

# Philosophy and Modernity<sup>1</sup>

ANDRÉ CLOOTS

CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF LEUVEN

## **Abstract**

What can still be the meaning of philosophy in modernity? The core of modernity is “liberty, equality, and fraternity through rationality.” The last element, viz. rationality, however, implies that modernity is at once a critical analysis of its own core. Reason is intrinsically linked to critique, even to a critique of modernity’s own basics, including its rationality. Therefore, modernity is not something ‘substantial’ but rather a process. Nor is it a matter of reducing everything to the same – the same of reason; but on the contrary, it is a new way of dealing with plurality. This affects also the status of philosophy and its relation to the plurality of other independent forms of insight, like science, art, religion, etc. Philosophy can no

---

<sup>1</sup> A plenary lecture presented to the participants of the National Conference of Philosophical Associations of the Philippines at Saint Louis University, Baguio City, on April 6, 2017.

longer provide the ultimate foundation for all the rest (at the bottom – Descartes) nor can it be any longer its all-integrating absolute knowledge (at the top – Hegel). Lyotard describes philosophy as only a small vessel. But that does not diminish its central role in today's modernity.

**Key words:** *Modernity, Rationality, Enlightenment, Plurality, Philosophy, Autonomy*

What I will do in this paper is what philosophers are supposed to do, and that is to reflect on the different concepts involved in the title of this paper: what does philosophy mean, what does modernity mean, and what are the links between them?

“Philosophy and Modernity” are concepts we are familiar with. Indeed, philosophers are not dealing with odd things, things inaccessible to normal people, as is often suggested. On the contrary, what philosophers are dealing with is what everyone is dealing with. Philosophers are not dealing with strange things, but they are asking strange questions about normal things. Philosophy is asking questions which always lie one step ahead: unusual questions about usual things. What does the word ‘modern’ mean? And what actually is ‘philosophy’? We are supposed to know that, but do we,

really? And finally what could be indicated by the word ‘and’ in the title, “Philosophy *and* Modernity”?

Heidegger says that “it is in the nature of philosophy never to make things easier but only more difficult.”<sup>2</sup> It makes us aware that things are always more complicated than we thought at first sight. The philosopher is not the one who gives the right answers, but he is someone who brings up the right questions so that people can find the answers themselves: the real answers are deep in each of us, but we do not know them yet. The philosopher, Socrates taught us, is like a midwife: he can only help wisdom to get born. Thus, the main contribution of philosophy to modern education might well be the question mark: philosophy should question things that are considered self-evident, not in order to take away all answers, but to make these answers richer, more complex, more related to the larger whole.

My aim here is to stay in this tradition of Socrates and his pupil Plato. The method of Socrates was “maieutics”: to ask questions in order to arrive at deeper insight. These questions are questions about concepts. It is no accident that Plato, being Socrates’s pupil, worked out a whole theory about the world of ideas as the core of his philosophy. It is the core of Socrates’ as well, because that is what the questions are always all about. They are questions about the good: what the word

---

<sup>2</sup> Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. by Ralph Manheim (Garden City: Anchor Books, Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1961), p. 9 – [-Ed.]

‘good’ means, or in other words, what the concept of the good actually means. We might think, Socrates said, that we know that, because we use the word continuously. But when you go deeper into it, such words become more and more problematic. And that is what philosophers are supposed to do: to make clear the complexity of such words and the difficulty to understand them properly. That is also what I want to do today: to put question marks, especially behind the words ‘philosophy’ and ‘modernity.’ And also behind the word ‘and’: what does ‘and’ mean here.

‘Modern’ is also a word we continuously use, but what does it mean? What is behind that word? Of course, to a certain extent we know it, since we are ‘modern’ people ourselves. And yet, what is closest to ourselves, often is the darkest of all. That is what Heidegger also says about the word ‘Being’: we know it, since we ‘are.’ But when asked to explain it, we do not know it at all. To such an extent, Heidegger claims, that we even no longer know what we are asking about when we are asking about ‘Being.’

## **Modernity**

Well to a certain extent, the same is true for the word ‘modern.’ We all live in modern times, even if these are called ‘post-modern.’ And we all consider ourselves modern people, even if we blame modernity for many problems of today. Indeed, even if we blame modernity for many problems, it does not stop us from being modern people. Actually, the

critique of modernity is the essence of modernity itself. And that is what makes modernity so special.

