TWO DIALOGUES FOR A FOUNDATION BEYOND THE TWO CULTURES
DICHOTOMY

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The following is the text of a talk given at the General Education International Conference 2015,

ABSTRACT:
Based on the reflection on the past two years of teaching the GEFP, I show how the two courses based on the
two dialogues, with Nature and with Humanity, can be a means to overcome the traditional dichotomy
science/humanities and, as a consequence, to provide a more solid foundation for a person's intellectual
development. Specifically, I propose that such aims can be achieved by focusing, within the two dialogues,
on the interaction between Nature, knowledge, and values.

INTRODUCTION

With this talk I would like to show how, through a reflection on my teaching for the General
Education Foundation Programme, I realized that the approach based on two core dialogues, with
Humanity and with Nature, can be a means to overcome the traditional dichotomy
science/humanities and, as a consequence, to provide a more solid foundation for a person's
intellectual development.

The main mission of such a common foundation programme is “to guide our students to
think through” and “to deliberate on a set of essential human questions”; “to equip students to be
individuals who neither blindly follow nor blindly challenge; individuals who have the courage to
express their true opinion, individuals who are, in this sense, truly free”1. In Dialogue with
Humanity centers its questions on “what constitutes a good life and a good society”2. “In Dialogue
with Nature” asks what we know about nature and what the limitations in our understanding of
nature are.”3

During the first two years of teaching the course In Dialogue with Nature, I explicitly
oriented the reflection and related discussions towards the development, the defining aspects, the
power and limitations of what we call modern science. This is not inconsistent with the specific
aims of such a course and our selection of core texts leads naturally to such an approach4. I myself
think that, referring to modern science as a constant comparison term when discussing any issue
within the course, is perfectly reasonable given its unprecedented influence on our societies and
given that, epistemologically, it cannot be considered simply one of the many possible ways of
acquiring knowledge about Nature5. However, at the same time, I started to reflect, more and more
frequently, on the title of our course and I asked myself: what would happen if I took the title of the
course more literally? That is, what would happen if I assumed that the course deals with our
dialogue with Nature, without giving for granted the central role of knowledge and the relevance of
modern science?

In the following sections I present the reflections and the analysis that unrolled while trying
to answer my own question. Finally I suggest some possible merits of such an alternative approach.

TWO DIALOGUES

First of all, I realized that I needed to formulate an argument to justify the distinction of a

1 Leung Mei-yee, “In Dialogue with Humanity”, Forewords, pp. xix, xx,xxii
2 Ibid. p. xx
3 Ibid. p. xx
4 All texts of “In Dialogue with Nature” refer to modern science either directly or through a commentary.
5 Even with all its limitations, it is difficult to argue that another form of knowledge can be more reliable or
dialogue with humanity from a dialogue with Nature. In fact, such a distinction can be opposed by two, possibly overlapping, camps: those who consider humanity part of Nature and those who state that all our interactions are culturally mediated and, as a consequence, that they can all be reduced to our interactions with other human beings: a dialogue within humanity. However, whether or not such a distinction corresponds to an actual underlying, ontological, difference, there is a practical reason that warrants it: the common experience that our interaction with other human beings includes modes that do not apply to our interaction with the remaining part of the world. Such modes correspond to the dialogue aimed at persuasion and to the discourse on values. As a matter of fact, there is a part of the world, a large set of phenomena, that appears deaf to our prayers and blind to our values. Such a state of affairs corresponds to what several Greek philosophers describe with the word “ananke” (ἀνάγκη), which means constraint, necessity (besides meaning force)\(^6\). It is the acknowledgement of such a difference that justifies, at least heuristically, the distinction of the two dialogues.

Evidently, the whole problem discussed above could be avoided by not focusing on the two dialogues, and by, instead, selecting a priori a set of enduring questions. The two dialogues approach, however, enriches the reflection by unveiling new dimensions and provides a basic framework for both teachers and students to begin to organize the enduring questions that naturally emerge.

We thus have a dialogue with humanity, which is naturally centered on the discourse on values, particularly on what constitutes a good life and a good society. And we have a dialogue with Nature which, because of the apparent necessity of most non-human phenomena (their character of ananke) and because of their regularity, is mostly centered on the attempt to predict and control events through the acquisition of knowledge. In this way the rationale for different foci in the two courses becomes transparent.

