


Between corners

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I intend to discuss the role of the teaching of philosophy as part of the task of promoting a critical and transformative education. In this sense, I will understand philosophizing itself as a practice of perceiving oneself in the world and acting, critically and emotionally. I will defend the inseparable character of Philosophy with the Sciences and the Arts. The latter, as promoters of new forms of apprehension, comprehension, and expression of reality, capable of expanding our senses, our imagination and revolving our feelings. Finally, I point to extension activities to honor our commitment to society and to building a better world for all.

Keywords: Philosophy, Art, Teaching, Extension.

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INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of 2014 I was invited to participate in an event, composing a panel on the theme "There are questions that move the world". Perhaps because of a certain philosophical vice, I understood that it was a question, and not a statement, and I immediately translated the theme proposed by the question about the existence or not of fundamental questions. I don't know if that's what my hosts had in mind, but on the other hand, what could they expect from a philosopher? Finally, what else could I do but instigate my listeners to reflect on whether or not there are fundamental questions?

The necessary reinterpretation of the initial question and of the demand addressed to me thus gave rise to two new questions: the first, as I have already said, related to the existence or not of fundamental questions. The second related to the referral of this question to a philosopher. By inviting me to speak on this topic, are you implying that philosophy somehow has to do with the questions that we consider fundamental? Coming from an environment so different from mine, it is almost impossible to imagine what those who invited me really thought and wanted. However, the sea of doubts and questions aroused in me by this enigmatic phrase made me realize that I did think of philosophy as directly related to the inquiry into the existence and identification of fundamental questions.

In this sense, I now had before me two tasks: that of characterizing what could be considered a fundamental question and, at the same time, that of characterizing what in my view would be the task of philosophy itself. Along the way, I came across my vision of what philosophy is and, consequently, my role as a philosopher and professor of philosophy. I now return to the questions of the past, to reflect on the question of the teaching of philosophy and the role of the philosopher or the apprentice of philosophy in society.

PHILOSOPHY AND THE ISSUES THAT MOVE THE WORLD²

Following an analytic tradition, I have always tried to identify philosophy less as a domain of knowledge about specific themes, than as a specific look at the most diverse themes or, simply, at the world. An eminently inquiring look that seeks to identify, in the various discourses, beliefs that are often hidden and camouflaged motivations that make the public debate non-transparent and, at all times, make the pretensions of a rational discourse fail. The task of the philosopher is thus close to that of a detective, that of an authentic psychoanalyst – that is, a psychoanalyst emptied of truths – or of a tireless assembler of puzzles. All of them have before them a plot that cries out for some kind of

² This section and the following are taken from the article *Are Questions Moving the World?*, published in: DIAS, Maria Clara. *What is Philosophy*. Rio de Janeiro: Ed. Pirlampo, 2016.



reconstruction, in order to reveal, to the actors, something about themselves. But if this is what the philosopher does, in what, in fact, could we distinguish him from these other professionals?

This question deserves a careful answer. In the first place, I would like to point out that all the distinctions to be made here are only of degree and cannot be taken as absolute. In other words, there is a limit at which our daily practices bring us closer or further away from the philosopher and I do not think that we can clearly specify what this limit would be. The reason for this is that all the time we are dealing with issues whose degree of importance to our lives and to the lives of others may vary. In this sense, what is revealed to the actors at the end of the task of reconstruction can result both in a simple pleasurable aesthetic contemplation and in a new narrative about one's own existence or in the understanding of the reasons for an era. The proximity, even if contingent, but fundamental, of this existential nucleus will be what I will be adopting here as a criterion to characterize the reconstruction in question as more or less philosophical. To dispel the arrogance of this assertion, I must add that, as a practice, philosophy can be exercised by any of us and in fact is often more exercised outside than inside conventional academic environments. A good philosophical education, however, reinforces a certain critical skepticism about apparent truths and reasons and invites us to question and reflect in a more mature way about the different discourses produced.

In this way, I was necessarily led to give an affirmative answer to both of the questions posed above. Yes, I believe there are fundamental issues, issues that move the world. Yes, I believe that the philosophical task is to point to such questions, or rather, to reveal what fundamentally underlies our everyday discourse, be it a scientific, moral, political or aesthetic discourse. In any of these cases, it is up to the philosopher to analyze what is being said and to inquire why it is being said.

In another article³, I argued that philosophy sought to reveal universal principles. From a less formal and less essentialist point of view, what I mean by universal principles are nothing more than rules with a claim to universal validity, for which, in essence, we only require the widest possible scope. In the face of scientific discourse, for example, we seek to rescue the pretensions of veracity of its statements. The greater the internal coherence of a scientific theory and the number of cases attesting to the adequacy of its principles, the more credible or plausible it will seem to us. In the case of moral discourse, on the other hand, we will say that the claim of validity of a principle or the correctness of an action are directly related to the assent given by all parties involved in the situation in question. Also in this case, the claim to universality raised is rescued by the generality or comprehensiveness of the rule in question.