To be ‘modern’ does not mean that one uses technology, like a cell-phone or the internet. That is not what makes us modern. What defines modernity is far more than that, and something quite different. It is in the first place a set of values and of ways of thinking. It has to do—as we all know—with the rights of the individual, the equality of men and women, of freedom of expression and freedom of religion, with objectification and the role of science, with the separation of church and state, etc. So modernity includes valuations, methodologies, principles, which are all bound together in some intricate way. In that sense, modernity is like a web. It is made up of ways of looking at things, of principles, valuations, methodologies, etc., which all hang together in some way, like in a web. And when one touches on one of these, the whole web starts to wiggle.

In order to get some grasp of that web, it might be good to start from the slogan of the French revolution: *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, with one word added, namely: “Liberty, equality, fraternity through rationality.” If one had to summarize what modernity is, this would be a good candidate: This would be an answer to the question as to what modernity is, in one sentence. However, this sentence raises more questions than answers—questions which belong to modernity itself. From the very beginning, modernity has been this critical reflection on what liberty means, or equality, or fraternity for that

matter. Not counting the word ‘rationality,’ in a way modernity has, from its very beginning, been dealing only with that word, one could say. In that sense, modernity is first of all a reflection on itself: a reflection on what modernity itself is or should be, or even ‘could’ be. For that very reason, modernity is not ‘something’; it is a process, an ongoing process of critical reflection on its own basic elements.

1. Take for instance the word ‘liberty.’ Whole books are still being written on what that could mean. What does ‘freedom’ mean, after all? The more we reflect on it, the less we know it. It has something to do with autonomy (from the Greek words ‘autos’ [self] and ‘nomos’ [law]). Which means that the law ultimately does not come from outside (hetero-nomy) but from ourselves. Even when it is said to be heteronomous, i.e. to come from outside (God, nature [natural law] etc.), it is the individual who in his full autonomy, affirms (or denies) that heteronomy. It always is, as Kant said, a self-imposed law, even if it is said to come, as Christians do, from God.

So autonomy means, first of all, the right to decide for ourselves our opinion, our moral stance, our marriage, our religion, our philosophy, and so on—not on the basis of pure arbitrariness, but as Kant would say, on the basis of reasonableness. And as we are basically reasonable beings, the law comes out of ourselves; it comes out of our own reasonableness which is our very being. The law is: be yourself, be what you are, be reasonable.

But autonomy is much broader than that. It does not only describe humans who are free or autonomous (e.g. in choosing his religion, his moral judgment, his or her partner, etc.). No, the autonomy modernity is aiming at is far broader. It is related also to the different realms of culture. That is where the separation of church and state comes in, for instance. Modernity started in philosophy with Descartes who said “I think, therefore I am.” That implies that I am the principle of my thinking, no longer the tradition, or the authorities like in the middle ages, or even the bible. Philosophy goes its own way even in relation to religion. After all, philosophy is not religion, and religion is not philosophy. In science, modernity started with Galileo, who based his claims no longer on the bible but on experience and measurement: When I measure it that way, it is that way. Even if that contradicts the bible. The bible does not give you science. “The bible is not about how the heavens go, but how to go to heaven,” as Cardinal Barronio phrased it. The bible is a religious book, not a scientific one. Step by step, all the different domains of culture claim their own autonomy: philosophy in Descartes, science in Galileo.

Later, politics becomes autonomous. Modern politics is not done on the basis of the bible. We do politics on the basis of political principles and reasons. The same goes for morals—one of the last domains intimately linked to religion, which becomes autonomous. Modern morality is

done on the basis of moral reasoning, not on the basis of religion. So all the different domains become independent and develop their own logic: a political logic, a scientific one, a philosophical one, etc. This is what Max Weber called “the differentiation of culture.” Religion ceases to be the all-encompassing domain. Each domain claims its own autonomy.