THREE HINGES

I stated that our dialogue with Nature is mostly centered on the attempt to predict and control events through knowledge. This, however, is a human choice, no matter how obvious it may appear due to our practical needs and to the character of inevitability of Nature. As all choices, it is based on some implicit or explicit values. In fact, there are cultures whose members choose to center their interaction with Nature around different modes, as a consequence of their different values, or, more accurately, of their different hierarchy of values\(^7\). In this way it becomes apparent that the reflection on values is essential not only in a foundation course that focuses on the dialogue within humanity, but also in a course on our dialogue, or our interaction, with Nature.

The above considerations suggest that it is possible to describe the development of a person’s core, or foundational, education as a process of reflections around three hinges: Nature, knowledge, and values\(^8\). In order to support this statement I will try to show that all the issues that emerge in the two dialogues revolve around the three hinges and, more importantly, their interactions.

A set of questions common to many classic texts, and thus classics of our dialogues, comes from the search for the true reality of the world and for our place in it. Clear examples are some of the texts by Plato and Aristotle, but also Laozi and Zhuangzi. At the same time, classic texts of the various religious traditions try to offer answers to the question of what our human nature consists in, whether we are an inseparable part of the whole or we are clearly distinct from the rest of the world. And, as a consequence, does it make more sense to govern Nature or to follow her? Also, are there divine beings? Is there a creator?

What all these questions have in common is the focus on our relationship with the true underlying

\(^6\) “In Plato’s Timaeus it is the brute force of nature.” [http://global.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/22700/Ananke](http://global.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/22700/Ananke)

\(^7\) Examples of such cultures can be found not only among communities or societies not affected by the scientific revolution, but also within modern societies. See Preti (1968) and Colanero (2014).

\(^8\) For pedagogical purposes it would be probably better to explicitly consider a fourth hinge: human life. However, I will not discuss it explicitly here because the issues that revolve around it can be subsumed under the previous three hinges and because I will focus more on my experience in teaching “In Dialogue with Nature”.

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reality, whatever that may be. For this reason they can be subsumed under the topic of Nature in the ontological sense.

The reflection on human knowledge and its limitations is clearly one of the core aspects of a general education. Such an aspect does not only cover the questions related to the development of science, but also the significance of other forms of knowledge, such as the knowledge transmitted through religious traditions, or the understanding of the self, gradually acquired by an individual, as is described in classics like the Odissey, for example.

Finally, general education, and the core texts that are proposed to students, deal with values: from the three classic ones – truth, good, and beauty – to love, justice, freedom, down to more specific ones such as the value of the product of one's labour, or the value of the labour itself, or also the value of our harmony with the environment.

As a well known report on general education puts it, “general education is obviously and necessarily based on assumptions – explicit and implicit – about what is important, worthy, and valuable”. As a consequence, one of its aims should be to make the students aware not only of the existence of such assumptions, but also of how they arise. An effective way to become aware of the dynamics that affect such choices is to identify the interactions between our view of Nature, the form of knowledge we use, and the values at stake: the interactions between the three hinges.

In fact, the main aim of the proposed three core concepts is not to pigeonhole the issues discussed within those three categories, but to suggest a simple framework for finding clear and meaningful relationships between the issues, and to aid the students in constructing their own structured and conscious view of the world.

In this context, the problems of the self, of what constitutes a good life and a good society, can be understood from the point of view of the interaction between Nature, knowledge and values. The answer to what is the self depends on my belief on the nature of human beings. The purpose or the significance of my life, which is perhaps the highest value for an individual – that which determines a good life – depends too on the answer about the belief on human nature. However, depending on the value that we give to knowledge, the acquisition of new knowledge may in turn affect our view of what is the self.

On the other hand, what constitutes a good society obviously depends on our shared values, which are, however, also affected by what we know or believe about Nature, including human nature. The answer depends, for example, on whether we consider ourselves fundamentally distinct or nonseparable from the rest of the world. In one case, to govern or manage Nature may be considered necessary for achieving a good life and a good society. In the other case a good society would be one that follows the ways of Nature. In both cases, the answer would be affected by our knowledge of the laws of Nature. In this regard, one of the suggestive questions could be: does the invisible hand, that Adam Smith refers to in some passages, correspond to a general law of Nature?

The proposed three key concepts and their mutual interactions can also be useful for analyzing the texts used in general education courses. As an example I would like to consider two of the selections that we propose to our students: one from “Silent Spring” by Rachel Carson, and the other from “Science and Method” by Henry Poincaré.

