QUEST laboratory

AFRICAN NOTES ON THE UNESCO STRATEGY ON PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT. *On the occasion of the 2004 Day of Philosophy as organised by the United Nations Educational and Scientific Commission (UNESCO), a questionnaire on UNESCO's strategy on philosophy was circulated among selected philosophers world-wide. In the present article the Editor of* QUEST: An African Journal of Philosophy / Revue de Philosophie Africaine *fills out the UNESCO questionnaire from the specific perspective of philosophy in Africa. He seeks to define the role of UNESCO in the field of philosophy, particularly in the light of interculturality, globalisation, and reconciliation; these three topics he considers to be philosophically at a par with UNESCO's recognised goals of poverty alleviation and human rights. He stresses how UNESCO as a (powerful and elitist, global) formal organisation may need profound self-critique before it is ready to serve the case of philosophy in the South. Philosophy's contribution to global justice is to be largely situated in the South; here also some of humankind's most vital philosophical traditions have originated and may still be encountered outside the academic and bureaucratic sphere (that is most congenial to UNESCO). Involvement of philosophy in decision making and the media may help promote philosophy as a subject world-wide; special importance should be given to UNESCO's role in acknowledging and protecting language diversity as an obvious model for interculturality.*

KEY WORDS. *bureaucracy, Day of Philosophy, decision making, formal organisation, globalisation, human rights, interculturality, language diversity, media, philosophy, poverty alleviation, reconciliation, self-critique, South, UNESCO.*

The UNESCO Strategy on Philosophy: QUESTIONNAIRE

Introduction[1]

UNESCO was borne out of a philosophical, ethical and moral interrogation about the

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[1] The text in small typeface, and the questions in bold typeface, are taken from the UNESCO questionnaire as circulated in 2004 – QUEST hereby acknowledges the UNESCO copyright; the author's responses appear in italics.

condition of the world. The need for an Organization which aimed to defend and foster the values of justice, democracy and human rights for the maintenance of peace was clear to the founding thinkers in 1945. Enduring peace and stability was to be built in the minds of men through intellectual co-operation, exchange and development, and UNESCO was to be the intellectual and ethical arm of the United Nations system.

This is why a Philosophy Programme, a unique programme within the United Nations, was created in 1946. Philosophy at UNESCO has since been geared towards the four following tasks:

1) Fostering Philosophical Research and Scholarship:
    Example: Research programme on the 'Birthright of Man' (1968) to analyze the universality of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; Fostering research on the link between philosophy teaching and democratic development (1990)
2) Promoting Philosophy Education:
    Example: 1. Programme on Teaching Philosophy and Democracy (1951, 1952, 1980, 1983, 1985, 1990); 2. Programme on Curriculum Development with Special Emphasis on Africa (1996)
3) Creating a Forum for Intellectual Debate and Philosophical Exchanges:
    Example: 1. Philosophy Colloquiums (since 1978), for example, a colloquium on the 23rd centenary of the death of Aristotle; 2. UNESCO Philosophy Forums (1995, 1996, 2003)
4) Stimulating Philosophical Reflection on World Problems:
    Example: Series of Conferences on "*Reflection on the Post-Conflict Society*", with presentations by Jean-Paul Sartre, A.J. Ayer, Emmanuel Mounier, Pierre Bertaux (1964); Series of publications on *The Philosophy of Science and Culture of Peace* (1951) concerning the responsibility of scientists to promote a culture of peace

Today, the Philosophy Programme covers the following activities:
- **Philosophy Day**, celebrated in over seventy countries;
- **Philosophical Dialogues: Asia and the Arab Region**: a new programme launched this year, which will aim to foster philosophical dialogue and research between the two regions;
- **UNESCO Philosophy Forums;**
- **Pathways of Thought**: a programme which provides a forum for interdisciplinary debate on key philosophical issues;
- **Philosophy Facing World Problems: Poverty**: a programme launched in 2002, which aims to give philosophical analysis, rigour and reflection on the problem of poverty and human rights.

Aims of the Strategy

The development of a UNESCO Strategy of Philosophy was requested by the Executive Board at its 169th Session. The Executive Board requested the Director-General to propose to its 171st session, an intersectoral strategy on philosophy to be drafted in close consultation with the Member States and their National Commissions, relevant NGOs and eminent personalities.

This Strategy will define the key areas of work for the Philosophy Programme for the next six years.

Questions:

1. What should be the role of UNESCO in the field of Philosophy? [please tick one or several options]
- **Promoting Philosophy Teaching** √
- **Fostering Philosophical Reflection and Research** √
- **Strengthening the academic cooperation** √
- **Supporting Philosophical Debate and Dialogue** √
- **Creating and supporting networks of Philosophers** √
- **Supporting the mobility of young researchers** √
- **Other comments:**

I applaud UNESCO's initiative in identifying some of the most pressing and pertinent questions that constitute the challenge for philosophy today, and in my extensive answers I have sought to live up to the seriousness and relevance of these questions.

