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## PHILOSOPHY AS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Unprecedentedly in the entire human history, we live in a world of abundance of information, instantaneously accessible with a few clicks on our devices. What seemed to be in the past an exclusive privilege for a limited number of educated, is now taken for granted and open to everyone who has access to the Internet and programs of artificial intelligence.

Philosophy, with its quest for wisdom, fights to find its own mission in these new circumstances. Analogically speaking, our time is similar to the time of Pythagoras, the first one calling himself a philosopher – a lover of knowledge, in distinction to the sophists, holders of knowledge. The followers of Pythagoras were divided into two groups: the listeners and the learners. While the first group was interested in hearing the doctrines of the gods, death, the afterlife, moral teaching, harmony, justice, and ritual purity, the second group focused on so-called scientific knowledge, such as arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy. Whether one belonged to both groups simultaneously or sequentially, or whether one's holding of knowledge was more elevated, seemed to be secondary for Pythagoras. What really mattered for him was one's aspiration to approach the highest possible knowledge, which cannot be expressed with terms adequate for the description of *physis*, broadly translated as nature. To

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have an insight into the highest possible knowledge, one must dwell on the knowledge of the soul and the divine.

To reach this kind of knowledge, *i.e.*, the ultimate goal of every lover of wisdom, one needs to go beyond the intellectual exercises rooted in reason. Access to true knowledge is a matter of spiritual engagement, transcending the principles of the natural world. No wonder why the founders of ancient Greek philosophy did not struggle to refer to philosophy as a spiritual activity, calling for examination and deeper understanding of their present understanding.

Philosophy as a spiritual activity seems to be a term at odds in contemporary academic circles, too often reducing and comprehending spirituality as something esoteric, abstruse, incomprehensible, old-fashioned, non-scientific, not worth attention, left to the field of theology. At the same time, the globalization process is profoundly shaking the Western mind and forcing us to take a critical step against any kind of one-sided, narrow solutions based on uncritically selected principles or ideologies. Daily encounters with new cultures, traditions, and religions, motivate us to rethink our self-perception, the perception of our society and of the entire universe.

One of the most urgent challenges of the contemporary mind is the question of integration, harmony, and synthesis, which will bring together what seemed to be fragmented and separated. New integration and synthesis are a primordial task for both philosophy and theology, faith and reason, spiritual and rational engagement, called to put together what seems to be in conflict. This task escapes the boundaries of a new intellectual vision. It is a matter of spiritual activity based on the practice of trust, surrender, repetition, acceptance of the path, rediscovery of the traditional solutions, already proven to be solid and deposited in the human spiritual treasury, as well as the introduction of new paths that will lead towards harmony and unity despite cultural or religious differentiations. Broadly speaking, it is a matter of new metaphysics, allowing us to rediscover the beauty of an all-including cosmological vision. The vision goes in unison with anthropology, reopening the meaning of how to be human in the context of globalization.

In addition to the globalization aspect, the invention of artificial intelligence, with its apparently limitless use of knowledge, faces philosophy

with an unprecedented new challenge: can our understanding of what it means to be human be left to a computer-run analysis based on more or less sophisticated algorithms? There is no doubt that new possibilities of AI technology with its fascinating results will shape what we believe to be coherent and correct. Will the code of human nature in its entire complexity finally be disclosed?

In its mission to search for wisdom, philosophy calls us to rediscover what seems to be neglected: the importance of being connected, human relationships, neglected or only superficial comprehension of intimacy, the existential question regarding the meaning of human life, including those aspects that too easily escape our attention: pain, suffering, and finally death. Despite the abundance of information and technological advancement, the mystery, simplicity, and beauty of human existence need to be brought to light in a refreshing view.

Following Pierre Hadot's interpretation of Plato's teaching in his book *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, all ancient philosophy believed in the "ontological value of the spoken word." The living and animated philosophical discourse is not intended only to transmit information but to produce a certain effect on the reader or listener. Ancient philosophy intended to form people and to transform souls, which is possible only through dialogues and conversations pursued for a long time. This dialogue was intended to be a spiritual exercise, understood as an exercise of authentic presence of the self to the self, and of the self to the others. By exercising philosophy and by giving attention to oneself, one was led to the Socratic maxim "know yourself." What mattered in the process was not so much the solution to a particular problem, an exact exposition of a doctrine, or transmission of encyclopedic knowledge, more or less accurately reflecting the reality of the world; all these can be done as a purely intellectual exercise or beautiful discourse, totally separated from life. The goal of philosophy as a spiritual exercise is the transformation of one's vision of the world and a metamorphosis of his/her personality, *i.e.*, a transformation of all aspects of his/her being: intellect, imagination, sensibility, and will.

Consequently, philosophy as a spiritual exercise is meant to be practical, requiring effort and training, involving one's whole way of being. Philosophy is an art of living that cures us of our illness and teaches us a new way of

life. Referring to *Phaedo* (Phaedo 67, c-d), philosophy is training for death. This training includes the purification of the soul, placing the boundaries of the body, practicing the virtues, putting oneself in order, allowing to be touched by the Good and God.

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