But if identifying claims of validity, truthfulness or correctness, and indicating the most appropriate way of verifying them is all that we philosophers can do, what would actually be our relation to the so-called fundamental questions? At this point, I am sorry to disappoint lovers of

³ See "What is Philosophy" in: DIAS, Maria Clara. What is Philosophy. Rio de Janeiro: Ed. Pirlampo, 2016.



metaphysics. What I will be considering as fundamental questions are not questions that concern such topics as the existence of God or eternal truths; the immortality of the soul; the essence or nature of human beings. These are questions that can only be answered through the construction of a theory, at the heart of which certain statements will be adopted axiomatically, that is, as unquestionable and structuring starting points, as dogmas or as absolute "truths". My conception of what philosophy is goes precisely against this tendency. Philosophy as an exercise in critical thinking is the antithesis of dogmatism and cannot corroborate it.

Although we are accustomed to referring to philosophical systems such as the philosophy of a particular author—Plato's philosophy, Aristotelian philosophy, Kantian philosophy, etc.—we must be able to distinguish any proposed theory or system from the exercise of philosophizing itself. From Plato, Aristotle and Kant we inherit, above all, the stimulus to doubt, question and reflect exhaustively on the best way to organize our beliefs, our values and the society in which we live. Without appeal to transcendence, philosophy is a constant challenge to exploring the limits of human rationality.

With this caveat, what I understand as fundamental questions are nothing more than questions that refer us to the central aspects of our existence: the type of life we choose to live; the kind of person we want to be; the kind of society we aspire to integrate. To put it this way, such questions are related to our most basic universe of beliefs and desires, and it is therefore impossible to seek a satisfactory answer to them without rummaging through the huge chest in which not only our personal experience, but the residual experience of countless human beings accumulates. After all, we are far from being able to be described as isolated beings, with fixed and solidly demarcated identities. We are a little bit of everything that has been bequeathed to us during our existence, in the most diverse ways, by individuals whose spatio-temporal proximity to ourselves no longer matters. There is no way, for example, not to recognize in my words a certain Aristotelian heritage. But it would be difficult to determine to what extent this noble philosophical legacy can be more or less decisive than the repercussion that the daily experience of social injustices, intolerance and the vanity of human beings has on my choices. The life that I consider worthy of being lived, the kind of existence capable of making me a fulfilled person, and the society to whose ideal I associate my personal self-realization, are the fruit of a human history, with ballasts that far surpass my existence, but whose repercussions resonate in my ears, determining my choices, no longer essentially subjective.

The fundamental questions are those that we arrive at from the agent's point of view, but that we understand best when we begin to investigate the steps that led us to the place from which we speak and the dissonant voices that reverberate in the official discourse. Finally, the fundamental



questions are those with which we seek at the same time to weave the links that make up our own history and those that unite the history of all humanity.

We are beings capable of making choices and, as long as we understand ourselves in this way, we are directly or indirectly committed to fundamental issues, capable of guiding our choices and moving the world. From a formal point of view, we can then say that the fundamental issues are those that guide structuring, core choices for the constitution of each individual's identity, thus having a very general, comprehensive and, why not say, using philosophical jargon, universal character.

These issues are, for example, the philosophical approach to ethics, which, far from prescribing a manual of conduct, seeks to make our choices intelligible in the light of the beliefs and desires we share. Here the philosophical task will once again be to find a standard that best accommodates or unifies our decision-making, ensuring a minimum coherence, adopted as a criterion for attributing rationality to our actions.

However, no matter how much we may choose general, shared criteria, such as the coherence and integrity/unity of the belief and desire system, to ensure the rationality of our deliberations, we will have little or nothing to say, as philosophers, about the content of such mental states. Our beliefs express the way we believe the world to be, and the truth of these beliefs requires empirical verification, inherent in science and not philosophy. Our desires express how we would like the world to behave, which in turn involves a certain knowledge about the world and how we react to it. Only when such desires cease to express mere inclinations, subjective, superficial or superfluous preferences, and begin to indicate structuring choices for our own personal identity, do we then enter, once again, into the realm of a philosophical investigation, namely, ethics.

ETHICS AND REFLECTION ON THE KIND OF PERSON WE WANT TO BE

Ethics is characterized, in a general way, by being the scope of philosophy focused on questions related to what we should do. However, in order to better understand the specificity of this question as a philosophical question, we must first distinguish the different types of answers available. A very common way to identify what we should do is to turn to an authority and let its designs guide our choices. We do this when we are children and simply rely on authority and/or parental love as a sure guide to ensure the success of our endeavors. Many continue to do so throughout their lives, when they choose as the decisive standard of conduct the prescriptions of transcendent entities or idealized entities, to whom they delegate their own decision-making power.