This is actually very close to what Jean-Francois Lyotard, the French postmodern philosopher, calls “the end of the great narratives.” What Weber said a hundred years ago about the differentiation of culture resonates again, more than a century later, in Lyotard. In the meantime, philosophy had claimed the all-encompassing position (just think of Hegel) taking it over from religion. It is philosophy which, not taking a particular position but that of ‘reason itself,’ claims to be above all the other domains, claiming to encompass and to integrate them all. Philosophy, being not limited to a specific form of reason, like science, art, religion etc., claimed to be the standpoint of reason itself. What becomes clear, at the end of modernity, is that reason also cannot take that position (the position religion used to occupy). And that is what “the end of the great narratives” is all about. I will come back to that later.

2. The second element is equality, which is also a very difficult and complex term. All humans are equal, but of course no one is identical to another. All human beings are



equal, and yet all humans are different. So equality does not mean identity. It means ‘of equal value’ (and even that is ambiguous). The reformation (Luther, Calvin, etc.) stressed that priests are not intrinsically higher than the lay person. No calling is intrinsically higher than another. Labor and marriage are also a ‘calling.’ In society, equality means that no one is intrinsically higher or lower than another: no caste, no nobility. One is not more ‘reverend’ than another. That step to equality is especially relevant in relation to those who are usually excluded, and in that sense equality stops exclusion—women, gay people, pagans, unbelievers, etc.

But that equality goes much further. It plays at all levels. For instance at the level of the planets: there are no higher planets and no lower ones, as in the Middle Ages. When Galileo directs his telescope to the moon, he does away with the medieval separation between the sub-lunar world and supra-lunar world, between earth and heaven. Basically there is no intrinsic difference, and certainly no higher and lower.

The same is true for languages, sciences, places, times, etc. And eventually (which is more a problem of today) also for religions. Religions are not higher or lower in themselves; they only are higher or lower in the eyes of the believers. And here autonomy comes in again: each of us chooses which religion is higher for us, but that is our

autonomous decision. It does not follow out of ‘the nature of things,’ even if it might look that way for the believer.

That is what is called ‘de-hierarchisation,’ a basic principle of modernity: the ‘archai’ [principles] of things are no longer ‘hieros’ [sacred]. They are no longer higher or lower because God decides it or because it follows from ‘nature.’ All ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ designations are human decisions. This does not mean however that there are no longer hierarchies. There are still hierarchies, more than ever, but they are ‘autonomously’ put that way. They are installed by humans, not by God or nature.

That does not mean that for the individual there are no higher or lower things in themselves. There are higher moral norms and lower ones, and one religion is for us higher than another, otherwise it would not be our religion. But when put this way, it becomes clear how the process of de-hierarchisation affects our times more than ever. How to decide about higher and lower in morals, in religion, in politics, becomes more and more difficult because they are always the human being’s (auto-nomous) decisions. Even when he or she says that it comes from God, it is still a *he* or a *she* who says that it comes from God. But the other person also has the right to claim that his or her vision is higher. That means that there are no longer claims of pure absoluteness. We always have to ‘relativize’ each claim to absoluteness: all absoluteness is relative. Reason relates our absoluteness to the claims of

the other, and in that sense reason relates—and by the same token, it relativizes. We have to become, as Marcel Gauchet puts it, metaphysically democratic.

By saying this, I have already introduced the other elements in our definition of modernity. In the first place the role of reason. But before I come to that, also the other element, viz. fraternity must be introduced, since what I said about becoming ‘metaphysically democratic’ touches first of all upon that third element of modernity, viz. fraternity.

3. The meaning of fraternity is often misunderstood. One often hears the complaint that modernity is individualistic and that there is not much fraternity. That might be true, but that is beside the question. To put it that way is to misunderstand the meaning of fraternity. Fraternity has nothing to do with love. Rather it is related to those people we do not love at all, and even to those we hate. We should treat even these people with dignity and respect. So fraternity has first of all to do with respect, and respect goes beyond tolerance. Tolerance means to tolerate, but to respect means more: you have to recognize the value of other cultures, of other religions, of other traditions, etc. Fraternity is actually referring to the whole sphere of justice, and justice has to do first of all with a ‘just’ treatment backed by a whole juridical system. Justice means respecting the basic rights of others because they too (other cultures, other religions) have value in themselves.

That respect (or justice) is expressed in different ways. It is first expressed in the word ‘recognition’—another central word today. This recognition is not based on someone’s hierarchical place, but on his or her having value and on his or her being ‘equal’ to you. As such, fraternity is based on equality: the equality of each person, each culture, each religion, etc.

