

Rethinking Philosophy: The Power of the Word¹

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Why have we philosophers come together in a World Congress for a whole week? What can we offer the world through our papers, symposia, lectures and discussions? Will all this amount to little more than words, words and still more words? How can these words be important for the world today?

Other researchers and scholars have their own special fields; they represent specific disciplines, specific domains of research and education. But we philosophers have no special discipline. In fact, we have discussions with researchers from all fields, and not only with researchers but also with technicians, artists, moralists, indeed with thoughtful people from all walks of life. We can engage with their fields, yet our activities do not belong to any one of them. We are everywhere but occupy no particular place. Our strength does not lie in pursuing a particular area of research and thought from which we produce results, but in our capacity to speak rationally about everything, to consider the role of everything in the whole. What sets us apart from all other researchers and theorists is the fact that we have only language, only speech, only the word as our tools of engagement.

By using the philosophical concepts and discourse we have learned and the thoughts of earlier philosophers that we remember, we try to speak philosophically in our own way and according to the conditions of our time; our aim is constantly to rethink philosophy in our own day, as we describe, analyse, argue, criticise, teach and propose new ideas constructed out of these discourses. And if in doing so we perceive a danger that could threaten humanity or the world, or the integrity of the individual or a vulnerable group, we may feel it our duty to propose a way of preventing such evil or catastrophe from occurring, and we may be impelled to warn humanity against hidden destructive forces or against a carelessness with regard to new discoveries or developments that might prove disastrous.

But whatever we do, the only power we have is the power of the word, the power of language, of our speech as teachers, educators, lecturers, reviewers, opinion

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makers. A great philosopher of the 20th century said: 'The word is my kingdom – *la parole est mon royaume* – and I am not ashamed of it'.

Sometimes political leaders and heads of institutions however do try to make us ashamed of it; they cannot see why they should support and give room to philosophy, since philosophy does not have a technical purpose, nor does it contribute to increasing productivity of material goods or strengthening the world's technical capacity. Sometimes philosophers are even removed or excluded from universities and higher education establishments because they are considered as useless and perhaps even dangerous for the established order. Nevertheless there are today many signs of the vitality of philosophy, and philosophical thinking still plays an enormous role in the world.

The attendance at this congress shows this. The vigorous life of philosophical societies all over the world shows this, as does the constant creation of new centres for philosophy and of new philosophical societies. The enthusiastic participation in the annual International Philosophical Olympiads where high school pupils from many countries compete for the prize of the best philosophical essay is another clear indicator of this vigour. And last but not least it is shown by the continuing high level of publication of philosophical works in all important languages.

All over the world philosophers engage in open debate both inside and outside academic institutions, and in most places they are well received. Thus, if 'power' means cultural and political influence, philosophy has become a global world power. Truly, on our planet where wars and conflicts are ever-increasing, the power of philosophy manifests itself by defending the freedom of thought, the freedom to express fundamental or universal values, the freedom to criticise injustices, and the freedom of dialogue across all cultural and national frontiers. In short, philosophy appears everywhere as the power by which the will to peace is maintained. Indeed, it is very likely that, without philosophy, the world would be a very much worse place for human life.

From this it follows that power does not necessarily equate with domination of others, but can be liberating, giving space for new possibilities, opening new horizons, unveiling hidden forces and opportunities.

One often forgets that the economic, technological and military powers do not possess the monopoly of power in the world. Philosophical argumentation and reflection constitute a non-economic, non-technological and non-military power by projecting a word that is capable of challenging the other powers, exposing lies and illusions, and proposing a better world as a dwelling-place for humanity.

Often the power of the philosophical word has been ignored, as when philosophy was seen as pure description, pure reference, an innocent mirror that is non-retrospective and serves only to make us present to things. But this idea of philosophy as a mirror of nature has been criticised both from a hermeneutical point of view and from a pragmatic point of view: Hans-Georg Gadamer showed in *Truth and Method* (1960) that there is no description without interpretation of the historical situation from whose perspective we describe something and Richard Rorty declared in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979) that philosophy must focus on action that changes the world.