The excerpt from “Silent Spring” presents the risk of potentially appearing a simple, even naive, call not to be greedy and to respect Mother Nature who knows what is good for her children. However, as soon as one asks the three questions – what is Nature in the context of this text; what values, implicitly and explicitly, does Carson assume for her proposed interventions; what form of knowledge does she use and how – the picture becomes much more articulated and non-trivial. In fact, we can easily see that she founds her arguments on two very basic values: human well-being, both collective and individual, and, as a necessary requirement, a sustainable ecological healthy

11 See, for example, the questions raised by Darwin's theory of evolution on the nature of human beings, or, also, developments in neuroscience that test human free will.
12 See, for example, her tolerance for selective spraying and her statement that “sometimes we have no choice but to disturb these relationships, but we should do so thoughtfully, with full awareness that what we do may have consequences remote in time and place” (Carson, p.64).
balance. Her references to other values, such as the economic value of tourism, or the right of an elderly lady to collect wild flowers, are expressions of the more general value of human well-being. The form of knowledge that she adopts is modern science, both from the point of view of its methodology and of its findings, including the awareness of the tentative nature of its results. By examining the interaction between values and knowledge in Carson's text we finally dispel any doubt we might have had about her message being simplistic. We find that Carson does not start with a predetermined rigid position on how specifically we should act on the environment. Instead she compares “human intentions, based on our values, with their likely consequences, based on the non-subjective natural phenomena. Such an attitude leads her to some times reject, some times accept or modify, various proposals of agricultural or industrial development”\textsuperscript{13}.

The text by Poincaré presents the opposite problem. It may seem too complex and too rich of concepts and ideas. Our excerpt can be conceptually divided in three parts: the selection of facts, the role of beauty and usefulness in such a selection, and the three stages in the process of discovery. By reading it from the point of view of the three hinges, we find out that the selection of facts deals with Nature, specifically its regular recurring character; the second part shows how two fundamental human values – beauty and usefulness – affect and contribute to the acquisition of knowledge; the third part deals with knowledge and the nature of the human mind, specifically with the mental processes involved in mathematical discovery.

**MERITS OF SUCH AN APPROACH**

Having presented the rationale for the two dialogues approach to general education, and how it naturally leads to the identification of three hinges of reflection, I can now discuss the possible merits of such an approach.

First of all, it has some practical pedagogical merits. It suggests a framework for students to orient themselves in the jungle of concepts, issues and problems raised by a general education course and by the suggested classic texts. It helps in making explicit the interplay between values, beliefs, choices and actions, which is often implicit in the texts and in our dialogues. These can be aids for the teachers too. Also, by reflecting on what is Nature for us, on our attitude towards the acquisition of knowledge, and on what really counts in life for us, we become individuals who are more aware of the factors that affect our attitudes, more aware of which attitudes are the result of deliberate choices and which ones are the consequence of social or cultural pressures. Does this not contribute “to equip students to be individuals who neither blindly follow nor blindly challenge; individuals who have the courage to express their true opinion, individuals who are, in this sense, truly free”\textsuperscript{14}?

As mentioned at the beginning, another merit of the two dialogues approach is that it can be a means to overcome the traditional dichotomy science/humanities. It can do so by (1) shifting the attention from the intellectual traditions to the actual human life – the two dialogues cover all human activities – and (2) by focusing on the interactions between Nature, knowledge, and values, which not only cross the two dialogues, but allow to discover non-trivial relationships between the so-called sciences and humanities and perhaps to also make sense of such traditional distinction. In this sense it can constitute a useful framework for teaching across the disciplines, particularly across the sciences and the humanities.

Finally, it supports a view of general education which has the potential to be cross-cultural, because it aims at making a person aware of the interactions between the self, Nature, knowledge and values, and this works no matter what is the cultural background of the students and of the institution and whether general education should teach values or not.

**CONCLUSION**

\textsuperscript{13} Klaus Colanero, “The nature of scientific knowledge and its relevance for our choices of intervention on nature”, 2014.

\textsuperscript{14} Leung Mei-yee, “In Dialogue with Humanity”, Forewords, pp. xix, xx,xxii
I would like to conclude with a few preliminary considerations on the effectiveness of the proposed conceptual framework in the actual teaching of a general education course. Given that I have started to explicitly and systematically employ the above ideas only mid-way through the last academic term (and I'm currently employing them during the Summer Term), I can only rely on preliminary impressions with regard to a few aspects of teaching and learning.

With regard to teaching, the reference to the “two dialogues” and the “three hinges” helps me in presenting the significance of certain connections between different texts, which would otherwise risk to appear accidental.

With regard to benefits for the students I did not have the opportunity to perform a formal evaluation yet. For the time being I can only say that (1) there are no negative effects on their learning; (2) in class they always responded positively when asked to reflect on the interactions between Nature, knowledge and values; (3) they did not appear confused by the questions and seemed to find them meaningful; (4) they were able to make use of that framework in their essays.

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