Report of the UNESCO Asia-Arab Interregional Philosophical Dialogues on the Role of Philosophy in War and Peace

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The workshop group dealing with this theme was strongly multicultural, with members coming from Cambodia, China, Thailand, Algeria, Morocco, Iraq, India, and the United States. Thus the group was a miniature UNESCO.

At the outset the group decided to concentrate on two areas: (1) the clarification of basic philosophical terms, and (2) the application of these terms to concrete experiences of war and peace. Given the overall theme of the ENCOUNTERS, we also paid some attention to the role of "modernity". Under the first heading (1), we focused on the meaning of such terms as "philosophy", "dialogue", "war" and "peace". We felt that, in order to play a role in war and peace, philosophy has to be construed as a "practical philosophy" and not just as "pure" or "theoretical philosophy". We agreed that there is a great classical tradition of practical philosophy- in the West (Plato, Aristotle), in the Muslim world (al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd), in India (Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita), and in East Asia (Confucius, Buddhist Sutras). We felt that there was a need for a revival of this classical tradition; one member spoke even of the need for a "new classical philosophy" in our time. Traditionally, practical philosophy (comprising ethics, politics, and aesthetics) has been "dialogical" in the sense of an interactive search for truth and goodness among all participants. Although all are oriented toward truth, no participant is assumed to be in sole possession of truth; hence, practical philosophy is more like a "path" or "chemin" than a finished doctrine. By contrast, modern philosophy has given priority to "theoretical philosophy", especially philosophy of science. Scientific knowledge in modernity tends to be univocal or monological, not dialogical. The group agreed that a renewal of practical philosophy as dialogue is imperative for contemporary cross-cultural or inter-civilizational encounters.

Once practical philosophy is seen as dialogue, the relation between philosophy and "war" becomes clear: war is the end of dialogue. The working group discussed different types of warfare, from ancient times to the present. While traditional forms of warfare involved clashes between clans, tribes or city states, modernity emphasizes wars between "nation states". Still more recently, we have seen the emergence of "terror wars" (involving both state actors and non-state actors). There are also different methods of warfare. While classical warfare emphasized direct hand-to-hand combat, modern wars have increasingly become technological, often placing the accent on distant or long-range modes of destruction.

Turning back to the relation between philosophy and war, the working group discussed the ethical legitimacy of warfare. Radical pacifism declares that all wars are equally unjust or illegitimate. While respecting this kind of pacifism, most members of our group favored a version of "just war" theory. In terms of this theory, severe limitations are placed on warfare, mainly three: war must be the last resort; it should happen only in response to a direct attack; and the response must be proportional to the level of attack. We agreed that limitations on
warfare have been established by legal philosophy, especially by the tradition of international law (as manifest, e.g., in the Geneva Conventions, the Nuremberg principles concerning "crimes against humanity", and other documents). The group also discussed the role of ethical philosophy in establishing some global core values or standards of human conduct (as evident, e.g., in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights). The working group briefly considered a difficult topic: the role of religious teachings in relation to war and peace. Although some members argued that religion is best left aside, the majority felt that, in many cultures, religion and philosophy are so closely linked that both need to be considered (their separation is mostly a result of modernity).

There was agreement, however, that religion must never become an "ideology of war"; rather, religious teachings should always strengthen the search for peace (a role reflected, e.g., in the relation between "Islam" and "salaam"). Regarding the notion of "peace", it was agreed that peace cannot just mean the absence of armed conflict. Rather, peace must involve the fostering of shared ethical values conducive to a peaceful civil life. Here the need for a "new classical philosophy" was again stressed. In terms of "applications" (2), the group turned attention to such contemporary calamities as the war against Iraq, the war in Lebanon, and the situation in Gaza. There was agreement that in many of these instances, the philosophical and legal principles regulating or limiting war have been neglected or pushed aside. In conclusion, the working group strongly agreed that philosophy has an important role to play in the domain of war and peace. Although philosophers as such are not politicians or policy makers, they can and must maintain decent principles of justice and ethics in the political arena. To this extent, philosophers are called upon to "speak truth to power" (as stated by Edward Said and Hannah Arendt). Philosophers also should insist on the importance of teaching philosophy in colleges and high schools, and on the general "right to philosophy" (Jacques Derrida).