The respect for that equality is expressed, secondly, in the rule of law which guarantees a minimum of recognition to all, independent from the will of the king, of the majority of people, or whatever. And thirdly, this respect is expressed in the obligatory mutual support: i.e. in the welfare state, in Obama care, in social security systems to which everyone has to contribute. Fraternity is not on the level of the will but on the level of obligation. It is one’s duty to pay taxes, or respect another religion.

And finally, that respect or that justice must be done to the other, is expressed and summarized in the universality of human rights. Fraternity has to do first of all with the rights of the other and the obligation to respect them, even if you do not like that other at all. In that sense these human rights are said to be basic in modernity, because they encompass all the basic elements, not only for ourselves, but as much for the other (in that sense they are not only rights, but also obligations). They encompass the autonomy of both me and the other, our equality, and our being a ‘frater’ (a brother). In that sense, human rights

refer not only to me (for whom they are rights) but also to the other (for whom they are rights as well, and thus for me obligations to respect).

For modernity, these human rights function in a double way. They function as something which can be enforced, but at the same time for a modern society they function as an appeal, as an ideal. In other words, they function in a modern society both as the minimum (the minimum of rights) and as the maximum: the full deployment of men and women in society. But here again, these human rights are extremely important but at the same time they contain as many problems as they contain answers: what does the freedom of expression, or the freedom of religion mean? How far do they go? How do we harmonize them? When you think of Charlie Hebdo and the cartoons against Mohammed: where does the freedom of expression end and where does the freedom of religion begin? Here again we see how modernity is a very complex phenomenon. The principles seem to be clear, but they are a nest of confusion. The fact that the Supreme Courts, in the US, in Europe, in the Philippines, and everywhere have so much work to do, is the symptom of that.

4. The fourth, and most difficult, element to define when it comes to modernity is rationality. We continuously use that word (certainly philosophers do) but we know less than ever what it means. Why do we call certain things or positions ‘reasonable’? Is it because we can deduce

them? Most of the things we call reasonable are not deducible. This process of deduction is different from the question of from what they would be deducible. For instance the separation of church and state, or of politics and religion: how would you be able to come to an answer to that just by a logical deduction?

Religion and politics were always intertwined, from the very beginning of mankind, up to today (just look to the Tea Party in the US, or to the Philippines for that matter). Or take the equality of men and women as it is understood in modernity: even in modernity up till now, this equally was not evident at all and not logically deducible.

Women's rights are a very recent topic all over the globe. So many things we take for granted as reasonable today were not so evident in the past, even for the greatest minds. Plato for instance had slaves and saw no problem in it, just like Socrates. Even Saint Paul did not advocate the abolition of slavery. So it is not a matter of pure logic nor is it a matter of thinking better than before. It is a matter of thinking differently. And that means that it is a matter of 'reason' in a very complicated way.

It is a matter not of common sense either, as people often say.<sup>3</sup> What used to be common-sense can change

---

<sup>3</sup> Descartes said already that common sense is a tricky thing: there is one thing he said which is evenly or justly distributed, that is common sense: everyone is of the opinion that he has enough of it. The others don't, but I have common sense.

over the years, and can become quite wrong, as the mistaken common-sense of having slaves for over the centuries testifies. Or maybe we should put it differently: what we call common sense is often what we have come to see as reasonable throughout the ages. And when that ‘reasonableness’ changes, also common sense changes.

Yet, reason is at the heart of modernity: reason is the *core of reality* (“things are reasonably together”) as well as the *key to reality*. When a new unknown disease comes up, there is only one way to deal with it for modern people, and that is through rationality and scientific research. Reason is the last criterion, even in relation to religions: we no longer accept religions which are against all reason.

In that sense reason is related to what Max Weber called “the disenchantment of the world,” which literally means that there are no longer magic influences, not by man on God (man cannot influence the deities by magic rites or formulas) nor by God on man: everything happens the way it does not by arbitrary decrees of the deities but by ‘reasonable’ laws—eventually fully accessible only to reason.

