

## Philosophy and Domination- Luis Villoro

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In our time, philosophical activity has become a source of perplexity. Its doctrines seem destined to give way to a more secure rational knowing, science, or else to disguise socially manageable opinions, ideologies. Is there a place for philosophy between science and ideology? Between the fascination for the scientific mentality and the intoxicating ideologies, does philosophy, that one which pretended to know that it was never too sure of itself, still have some purpose? We often ask, what is philosophy for? In short reflections, more an attempt than an achievement, they will look for an answer down a biased road: philosophy seen from the social structure of domination.

### The Two Faces of Minerva

Philosophy has always had an ambivalent relationship with social and political power. On the one hand, it took the succession of religion as a theoretical justifier of domination. All constituted power has tried to legitimize itself, first through religious belief, after that in a doctrine of philosophy. All power to be constituted has looked to the fervor of a divine promise, in the vision of a utopic world or in the rational analysis of a society, for the foundation of its revolutionary pretensions. It seems that the brute force that supports the domination makes no sense to humans, if it is not justified as acceptable in the end. Philosophical discourse, to relieve religion, has been tasked to give it that meaning: it is a thought of domination.

Furthermore, philosophy has often been seen as a corrosive exercise of power. Since Greece, genuine philosophy appears as a nonconformist character, cynical or extravagant, or else disdainful of the public affairs, distant and distinct, "hiding in a corner,...murmuring with three or four young kids" (Gorgias, 485d). Often branded as the corruptor, the dissolvent, the introducer of dangerous novelties. Throughout history, almost all revolutionary philosophy has earned, at any time, any of these epithets: dissident, denier of the establishment, disruptive of consciousness, sacrilege or heretic, anarchic or libertine, reluctant and independent, when not frankly revolutionary. In effect, authentic philosophical activity, that does not limit itself to reiterating established thought, can do no less than be an exercise in freedom from the accepted beliefs of the community: it is a thought of liberation.

Philosophy has been the justifier of power and denier of the subordination of reason. It has been a thought of dominion and a thought of liberation. "How can we explain this ambiguity?" Can this apparent contradiction not reveal to us an important characteristic of philosophy? Consider the two features that, since Socrates, have been presented in philosophical activity: it has claimed to be, both, a reform of understanding and the choice of new life.

## The Philosophical Question

Let us first try to characterize the peculiarity of philosophical question before other types of questions. The philosophical question carries to its conclusion an operation that one finds implicitly in any scientific question: to put to the test the many received beliefs, as well as the assumed conceptual apparatus in them. But, in your everyday work, the “normal science” (in the meaning of Kuhn) primarily refers to facts, to objects and to relations between those facts or objects. The way in which science responds to the problems posed is to understand those facts and relations through a paradigm or a conceptual theory previously accepted by that scientific discipline. Because it must provide reasons for the given facts or objects, scientific thinking begins from certain basic beliefs with which to interpret and explain them, science cannot put its basic beliefs into question during the explanatory process. To explain means: to subsume facts or relations between facts, under conceptual schemes whose validity is accepted. Thus, “normal science” is only possible on the basis of a conceptual framework shared by the scientific community, paradigms and explanatory theories, which do not put the everyday work of science into question. Only when a paradigm or theory proves unable to give a reason for the facts, the inquiry will be directed towards them. In those cases, the question no longer refers to the facts, objects or relations between them, but rather to the basic beliefs and the assumed concepts of the normal science. Only then, the scientist feels the need to test his own conceptual apparatus. The scientific question becomes radical. That radicalization is a step from the scientific question towards a philosophical one.

The philosophical question, in effect, does not refer to facts or objects of the world, not even to classes of them; rather, it refers to the assumed conceptual frame in any thought about those facts and objects. Therefore, it concerns the basic beliefs that precede any interpretation or rational explanations. It arouses a permanent wonder, a perplexity before any unexamined opinion, before any shared belief, before any inherited knowing; alarm in the face of that which is “accepted without discussion”, alarm before “the obvious.” From Socrates, who traveled the city streets to shake the confidence of his countrymen in their opinions, up to Wittgenstein, determined to point the fly out of the bottle of its own conceptual apparatus, philosophy has assigned itself the task of putting into question all assumptions, all accepted opinions without discussion, all shared convention, putting into question, ultimately, the system of concepts that allows one to formulate a meaningful question. Its object is purely conceptual. For that reason, if knowledge implies a relation with facts and objects of the world, philosophy rightfully does not know, rather it thinks. It is a reflection on understanding. At some moment, in the 17th century, that thought wanted to be so radical that it claimed to start from universal doubt regarding all the received beliefs in order to reconstruct on firm foundations of science. Now we understand the impossibility of this undertaking. We have learned that even the most radical questioning has to continue to admit the basic beliefs that we cannot part with or break down any further. But, even though philosophy cannot bring about a “universal reconstruction of

knowledge,” as Descartes wanted, it can, at the very least, bring about a “reform of understanding.”