But already in 1955 the Oxford philosopher J. L. Austin was giving lectures on

speech acts. These were published in 1962 in the booklet *How to do things with words*. He showed that a proposition that presents a meaning is an act, (he called it a *locutionary* act), and he claimed that the *locutionary* act cannot be completely separated from what he calls an *illocutionary* act by which a certain *force* is added in the saying of something. In other words, the total situation in which the utterance is issued and what Austin calls the total speech act is always both *locutionary* and *illocutionary*. Already by selecting something we want to say and omitting other things we do not consider as important we have a certain influence on those who read or hear what we write or say. Thus, the word has always a force in the world.

That means that philosophising is never totally neutral. We philosophers have a responsibility to know how we do things with words.

However, if philosophy can wield the power of the word, not all kinds of philosophising are necessarily good for humanity. In the 20th century we have learned how destructive and disastrous nationalistic, fascist and other totalitarian thinking can be for humanity. It can be very seductive for a group and can nourish forms of mass suggestion that appeal to the worst part of ourselves. And this part of ourselves is not only formed by our egoistic drives but it is also constituted by what Tomonobu Imamichi has called the '*nosistic*' drives, an egoism in the plural (from latin: *nos*, we), a group-egoism that divides humanity into positions and considers as potential enemies anybody else or any foreigner belonging to another group, another nation or another culture.

But the *illocutionary* element of language is not sufficient for an understanding of how our speech can be both good and evil. In the speech situation the influence of the word is not only found in carrying a meaning from one person to another, in giving information about something to someone or in asking a question, making an appeal to someone, giving an order or offering an excuse.

A speech act can intend to form the other, for instance in order to dominate, to subjugate, to humiliate. Therefore there is a third aspect of speech acts, that the perspicacious J. L. Austin mentioned but did not develop very much, to which we need to give more attention. This is the *perlocutionary* act that he defined as 'the achieving of certain effects by saying something'.

Today this *perlocutionary* act could well be the most important kind of speech act we philosophers have to examine. But in all the philosophy of language developed during the 20th century I do not find sufficient analysis of how language can achieve certain effects and touch the other through the very act itself of saying something to that other.

It is true that since philosophy took the linguistic turn to which J. L. Austin contributed in the 1950s many philosophers have been occupied in trying to understand language. One may cite as instances the analyses of ordinary language by Ludwig Wittgenstein and others, the work on the phenomenology of language by Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and others, the hermeneutical reflections on interpretation of speech and text by Hans-Georg Gadamer and others, the reflection on poetic symbols, metaphors and narratives by Paul Ricoeur and others, the theory of communicative action by Jürgen Habermas and his school, and many other forms of philosophy of language, whether in analytic or synthetic philosophy, both inside and outside European culture.

Thanks to this linguistic turn, to this attention paid to language, we have learned to understand how philosophy in itself may not only enlighten and liberate, but also seduce and manipulate. Of course, promoting enlightenment and liberation and avoiding seduction and manipulation have been the aims of philosophy since Plato prescribed 'reasonable talk', that is, talk that we can agree on in a dialogue where every interlocutor is honest to himself and honest to others. Certainly, to Plato and later in particular to Søren Kierkegaard, irony also and what Jacques Derrida has called 'philosophizing in the margin' may equally be reasonable. But seduction and manipulation whose intent or effect is to reduce people to blind instruments of an ideology or to the condition of a flock with a leader who thinks for them, however much it may adopt a philosophical guise, can never bring them to reason.

The reason for having philosophers is thus that they are the guardians of reason. Therefore it can only be counterproductive if philosophy is practised as an anaesthetic or as a vehicle for what is provocative but not better: hate-talk, speech of hatred. Indeed, the good philosopher is one who is involved in his or her cause, who speaks with enthusiasm about what he or she believes and is sober-minded even in the face of the harshest criticism. But hate-talk that uses insult and defamation against others, whether they be other philosophers or non-philosophers, politicians for instance, reduces argument to violence and turns philosophy into egoistic or *nosistic* warfare.

Today, philosophy has lost its innocence; we cannot philosophise without reflection on our linguistic practice. Therefore more understanding of the *perlocutionary* act is needed in order to make us more conscious of how in every communication, from the most intimate to the most political, we can both encourage and hurt, both stimulate and repress others.