Thereby the world becomes autonomous and isomorphic; there are no two levels of causation, a natural one and a supernatural one. Eventually disenchantment is the end of a two worlds concept, with a physical world on the one hand, and a supernatural on the other. Disenchantment means that there is only one world, our

world. Does that mean that only the world of science is left? Is that the only ‘reasonable’ world? Or is there only the philosophical world? Is philosophical reason in the end the only valid reason? I will come to that later, but for now I have been stressing that reason is more than logical deduction. What we find reasonable, we do not find because we have been able to ‘prove’ it. In this regard it might be relevant to make a distinction between reason and rationality, where rationality could refer more to logical deduction, while ‘reasonableness’ is broader: it is the ability to ‘reason’—taken here as a verb in the first place. This entails a willingness and the ability to give reasons and thus to argue. It is that kind of reasonableness that is required for instance in a modern democratic process of decision-making. Or in morals, for that matter. But I will go deeper into rationality later on. First I will move to a next step.

## **Enlightenment and Romanticism**

Although the basics of modernity seem to be clear (“liberty, equality, fraternity through rationality”), they contain as much problems as answers, such as how to give content to liberty (autonomy), equality (equality in what regard?), fraternity (what is justice?), and certainly also to reason.

We often equate modernity with enlightenment, but enlightenment is only one way of giving content to these ideals of modernity, even if it is the first way. In the beginning, modernity and enlightenment were the same (as in Descartes, Spinoza, etc.). But slowly, the reaction started,



culminating in what we now call Romanticism. The Romantic reaction is not a reaction against modernity but against enlightenment and the enlightenment concepts of liberty, equality, fraternity, and rationality. In the romantic reaction (which officially started around 1790 and already influenced Kant and Hegel, but actually had its roots already much earlier), all of these elements get a completely new twist.

Take first of all liberty or autonomy. In the enlightenment version it is first of all the individual freedom that matters, independent of others—of culture, of tradition, and even of the world outside. Think for instance of Descartes: his subject is a subject which in principle could exist completely on its own. But such a subject is a construction. The romantics will stress that we are only what and who we are in relation: in relation to others, to our traditions, our language, our culture. Each subject is an embedded subject, not an atomic one.

The same goes for equality. In the enlightenment view man is first of all an individual rational subject and it is only as such that we are all equal. To a large extent, we are even identical: as Kant presupposes we all have the same rational apparatus. But romanticism will stress that we are first of all radically different, not only as individual beings, but also as embedded beings. First of all, romanticism will come up with the idea of authenticity. We are all individual selves, different from others, with each of us our own individual depth. And that difference has to do with our specific embeddedness. We have all different cultures, different languages, different

religions, and different ways of thinking. I am not just a rational subject and as such equal to you. I have a different soul and a different identity. I am also what I am born with, what I believe, what I feel and fear. The rising nationalism of today is one of the outcomes of these insights.

This also has immediate consequences on the concept of fraternity. Where fraternity means respect and recognition of each one's identity, the question today is what this identity consists in. From the romantic point of view it is not only a matter of recognizing identity, but first of all a recognition of difference. You can think here of the hot discussions on the headscarf. From the enlightenment perspective this is something particular and does not deserve recognition. From the romantic perspective, it is part of my identity (identity-through-difference) and needs recognition. Here one sees very clearly that what is important are not only liberty, equality, fraternity, and rationality, but also and even more how these are conceived.

Actually, romanticism was a reaction to the unilateral understanding of these concepts, stressing the need to broaden them. Instead of the disembedded subject and the disengaged subject of enlightenment (with the scientist as model), romanticism stresses embeddedness and engagement. Where enlightenment separates facts and values, romanticism stresses their connectedness—just like it stresses the connectedness of reason and emotion, of philosophy and literature, of our thinking and our cultural background, and so on. That is one of the reasons I made a distinction earlier

between rationality and reasonableness. Rationality would fit better with the enlightenment, while reasonableness fits better with the romantic critique.

### **Philosophy and Modernity**

Behind this distinction between enlightenment and romanticism is a wholly different concept of being human, and a wholly different concept of reality.

Philosophy cannot simply provide the ‘right’ concept of man or the right concept of the world or the right morals: these actually do not exist as such. And even if they would, we do not have them. In the garden of Eden, man was forbidden to eat from only one tree: the tree of knowledge, knowledge first of all of good and evil. That knowledge we will never have. It will remain a lifelong search, forever. But what we do have in philosophy is critical analysis. Philosophy lives from critique, radical critique: not in the negative sense of rejection, but in the original sense of the Greek word *krinein*: to judge, to assess, to weigh and to balance, and see what it is worth—through reasonable argument.

