

For the Conceptualization of Philosophy as Intangible Heritage of Humanity

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In the study of history one perceives that many of its material nuances, surviving today from a world troubled by wars, have become heritage of humanity. But it is also revealed to us that several great creations, fundamental to the flourishing of civilization, do not hold the status of intangible heritage. And one of them is philosophy.

After the Peloponnesian War, the Athenian polis lived through a period of great intellectual effusiveness. The agora, stage of the greatest political debates of antiquity, was crowded with intellectuals who did indeed have powers of persuasion over their fellow citizens, but who charged for it and did not stimulate independent, autonomous thought. These teachers were the so-called Sophists. Yet in that cauldron of ideas there arose a man who, for his oral teachings, given without charge, and for his innovative method of acquiring knowledge, would come to be the intellectual regarded, more than two thousand years later, as the greatest of all Westerners: Socrates.

Of all his teachings, the core of the doctrine is the celebrated phrase "I know only that I know nothing". Through it Socrates externalized his famous dialectic, in which he urged passersby in the agora to formulate their own concepts, which were then set out and refuted by him, thus revealing an earlier and unconsidered conceptualization, in favor of the immediate framing of a new definition, more conscious and compatible with objective reality. That method was called maieutics. In this way Socrates supplanted the Sophists.

Socrates, as stated above, set out his teachings orally. He wrote nothing, or almost nothing, including the knowledge transmitted to the most famous of his disciples: Plato, founder of the Academy, the first university of the West. At its dawn, and after the founding of the Academy, Plato set down in writing the knowledge transmitted by Socrates, as well as, obviously, the learning he had absorbed himself. Therefore what we know of Socrates is bequeathed to us by Plato.

Logically, it would have been improbable for such writings to survive many immediately following generations, given the volatility of the geopolitical context of antiquity, especially when the Greek city-states fell under the domination of the Roman Republic in 146 BC. But survive they did — so much so that this conquest did not prevent the dissemination of the Socratic-Platonic doctrine, even though the physical structure of the Academy had been destroyed decades before the conversion of the Roman Republic into an Empire, which occurred in 27 BC.

For administrative reasons, in AD 395 the Roman Empire divided into the Western Roman Empire and the Eastern Roman Empire, a partition consolidated after the death of the emperor Theodosius I, with the former Greek city-states falling within the limits of the latter. The capital of the Eastern Roman Empire, also called the Byzantine Empire, was the ancient Greek colony of Byzantium, later renamed Constantinople, from which the Eastern Roman emperors governed. Those rulers, like the kings and feudal lords in the former Western territory, sought to impose the official Christian religion upon their population by fire and sword — especially the most famous of them, Justinian.

Justinian left us several memorable works of splendid Byzantine beauty, not only in Constantinople, such as the Basilica of Hagia Sophia, but also in another renowned locality, the Italian city of Ravenna. Hagia Sophia, like many of his other achievements, is considered material heritage of humanity. In the same way, the codification of Roman law that he carried out is intangible heritage. But, as said, Justinian persecuted non-Christians, prohibiting doctrines considered heretical — among them Socratic-Platonic philosophy, which he banned in AD 529.

Only on account of the Catholic Council of Florence, at the end of the 1430s, did the West regain contact with Plato and, in consequence, with Socrates, when the Byzantine intellectual George Gemistos Plethon disseminated them there. The copies carried over were, at the request of the Florentine leader Cosimo de' Medici, translated from Greek into Latin by the philosopher Marsilio Ficino. The complete translation was finished at the twilight of that fifteenth century.

Later, notwithstanding his eclectic output, the German philosopher Georg Hegel, influenced by the maieutics of Socrates as transmitted to him by Plato, elaborated his own dialectic, composed of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. We have all heard of Hegel's dialectic, but few connect it to the teachings of Socrates. In the same way, the greatest German philosophers after Hegel — Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Schopenhauer — whatever their empirical pessimism, held Socrates as one of their references.

Finally, the present piece serves to reaffirm this author's conviction that a broad and illuminating field of knowledge — philosophy, understood here as Greek, German, or Greco-German — must not be relegated to a secondary plane of human considerations. On the contrary. Concepts that have survived millennia of adversity, marked by geopolitical change, wars, oppressive governments, and possible natural catastrophes, and which, upon their rediscovery and afterward, greatly influenced our political and social systems, shaping the West as we know it, must be held inalienable for present and future generations. Let them be immortal. Let philosophy be, definitively, the greatest of the intangible heritages of humanity.

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