However, the pre-coded categories of this first question take the current disciplinary definition of philosophy for granted. There are more urgent and more important matters for UNESCO to consider in the context of philosophy, even if that means redefining philosophy:

- *how can we think diversity and unity at the global scale;*
- *how is such thinking to be informed by a re-thought concept of culture, one that is capable of dealing both with diversity and*

> *unity at the global scale?*
> - *how can we overcome the obvious differences, inequalities and historical grievances between continents, nations, etc.*
> - *how can we think global institutions, like the UNESCO, in that framework*
> - *the notion of 'intercultural philosophy' sums up these concerns rather effectively*

2. Throughout the various consultations, many scholars have recommended that Philosophy at UNESCO should focus on fostering philosophical analysis on contemporary world problems. Currently, the Philosophy Programme has a project on poverty and human rights. In your view, what kind of themes should Philosophy at UNESCO concentrate on, and what would be the best methodology?

> *Poverty and human rights are important topics, obviously, but these topics are largely outside most philosopher's academic competence or experience. Imposing these topics as central concerns for philosophy, may reduce the philosophers to studied ineffectiveness – or may even invite a superficial form of mercenary window-dressing that is in nobody's interest. I would rather advocate the topics I listed under question 1, which seem to me more properly and recognisably philosophical, and in fact more fundamental than poverty and human rights in the sense that a reflection on the latter two problems can easily be accommodated within the more overarching topics I identified.*

3. What is the best way for UNESCO to foster an intellectual movement with philosophers in order to contribute to social change or social transformation based on social and global justice?

> *In the first place, UNESCO must be congratulated on identifying this task ('to foster an intellectual movement with philosophers in order to contribute to social change or social transformation based on social and global justice') and giving it priority.*
>   *However, UNESCO must also realise that if it seeks to take a leading*

role in initiating and fostering such an intellectual movement, numerous contradictions in UNESCO's organisational format and its constituency will threaten to defeat the purpose of such a movement: with its emphasis on representation, legal formality, bureaucracy, excellence, luxury conditions of salaries, travel arrangements, per diems etc., UNESCO-associated scholars tend to constitute a global and national elite, more representative of the status quo, in class terms, than of the kind of social change and transformation so central to the movement we are talking about here.

In Africa, usually well-trained intellectuals are struggling under conditions that for most philosophers in the North Atlantic are inconceivable, from a point of view of economic, social and political security, work load, resources, etc. I know that similar conditions obtain in some other poor countries in other continents. Rather than condescendingly stooping down (temporarily and selectively extending, to such South scholars, the perks that would make them join the UNESCO circuit), a fundamental rethinking of bureaucracy, funding and participation must first be done within UNESCO before UNESCO is in a position to help realise its, very laudable, dream of 'foster[ing] an intellectual movement with philosophers in order to contribute to social change or social transformation based on social and global justice'. This rethinking should primarily be done by South scholars, in South locations (and not just South Africa, which whatever its achievements is not really in the same league), under South conditions shared by visiting scholars from all over the world.

Moreover, one or a series of conferences is not enough to foster an intellectual movement. After glorious beginnings in the 1960s and 1970s, philosophy is by and large on the decline in African universities, and many intercontinentally significant African philosophers have left their original countries either for South Africa or for the North Atlantic (especially the USA). An intellectual movement without material means has great difficulty surviving – while, on the other hand, the best way to smother an intellectual movement is by abundance of foreign funds and of global bureaucratisation.

So a way must be found to make South (not exclusively African) intellectual institutions the focus of such a transformative movement, to en-

dow professorial chairs (some of them permanent ones, but especially rotating ones), and to ensure that they have some funding for first-rate PhD projects of their most promising students. And rather than creating new growth points out of the blue (with the risk of another form of dependency upon the North), UNESCO must scout for already existing growth points and initiatives in the South, and prudently subsidise those. In the near future, an effectively Africanised QUEST *could be among such growth points.*

4. How can UNESCO best link current research in Philosophy (political philosophy, philosophy and policy, moral philosophy) to policy-making and to decision-makers?

In the first place, to the UNESCO list of 'political philosophy, philosophy and policy, moral philosophy', Intercultural Philosophy should be added.

