

Presentation

Philosophy, education and the future

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Human beings express themselves through words. And these words, being time, seek their connection to freedom or are irreversibly sentenced to oblivion. But not all move towards freedom or oblivion, because their rhythm is intermittent: they twinkle, they divide. They will flourish where we least expect, perhaps in the thoughts that transform us. In the art of asking questions—some very precise, embracing human complexity in general—thoughts that flow between words and scales of silence encounter one of the most original expressions of the task of philosophy. From words to silence, and from silence to words, there is a rhythm. The rhythm is evidence of the deep and tangible suspicion of our existence here; at the same time, it consciously embraces daily life with something intuitively known: we are more than matter. We are time, possibility and freedom.

Philosophical activity has had a consistently self-critical history; this has been a way of alerting itself of and maintaining the continuous need for revalidation and renovation. This self-critique has been a dynamic task, never static, founded on the value of questions and not on a final response that is set in stone. Therein lies the danger of dogmas, in the seductive comfort of that which is static. The philosophical questions of each era have been time under certain circumstances, in other words transcendence and immanence reconsidered in their historical context, in accordance with a rhythm between words and silence, oriented by the concerns of each era. Philosophical inquiry has been guided by a common thread: the understanding of human nature and reality. If the question is time, so is the person who formulates it. To be precise, words are made of time and silence, which constitute the philosophical question. Learning philosophy, therefore, is not confined to the walls of a classroom where philosophy is taught, nor is it bound to any degree. This does not imply disorganized learning; on the contrary, this must be rigorous, methodical, critical, requiring evidence and reasoning. Learning to philosophize does not involve only these elements, but also the ability to identify the risks enveloping humanity and transcending the traps of egotistical individuality. This ability alerts us that a critical reflection is urgent in educational spaces. I am referring to the causes and implications of the technological revolution, the

place that information occupies in contemporary societies and the economic investment in science with a greater degree of risk than benefits for the future. All of this is connecting us to other languages, other syntaxes. How much will this disrupt us? How much has this already disrupted us? What has been said until now underlines the relevance of thinking about and reflecting on human nature, particularly on its interaction with a technological development that is not stopping nor will it stop.

In this light, the philosophy of education is not solely an exercise for humanistic and artistic training, but also a means to be watchful before technology, information, communications and the risks we have already sown for the future. Therefore, the presence of the philosophical exercise and the persistence of ethical practices are indispensable to scientific and technological training. The incorporation of humanistic perspectives in innovation, technological development and scientific advances takes place in various universities whose visions turn toward the future, even when this has not occurred in the educational agenda of most countries. In our century—as in the past—the youth and adults who study philosophy take upon themselves, in one way or another, the exercise of questioning and the consequent search for an answer. They are clearly aware of its finiteness and, at the same time, of the opposite possibility: infinity. In both cases, one moves toward an unavoidable condition, time. This simultaneously presents its two faces, the finite and the infinite. Thus the miserly character of finite egoism does not affect the immensity and the dimension of the philosophical search.

Philosophical activity corresponds to its time. There, in these correspondences, dialogue begins and our world is defined or redefined; therein lies the coherence between the philosopher's tasks and his or her time. In order to achieve this correspondence between philosophy and that which consistently concerns human beings, dialogue is indispensable. In philosophy as in science, the formulation of questions constitutes the beginning of knowledge, but also of the dialogue that unfolds through other questions, that opens to further inquiry and seeks a more complete understanding. Openness and the constant formulation of questions are not a deficiency of philosophical activity, but precisely what sets it apart. Asking is already awareness and knowledge. In the question lies the relevance of philosophy for our century, its meaning and nature that bring us once again to the elemental questions of the human being.

Living is moving through a quest similar to that of the philosopher. In the best of cases, it brings us closer to an understanding of existence. What I mean by this is that philosophy, in some way, is renewed and comes together in every human being, like a river that merges into the sea. Dialogue, questions and the search for understanding create a stable, but constantly dynamic, syntax,

similar to the well-known river of Heraclitus; a syntax made of new problems or old/new topics, neologisms and risks that appear on the horizon and concern us as a species. Some of them, incorporated into contemporary philosophical activity, reveal the indispensable role of philosophy in the 21st century. I will mention a few such topics: the development of artificial intelligence and the imminent possibility of creating a super non-human intelligence in the coming decades (Bostrom, 2014); the reflection made and actions taken in order to understand how technological innovation—that communicates and informs us today—have intervened in our human relations, and warn us of the urgency to establish an ethic appropriate to our era (Floridi, 2013); the way in which synthetic biology has been promoted and invested in without clear ethical regulations, and with the great risk of intervening in the creation or modification of life cycles, synthetic bacteria or new diseases (Bostrom, 2013); the precariousness of current food subsistence, aggravated by the growth of our population on this planet. Through these subjects, ethical concepts of justice and equality arise, emerging from deep human and social roots. And we cannot forget the changes to the environment and the imminent irreversible effects we can observe today.