We need to reach such an understanding not only because philosophers possess the very visible power of the word and therefore are challenged by society to account for what they are doing by educating in philosophy and speaking in the public space, but also because they cannot explain their own activity without a reflection on the power of the word in general. And thereby they must recognise that this power is enormous. They cannot explain the *illocutionary* and the *perlocutionary* role of philosophy today without taking into account the effect we have on each other by speaking and writing as ordinary people, not only as philosophers, in a world that we perhaps more than ever shape by our words.

I consider this matter as one of the most urgent tasks for philosophers today who want to rethink philosophy and who want to apply their analytical and critical capacities to the most urgent problem we have in our time: How do we avoid by our words 'the clash of civilizations', that Samuel P. Huntington has seen as the greatest threat to humanity in our century.

It follows that we philosophers are not only called to understand ourselves and the power of our philosophical word. We must also contribute to developing a more general understanding of the power of the word. As members of the kingdom of the word we are responsible for teaching and explaining what words can do among people, not only in a single country but also among all peoples of the world who belong to different nations, different cultures, different languages, traditions and religions.

Let me take an example from my own country: the reactions aroused by the publication in September 2005 in the Danish newspaper *Jyllandsposten* of some cartoons

showing the prophet Mohammed as a terrorist, for instance with a bomb in his turban. These cartoons were accompanied by some editorial commentary saying that they could teach Muslims to endure 'disdain, insult and ridicule'. The reaction in the Muslim world to this perceived aggressive offence was heated and sometimes very violent; in many places Danish flags were burnt and even some Danish diplomatic residences were burnt down.

At the time most other Danish newspapers refused to publish the cartoons, but the Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen did not clearly oppose the publication in *Jyllandsposten*, declaring that in Denmark there is freedom of speech and that the government could not and should not intervene in decisions for which the newspaper alone was responsible. When asked to apologise for the publication of the cartoons, the Prime Minister understood this as a demand to take responsibility for something that the government had not itself done, and therefore he refused to make any apology. Few people in Denmark thought that it was a legal question and that the cartoons should have been forbidden by law, although many saw it as a moral question. But initially the Prime Minister did not see it either as a legal or as a moral question. However, when this year a Dutch filmmaker, Geert Wilders, posted on the Internet a short movie called *FITNA* that was extremely aggressive towards Muslims and then came to Denmark, thinking he would have the support of our Prime Minister, the latter distanced himself sharply from the movie. So, in retrospect, such a moral distancing could also have been taken with regard to the Danish newspaper. Why did this not happen?

The cartoons were defended in Denmark in the name of the right to freedom of speech. Then, more recently, the Danish intelligence service revealed to the press that three young people – a Dane and two foreigners – were suspected of planning to murder the cartoonist (though for security reasons evidence pointing to this was not published). But when this happened, no Danish newspaper simply treated these three people as presumed ordinary criminals. Rather, almost the whole of the Danish press was seized by a kind of war logic and re-published the offensive cartoons in order to defend Denmark – the 'country of free speech' – against all its enemies. The consequences were not long in coming, in the form of a bloody suicide attack on the Danish Embassy in Pakistan.

But I would ask: Was this unhappy story not rather the result of bad philosophy?

The idea of freedom of speech appears in the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States of America of 1791 which declares: 'Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech or of the press'. This amendment was promulgated in order to protect the freedom to criticise those in power. A century and a half later, freedom of speech was enshrined as a human right in article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 which declared: 'Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression'.

However, in the wake of the French Revolution, due in no small part to the free speech exercised by courageous citizens, the consequent Declaration of the Rights of Man and of Citizen of 26 August 1789 did not nevertheless proclaim a right to free speech without limits. The reason given was that there was no freedom without responsibility; this corresponds to the Declaration's definition of freedom in article

4 where it is affirmed that freedom consists in the right to do anything that does not harm any other, and that the limits to this right can only be determined by law.

