

Visibility and Invisibility in *The School of Athens* A Personal Report on the 25. World Congress of Philosophy (Rome, 01-08 August 2024)

Attila Pató, Pardubice University
atpa3600@upce.cz

The 25th World Congress of Philosophy (WCP) took place in Rome, from 1 to 8 August 2024, co-organised by the International Federation of Philosophical Societies (FISP), the Italian Philosophical Society, and Sapienza University, the host of the event. The 99 sessions were complemented by plenary lectures, panels, round tables and, not least, by the informal discussions that took place everywhere, especially on the crowded terrace of the surprisingly small café on campus and on the equally crowded terrace of the nearby corner buffet - and on many more terraces throughout the night in Rome.

In the following report, I would like to give as brief as possible, thus a fragmented picture and only on one or two topics, sharing more personal experiences and some food for thought.

Opening ceremony – Expectations about philosophy

I would not dare to estimate the amount of intellectual effort that goes into the speeches prepared for opening a congress. In this case all the speeches seemed to set general, but earnest expectations regarding the goals philosophy ought to fulfil and the roles it should assume - if only because the speakers were prominent representatives of the public life and Academy. Since some talks were given in Italian and for the sake of atmosphere, I missed to use the interpreters assistance provided in 6 languages through headphones, therefore leaving some room for misinterpretation, it is still a worthwhile effort to summarise the speeches delivered on the podium of at the Caracalla Spa's outdoor theatre, usually set up for musical events, to an audience of around 4400 participants.

The first speaker was Roberto Gualtieri (Democratic Party), the mayor of Rome, who has previously occupied important economic and financial positions in his country and the EU Parliament. His main message (judging by the Italian key words) was that philosophy can create unity to counteract the fragmentation of societies and sciences, and that it can also offer ways of moderating and rationality while speaking in the face of polarisation towards extremism in our globalised world.

The speech of the Rector of Sapienza University, **Antonella Polimeni**, can perhaps be summarised as follows: At the WCP in Rome, representatives of philosophy from all over the world have now come together “at the crossroads of philosophical perspectives on the world and on the problems that have been weighing more and more heavily on the world in recent years.”

Finally, the Presidents of the Congress Organising Committee, **Emidio Spinelli** (Sapienza Università di Roma, president of the Italian Philosophical Society, also president of the Italian Organizing Committee of the WCP) and **Luca M. Scarantino** (FISP President) addressed the

audience, welcoming the participants, and opening the Congress. Explaining the motto of the Congress – *Philosophy Across Boundaries* – Luca Scarantino stressed the importance of defining and preserving boundaries, but also the need to ensure that they remain permeable, thus ensuring dialogue, dynamism, and the awaited renewal of scientific and philosophical discourse that can only be brought about by crossing these boundaries.

Invisible groups: Ethnic groups, women, children

The audience could either take the content of the opening speeches seriously or as nothing short of a pretty collection of eloquent phrases, but it would be difficult to really gauge which of the presentations or philosophers directly answered to the challenges issued by the speakers. In any case, the *crossing of boundaries* was surely an important aspect, involving inter- and transdisciplinary perspectives, arching beyond the philosophical disciplines to the social sciences. Broadly speaking, burning social and political issues were also covered in great abundance.

My personal experience was very limited for three important reasons: firstly, I attended the congress at the invitation of Luca Scarantino as one of the members of the IPO community to lecture at the WCP, but also to aid the congress by chairing sessions, organising round tables, and by pre-evaluating the papers of the applicants. In this sense, I narrowed my field of vision to philosophy and education, especially to practices in teaching philosophy, philosophy of education, philosophy for children, and policies related to teaching philosophy. Another reason is that, even within this indicated horizon, the programmes ran simultaneously: session 60 dealt with the philosophy of education and session 71 with the teaching of philosophy, and in addition to the lectures and round table discussions, a late afternoon special event was also definitely interesting. Finally, due to the simple reason of scarcity of funds I was unable to stay for the full time of the congress.

Thus, I would like to reflect on the events solely based on my personal experience. And yet, Raphael's famous fresco could provide a wider horizon for interpretation: Who can NOT be seen in the fresco known as *The School of Athens*, and why? In addition to the issue of visibility, another pair of aspects is needed, as time and space cannot be missed.

Let's start with visibility. I will highlight three groups which, although not visible in the *The School of Athens*, were richly discussed at the WCP. One of the topics, the ethnic communities and cultures in the post-colonial space, appeared as the central problem of a lecture (at least for me in this case), delivered by **Desiré E. Moodley** (University of Cape Town) on her teaching experiences in secondary schools in South Africa. She spoke of the particular difficulties teachers face when teaching philosophy and culture to "coloured" students since traditionally it is the Euro-Atlantic and essentially "white" culture being taught (I use the terminology "coloured-white" out of necessity and with a marker, because the distinction is relevant in this case, unfortunately). How can they assume a "culture" as theirs, i.e., literally own a culture that they do not easily consider as their own in the given context of decolonization? For what reasons are their own, "very own", spiritual traditions not recognized, as if it cannot be taken seriously as "culture"? Well, is it true that there is no "indigenous philosophy"? Why can't their (culture) even exist or be recognized as such? Because it is not "rational", at most merely interesting as

magic, so we should stay within the bounds of common sense... But is this not a paternalistic approach in both of the following forms? To either accept and welcome, or to reject this? And how many kinds of rationality “exist”? Perhaps there is only one, and that is the one that “we” define? All in all, questions abounded, and the discussion was certainly interesting.

