

## Imperfection and perfection in culture, science, art, research

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### Culture unites

“Culture unites” may refer to a collective call in times of need: but, in truth, it underlines the initiative of a project whose aims and objectives are to protect and enhance the immense and prestigious heritage in Italy and in other countries.

Ours is a voice that urges commitment to the value of culture as a means for making informed, reasoned and reasonable choices, and also builders of the future for the new generations in this time of ‘educational emergency’. And thinking, naturally, about education not only in terms of teaching, but as a form of training that is acquired within a context of experience and competence through work and life, in view of a ‘human flourishing’ of the person considered as an individual and as the living cell in a community.

We often talk about beauty and, in this regard, it would be desirable to think and act so that beauty is not separated from the truth, as the classical doctrine of the transcendentals of being teaches us: the only response to widespread ignorance, neglect and indifference is represented in fact, in training, understood as education and competence, and in culture, understood as personal knowledge combined with wisdom. Culture is a value to be promoted and strengthened, an integration between different identities, a bridge that unites individuals, communities, countries and, as such, an extraordinary stimulus for the economy and for international relations.

And, underlining that Italy has the greatest concentration of cultural heritage in the world and that culture is not a luxury asset, it represents a long-term investment that creates wealth, authentic sustainability and value: indeed, by investing in education and training, protection and enhancement, culture generates positive returns aimed at preserving the cultural assets themselves, with equally significant repercussions from a social and economic point of view for the same territory in which they are located.

Art, understood in all its forms, opens up to a wider perspective, brings beauty to places of marginalization and suffering, provides a means for personal and collective benefit and helps to envisage a future without conflict or war, which we owe to future generations.

This is why it is important and necessary to transform the territory, making the cultural peripheries more dynamic and fully taking up the challenges that come from ‘urban cultures’ - as Pope Francis invites us to do in numbers 71-75 of the *Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium* – “Cities are multicultural; in the larger cities, a connective network is found in which groups of people share a common imagination and dreams about life, and new human interactions arise, new cultures, invisible cities. Various sub-

cultures exist side by side, and often practise segregation and violence. [...] On the one hand, there are people who have the means needed to develop their personal and family lives, but there are also many 'non-citizens', 'half citizens' and 'urban remnants'. Cities create a sort of permanent ambivalence because, while they offer their residents countless possibilities, they also present many people with any number of obstacles to the full development of their lives" (n. 74).

We are basically called upon to participate in developing a project of cities and communities "on a human scale", and this is undoubtedly a historic moment in which concrete actions are needed when there is no vision of the future and a continuing stagnant present.

Culture is a living organism that must be nourished with conviction, with continuity, and with wisdom.

### **For a technology that is more human and a way of thinking that is more critical**

It is indisputable that in the cultural sphere this conviction, continuity and wisdom must proceed in the various branches of science and art, by taking into account the importance of prevailing and advanced technology and, at the same time, reconciling those degrees of imperfection and / or perfection to be corrected together with the critical thinking of the operators and users.

In this regard, the intuition of the English writer and philosopher Aldous Huxley, author of a dystopian narrative in which he describes a near future that presents negative social and technological situations and developments, is extremely relevant: the tiring 'grip' on reality (observing nature, reflecting on documentary materials, books) is the only resistance to the dictatorship of apparent pleasure, in other words, of the 'everything immediately and easily' to which one is instinctively drawn, i.e. the search for sensations replaces the search for sense.

How much time do we spend observing nature and how much the screen, understood as everything that appears and affects us sensorially? Our grip on reality depends on nature (observation) and culture (reflection), without which we are prisoners of an illusion, so to be happy we must exclude rather than understand, enjoy rather than rejoice, free ourselves rather than commit ourselves, only to discover we are always dissatisfied. In his work "New World", Huxley eliminates this inevitable unease of the soul by presenting an alternative, "soma", a drug distributed in moments of crisis and social disorder. But it is definitely not to be considered a solution and / or an alternative to the established intents and objectives in our life.

And here, the power of our critical thinking intervenes, also aimed at a more human technology, at a necessary passage – Pope Francis in his Encyclical *Laudato si'* is not afraid to use the expression "courageous cultural revolution" – from the "technocratic paradigm" to a "wisdom paradigm" into which fit, in the right order and respective correlation, wisdom, science and technology.