But at the same time, philosophy is also looking in depth. We try to capture, judge, and assess our different presuppositions in the depth of our differences. Those differences include those which we are conscious of, but above all those of which we are less conscious but which come into play in our consciousness nevertheless. I do think that the task of philosophy is also, and maybe even in the first place, a search for presuppositions. We search for not only

our individual or cultural presuppositions, but also what we have in the back of our mind when we talk about modernity. What kind of modernity do we presuppose, what kind of humans? What is our concept of subjectivity or of the world? These are today the basic issues that determine our discourse. In that sense, philosophy is at the heart of the question of what modernity is.

Philosophy certainly has changed over the centuries, not only in relation to the Middle Ages by gaining its autonomy, but also within modernity. The distinction between religion and philosophy certainly has become deeper in modernity than in the Middle Ages due to the differentiation Weber was talking about. I have the impression that for Filipino students going to Europe, this distinction is one of the most radical experiences. The distinction is far greater in Western Europe than it is in the Philippines, and it is still a lot greater in some of the great universities in the United States of America.

But even in an autonomous 'modern' philosophy, the role of reason is not univocal. Modernity is not a monolithic thing. It is not a substance, a thing, but an ongoing process. Until today, it is a process of reflection and self-reflection. Indeed, modernity is based on rationality, but rationality or better, reasonableness, is a complex thing. This on-going process of reasonableness has a very special status compared for instance to emotion, or revelation, or tradition, or intuition. Emotion cannot put limits to itself, nor can revelation. Only reason can see the limits of emotion and of revelation or intuition and see that the latter do not

encompass everything. In addition, reason can also put limits to itself: to think reasonably implies to think reasonably about reason itself: what it means, what its limitations are, and its possibilities. Reason is the only faculty which not only can critically analyze the other faculties and limit them, but also critically analyze and put limits to itself. What is so special about modernity is this process of critique, and above all, self-critique: the continuous reflection on reason by reason itself. That is actually what happened in romanticism. In the end, it was a reflection on reason. And that happened throughout modernity, until today. Post-modernism, for instance, is such a critique of reason by reason itself—and actually the whole of contemporary philosophy, from Kierkegaard to Heidegger, and from Wittgenstein to Rawls.

All this means that modernity as it is now, is no longer the same as enlightenment. The meaning of reasonableness today is enlightenment gone through that romantic reaction (and many other reactions) and thereby qualified. Modernity is no longer what it was at the time of Descartes or Hume, or even of Kant and Hegel for that matter. Centuries of reflection have come after, and they all qualified what modernity means today, in our so-called ‘postmodern’ or late-modern times.

And thus it also qualified philosophy. It can no longer mean what it meant for Descartes: the absolute foundation (*fundamentum inconcussum*). This has shown to be an impossible dream: the dream to replace the absolute certainty of religion by the absolute certainty of reason. Reason does not provide us an absolute foundation. Hegel tried to save the absolute

position of reason by putting reason not underneath but above everything, as the all-encompassing ‘absolute spirit.’ But even that showed itself to be impossible. Philosophy cannot encompass it all: science, religion, art, etc. They go their own way, and philosophy is left apparently as just one domain among all the others. We have to recognize that, more than ever, there are many approaches to reality, not just the philosophical one, and that the philosophical one no longer has a kind of a privileged position, as it had in Descartes or in Kant or Hegel. Yet, philosophy still has some special position. It has its own way of dealing with plurality.

Actually, modernity is first of all the recognition of plurality and the search for a means to deal with that: a plurality of autonomous approaches to reality, like science, religion, philosophy, art, opinions, traditions, languages, etc. Modernity started with plurality and it ends with it. It started when the unity of a Christian culture was torn apart during the religious wars in Europe. That was the time that modernity started. It tried to develop an answer religion no longer could give: how to deal with that plurality. At the end of modernity, in our late-modern times, plurality is the word of the day. Modernity is an attempt to develop a way to deal with plurality through the way of reason, the way of critical analysis and of reasonable discourse. In the meantime we are far from the answers given at the beginning of modernity by Descartes and others.