The other group also underrepresented in Raphael’s fresco are women. Gender was certainly a recurring theme along the main line, *across boundaries*, at the Congress. In the context of philosophy education, as an invited special event and featuring a series of online lectures and discussions for interested philosophy teachers across a year, the programme *Adding Voices to Philosophy Curriculum*, organised by **Floris Velema** (Leiden University and IPO team leader in the Netherlands), presented the project’s final panel. **Ruth Hagengruber** (University of Paderborn, one of the founders of the EcoTechGender project) gave a lecture on the importance and the conspicuous presence-absence of Émilie du Châtelet in the history of philosophy, as well as in the canon of philosophy education. In the same panel, **Aline D’Haese** from Belgium (Sint-Ursula Scholengemeenschap and lecturer at KU Leuven) presented the otherwise much better known Alexandrian Hypatia within a similar pattern of “negligence”. Or, one is now compelled to ask, is she another victim of “intentional forgetfulness”?¹ Here too, the question was raised that, although the marginalisation of women has always been a “natural” phenomenon, it was perhaps only in the modern era that the idea of women (along with children and people of colour) being inherently incapable of philosophical rationality, and instead being a privilege for men, was conceived.

Another important topic of the panel was the diversification of curricula. **Stephen Miller** (Chair of the APA Pre-College Committee) discussed American aspects, while **Arjan Koek** (Netherlands Institute of Curriculum Development – SLO) presented a report of the results of the reforms in the Dutch national curriculum development - one important aspect is to overcome the hegemony of the predominantly white and male canon. And this is precisely the canon as represented by Raphael’s fresco. Of course, there is no question of “smashing” the magnificent fresco. But the time is ripe for a thorough revision, to create a new “fresco”, or create more frescos, just to catch up with our very different age. Every age has its own ideal, or ideals, which may or may not be organised according to different rationalities.

The third social group not depicted in Raphael’s fresco are children. But not surprisingly, after decades of development and proliferation, *Philosophy for Children* – lately often abbreviated as P4wC (short for *Philosophy for/with Children*) or simply P4C – could not be absent from the congress. For example, Matthew Lipman’s renowned disciple **Walter Omar Kohan** (Rio de Janeiro) spoke at length (at least the one time I saw him) in the *Pre-College* panel and deliberated on the connections between time, children, and the education of philosophy. The distinction between the two concepts of time - the linear *chronos* and the cyclical *aion* - is interesting for the philosophy of time because it is the latter that, in his view (sketched here only very briefly), reveals the original meaning of the school. The word *scholē*, in Greek, originally meant leisure, and the teaching/learning and cultivation of philosophy just

¹ More information and audiovisual materials on the role of women in philosophy, their achievements and many other interesting facts can be found on the website: <https://historyofwomenphilosophers.org/ecc/#hwps>

happens to be related to the fact that the free Greeks had leisure, and of course had the right to appear and speak freely, which provided opportunity for the debates in the agora, and for the operation of philosophical schools.

But teaching philosophy to children, the philosophical activity with children, is related to the psychology of children insofar as we understand it in the light of Heraclitus B 52 DK. Time is a child at play, Walter Kohan continued, but here Heraclitus uses the term *aion*, which is cyclical and suspends the validity of linear temporality². This is the phenomenon of a child at play, which suspends the sense of temporal time imperceptibly and which is experienced by anyone who is immersed in thought or daydreaming, but also in a discussion of thought, just as it may well occur during cultivation of philosophy. Yes, here too we see two kinds of rationality, a world view or perception of the world based on two different concepts of time. For how different the *aion*-world experience is, reflecting the perception of time of playful children, compared to the linear perception of time, as experienced in our standard institutional educational practices. Inspired by Walter Kohan's speech and the subsequent discussion, it is tempting to step forward: the same linear time-concept can be detected within the developmental psychology employed to ground all our curricula (decisions): mental development of a "healthy" child is supposed to be also conceived of as linearly: from the zero-point, i.e., "tabula rasa", we are supposed to be born with, up to maturity, and then building a career following the ruler of degrees.