### **The Reform of Understanding**

The philosophical question leads to the criticism of reason itself. This comes down to three interrelated operations. First: The analysis of the concepts. This allows one to reject the obscure concepts and to realize increasingly precise concepts: the reform of our conceptual apparatus. Second: The examination of the reasons on which we base the statements that express our beliefs. This allows one to reject groundless opinions and arrive at well-founded reasons: a reform of our beliefs. Third: The above operations allow one to identify the questions that cannot be formulated, due to a lack of meaning or response from other legitimate questions, and in that way one arrives at increasingly enlightening questions. As restrictive as this process is to the examination of concepts and specific questions, such as the ones the philosopher typically handles, the understanding cannot remain the same before and after this process. The criticism of reason inevitably leads to the abandonment of obscure concepts and unfounded beliefs and to the formulation of new concepts and beliefs: one frees the understanding, though only partially, of certain accepted opinions without discussion; this allows one to reform the conceptual frame on which they are based.

That said, no society can subsist without a system of shared beliefs and an accepted conceptual frame that is transmitted everyday through education and social practice. The reiterated beliefs govern social behavior, they allow ordered action within the existing structure of domination. They constitute, in fact, an apparatus of control over minds, which ensures the reaffirmation of the social order.

Philosophical activity calls into question one’s acquired beliefs from belonging to a society in order to access other beliefs based on one’s own reason. Each person should examine for themselves the foundations of their beliefs. For this reason the communication of a philosophical truth is the opposite of indoctrination. It is not to communicate opinions, but to point out the reasons on which the belief is based, in such a way that another person will only adopt a belief if the foundation upon which it is based makes sense to his own understanding. To communicate a philosophical truth consists in opening the other’s mind so that it can see, for itself, the reasons on which it is based. Kant said “Philosophy is not taught, it only teaches how to philosophize.” In effect, before the indoctrination of minds by external voices, philosophical activity intends to awaken in each person their own “inner teacher,” as Saint Augustine called to his own voice of reason. Thus the reform of understanding frees the mind of its subordination to imposed beliefs and it puts it in an openness to accept the beliefs it can see for itself. Emancipation of reason from the domination of conventions, the rupture of the very conceptual apparatuses that reiterate dominance.

It is true, many philosophers choose not to propose this aim; in the academic world there are actually some who even despise it: they want to seem neutral in the

face of all situations of domination. What is furthest, in appearance, from a liberating activity, than a conceptual analysis about a specific topic of everyday speech or scientific discourse; like those that today fill the specialized journals of philosophy? Yet, as long as such analyses question and analyze previously accepted concepts, as long as such shared beliefs are discussed, even if these and others are restricted, this calls into question, even inadvertently, an instrument of domination. Because of its questioning and critical activity, not by its express intention, philosophical activity is a disruptive mentality, that is to say, it fulfills a role in the breakdown of beliefs.

Thus, philosophical activity has generally presented itself with images that express, with different variations, a common theme: the rejection of a servile or alienated situation, and the access of reason to a situation liberated from servitude. Historical examples abound: prisoners bound in a cave that they escape, finally, to head towards the sunlight; an abandonment of fragmentation and recollection of oneself; inner enlightenment; destruction of the “idols of the forum and the theatre;” the discovery of “pure reason,” transformation of a “natural attitude,” forgotten by one’s own reason, to the “reflective attitude;” healing, therapy against the deceptions of Language. As different as these images are, they all express a disruptive movement, a rupture.

### **Choose the “New Life”**

Now let’s move to the second feature that was noted as a characteristic of philosophy. Since its inception, philosophy has been connected to a search for the “good life.” The reform of understanding also reveals, often, the road to a just life. The philosophical life is distinguished from other life choices by claiming to be grounded in a personal examination of the liberated reason and not in the “desires” (“myths” in Greek) of the community.