What we have learned, philosophers and religious people alike, but also scientists and artists, is that there are two

positions which we cannot occupy: we do not have the absolute standpoint nor do we have no standpoint at all. We always have one particular standpoint, including the philosopher.

For the same reason science is not the absolute standpoint either, nor is it a standpointless standpoint. Even science looks through specific glasses, from a certain perspective, using a specific method, asking specific questions and looking for well-defined kinds of answers. No matter how important science might be, it is a human enterprise, tentative, bound to historic conditions and concepts, and looking from a certain perspective—a perspective we can no longer escape, it is true, but a specific perspective nevertheless. This also means that it cannot be taken to be the only and final narrative about humans and the world.

But this is true for all other domains as well, not only for science. It is true also for art, and even for religion. It is often said that science reduces things, and that is true. Indeed, science reduces, but that is not only its weakness, it is also its strength. By looking from a very specific standpoint, asking very specific questions, and looking for very well-defined kinds of answers (measurable ones for instance), it can see what otherwise cannot be seen. It always has certain glasses on. This is true also for all the other domains, including religion. They all look through certain lenses as well. They all build on experience, just like science. But at the same time, they also create their own experience and that is exactly what glasses do: they make us see things we otherwise cannot see.

That is why within modernity, and even within an enchanted world, there can and should still be room for enchantment. However, in order to see it, one does need a specific kind of glasses and a specific language: the language of narratives, holy texts and symbols, the language of rites and traditions. They too tell us something about humans and the world and even about our disenchanted world. Only with glasses fathoming the depth in things can one see depth, as the American philosopher Alfred North Whitehead says, “a one-eyed reason is deficient in the vision of depth.” With one eye you hardly see depth. That is why even in modernity there can perfectly be and should be room for something like religion, just like for art or poetry for that matter. Science tries to see less in things (all are merely cells and atoms), religion tries to see more in them (something divine). And each of these perspectives reveals their own truth about what it means to be human and about the meaning of the world.

Modernity is thus not simply the leveling down of everything or the great narrative of Reason, with a capital R, dominating all other narratives as is sometimes suggested. This certainly is not the modernity we are living in today. Modernity as it has evolved throughout the centuries, continuously reflecting on itself, is not leading to an overpowering unity but is rather a (new) way of dealing with the always-growing plurality, a plurality that is more radical than ever.

We cannot deny plurality throughout history, but that plurality was not as radical as it is now. Reality was looked at



from one perspective, our own, and what did not fit in it, was wrong, inferior, etc. That has been so throughout history, for religions, for traditions and cultures, etc. But now, in the time of modernity, with its liberty, equality and fraternity, this can no longer be the position: we have to recognize the value of other religions, other cultures, other opinions, etc. In that sense, modernity is far more demanding than any other culture: our perspective is only one perspective and a particular one. It can no longer be the only access to reality. That is what is meant by radical plurality. And then the question is: how do we deal with that? How do we deal with otherness, without either rejecting it or reducing it to the same?

We cannot reduce everything to its reasonable core. That is not a recognition of plurality. It is first to let things (or religions, cultures, or whatever) reveal themselves, in their entirety. Yet, as a philosopher we approach it through reason: a hermeneutical reason nowadays, in search not of foundation but of understanding, in search of the meaning and the webs of meaning expressed in it. Yet, in the end reason remains the last judge: what goes against all reason is unacceptable. That remains. In that sense modernity is turning the mediaeval principle about the relation between religion and philosophy upside down: for the Middle Ages—as for Aquinas for instance—reason should be able to go its own way, except that it cannot contradict the bible. Now it is the opposite: religions can go their own way, except that they cannot contradict reason.

The final place of reason is and remains at the heart of modernity. Reason is also at the heart of philosophy. For that very reason, philosophy is pivotal for modernity. Not that philosophy can take the position of ‘reason itself’ as we have seen. Reason, and the role of philosophy for that matter, can no longer be what people like Descartes or Hegel conceived it to be. Step by step, reason has learned that it is not everything and that it cannot do everything. Not everything comes out of reason. To the contrary, not very much comes out of reason. The real answers are given elsewhere. Yet reason remains the last criterion to judge and assess (*krinein*) all the other narratives, even if first of all negatively: what is really unreasonable cannot be accepted. In other words, reason is not the only word, but it does have the final word.