A second prudent way of answering this question is to try to adapt our conduct to the socio-cultural and legal codes of the society to which we belong. It is in this way that we try to respect the schedules established for the social and academic events in which we are engaged and that, when



driving, we try not to drink, obey the signs, etc. Little or no philosophy is needed to know what to do in these cases. In such contexts, all we need, so to speak, is a certain amount of prudence and a fairly immediate desire not to be reprimanded socially or legally.

But as I have warned above, we are working in a terrain where distinctions are only of degree and not absolute. This means that the violation of a rule of social conduct or a legal prescription can receive different weights depending on the role that the conduct in question may come to occupy in the core of issues that directly concern the constitution of our own identity. In other words, I might as well choose to have a coffee in the cafeteria, arriving late to class, without it shaking the image I have of myself. But if I were to make this attitude a routine, I could hardly sustain for long the image, which is quite dear to me, of being a teacher who honours her commitments. In the same way, I can pass a sign, when I have some urgency to get to a place, and at the same time, I realize that such an infraction will not cause harm to other individuals. But if I systematically choose to obey or not the signs, adopting only my personal interests as a guide, I will be becoming a person who disregards the interests of others, including the preferential interests of other individuals, such as the maintenance of their own physical integrity. With this, I will be becoming a harmful being to society. The moment an apparently simple disobedience to a rule of social and/or legal conduct has reached this limit, we will have reached the realm of morality.

The question of what we should do in the realm of morality is the one whose answer leads us to the kind of person we want to be, the kind of life we consider worth living, and the kind of society we want to build. In this way, we cannot infringe on a moral principle that we endorse, without the result of this conduct reflecting on our self-esteem. We are the ones who choose principles and moral values. And we do so not as a response to a heteronomous demand of us, but as the fruit of our reflections on what we think is best and what we aspire to for our own lives. In this sense, when we violate a principle of conduct that we ourselves have chosen and values with which we identify, we are hurting our own integrity and distancing ourselves from who we would like to be. Understood in these terms, morality is not something that oppresses and subjugates us, but the path to our personal self-realization. Returning to the starting point, we could now ask: what question could be, for each of us, more fundamental?

If we agree on this point, we can now proceed to establish the relationship between the core questions of morality and the other questions that philosophy deals with and make up our universe of fundamental questions. Knowing or knowing about reality, reflecting on what we know and what we consider valuable, making decisions based on our interpretation of the facts and the feelings generated by them are activities in which we are always involved, although in some cases in a way that is not very engaged. The fact is that our moral decisions depend on such processes. In this sense, the better, and in a more judicious way, we know reality; the better we identify our values and their



correlation with our universe of beliefs and desires; The more attentive we are to the feelings generated by our different experiences and by their ability to intervene in the course of our actions, the closer we will be to making better decisions.

I suspect, therefore, that both the yearning for empirical knowledge that drives the universe of science and the aspiration for formal rigor that characterizes mathematics and logic reveal, deep down, the need to seize the most appropriate means to be and be better in the world. Without such instruments we would not even be able to make choices, because our field of reflection would be empty, or we would make choices in a totally arbitrary way. These choices, therefore, could not be reported to the agent.

It is here, then, that philosophy places itself at the service of science, analyzing the different forms of knowledge, methods, paradigms and providing the principles of formal ordering of thought or language. It is thus that science, in turn, returns to philosophy, and more particularly to ethics, making possible more appropriate, though not exhaustive, and definitive, responses to our quest for the full realization of a form of human life.

THE TEACHING OF PHILOSOPHY

Assuming now the plausibility of what I have sought to defend as the task of philosophy, how then can we teach philosophy? What would be our task as philosophy teachers?

In the first place, we can say that it is up to the philosophy teacher to contribute so that his or her learner identifies the fundamental questions and seeks to trace a path of answers. These answers, in turn, cannot be definitive, as they will always need to be checked based on the experiences of each one of us and the demands of the society in which we live. The student of philosophy will be, first and foremost, curious, suspicious of certainties and/or absolute truths. As a good curious, he must have all his senses sharpened to grasp the various signals thrown in the course of our sensible experiences. In this way, it will go hand in hand with the investigations and discoveries of science, but, as I will argue below, impregnated by the arts.

The good learner needs to know that there are books of literature that carry in themselves the entire history of humanity. Works of art are relics, not only capable of expanding our world, our universe of meaning, but also our feelings, generating a more charged perception of everything and everyone that is around us. The teaching of philosophy, or education as a whole, cannot disregard this tool. The learning we aspire to must be more than the mastery of a technique. It must contain the artist's mastery and creativity. And for that, we need more than the assimilation of content and the mastery of calculation rules. We need our learners to experience learning as something capable of transforming their way of seeing and being in the world. This involves mastering new forms of expression, capable of highlighting facts, provoking feelings, and transforming our interlocutors.