More importantly, if UNESCO is seriously determined to play a role in linking 'current research in Philosophy to policy-making and to decision-makers', a number of ways are open:

- *UNESCO itself represents a major laboratory for policy making and a context for decision-makers, based on once topical philosophical principles (those that could negotiate an intercontinental consensus in the 1930s-40!) and that urgently need rethinking – as is very clear, for instance, in the case of UNESCO's stance on humankind's Intangible Cultural Heritage (which now, in my mind, seems to revolve on the reification, elite appropriation, bureaucratisation and commodification of culture); such rethinking could make policy makers aware of the potential of philosophy to inform and enlighten policy makers' predicaments, and would make UNESCO more credible as a broker in philosophical relevance*
- *UNESCO could experiment with a subsidised scheme where, on a rotation basis, philosophers of proven capability and experience would function as formal advisors of international and interconti-*

nental bodies; and where prominent policy-makers would take up rotating professorial chairs in philosophy departments

- *UNESCO could initiate an intellectual process bringing policy-makers and philosophers together through conferences, a journal, etc.; here it is important that quality of contents goes hand in hand with relatively low-threshold levels of specific professional technicality, so that philosophers and policy-makers can learn from each another and their, unmistakable, negative stereotypes vis-à-vis one another can be broken down.*

- *Meanwhile one of the earliest great names in the Western philosophical tradition, Plato (with his much-criticised idea of putting philosophers at the helm of the state, and his Sicilian adventures) reminds us not to expect too much from philosophers in policy-making*

5. How can UNESCO effectively reach the general public in promoting and fostering philosophical reflection?

Among academic subjects, philosophy scores relatively low in general public visibility, awareness and esteem, incomparable with literature, physics, or medicine. There is no Nobel Prize for Philosophy (some philosophers have won the Literature one), and in many countries (including e.g. The Netherlands) philosophy is not or hardly taught in primary and secondary schools. The great majority of people do not realise that – to the limited extent to which individual human agency informs the course of history – it was philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Voltaire, Diderot, Hegel and Marx who, more than statesmen or religious leaders, through their ideas, have had a determining effect upon the course of North Atlantic history (and, given North Atlantic hegemony since the 18th century CE, upon world history) throughout the Middle Ages and for much of the Modern Age. In the same way, the impact of philosophers like Lao Tse, Kung Fu Tse, Śankara, Al-Ghazali and Ibn Khaldun, over even longer periods and even greater collectivities of people, is not generally recognised by the general public, especially not in the North Atlantic. Even basic philosophical training can be a power-

ful tool to help organise one's individual existence and to negotiate the contradictions between generations, classes, nations, cultures, identities, and religions. In the globalising world of today, such a tool is well-nigh indispensable. The above implies a number of courses for action:

- *UNESCO should produce attractive and effective teaching material on philosophy at primary and secondary school level as well as at the introductory university level, in a sufficient number of major languages*
- *Such a project would already bring out what seems to be one of the most fundamental contradictions of philosophy today: without being explicitly organised around an explicit and consensual theory of linguistic and cultural specificity, of translation, and of the challenges of universality, in the world today most classical philosophical traditions continue to have some impact on ongoing professional philosophising* mainly through the medium of translation *(from African languages, Ancient Greek, Chinese, Sanskrit, Arabic, French, English, German, Japanese, Latin, etc.). Translation is tacitly taken for granted, and – against all evidence – considered to be unproblematic. This means that, in today's dominant philosophical discourses, the problems and the possibilities of interculturality tend to be already dissimulated before they are consciously registered. Inside and outside the specifically philosophical field, UNESCO has a substantial role to play here, in supporting the diversity of languages, protecting the many endangered languages, promoting bilingualism and multilingualism as humankind's typical historic situation, and exploring linguistic diversity as a paradigm for productive tolerance in the fields of diversity of cultures and worldviews.*
- *UNESCO should persuade national education authorities to give more room to philosophy*
- *UNESCO should persuade national communities of philosophers to make themselves widely seen and heard in their national societies, with relevant debates on topical issues, and phrased in a language accessible to non-specialists*
- *UNESCO should make publicly use of the analyses and advice of*

> *philosophers*
> - *UNESCO should create an impressive, intercontinental and low-threshold media event around some annual UNESCO Philosophy Prize*
> - *UNESCO should complement such a unique event by regular popular media broadcasts highlighting the potential and the achievements of philosophy – in the same way as, e.g., the popularisation of the natural sciences enjoy extensive media support*

6. In what ways can UNESCO promote the world traditions of philosophical thought, as well as to foster the research and teaching of 'lesser-known' philosophical traditions?

