

Introduction

The Salvific Dimension of Thought

WHEN WE ASCEND TO high peaks, we become inevitably seized by the impression that it is not possible to climb to still more prominent heights, and even less to discover a new peak with passion and tenacity, so that it is vain to aspire to crown a superior vertex. Everything has been already conquered; everything has been unveiled; there is nothing to elucidate. What is left is to indulge ourselves in our conquest, to contemplate the vast landscape that others have opened for us. We thus feel tempted to avoid any responsibility to move forward, to promote life and imagination, to fight, to engage in a new search which may extend the horizons of life and thought: what is left is to delight ourselves in our own complacency.

An exhausted age must learn to fascinate itself and to become imbued in the surprise of the unusual, the verve of the gift of life. It is true that we do not know the ultimate root that binds us to this space and this time, but we treasure a force that enables us to continue to promote the power of being, to push history forward: that is, to create. An emaciated era is left to concentrate all the strength of its intellect and will, all the inspiring nutrient irradiated by science, technology, the humanities, art, institutions, and, moreover, the inscrutability of each individual, in order to enjoy the sense of wonder, and to succumb to enthusiasm. This may give us unto a quest that perhaps lacks a definite term, but nonetheless reveals our deep purpose: to place us on the cusp of the creative energies of life; this entails the responsibility to expand its scope, to find a “further,” an “*ulterior*,” a “*plus*” to that which is already given. However, we shall not conceive of this goal as a final truth that will resist the passage of time and the trial of the future, but as a pure intuition, as an inexhaustible calling, as a perpetual source of inspiration.

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There is something in thought that is salvific, as if the epiphany of the redemption longed-for by humanity appears in the realm of philosophy.

The vocation of philosophy is not the theoretical contemplation of ideas, or the attempt at reaching ecstasy before the empyreal beauty of concepts, or the mere proposal of a critical analysis of the world that surrounds us. These indeed are moments of philosophical thinking, which epitomizes thinking itself, since it approaches knowledge from an integrating, ultimate perspective that is not susceptible to being satisfied by means of a partial insight. Instead, it intends to reach, even though asymptotically, a *fundamentum*, a “foundation.” Philosophical thinking, moreover, has a higher ambition: that is, it is destined to save humanity.

To “save” means to set a different scenario, in which negativity, which has become inexorable, posing a burden which is impossible to carry any more, may be overcome by a statement, by a word, by a *positivitas*, by a thought in which the previous negativity does not triumph but is removed and annihilated. Only thought can create such a new *positivitas*; thought alone envisions the revocation of this negativity, so ineluctably powerful that it claims for itself the whole sphere of reality.

When negativity is so intense that it is confused with reality, and when human aspirations are humiliated by violent reality that dashes every dream and confines thought to a subsidiary task (the methodical dimension without the ethical scope),¹ the necessity of salvation emerges as urgently as ever.

We all seek salvation. We all become prisoners of negativity. Humanity wants to be saved: to be saved by the arts, by science, by technology, by politics. We want to overcome the untenable power of negativity that so often enslaves us. But, where is the saviour to be found, and where is the source of salvation?

Salvation may only come from the infinite springs of the word. The word saves us: the word of science, the word manifested in art, the word of a society which promises something for itself . . . Humanity understands itself through language: human beings use words in order to know each other and to cooperate in the edification of something that may transcend them. The word invites us, and in fact leads us to transcendence. This is salvation: to inaugurate a new world in which the former negativity may be overcome. Those religions that offer salvation

1. T. S. Eliot wrote, prophetically, in *Choruses from the Rock* (1934): “Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?”

do so through the word: whoever listens to their doctrine drinks the water of life, because the word is life.

And the word becomes philosophy when it thinks about the world, history, and the human being. It becomes philosophy when it no longer remains in the realm of the analysis of reality, but it dares to seek to understand, in search of a meaning which may help us gain knowledge of ourselves, freedom, and possibilities of action and thought.

Philosophy is called to save humanity, inasmuch as it cannot escape the responsibility that belongs to its deepest essence: to reach the core of things. It is not for philosophy to stay on the surface, but to be immersed into the complexity of the world, to let reality speak to us, discovering the word that remains unknown and hidden in the midst of an apparent lack of meaning. Philosophy is therefore humanization, and humanization is the salvation of humanity.

The philosophical experience provides a permanent consolation through the power of thought to create and transform. Humanity can be relieved from its languid sadness by means of reading the great works of philosophy and feeling itself part of such an intellectual adventure. The withered melancholy provoked by the impending fate of a lethal nothingness ascends to the vivid and passionate enthusiasm for knowledge and for the salvific energy of thought, in which the world is not tyrant's fixed dominion, but humanity's home to improve.

The salvation that flows from philosophy perpetually faces the insurmountable barrier of death. Philosophy can teach us to stand before death with dignity, to be aware of the fact that the scope of humanity is broader than that of the individual, for humanity survives in its members, and that only from death does life renew itself. In truth, philosophy offers no comforting answer to the persistent problem of our meaning as individuals: why, with the capability of posing such compelling questions about the sense of our existence, we have to return to the dust we come from, in which consciousness will vanish into the unconscious? Why must we die?

For this grave matter, religions shall outlive philosophy. Philosophy does not save us from death, but it saves us from life. It helps us guide our life. We philosophize because we hope to obtain answers, not merely to ponder, but rather to know. We philosophize to understand and moreover, to redeem a humanity torn by its lack of meaning: we philosophize in order to find a meaning, and, if we fail, we philosophize to build a meaning. Once we open the gates of philosophy, and we penetrate its world of concepts, categories, streams of thoughts and theories, we unfold the veil

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of salvation. By participating in this fascinating struggle for understanding, we redeem ourselves, and redemption is the salvation that cleanses the wounds of humanity. By collaborating in the effort to comprehend made by our fellow human beings throughout the centuries, we discover ourselves. We achieve salvation because we learn to understand ourselves as beings in search of meaning.

We have inherited a longing for understanding present, in its highest expression, in philosophy. Through philosophizing, humanity has saved itself. It has not been captured by the obvious, and it has been able to overcome the frontiers of its *hic et nunc*, ascending into the kingdom of ends. Through philosophizing, humanity has vehemently shown that it cannot be satisfied by the world alone, but it needs to create a world beyond all others, integrated by the arts and the sciences, but which aspires to an ultimate foundation, to a *fundamentum*, to the deepest possible understanding.

By philosophizing, we have saved ourselves, and we are still doing so. Humanity will only die once it ceases to philosophize, once what is transient prevails, and once it becomes enslaved by that which does not seek to understand but limits itself to provide a mere description of the surrounding reality.

I think that there is an intellectual, philosophical salvation for humanity: we just need to follow the luminous path of centuries of ideas, doubts, questions, and challenges of philosophical thinking. This shows, as in an unrestricted divine epiphany, that humanity needs to understand if it wants to set the conditions to liberate itself from the oppressive power of negativity, from a lack of hope that has surpassed the bleak threshold beyond which we can no longer resist.