What is that “good life,” marked by free reason? The discrepancies are enormous. The models of life that present the different philosophies vary considerably. They can even situate themselves between extremes seemingly opposites on a pole, for example, the detachment of all attachment to the worldly life, advocated by a follower of Plotinus, and at the other end, the Nietzschean affirmation of the full life; on one side, the Stoical impassivity before sufferings, on the other, the affirmation, from Plato to Schopenhauer, of love or compassion as ways of salvation; at one extreme, Aristotle and Spinoza: the peace of the contemplative attitude, at the other, Marx: the presentation of the transformative practice of the world. Within this diversity of positions, is there no common feature that could define them with respect to the topic that occupies us?

The search for “good life” began with a change of attitude: a rejection of the values and forms of usual life, and the choice of other values not fully realized. The new life is not realized by following the conventions repeated day by day, that maintain the unity of society and permit the continuity of order. In general, the postulation of the “just life” no longer confirms the moral beliefs that justify that social practice and imply the acceptance of a moral beyond, that break with established customs and valuations. Often, this change of attitude arrives at a reversal of values: at the limit, the good life assumes the choice of the other, of that which is different from the repeated practice of the established society. Thus, in a society where the desire for power is withheld, the Greek scholar chooses to suffer the injustice rather than commit it in order to preserve well his inner freedom, pure of all ambition and dominance; in a world filled with appearances, the Hindu philosopher chooses the inner void and the isolation: and many centuries later, in a civilization alienated by the profit and exploitation, there will be a philosopher who will again postulate the other: a future world where man will become brother of man. In whatever forms the new life presents itself, they agree on one point: it is always liberation and authenticity. This existing society of domination does not attain that life: to get access to it, one must break with the conformism of ideologies or moral conventions. The “good life” places itself somehow “outside” of the dominant social practices: it projects itself into a world of utopia; it takes refuge in a small community of scholars; it encloses itself in the proud independence of the individual or it concretizes itself in a group or social class as the challenger of dominance. The good life is the other in the bosom of the existing society.

### **Rupture and Liberation**

In the majority of philosophies, the road to liberation, although presented as universal, only offers itself to each individual. In some, however, it is postulated as an ideal of collective liberation. In the image of the righteous man liberated, happens the liberation of the community of all men. The philosopher becomes then a reformer or even a revolutionary. By doing so, the search for the just life of the individual “soul” extends to the entire society. The disruptive thinking characteristic of all philosophy thus acquires a new reach. It is difficult to understand the philosophers who are reformers or revolutionaries if we do not assume, in the depth of their reflection, that quest for the just life we discussed before. As strict as the scientific rigor is, with which some claim to exercise their thought, this always presents the change of attitude that leads to rejecting the values of the society of domination and to postulating its opposites.

In the same which in which the individual just life realizes itself “outside” of the dominant practices, in a similar manner, the collective just life places itself in a situated

state “beyond” the existing society. Not only that: the existing society can only justify itself if it is based on that different state, either because it derives from it and realizes its values, or because it tends to it as its end. Domination is only legitimate if it is based in a state without dominance. In effect, in the state that legitimizes power it removes the specific structure of dominance of the existing society; fittingly, for this reason, it is situated “outside” of it. In some philosophies, it is a state external to its history; it places itself then in nature (“the natural law”), in an ideal order (as in Plato’s Republic), or in a “no-place” (Utopia). In others, it is situated before the civil society. In a “state of nature” prior to domination. Some, at last, are placed at the end of history, in a “world of ends” or in a “society without classes,” where the same source of domination dissolves.

The reform of understanding usually goes together with a project of life reform, and eventually, a reform of the community. If through its theoretical query, philosophical activity was questioning and disagreement, it acquires through its practical attitude a sign more of negation. Faced with the thinking used to integrate society and to ensure its continuity as that same society, philosophical thinking is thought of rupture, of otherness.

How is it possible then that it becomes so easily obliging? By what strange dialect is this disruptive thinking transformed into support for the society of domination?