The leading idea behind many UNESCO initiatives and activities in the cultural field, seems to be that official listing, registration, recognition, canonisation, subsidising, representation, – in short, bureaucratic appropriation and reformulation – is the best way to preserve local, national and continental cultural achievements, to prevent them from dying out, and to make sure that they are not eclipsed in the process of North Atlantic hegemony, the onslaught of technology, globalisation and commercialisation, etc. For reasons indicated above in connection with UNESCO's programme on humankind's Intangible Cultural Heritage, this idea is naïve and in need of serious rethinking: it does not take into account the fundamental shifts in aesthetic and performative format, internal and external power relations, and the attending financial consequences, that are inevitably involved when a historic local or national cultural achievement is subjected to the process of appropriative embedding in a world-wide bureaucratic organisation. Cultural policy risks killing with one hand what it preserves with the other. Therefore my intuitive response to this question would be: world traditions of philosophical thought can very well look after themselves – their intercontinental implementation in the hands of scholars, disciplines, universities, reflects a historical process of emergence, confrontation, and obsolescence that is in the nature of cultural history.

However, we have to admit that under modern conditions of hege-

monic globalisation there are a number of specific threats that scarcely have had parallels in history, and that therefore require more systematic countering than just the historical play of cultural forces.

In the past hundred years, the formal organisation after West European 19th century model (primarily, but far from exclusively, in the form of the bureaucratic modern state) has been incredibly successful in spreading all over the world. It has gained absolute dominance as the standard way of organising religion, politics, the economy and industry, education, media, medicine, sport and recreation; it has thus become the principal social technology for the creation and management of power – including power through self-organisation, but mostly power by organising and controlling others. The formal organisation has managed to eclipse most other pre-existing formats of social organisation. It is increasingly encroaching on intimate domains of the family and the person. In the process, the modes of thought enshrined in and transmitted through these pre-existing local forms of social organisation, risk to disappear without a trace; or if they are more or less salvaged, then most likely only in a form (e.g. scholarly North Atlantic descriptions as in ethnography, or condensed and bowdlerised Internet entries; or as certified UNESCO sites) that entails a radical change of format, content, and power relations in the management of these forms of thought; here UNESCO has a role to play, in identifying suitable contexts for the identification, preservation and management of historic modes of thought.

Largely as a result of the success of the modern formal organisation, most forms of thought in the world today (either practical or theoretical, either informal or academic, either ephemeral or canonised) are implicitly embedded in one converging type of particular context: that of the rationality of the modern formal organisation. Even if the formal organisation has been informally defined so as to adapt to local conditions, its essentially hegemonic, North Atlantic ideal of a particular kind of rationality hovers over all historic local forms.

Now, UNESCO is not an impartial outside observer to these fundamental processes of redefinition and domination. UNESCO is a formal organisation among the others. The processes of redefinition and domination therefore are likely to be part of the UNESCO as a massive, global formal organisation in its own right. Probably it is only through a

process of profound self-critique and intercultural counter-hegemonic reflection that UNESCO can become aware of, and can steer away from, the undesirable implications of its own formal organisation. For UNESCO's role in ''promot[ing] the world traditions of philosophical thought, as well as [in] foster[ing] the research and teaching of 'lesser-known' philosophical traditions?'' this means:

- *in addition to recognised exponents of these traditions, also out-siders, non-academics and non-bureaucrats (e.g. sages, midwives and girl's puberty teachers, shamans, diviners, healers, commu-nity priests, prophets, sacred kings etc.) may be recognised as be-ing among the authentic bearers of vital philosophical traditions of mankind,*
- *forms must be sought to enlist their participation at the global level, in a way tangential to UNESCO, but without encapsulating them, in their turn, in the bureaucratic fold just described and cri-tiqued.*

7. What kind of capacity-building programme would best support philosophical research and scholarship in the Least Developed Countries?

I have already touched on this point in my answer to question 3.

8. How can UNESCO best promote the teaching of Philosophy in the world? Fur-thermore, at what level should the teaching begin?

I have already touched on this point in my answer to question 5.

9. What would be the best way to preserve, teach and promote oral traditions of philosophical wisdom and thought?

I have already touched on this point in my answer to question 6.

10. Many scholars have noted that Philosophy at UNESCO should be the backbone for the work of the entire Organization, as well as for the whole United Nations system. Do you agree, and if yes, how could such an idea be realized?

Yes, I do agree in principle, although the term 'backbone' suggests a centrality that I (contrary to Plato in The Republic*) would not yet entrust philosophers with, considering their endemic inaptness in public affairs, and their endemic lack of experience in striking compromise (without which no human group can function). In the UNESCO context, I would enlist philosophers as advisers, and I would give them the power to ask critical questions and to produce advice and fundamental criticism precisely when not asked to do so. But I have already touched on this point in most of my previous answers.*

11. Please use this section to note other comments, ideas or suggestions that you may have:

The above will do.