Our schools need to be focused on new techniques capable of promoting logical reasoning, comprehension of texts and writing. But they must think of the good exercise of all these capacities as necessarily associated with an imaginative reason. As I have tried to argue, from the Perspective of Functioning⁴, the best way to understand what we are is through our characterization as a non-fixed, flexible network of diverse functions that complement each other, generating in us the perception of a unity, to which we then begin to report our own identity. If we are willing to understand ourselves in this way, then the tripartite conception of reason-imagination-emotion will no longer make sense, and the more rational we will be, the more we allow ourselves to be guided by our imagination and our emotions. With this, we need educational tools that promote imagination and provoke emotions. Art, already feared by Plato for its power to persuade and divert the learner from a diet of control over feelings, is, even today, the most effective tool to achieve this goal. Teachers who aspire to learners committed to critical and transformative knowledge about the world need to let themselves be impregnated by art.

With that, I move on to the second fundamental aspect of our activity as philosophy professors, the promotion of the aforementioned critical and transformative understanding of the world.

The philosopher is often seen as a nephew, someone who lives in the world of ideas or an ideal world. From the conception of philosophy that I have just defended, we can conclude that the philosopher who has this profile is, in my opinion, a bad philosopher. Being a philosopher is a life choice. Teaching philosophy is not merely an academic commitment, but a constitutive part of philosophical activity itself. The philosopher seeks at all times to investigate, analyze, weave relationships and draw conclusions. This whole process is driven by an essentially intersubjective discourse. This means that each stage of philosophical reasoning must be able to be intersubjectively understood. Philosophical knowledge is averse to dogmatic obscurantism and the linguistic pedantry of erudite discourse that aims to guarantee the supremacy of "a subject supposed to know" over the others. It is up to the philosopher to clarify and not to conceal. In this way, their activity is always committed to teaching, in the classroom or outside of it. A teaching that does not concern a specific content, but rather the reflective activity itself, and therefore philosophizing.

Philosophizing is, therefore, an activity that cannot be closed in an office or classroom. It is something that overflows any academic activity, reaching the streets and corners of our existence. To teach philosophy is to teach a way of being and understanding oneself in the world. To this end, I would like to emphasize the fundamental role of the once despised extension activities. Through them, we honor our commitment to society and, more than anything, we teach our apprentices to take on a social role, and, with the tools acquired, make this world closer to what we would like it to be.

⁴ On the Functioning Perspective, see: Dias (2015, 2016, 2017, 2019).



The famous tripod of teaching, research and extension is what ensures that universities are a source of transformation, a place for all and for all. The university is not an isolated abstract entity. It is part of society and also involves those who are not in it, but who, in some way, directly or indirectly, are part of the group of individuals who give meaning to its research, to whom its services are intended and who enriches, as diverse voices, all knowledge, all the cultural and artistic forms produced in it. Extension activities are the most forceful way to make our apprentices understand the social function of universities and all those who are in them.

Through thematic exhibitions of films and photographs promoted by the Center for Social Inclusion – a university extension project created and coordinated by me, since 2010, together with UFRJ –, I conquered the adhesion, not only of students, but also of the public outside the university, to causes that are dear to me, such as the consideration of the basic functioning of non-human animals and the environment; recognition of the basic rights of persons deprived of their liberty; the visibility and consideration of LGBTIA+ demands; the defense of the right to national self-determination of the Palestinian people; the defense of the non-criminalization of abortion; the right to euthanasia and the struggle for social justice and land for the countless "Roses" of our country. The dialogue, not only with my students, but with all with whom I shared these moments, enriched my perception of the world and made me a philosopher, a citizen, a better person.

REVIEWING

In this chapter I have sought to answer the question of the teaching of philosophy and the role of the philosopher, the teacher and the learner of philosophy through an investigation of what we can understand as philosophizing itself. With that, I returned to the connection between philosophy and the issues that move us and the world. I have highlighted as fundamental philosophical questions those that refer us to the central aspects of our existence: the kind of life we choose to live; the kind of person we want to be; the kind of society we aspire to integrate. I defined being a philosopher as a choice for a life committed to such questions, and therefore to teaching, not only to reflect on the world, but also to transform it. I have defended the eminently inseparable aspect of the relationship of Philosophy with the Sciences and the Arts: the former as capable of providing the material basis on which philosophical research focuses; the latter, promoting new ways of capturing, understanding and expressing reality, capable of revolving and expanding our senses, our imagination and revolving our feelings. Finally, I pointed to outreach activities as a way to honor our commitment to society and to building a better world for all.



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