### **From Philosophy to Doctrine**

Let us review the two features that we distinguished in philosophy: the reform of understanding and the choice of a form of life. Regarding the first, philosophy entails a continuous rational activity. In this rational activity, questioning, putting into question, analyzing and defining concepts only stops for a moment to establish its results and then immediately continues a new inquiry. No argument can be finalized, no analysis arrives at concepts that cannot in turn be analyzed, no answer ceases to refer to a new question. Permanent criticism of reason, its progress does not consist in formulating definitive statements, but rather dissolving false questions and raising other more enlightening questions, in rejecting confusing concepts and finding more precise ones. Nonetheless, the result of that activity is fixed in a discourse, in other words, in a collection of statements linked with each other in an order or system. The reflection remains mired in conclusive propositions: expressed in a collection of theses, which can be proposed in the acceptance or rejection of the other. Philosophical discourse, fixed in clauses, definitions, premises, and conclusions, is independent of the rational activity that produces it; objectified, it is given as a finished product of reason. It no longer serves only to communicate the way of reason in the inquisitive procedure, but rather to

express a collection of beliefs that may or may not be shared. Upon its emergence in a discourse, philosophical activity can become doctrine.

Doctrine is an interrelated collection of opinions that can be taught. To transmit philosophy as a reflective activity consists in awakening in each person their own reason so that they could see it for themselves. To accept a philosophical statement means to follow and reproduce, within one's own reason, the question, as well as the analysis and argument that led to that statement. To communicate a philosophical doctrine, by contrast, consists in proposing a collection of interconnected beliefs so that the other adheres to them. It is not the rational activity that is transmitted, but rather its product. Codified in your own slang, sealed like cohesive system of opinions, the product of reason, separated from its productive practice, can operate as a "conception of the world," as the common belief of a school, as a "philosophical current," when not of a group or a sect. The apprentice of philosophy is no longer called on to repeat in herself the astonishment and inquisition of her own reason, now she is invited to follow an "ism," to be led by the thesis of a school. The liberating thought of all shared beliefs has given rise to a new system of shared beliefs.

### **The Power of Ideology**

Such a process occurs with an understood philosophy, as life reform. The postulation of the "good life" assumes a personal change of attitude. Therefore, in this field, philosophy is not detached from practice. Philosophical thought invites one to choose a form of life; the practice of that life corroborates the thought. The new life cannot ground itself without the existence of personal testimony. Just as in its critical activity, the transmission of philosophy can only be the awakening of the free reason of another. In its practical proposal, the transmission of the philosophy only consists in arousing the personal conviction of the other and the change of attitude that leads one to embrace a new form of life. The reasons communicated by philosophical discourse have that ultimate purpose. But here also the result of philosophical activity, when expressing itself in discourse, can be transformed into a moral or political doctrine. It is presented as a cohesive collection of theses and sentences, valuations, norms or precepts for life, and practical regulations. Then it can be used and manipulated in order to orient and direct the actions of the rest.

Its codification in a doctrine is the threat that weighs on all liberating thought, both the one that looks for personal emancipation, in a moral practice, and the one seeking a collective liberation, in political practice. In all cases, disruptive thinking can coalesce into a codified system of sentences, theses, precepts, and prescriptions. The

disruptive thinking thus halted, separated from individual or social practice, as the case may be, it is no longer transformed by the tenor of life that produced it. To communicate philosophy turned doctrine, it no longer consists of inviting a change of attitude so that another can freely choose a new practice of life, but rather in transmitting a collection of beliefs so that the other attaches his or her life to them.

Upon the conversion into doctrine, a philosophy can be used to move others with different purposes; but there is one that I am interested in highlighting: it can serve as an instrument of social cohesion. In a society divided into classes, the sought after cohesion can do no less than reproducing systems of domination. Policymakers, priests, and moralists can make theirs a doctrine of personal liberation to consolidate a group, a church, a social class: political devices, bureaucracies, and parties, appropriate a doctrine of collective liberation to justify their power. In order to integrate themselves into the group and feel secure in it, the individuals subjugate their reason to the learned doctrine. The activity intended to put into question the beliefs that dominate us, instead creates beliefs that dominate minds once again. This is possible through two steps: First, the independence of philosophical discourse with respect to the rational practice that produced it and its fixation on a doctrine. Second: its utilization as an instrument of cohesion and dominance. Upon allowing this second step, philosophy changes into ideology.

That change satisfies a need. Whatever social group requires shared beliefs for all its members, which, upon reiterating itself in daily behavior, provides homogeneity and cohesion. The commonly accepted beliefs are manifested in dispositions to act in a way that maintains the order and security in the group. The shared beliefs occupy us in a dual sense of the term: it gives us our place within the social structure, even within a cosmic order, and we remain "occupied" in the sense of being allowed to act according to the social roles that correspond to us. By being occupied in a society governed by domination, by the shared beliefs, in return for satisfying our need for integration and security, we ensure our collaboration in the existing structure of power.

