For me there is a profound affinity between that transversal journey through knowledge and the liberal spirit, enemy of internal barriers as well as frontiers imposed from outside.

Of course the danger is that of size, if I can be allowed an observation, if not a criticism at least – I would say – a warning, so that the sense of self-limiting should also balance the character of indefinite expansion in which the Institute might lose something of itself by overreaching. I add to that overall idea the clever interweaving in the form of knowledge transmission, with seminars, one-off lectures, colloquia, large-scale projects and the vast work of publishing, which separates the Institute from most institutions of a similar type. The spirit of invention is here a corollary of the liberal and the transversal.

Now you will allow me to emphasize that the Institute, despite its breadth, has never stopped – and will probably long continue – being called the Institute of Philosophical Studies. This means that the network has a centre, philosophy; but it is not philosophy in the professional sense of the word, that is, the philosophy I am part of myself as my occupation, but philosophy in its spirit of both coordination and hegemony. And by hegemony in the proper sense of the word I mean not the head that rules the limbs but that lives from the life of its limbs. And I would say, almost better than hegemonic, panoramic. Philosophy can be the means for the transversal circulation of knowledge. It has itself to become transversal as well as liberal.

Speaking of the Institute's aims, you will allow me in conclusion to mention the figure of the philosopher who has certainly left the strongest mark on the Institute in the last 20 years: that of my master and friend Hans-Georg Gadamer, who recently died and had been the Institute's great guardian spirit since I had been coming to it. Gadamer, who asked for the announcement of his death to say that he had *left*, or *taken his leave* – that was the precise phrase he used: he had *taken his leave* after a full and busy life, he had simply *taken his leave*. Which means he had just made his exit, I would say as quietly as possible, from the great conversation which began before him and carries on after him – as we are all required to do: enter a conversation that started before us and will continue, enter the public space and leave it with dignity and honesty. He could write that phrase because he had an elevated idea of 'philosophizing together' and it is that 'philosophizing together' which meant that he could sponsor and – if I can say so – celebrate with his presence the liberal, transversal

vision I mentioned at the beginning. I would say that the title of his great book, in which his whole work is collected, *Truth and Method*, is almost the Institute's motto, for philosophers and non-philosophers alike. The title *Truth and Method* says it all: the method spread along the lines of objectivity, truth brought together in the order of the human sciences and above all accompanied, framed, on the one hand by aesthetics, the idea of the beautiful, and on the other by the idea of a speech that brings us together because it always precedes us, it was always spoken among us, for us and after that by us. Dear President Marotta, you not only preside over an Italian Institute of Philosophy but an institute with a universal aim whose humanism shines out from the luminous point that is your Institute in Naples. Thank you for inviting me.

Paul Ricœur

Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

Notes

1. Text of the lecture delivered on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the Italian Institute for Philosophical Studies, Paris, UNESCO, on 20 November 2002.