The majority of contemporary societies share experiences related to these concerns. It would be reductionist to think of these only in the immediate or short term. The complexity that weaves them together compels us to consider the long term, with a vision that the astronomer Martin Rees has outlined with clarity (Rees, 2003). It is while thinking about the future that the relevance of philosophy and its presence in contemporary education are intensified. Presence and persistence come together in two simple, but at the same time intertwined, questions: what value do we place on the future? And do our present actions truly value the future? The relevance of these questions is undeniable, but the meaning or relevance granted by each person will vary. Here, I am skeptical, because our actions and priorities seem to reveal that the future lacks value. However, the human experience, by its very nature, feeds the concern for the future of others, those who are not yet born or who are just beginning their lives. This is where I glimpse hope. In another space, I have reflected on this same idea about the risks that we are creating and the future as a philosophical concern established from the present point (Martínez Ruíz, 2015). In this concern for future generations lies one of the branches of our human condition: transcendence. The obstruction of transcendence through the canceling of the future of the human being as we know it is far from mere hypothesis. We have enough meaningful evidence today to warn us.

If transcending our own finiteness happens by living on through others, or if this search for transcendence becomes knowledge about the ultimate nature of reality, an understanding

will emerge of the existence of human beings, of others and of ourselves, of those who are not yet born and are still the future. But if our present negates the possibilities of future existence for others, then our actions are negating the very possibility of transcendence and freedom.

The effects of boundless consumption that devastates the environment, technological innovation in information and communications, disproportionate and unregulated economic investment in robotics and the development of an artificial super intelligence and in synthetic biology constitute a call for reflection, in order to act upon the very foundation of the growing egocentric individuality that negates the future and has created the risks surrounding us. These risks are not new, but the speed at which they are appearing, their immediacy and the way in which they adapt to endure give them great potential.

It is worth mentioning the growth and the cultivation of an egotistical individuality developed using technology. The topics of individuality and egocentrism are very old, both in the West and in the non-West, but their combination with technology is noteworthy. We see the use of simple and daily applications (apps), which evolve from helpful tools in daily life to the cultivation of a moral question: attachment. Attachment and societies that cultivate individualism, feeding into the generation of egoism as a characteristic of success, are promoted by technological advances. All this involves a series of converging concepts that we can integrate—considering a more complex meaning with its ethical and ontological implications—into the term *appego*, which implies the root of the ethical problem: egocentrism that can obliterate the value of the future.

There is an implicit concern in this obliteration. If technology is neutral and will not stop—as can be seen in the past three decades—but has the capacity to transform life conditions then it offers great benefits for humanity, but it also entails the possibility of great risk. Neutrality ends where the intentions we give technological development begin. Upon first glance, there is no need to be alarmed or concerned by this development, but if we add up all the various imbalances that are taking place on planetary ecosystems, then neutrality has opened the door to an unbalanced intentionality that generates more problems than benefits for humanity. There, in the subtle and precise direction we give to the neutral character of technology, lies the importance of ethical awareness and its application in a future of technological innovations, in an era that has made us instruments of our *appegos*.

When speaking of the future, I am referring to the implicit concern for time. This has been one of the greatest philosophical topics of both the West and non-West. We are time, and a great part of our concerns about human nature comes back to the question of time. But what do I mean by future time? The future I

am referring to is that which is born, as a possibility, in the present. This present is also our accumulation of the past. The past time both exists and no longer exists. It exists inasmuch as it contains the accumulated and undeniable history that conforms us; but it does not exist because it is immobile, it can no longer be changed. This is why I say that there is no future, but only a present; yet there is no present without the possibility of the future.

As a possibility, the future means construction, and that is where the three words, philosophy, education and future, become relevant. In the construction of the future, there is a web through which we are now passing; its precious value is covered or uncovered through our progress in the present time. The freedom and dignity to recognize this future construction are ours; they belong to us. This is why when I mention the future, I am actually referring to the present: because the time that condemns the future is the present. The awareness of this confluence emerges before an obvious and intuitively felt knowledge: if we are time, we are also possibility and freedom. Time, possibility and freedom encounter another synchrony, which I outline today, accessible and inaccessible, both distant and near, evoked through three words: philosophy, education and future.