Thus, disruptive thinking, when utilized in a doctrine that is taught and shared, can give rise to an inclusive thinking, intended to maintain continuity. The thought that opened the reason of the other to accepted beliefs, can lead into a thought the meeting of which is to reiterate the same: the common and used beliefs in a group or class. It is that distinct function and not its content that separates a thought of liberation from a thought of dominance, the philosophy of ideology. The same discourse being conveyed can inspire in the other a liberation from her prejudices and the awakening of her reason, or, on the contrary, it will impose itself as an unchallenged opinion that occupies



and integrates into a structure of dominance; in this second case, the “inner teacher” gives its place to the whole class of “external” teachers.

## **Thought and Domination**

Now it will be clearer to us, perhaps, why social powers turn to philosophy to legitimize themselves. Domination is only effective when the dominated accept it. Thus it has to be presented as non-domination, in other words, as simply the realization of other values: freedom, equality, happiness, etc. The state of domination is legitimized in the consensus if it is presented as that in which something other than domination can be realized, postulated by philosophy. The use of the thought of non-domination or something other than domination as an instrument to reproduce the same situation of dominance is precisely ideology.

This operation is realized through a hidden thought: such is the thought of domination. This concealment consists in presenting the thought of rupture as if it were practiced by sharing the beliefs that secure social continuity; presenting the thought of liberation, which opens up a different way of life and society, as if it were expressed in commonly accepted doctrines that ensure the reiteration of the existing way of life and the existing society.

This ideological concealment can be seen in the use that political power makes of philosophical doctrines. In many cases, the exercise of domination appears as an historical realization of the other state postulated by philosophy. There are many examples in the history of thought: The values of Christianity that are precisely the denial of all conquest were realized in the Spanish conquest; the Jacobin dictatorship expressed the social contract of individual liberties meant to protect them; in capitalist exploitation the rights of all men are guaranteed, which implies the rejection of all exploitation; in the domination of bureaucracy the liberation of the proletariat is assured, which assumes the rejection of all bureaucratic power. Has it not been the fate of the majority of liberatory thought to be used to justify situations of dominance? By moving away from the practice that gave it its start, by abandoning its continuous questioning, and by fastening itself to an "ism," libertarian thought is ready to become a servant of an established power. Ideology is that concealment of philosophical thought in order to use its doctrines in the service of domination.

## **What is Philosophy For?**

At the end of these reflections we can return to our initial question: What is philosophy for? Social integration requires a repetitive/reiterative thought that occupies us. In today's societies, repetitive thought operates as an instrument of domination. The dominated society is made rigid within an alienating system: the products of reason dominate its producer. All progress and all liberation implies rupture. Philosophical activity is the gadfly of ideological conformity. It impedes the calm complacency in accepted beliefs and denies the self-satisfaction of reiterated beliefs. Thus it gives perpetual testimony to the possibility of liberation from reason.

And isn't this disruptive power of philosophy necessary now more than ever in an age of homogenized thought reduced to common places, canned, and consumed in large amounts in a society of accommodating, manipulated thought that is fascinated by force and power, and in this age, in this society, where reason seems to have been domesticated by the desire for profit and dominance? If ideology emerged from the necessity for security and social integration, then philosophy satisfies a necessity for authenticity and freedom. Is this need not alive now more than ever? Is there not an urgency for us to learn to be amazed again at the opinions that are "obvious," to want to instill, to want to learn to question anew the myths that have numbed us, to recover the precision and truth of the concepts beneath the worn-out disguises of the statements in use?

Understood in this way, philosophy cannot be reduced to its professional practice. No teacher holds the monopoly on philosophical activity nor is there any academy that guarantees its exercise. Philosophy is the disruptive activity of reason, and this is found at the limit of all scientific thought. Because all genuine science, to be radical, is a steady critic of the worn-out and common thinking that is specific to ideology. Philosophy is not a profession. Philosophy is a way of thinking, a way of thinking that painstakingly, time and again, tries to conceive, without fully achieving it, that which is different, that which is removed from all society wherein reason is subjugated. That which is never reached, always pursued in perplexity and doubt, is truthfulness against prejudice, illusion or deception; authenticity against alienation; and freedom against oppression.

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*Luis Villoro: Historian and philosopher. Among his works, there are two that are fundamental: The Ideological Process of the Revolution of Independence and The Great Moments of Indigenism. The present text is his recent admission speech at the National College. Our thanks to the Estate of Luis Villoro for the permission to publish this translation, especially Juan Villoro for his faith in our project.*