Truly, an absolute freedom of speech and expression is problematic. This is already true in the case of the claim of freedom of religion that historically precedes the claim of freedom of speech. Religious freedom has been claimed as a freedom of faith, and this has been claimed as a human right, but not without limits; because freedom to practise a religion that includes violence in order to force people to convert has never been generally accepted as a human right. In other words, freedom of religion is a right as long as it does not deny anybody else the same freedom.

But freedom of speech and expression also is problematic if it is claimed as unlimited; it may be practised as violence if it is a *perlocutionary* act that hurts and humiliates others in order to dominate, repress or oppress them.

There is, however, a much more fundamental human right than the right to freedom of speech, and this is the right to freedom of thought. This freedom of thought was claimed by Voltaire in his *Philosophical Dictionary* of 1764 and by many other European philosophers in the Age of Enlightenment. The right to this freedom can be considered as absolute, if by thought is meant an inner conviction or a faith that does not include violence against others. Thus, there is an absolute freedom of conviction, but not an absolute freedom of expression of any thought.

The cult of public freedom of expression in a country like Denmark is peculiar in comparison to what is normally admitted in Danish family life. Everybody knows that in a family or amongst friends you may think what you like about your wife or your partner, about your parents and your children, and about your closest friends. But if you want a good life together with them, you must always take care how you convey those thoughts to them. Hence you do not use the word as a weapon against them. Why should this use of freedom be otherwise in the great family we call humanity?

As members of this human family, as citizens of the world, we must recognise that the humiliation of others can be the most brutal violence we can inflict short of directly killing. The economic exploitation of a large part of the world's population by a smaller, richer group is a big problem, but it is not the greatest problem we face; the greatest problem is the lack of mutual recognition between peoples from different cultures, different languages, different histories, different races, different religions. Yet it would cost us Europeans and Americans nothing in money or capital to grant this recognition. But this seems much more difficult for us to practise than any renunciation of material goods. To do so demands a humility we do not possess.

The contrast between recognition and humiliation is indeed very instructive. To recognise the other is not only to accept the simple existence of the other, but to refrain from violence against that person. Humiliation on the other hand is an attitude that is intended to give the other a feeling of inferiority, to injure the self-esteem of the other and the self-respect of a cultural community. When one's self-esteem is wounded it is the very relationship with the other human being that is hurt, because a relationship cannot unfold without the other. Humiliation destroys our 'living together' not only in personal relationships but also in social life.

Humility is the opposite of pride and arrogance: it is to consider oneself as on a level with every other human being. By contrast, humiliation of the other is not a

virtue, it is a vice – it constitutes the attempt to dominate the other by forcing him or her to be humble. But enforced humility can never be true humility for that must come generously from the proper character of the individual and not from the outside or out of fear of the other. Humility is humbleness before the community to which we belong. In this sense, it is not a feeling of inferiority, but a feeling of belonging. And it consists in the conviction that none of us has a true identity without the component that we receive from others. In fact, an individual human identity in the modern world is a synthesis of identities. As Amartya Sen says: ‘In normal lives, we see ourselves as members of a variety of groups – we belong to all of them’.

Today we face several big problems that we must resolve together. Therefore we have to be cosmopolitan and this is no longer a romantic dream but a very concrete task. Let me mention just three concrete problems: The problem of global warming and the environment in general, the problem of intercultural co-existence, and the problem of financial globalisation. No peaceful solutions to these connected problems can be achieved if we do not learn to behave peacefully through the medium of language, that is, to use language as an instrument of peace and not as a weapon. We live with the problems of a complex technological environment, but we cannot master this complexity if we cannot master our language. Thus, we must rethink philosophy according to an eco-ethics, an ethics of our world as *oikos*, as dwelling-place for our good life together.

Philosophy therefore is an absolute necessity. We need the power of the word. This need is the deepest drive we have. A young Chinese wrote to me when his efforts to find money to attend our Congress were unavailing: ‘I cannot come to the World Congress of Philosophy, but *philosophy will go on in my heart!*’

He belongs to the kingdom of the word. He shares the conviction that has brought us all together here in Seoul. He joins with us in our burning wish: Long live philosophy!

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Notes

1. Opening Presidential Address, 22nd World Congress of Philosophy (Seoul, July 30 – August 5, 2008).