
ROBERTA DE MONTICELLI
Vita-Salute San Raffaele University,
Milan
demonticelli.roberta@hsr.it

WHAT IS AT STAKE¹

abstract

Recent events involving two symbols of ancient and modern philosophy, and two capitals of the Idea of Europe – Athens and Paris – suggest the timeliness of this issue of “Phenomenology and Mind” on Philosophy and the future of Europe. In the spirit of the Manifesto di Ventotene philosophy should be conceived of as the very foundation of the European Utopia, and the Charter of Rights of the European Union as the legally binding incarnation of Ancient and Modern Practical Reason. Dignity and Justice are in fact the alpha and omega of this Charter: two values being respectively the source of what is due to the individual person and what is necessary for the good order of society. The core of the Charter hosts the three central values of Modernity and its battles, liberté, égalité, fraternité (Solidarity), plus a fourth one, not yet explicitly referred to in the preceding Declarations and Constitutions: Citizenship, the value hosting all the virtues of Public Ethics, without which no Republic could survive for long under the rule of law.

keywords

Athens, Paris, Enlightenment, Values, Practical Reason, Charter of Rights of the European Union

1 The present issue inaugurates a new series of *Phenomenology and Mind*, the journal of San Raffaele Faculty of Philosophy and its Research Centres. While the editorial and scientific boards stay the same, our journal will be published, from now on, by Firenze University Press. I wish to thank the new Publisher and staff on behalf of us all, wishing us a happy joint venture for the next years.

This issue of our journal is exceptionally multilingual in order to emphasize the value of that particular variety of national traditions which the European Union is supposed to have maintained and harmonized. We underwent the last phase of editorial processing in the middle of the most symbolic crisis that the EU has experienced since its inception: the concrete risk of the so-called “Grexit” – the Greek referendary “no” to austerity conditions imposed upon the extension of their European loan. We have witnessed the eleventh hour negotiations that prevented the country where the very idea of Europe first took root, from quitting the Eurozone if not the European Union itself. We are now witnessing the global choc of a terror attack on the heart of Europe and against the city which is the very symbol of European Enlightenment: Paris. Hence this issue of the journal could not be more timely, even in its title: *Philosophy - and the Future of Europe*.

Why philosophy? Most of the received essays focus on the *distance* between the *ideals* which inspired the construction of the EU and the actual way in which that institution works in its present state. Some even call these ideals rhetorical. Others suggest new ways of interpreting them: some would reduce their axiological ambition. Others, on the contrary, denounce the present “governance” of the EU for betraying the democratic ideal of the *Manifesto di Ventotene*, down to the very name “governance”, denoting and at the same time disguising a non constitutional government, an executive power without legislative or judiciary checks and balances.

Be that as it may (and however far the working of an institution may stray from its constitutive *raison d’être*) one should not ignore this fact: the European Union is an institution founded on universally valid values. As such, it is the finest and ripest flower of philosophy. Of *modern* philosophy, by all means – for it is a late child of what some call a misleading utopia, a Kantian effort for *perpetual peace* among States. It is a late child of philosophy *tout court* however, and hence quite particularly of ancient Greek philosophy as well, as far as we know it. If we agree at least with the spirit (if not the letter) of the following remark by Simone Weil, written in 1941, as she hoped that a new European civilization would emerge after the bankruptcy of Practical Reason in the XXth century.

La notion de valeur est au coeur de la philosophie. Toute réflexion portant sur la notion de valeur, sur une hiérarchie de valeurs, est philosophique, tout effort de la pensée ayant d’autre objet que la valeur est, si on l’examine de près, étranger à la philosophie (Weil 1941, pp. 121-126).

There is a core tenet which seems to be at stake in any valuating experience. For in any experience of assessment – the suffering of wrongs or enjoyment of flourishing – we *take our lives seriously*. Yet what does it mean, taking one’s life seriously, thereby attributing importance or value to it? What is a life worth being lived? Is it just life as such, at its biological level? Is life as such worth the pains and troubles it costs, under any condition, including slavery or severe illness? Hardly so: we recognize the value of our lives each time we regret spending them in nonsense, or regret lost opportunities to let our talents flourish. We feel the responsibility we have for them – of making something valuable and meaningful out of them. Even when craving for the sweet light of this earth, just that, we praise the splendor of the light and the tranquillity of simple pleasures – as Ulysses prepared himself for his next life in the other world, rejecting the lives of kings and heroes, happy to choose even that of a farm laborer. Between Plato’s Myth of Er and the Parable of Talents, the simplest and most universal questions of philosophy take root. As far as we know, they are rooted in «Europe» or in its cultural tradition – and yet these questions remain as universal and universally accessible as does philosophy itself.