That is true also today. More than ever are we confronted with questions such as: how shall we deal with both science and religion for instance, or with reason and emotion or intuition, how do we deal with a multitude of perspectives, standpoints, and registers. That was the primordial question of modernity from the very beginning and it still is. Modern politics is characterized since Montesquieu by the division of power: legislative power, executive power, juridical power. “Power should limit power” as Montesquieu said. In a modern democracy, the law should limit the politician. Something similar is true for all modern ways of thinking and for all modern ways of dealing with different forms of truth: ‘truth should limit truth.’

What then about philosophy? What is its place in all that, if it can no longer be the foundation or the integration of all, as in Descartes or Hegel? Is it just a domain alongside the other ones? Yes and no. Philosophy is, as Jean-Francois Lyotard the French postmodern philosopher says, not even a domain in itself. But it does have a very special status. Lyotard compares our culture to an archipelago of different islands (you can think of the Philippines if you want), islands like science, art, religion, etc. Philosophy, Lyotard says, is not an island in itself. It does not occupy a specific domain nor does it have a specific method. But that exactly makes it so specific. Philosophy is like a small vessel, he says, sailing from one island to the other. The philosopher is at home nowhere, and yet everywhere, over the whole ocean. He goes ashore at all the islands but can leave them as well, showing how each island is but an island.

In that sense, philosophy guards us against two things: it guards us against both narrow-mindedness and arrogance. It safeguards from the narrow-mindedness of locking oneself up in one's own limited domain and of looking only through one's own limited glasses. It keeps thought directed towards the whole and open for what is behind, beyond, or aside. On the other hand, philosophy guards against all claims to absoluteness, whether they come from religion, science, art, or economy, from one's own culture or from another one. To philosophize, Gadamer seems to have said once, is to realize that the other might also be right.

Why do we think the way we think today? And why do other people, other cultures, other philosophies, or other religions think differently? This is not because we can think better. In all cultures, there are clever people, not only in our own. We do not think better, we think differently—based on other presuppositions, coming from different backgrounds. To do philosophy is to try to become aware, again and again, of our presuppositions and thus of the glasses through which we are looking. No one can claim to have no perspective and to have no glasses on. Without glasses (i.e. without presuppositions) one cannot see, as Gadamer has made clear, or Popper for that matter when it comes to science. According to Popper, “Our intellect does not draw its laws from nature, but tries—with varying degrees of success—to impose upon nature laws which it freely invents.”<sup>4</sup> It is our questions which make nature speak. But they also determine what nature can answer and how it can answer. Without glasses one cannot see, and without presuppositions one cannot think, since consciousness exactly means to select and to organize. But once we are aware of the fact that we are wearing glasses, we are already to some extent transcending them. It certainly is the first step to wisdom—something philosophy, according to its very name, is looking after.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1996), p. 191. [-Ed.]

<sup>5</sup> Although it is important to keep in mind that philosophy is looking for a *certain kind* of wisdom: wisdom-through-reason. It is not the wisdom of the guru, nor that of the old wise man, nor that of the priest or the monk for that matter. It is not that kind of wisdom philosophy is after: it is only after that wisdom which

To do philosophy is not just to try to know or to memorize what all these strange philosophers have been claiming over the centuries. The first thing is to know *why* they proclaim these often strange things: from what perspective, from what way of questioning, or from what kind of problematic. And above all: with what arguments? Then it will soon become clear that these strange claims are far less strange than they appeared at first sight. Soon our spontaneous criticism will lose their pertinence. Not that we have the right answers all of a sudden. Philosophy does not offer many answers, but mainly questions. And each answer is questioned again right away. But in the meantime, insight grows. Even when philosophy does not give answers, it yields insight. Through philosophy, one starts to see the complexity of things, their different aspects and the different possible approaches to them. Philosophy, to repeat Heidegger, is not there to make things easy, it is there to make things difficult. It makes us look in the plural and see the complexity. And that is what philosophy is all about. It is the beginning of the kind of wisdom philosophy is looking for.

---

can be based on reasonable argument. Where reason ends, philosophy ends. Of course one can claim that there is more than reason, but even for that reasons have to be provided in order for this to be a philosophical statement.