Teaching philosophy: as a curricular subject and as extracurricular activity

Such a differentiated discussion on institutional and extracurricular philosophy education occurred several times during the congress. In several panels, we had the chance to enjoy presentations on specific projects, examples of successful leisure programmes for children and young people, especially philosophy camps. Let me mention just two examples: One of those is made possible by the welfare society and generous education policies in Canada. The philosophy summer camp for children and young people held in the past few years: wonderful nature that also becomes an agent, where practical and theoretical creativity can be combined, etc. The other one is a regular programme, which neither funding nor politics could bring to life, but started nonetheless when **Bruno Ćurko** (Split University, also responsible for the IPO in Croatia) asked a primary school in Zadar for 15 minutes a week, 2-3 times a week, to hold philosophy sessions for and with children. The determination of this single philosophy teacher has now led to a national movement and, in consultation with the ministry, even a teaching programme for a national "petit philosophy" programme has been developed, which is based partly on Lipman's principles and partly following the participants' experiences.

Other panels, on the other hand, gave examples of cases where the institutional form of philosophy causes difficulties. To take a Western example, a teacher in Ireland said that teachers' unions are strong enough to defend existing programmes, but that it is no longer easy to keep students' attention and interest alive in compulsory courses. In Lithuania, one of the IPO organisers, **Jolanta Saldukaitytė** (Vilnius University), reported that she and her colleagues

² Cf. Heraclitus B 52 DK: „Time is a child at playing draughts, the kingly power is a child's.”

had succeeded in getting philosophy courses accepted into secondary schools, but that the curriculum was being designed by the ministry to follow the traditional model (from Thales to Wittgenstein, if I understood correctly) - a model that teachers and students alike find more of a cumbersome task than a source of cultivation and enjoyment of philosophy. **Claire Katz** (Texas A&M University) discussed the motivation of students and how a methodological flaw in teacher training may at least partly explain why students are much less active and interested in compulsory philosophy courses (e.g. ethics) than in recreational programmes, as she has seen in the summer camps organised by their team. Similarly, she indicated that the teachers' systematic, institutionalised assessment practices also tend to inhibit the creativity and flexibility necessary to adapt to circumstances, which are undoubtedly necessary for students as well.

Some presentations, particularly by the young, dynamic colleagues from Korea or Japan, were rich in technical and mathematical details, but which nevertheless responded to the call and challenges set out in their project statement. Because, just to give one example, dealing with mentally handicapped children in an experimental version of P4wC is apparently a peripheral problem, yet an example by the Japanese university pilot project also serves as an ethical education for teachers in solidarity, and not just a fine example of social empathy. Indeed, what could be more important than engaging with young people who will be shaping the world framework in the not-too-distant future with their decisions, their choices, and not least with their votes. In the case of teacher training, this impact can be magnified.

On the other end of the technical line, i.e., relying on traditional pedagogical methods, **Larisa Retyuskikh** (Lomonosov University) who teaches philosophy for children, trains philosophy teachers and, with the enthusiasm of a young teacher, also popularizes extra-curricular philosophy by organizing IPO competitions in Russia.

The return of the Invisible

Lecturing on the topic of invisibility, **Joseph Murphy** (Philosophy and Ethics Department Chair at Dwight-Englewood School, Englewood, NJ, USA, and Head of the US IPO team) began with a personal experience of his encounter with philosophy, a story far from being a prototypical American career. His love of the Spanish language, pursued alongside his studies in the natural sciences, led him into the mysteries of Spanish mysticism. Philosophy has kept him busy ever since, but he is content to teach and promote it – for example, by organising the Philosophy Olympiad – which is undoubtedly no easy task, since American students are not allowed to write in English, as the IPO prescribes that no one can write in their country's official language. Therefore, a sensible combination of teaching Spanish and philosophy comes in handy. Joe Murphy insists that philosophy should be introduced into all subjects of education; as he puts it metaphorically, philosophy provides the basic infrastructure for science, social life and ethics, not to mention politics, but it is invisible to pragmatic practitioners of the sciences and disciplines.

Following the line of invisibility, **Stephen K. Miller** (Chair of the Committee on Precollege Philosophy, Oakwood Friends School, Marist College), took a different approach, citing the Ring of Gyges, and spoke of the magic of invisibility – or more precisely, the role of

imagination, hypotheses, possible worlds, alternative realities, and how an imaginary and counterfactual approach can play a productive role in teaching philosophy, not only to develop creativity of thought, but also to develop the moral imagination of adults.

Expectations and conclusion

The WCP organisers, **Luca M. Scarantino** (FISP President), along with the members of the organising committee of Sapienza University, **Emidio Spinelli**, **Francesca Gambetti**, and **Ivan Kolev**, have certainly done much to ensure that teaching philosophy, philosophy for children and other related subjects were given a worthy place at the 25th World Congress of Philosophy. After all, regarding the initially formulated expectations that philosophy has a role in solving, or at least answering the current world's challenges, my conclusion would be as follows: If there is anything to philosophy crossing boundaries and uniting us in a still human world, it is philosophy as a teaching instrument, in the very broad sense of *paideia*.

More about the congress can be found on the website: <https://wcprome2024.com/>

References

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