Taking one’s life seriously is an attitude – subject to overzealousness, for sure – which first found a universally accessible formulation in Plato’s thought that the individual soul is the “living centre” of the universe. Pico della Mirandola’s celebrated *Oratio de hominis dignitate* (1486) refers back to Plato – while discovering, on the track of Augustin, the fateful freedom of this “living center”, between being and not-being. The concept – and the Latin name – of this value of ourselves which is at stake in any value experience, has been with us long before the Enlightenment and the Age of Rights. *Dignity* is its name. The Enlightenment “only” adds the discovery of the essential relation Dignity bears to Justice. As Kant famously wrote, “Should justice completely disappear, no human life on earth would be worth living” (Kant 1983, p. 165). The reason is that “true” dignity only inheres to the exercise of the *liberty of the moral subject, autonomy*. No life deprived of moral autonomy is worth being lived. But injustice prevents many from exercising moral autonomy, and makes them subjects of arbitrary powers, within and outside of themselves.

The recognized link of Dignity and Justice adds Equality to Dignity, making Equal Dignity the very foundation of the Age of Rights. This quality which *ought to be* acknowledged in human persons independently of their virtues, status or citizenship; which should command for them equal respect and consideration, has not ceased to release its normative power since 1789. The concept itself was given exact wording in the First Principle of the Universal Declaration of the Human Rights in 1948, to prevent discrimination forever after the Nazi crimes. (“All humans are born free and *equal in dignity and rights*”). Addressing the insertion of Human Rights in post-war European constitutions and the injection of public ethics at the very foundation of politics via the constitutive principle of the EU, Jürgen Habermas quite recently wrote:

But these same normative claims derive their foundation from a universalistic ethics, whose contents, thanks to the idea of human dignity, have been included in civil and human rights of democratic Constitutions for a long time now. Only in virtue of this *inner connection* between human dignity and human rights, that explosive conjunction of morality and law has been set up, which should promote the construction of more justice in political institutions (Habermas, 2011).¹

This survey should provide some evidence for our claim concerning philosophy as the very foundation of the European Utopia, or the constitutive principles of the European Union as

1 It. transl. (2013), p. 31, our translation, author’s italics.

the legally binding incarnation of Ancient and Modern Practical Reason. Back to the *Manifesto di Ventotene*, we may now perceive both the Platonic and the Kantian note in its opening paragraph:

Modern civilization set down as its own foundation the principle of liberty, according to which a human being ought not to be a mere instrument of others, but *an autonomous life center*. This code at hand, an imposing historical action is being taken against all aspects of social life, which would not respect it.

Consequently it is no coincidence that human dignity is the first one of the six values under which the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights is articulated.²

Dignity and Justice are in fact the alpha and omega of this Charter: two values being respectively the source of what is due to the individual person and what is necessary for the good order of society. They hold together, like the two slices of bread of a moral sandwich, the three central values of Modernity and its battles, *liberté, égalité, fraternité* (Solidarity), plus a fourth one, not yet explicitly referred to in the preceding Declarations and Constitutions: Citizenship, the value hosting all the virtues of Public Ethics, without which no Republic could survive for long under the rule of law. Perhaps the very sequence of those six values is but a commentary on the celebrated proposition of Kant quoted above, concerning the intrinsic connection between Justice and the value of our lives. As if this Charter spanned, between its alpha and its omega, all the generations of human rights which emerged in the course of the civil, political, social and cultural history of Modernity. As if across its conflicts, its tragedies, and all the defeats of those who were “hungry and thirsty of justice”, we had learned more and more about what we owe to each other, and what a good political order ought to grant, even against those threats which are not borne of individual bad will, but emerge instead from the workings of associated life, economy and the distribution of power.

In fact, one can never exhaust reflecting upon Kant’s claim, for it reveals a dimension of what is due to each human being, *exceeding* not only life itself and its bare necessities as usually understood, but also the sphere of negative and positive liberties, i.e. of civil and political rights. There are, so to speak, “needs of the soul”, and these have everything to do with justice. We need to feel that our lives, and those of our children even more, are worth the effort, the pains and the risks that they cost: in short, we need our lives to make sense. Injustice is the main evil of associated life, and it certainly can operate as a bulldozer uprooting homes and affects, or depriving lives of every tangible support. But injustice can affect people even in more intangible ways, depriving people of will and meaning by vanquishing in their lives every chance to flourish.