The philosophical reflection on the value that the human being gives to the future is a topic of research relevant to the educational spaces of our time. There are different ways to approach this; one is through the intersection of ethics, the philosophy of information and a philosophy about scientific-technological advances. But this method is justly associated with different fields of knowledge, such as engineering and technological training. When we consider the value that we give to the future, we can fathom the indispensable role played by educational institutions focused on science and technology. Technological advances, technification and scientific progress show us, on the one hand, the benefits; but on the other hand, we can observe the sequence of risks for human existence and the planet mentioned above. This is where a critical vision opens before us. From both perspectives we can make a call not to fall victim to indifference, not to close our eyes before the evidence of the other face of the benefits produced by technological development.

I will begin to bring this train of thought to a close. The most profound concern that underlies the nexus among philosophy, education and the future is an irreversible risk for human existence, the possible destruction of the potential of the future. Octavio Paz, a poet and not a philosopher, identified one of the causes in *Conjunctions and Disjunctions* (1996), clearly expressing the idea in the 20th century: "Science is power, knowledge and fraternity. Since it is technical, it is an instrument, not a philosophy nor a god...Madness, which has been so widely and futilely discussed, basically consists of becoming instruments of

our own instruments” (p. 18). Reconsidering Paz’s idea today, we may ask ourselves: Have we been converted into instruments of our technological information and communications devices? It is worthwhile to ask if we have become—perhaps without even noticing—instruments of our own instruments. Towards the middle of the 20th century, and by way of a similar reflection, the scientist Erwing Schrödinger (2009) wrote in his book *Science and Humanism*:

I consider it extremely doubtful whether the happiness of humanity has been enhanced by the technical and industrial developments that followed in the wake of rapidly progressing natural science. I cannot here enter into details, and I will not speak of the future development, which will probably infect the surface of the earth with artificial radioactivity. (p. 13)

Schrödinger’s concept about future scientific developments bestows greater importance to the reflection outlined here: the doubt of something we take for granted. A serious doubt whether the happiness of humanity has been enhanced by the promises of science and technological development. If we apply this doubt to what we are living today, it would make sense to consider how information and communications technology is changing the way in which humans tend to understand the fundamental concepts of philosophy, such as the mind, consciousness, experience, reasoning, knowledge, truth, ethics and the line that separates the human from the artificial. The scope of these topics today is not exempt from the influence of computer mechanisms and systems, the infosphere and global connectivity. To a certain extent, these concerns were already part of the ideas of Turing, Von Newman and Norbert Wiener in the 1940s. Some of their concepts were expressed in relation to computer theory, electronic development and the possibility of artificial intelligence.

The previous considerations lead us to reconsider the relationship among philosophy, education and the future from the perspective of newly emerging fields of research. These are fields that stimulate the creation of new research centers, new university classes and non-traditional research topics that are increasingly blurring the lines between disciplines, as well as the establishment of new journals, innovative training and professions, informal concentrations and new types of employment. For this reason, some of the research topics for 21st century philosophy are the nature and ethical regulation of what we call software agents and multi-agent systems (MAS), the foundations of computer ethics, ethics in and for artificial intelligence, the ontological reflection about the existence of an artificial intelligence and of robots that can accompany human life, increasingly blurring the line between the artificial and the natural. Before the possibil-

ity of developing a super intelligence, it would be worthwhile to consider the idea of god and metaphysical thinking, but this idea is also of prime importance in the subject of information technology and how to define the human being in our era.

How do these topics and recent scientific developments influence the way in which philosophy reformulates its basic questions? The task of philosophy is the creation and reformulation of a distinct way of questioning, and both characteristics reveal the recognition of a basic knowledge: our existence is presence. In that knowledge, conscious of existence and presence, lies the possibility of liberating or negating the unfolding of human potential. This potential is founded on an initial act: the search for and understanding of our nature and our presence in the nature that surrounds us. Seeking and understanding constitute us. Both actions are at the root of our *raison d'être*, but acknowledging them in the present and securing them for the future is not a given. This has been demonstrated by our era. For this reason, recalling philosophical dialogue, the search for the meaning of human actions and the shaping of the future are tasks for the 21st century. Through these tasks we can once again recognize the place, presence and persistence of philosophy in educational spaces at all levels and disciplines.

May this issue of *Innovación Educativa* be a beginning, among many, to consider the tasks of our era.

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