A few years ago, the American writer and naturalist, Edward O. Wilson, the founder of sociobiology, was asked if humans would be able to solve the crises of the following century. The answer was: "Yes, if we are honest with ourselves and intelligent. We have paleolithic emotions, medieval institutions and extremely sophisticated technologies: this is the real problem of humanity". Several years have passed and, although the ancestral impulses of our brain have evolved, the powers of technology have grown dramatically. Our intent is limited in the face of the temptations of technology, compro-

mising not only our privacy, but also our capacity for collective action. This is also because our brain is not programmed to manage the awareness of the suffering of the planet. The news we read online confronts us with the pain and cruelty present in the world and leads us to a kind of acquired helplessness: a technology that gives us what may almost be considered omniscience without any qualms, is inhuman.

In this regard, it would appear that in developed countries and especially in emerging economies, access to technology seems to change life for the better, whereas it can harm when it is not regulated. Technology has the power to transform society, which needs it, if it is inclusive. And, with the aim of a more responsible, inclusive and sustainable capitalism, trust will become even more crucial with the spread of new technologies, such as “artificial intelligence”, which will be more important than “fire” and “electricity”, with the potential to disrupt life and health, as well as science and art. It is essential to maintain a sense of balance in all this, which comes from a sanely critical thought halfway between optimistic enthusiasm and apocalyptic defeatism.

At this point, we must not forget that we are the only species with the awareness to understand the difference, the distance between our brain and the technology we use, which means that we have the ability to reverse this trend. However, we must ask ourselves if we are equal to the task, in other words, able to look within ourselves and use this wisdom to develop a technology that is new and humane, as the American psychologist, and co-founder and executive director of the Center for Humane Technology, Tristan Harris, points out.

To “create” humane technology, we need to think deeply about our nature and, to do so, it is not enough just to talk about privacy. It is a profoundly spiritual approach: we must understand our natural strengths, including critical thinking and self-awareness, thus reconciling ourselves to technology. Critical thinking and self-awareness must lead to admitting a state of “imperfection” which, through a process of evolution, must lead to the truth in each of us, as well as in science and art.

### **Imperfection, evolution and truth in research**

According to the evolutionist Telmo Piovani, author of the work “*Imperfection. A natural story*”, it is possible to affirm that humility can become a talent for imperfection because it is constantly evolving.

Referring to the world of research, it has been experimented, believed and acknowledged that evolution does not adhere to pre-established standards, but explores what is possible: that is why imperfection is everywhere.

Besides, today, the vice of “totalizing perfection” takes on the appearance of group conformity. Positions and beliefs, which are by no means neutral, are designed on the basis of precise preconceptions that aim to create canons of consensus, self-conviction and communities based on prejudice, so that each community of believers has a profile that can be exploited commercially, with the aggravating factor that everything is cloaked in an illusory aura of freedom and democracy. This feeds the need for the human mind to shut itself up in protective communities. Instead, “shared and convergent studying” is becoming increasingly necessary, precisely because it is increasingly approved (in the most etymological sense of the term) and felt emotionally within an increasingly enlarged and inclusive scientific community and is as far as possible confluent and concurrent (above all, in the sense of movement and finalization towards a common goal, just as the meaning of the word “university” suggests).

It is equally true, on the other hand, that to be imperfect is natural and, at the same time, causes suffering, anxiety and discomfort. However, if we learned to critically undermine socially induced stereotypes of perfection and prejudices, we would be able to eliminate a contextual cause that aggravates that discomfort, and we would not have the problem of undue external pressures and the awareness of being different. Indeed, evolution not only feeds on individual diversity, but also takes advantage of the fact that each of us is made up of multiple, stratified and contradictory diversities. The secret of success as human beings, and even more so in scientific research, is to have made of fragility, a strength. Cultural and technological evolution would not exist if our ancestors had not been able to execute and protect what they in turn have handed down to us.

And in research, it is not only a duty, but a right to make a claim against prejudices, it is something more profound: it is the expression of irrepressible individual diversity. The evolutionary reasons for that imperfection are the same as those that make us human and keep us close to the truth, and even more so, close to the scientific truth.

### **One 'common belief' for a single judgement**

Why believe in your own conviction, why be certain, confident, have no doubt or perplexity, rather than discussing and comparing your opinion and position to validate your idea, an idea that has become your creed over time or, on the contrary, refute it by recognizing the validity of the opinion of others and their consequent judgment?