How does it feel, to live a life not worth living?

Just look around. It is a depressed state of mind, a state of hopelessness that we may describe as a form of atrophy that deadens the essential core of one’s mental life. Let me borrow a page of XXth century psychology to spell out which part of mental life I’m thinking of: “Let us for the moment give the name *value* to this common trait of intrinsic requiredness or wrongness, and let us call *insight* all awareness of such intellectual, moral or aesthetic value. We can then say

² Proclaimed in 2000 at the Nice European Council, the Charter has become legally binding on the EU with the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon, in December 2009. See http://ec.europa.eu/justice/fundamental-rights/charter/index_en.htm.

that value and corresponding insight constitute the very essence of human mental life [...]”. What happens when impairment of sensibility to values – or even sheer indifference, as an outcome of depression and resignation to injustice (“Nothing but normality”) – becomes a dominant state of mind? The same psychologist has a severe diagnosis to offer:

Thus negativism spreads through the population like an epidemic. [...] Gradually Nothing But becomes the unformulated creed of your postman, your politician, and your prime minister. When this phase is reached – and we have reached it – few people will have any stable convictions beyond their personal interests, which seem to survive even when, as values, they should also succumb (Köhler 1938, pp. 36-37).

How a *propos* for philosophy and for the future of Europe. Doesn't this description fit the apparent state of mind of large parts of the European population? In some countries, among which Italy, negativity seems to stem from the erosion of the most important goods of associated life, such as trust in the institutions, esteem and respect for officials, legal certainty, perception of some connection between competencies and public functions, capacities and promotions, crimes and penalties. These traits of trust central to associated life are often called “social capital”: yet, more simply, they represent the very conditions under which the value of everybody's life can be acknowledged in its very most important aspects which our Constitution calls “social dignity”.

When this acknowledgment is missing or impaired because the bonds of trust are broken, worn out by abuse through unlawfulness, corruption and lie, the “public faith” – so-called by our greatest modern poet, Giacomo Leopardi – drops to zero, and so does participation to civil and political life, as well as material and moral cooperation. When we reach such a stage, States are ready to default, civilizations to collapse. As long as we *suffer* from such a public misery, we respond as active citizens, trying to keep democracy alive as much as possible. But as soon as we stop suffering, that is stop *feeling the disvalue* of losing public trust, we have already dismissed the moral subject in ourselves. The sentry has fallen asleep; democracy is ready to become something else. Are we not close to that point?

As a conclusion, I shall quote Altiero Spinelli once again – for the last time. Greece is a mirror for other Mediterranean countries, and especially for Italy. Spinelli, who was both a realist and a visionary thinker, made a striking prophecy. True democracies within the single States, quite particularly the European ones, in this globalized world, are probably no longer possible. Here is why:

Struggling for democracy today is realizing, first of all, that we must stop this meaningless, not only Italian, but European rush toward a society which is polarized into organized interests, clamouring at the State and paralyzing it when they are in balance, and entrenching its executive, unbalanced power more and more, when a group or a coalition has managed to overwhelm its opponent and take the power (Spinelli 1946, pp. 105-106).

The present issue of our journal addresses a burning question, to what I called the finest and ripest flower of European philosophy, the European Union. The question is: why is this institution running the danger of forgetting its reasons d'être, or worse: why is it becoming insensible to its constitutive values. May this common effort of thought and knowledge be the beginning of a Socratic awakening for us all.

REFERENCES

- Habermas, J. (2011), *Zur Verfassung Europas*. Berlin: Suhrkamp; tr. it. *Questa Europa è in crisi* (2013), Laterza, Bari;
- Kant, I. (1897), *Metaphysik der Sitten*, Ital. Transl. Laterza, Roma-Bari 1983, p. 165;
- Köhler, W. (1938/1966), *The Place of Value in a World of Facts*, A Mentor Book, New York;
- Spinelli, A. (1946), “Relazione al II Congresso del Partito d’Azione”, in Spinelli, A. (1987) *Come ho tentato di divenire saggio*, II, *La goccia e la roccia*, Il Mulino, Bologna;
- Spinelli A., Rossi, E. & Colorni E. (1941), *Il Manifesto di Ventotene*; <http://www.italialibri.net/contributi/0407-1.html>
- Weil, S. (1941), *Quelques réflexions sur la notion de valeur*, in S. Weil (1999), *Oeuvres*, Quarto Gallimard.