The real problem is that one is loyal – in some ways, with good reason – to the world that has shaped them and consequently built their own cultural world, often becoming too “intimistic” in meaning and value, and fearing that if it comes under examination, it may collapse.

It is equally true, however, that a further eventuality can arise if, humbly, courageously and proudly, we put ourselves in a contradictory situation, opening the path to a possible synergy of two different positions which, however, are in need of common certainties. This is a greater achievement, because it confirms the idea of a methodological path which, as it is different, because it derives from the other world of training which has also become private, allowing one to integrate, complete and ascertain 'one's creed'. It has thus become the “common belief”, making the conclusive judgment, reliable and unequivocal.

Considering the way the past is presented in the present, revised, re-examined and projected into the future, what is reported is what is found in life as well as in science, art and research. They are simple, courageous and effective arguments and reflections which, in expressing a kind of Epicurean thought, it may be said, that if we have arrived at the aforementioned “common belief” and are projected into the future: “Wouldn't it be better to learn to enjoy the moment, knowing how fulfilling is our condition, which, by responding to the uniqueness of a judgment we are an integral part of, is attributable - one can rightly say - to an indisputable scientific truth?”.

### **The evaluation of the work of art**

The philosopher and rhetorician Protagoras, who is considered the father of sophistry and lived between about 490 and 420 BC., wrote in his work *Truth*, “Man is a measure of all things”. Whoever claims to possess an absolute truth is not in the right,

because everyone must be able to express their ideas, which are to be considered all legitimate: therefore, everyone is a measure of their own judgments and experiences and, for this, must be allowed to express them.

The above can be applied to the present time, and as history has already taught us in such cases, there is generally confrontation and recourse to enforcement. But it is also true that other criteria can be found to facilitate “confrontation” and find “agreement”, or at least have tried to do so, “after due consideration”. The priority, when possible, is not to establish who is right, but how to solve the problem and resolve differences by establishing, in the absence of absolute values, the principles on which to base a comparison and, therefore, an agreement.

At this point the question arises: “What is the motive that made us follow a path whereby, by virtue of critical thinking and self-awareness, a process of evolution can determine the transition from a state of imperfection to a state of perfection?”

In the context of art, experience was acquired, and it evolved through the years: the univocal subjective evaluation of an artefact of a historical, stylistic, aesthetic, iconographic nature, examined in relation to its attribution and authentication, as well as from a historical-technical perspective came to be accepted. But in spite of its unquestionable validity and scientific significance, it was painfully acknowledged that, as mentioned earlier, it was the result of a “vice of totalizing perfection”.

In reality, such an evaluation could neither be synonymous with perfection nor be considered totalizing. It was “not perfect” because, although attributable to a judgment deriving from undisputed experience and skill, it was nevertheless subjective and the result of human faculties and, as such, susceptible to a judgement that was scientifically “not perfect”. The meaning underlined by the term “not perfect”, is that scientifically, it does not respond to sensitivity, specificity, repeatability and reproducibility: these are the precise characteristics that are not reflected in the subjective evaluation and therefore, not reflected in the corresponding judgment.

It follows that this type of evaluation cannot be considered “totalizing” but needs to be compared and completed with an objective or diagnostic-analytical evaluation based on the use of innovative and reliable technologies that satisfy the above characteristics.

In doing so, by “separating the stereotypes of socially induced perfection from the appearance of group conformity and prejudices”, the integration of subjective and objective evaluations has led to not taking positions and not stating beliefs relating to pre-established standards, but instead to considering evolutionary reasons or human ones attributable to the concept of imperfection. This means we are fragile, but we are convinced that this fragility is the force of an aseptic and completely scientific truth.

And in the dialogue between knowledge, between people, and between different generations, there is a real need for humility that is wise, and horizons that are broader and more inclusive. We therefore need both imperfection and perfection in culture, science, art and research, together with the repercussions they have in the field of education and training. In an interesting speech given on 20 February 2020 in the Vatican, in view of the “Global Compact on Education”, it is no coincidence that Pope Francis remarked that: “One aspect of education is that it is an ecological movement: one of the driving forces that aims at complete formation. Education that places the person and his/her potential at its centre has the purpose of bringing him/her to knowledge of self, of the common home in which the person lives, and above all of the discovery of fraternity as a relationship that produces the multicultural composition of humanity, a source of mutual enrichment”.