

# Return to the Spirit of the Athens School (Raphael, 1509 – 1511) and to Humanistic Culture



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## Abstract

It is time for people to realize what happens to a society when it fails to invest in social relations and the need imposed by history to again make social capital the focus of our interests. We must understand that social capital cannot be replaced by economic capital. A good society is always the precondition for growth of economic values and empirical evidence would seem to confirm this thesis. But the question is whether we will manage in time to dominate this current, limitless greed and aggressiveness in favour of a greater focus on a sense of fraternity and solidarity expressed by love for others. Homo sapiens really does seem to be rather stubborn as regards understanding its own errors. A species that seems to be very attentive as regards learning the causes and effects of physical ills but that has not yet managed to correlate causes and effects in its history. Conceptually, similar situations to those we find ourselves having to face today have occurred before. Perhaps this explains why history is ignored, as if by doing so erects a kind of barrier to the fear of having to face suffering. Whether Homo sapiens will manage to deserve this appellation is difficult to say, time will tell if intelligence will turn out to be a benefit or a curse. Should it turn out to be a curse, this will only be because of a failure to use a truly precious gift, namely, our "humanity", in an intelligent way.

**Keywords:** Athens School; Raphael; Humanistic Culture; Spirit; Social; Political Sciences; History; Philosophy; Poetry; School; Poets; Aristotle; Semi-Criminal; Semi-Pathological

## History



**Figure 1:** The architecture contains Roman elements, but the general semi-circular setting having Plato and Aristotle at its centre might be alluding to Pythagoras' circumpunct.

The School of Athens is one of a group of four main frescoes on the walls of the Stanza (those on either side centrally interrupted by windows) that depict distinct branches of knowledge. Each theme is identified above by a separate tondo containing a majestic female figure seated in the clouds, with putti bearing the phrases: "Seek Knowledge of Causes," "Divine Inspiration," "Knowledge

of Things Divine" (Disputa), "To Each What Is Due." Accordingly, the figures on the walls below exemplify Philosophy, Poetry (including Music), Theology, and Law. The traditional title is not Raphael's. The subject of the "School" is actually "Philosophy," or at least ancient Greek philosophy, and its overhead tondo-label, "Causarum Cognitio", tells us what kind, as it appears to echo Aristotle's emphasis on wisdom as knowing why, hence knowing the causes, in *Metaphysics* Book I and *Physics* Book II. Indeed, Plato and Aristotle appear to be the central figures in the scene. However, all the philosophers depicted sought knowledge of first causes. Many lived before Plato and Aristotle, and hardly a third were Athenians. The architecture contains Roman elements, but the general semi-circular setting having Plato and Aristotle at its centre might be alluding to Pythagoras' circumpunct (Figure 1).

## Economy Social Science or Positive Science? The End of a Sociocultural Model

A visit to the Vatican Museums gives a chance to explore the history of humanity through its genius and works of art. The masterpieces found there illustrate the sense of aesthetic and cultural values of that history, the spirit of those who created them, the inspiration and willpower that guided their task. In short, what human beings have been capable of producing is simply amazing.

Initially visitors admire the beauty of these works, often without asking themselves what the artist wanted to express, just taking in the exterior image while failing to observe the sense and spirit that breathes through their works. Among these masterpieces, a really outstanding one (and very pertinent to this book) is The School of Athens that Raphael painted starting in 1508 when, aged 25, he was called to Rome by Pope Julius II. Raphael grew up during the Italian High Renaissance and drew on legendary characters who have contributed to creating world history as we know it today, adding his own contribution [1-5].

In that extraordinary, perhaps unique period, artists, poets, intellectuals, scientists, philosophers, mathematicians and physicists met and exchanged ideas in an ongoing dialogue about the essence of man, which was the focus of their interest. A cultural scene free of dogma and intolerance was created, one open to a cross-fertilization of ideas that led to a great leap forward in creative and intuitive thought. A similar cultural scene had previously existed during the golden age of Athens and the thinking of that time can rightly be considered one of the cornerstones of our history and culture [6-8]. In his fresco Raphael portrays the characters with such masterly brush strokes that even their spirit reaches out to fire the imagination and penetrate the heart of those viewing it. The leading lights of that era are all there, gathered around the two central characters – Plato, his finger pointing skywards to indicate the world of ideas and the spirit, and Aristotle, who instead stretches out his hand palm down to indicate the real world and scientific experience [9].

The world of ideas and the spirit can never be divorced from an empirical quest for truth. So, everything must be focused on a search for what is true, for beauty, to promote the primary aim – the fulfilment of human happiness. But the world was by no means a paradise in either ancient Athens or in Raphael's time. Both were times in which life was generally extremely hard, unrefined, times of trepidation and suffering. And yet despite these conditions human beings managed to achieve moments of sublime creativity [10].

Today we ought to be in a completely different situation from that of Plato and Raphael, thanks to the progress and power of technical knowledge. A knowledge which has become an end for the modern world, one that should have provided answers to satisfy our primary needs, releasing us from our "shackles", reducing inequalities, freeing us, at least in part, from a life of fatigue and suffering in physical terms. Scientific knowledge should have helped to create a situation in which our free, inventive mind could once again be the driving force of life, leading us to that dimension of spiritual joy we admire in splendid works of art [11].

This is what Keynes thought would happen. In his essay Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren written in 1930 he said: 'Thus for the first time since his creation man will be faced with his real, his permanent problem – how to use his freedom from pressing economic cares, which science and

compound interest will have won for him [...]. The love of money as a possession – as distinguished from the love of money to the enjoyments and realities of life – will be recognised for what it is, a somewhat disgusting morbidity, one of those semi-criminal, semi-pathological propensities which one hands over with a shudder to the specialists in mental disease'. Sadly, this has not been the case, in fact, the very opposite has happened. Technical-instrumental knowledge has become moral knowledge, an indisputable truth and so in no way open to discussion [12]. It dictates the rules for everyday life to the point that humanity itself has become its instrument. The technical culture of modern times has failed to achieve the aim that was hoped for. However, it is not the culture that is at fault but the improvidence of homo sapiens.

We have failed to redistribute wealth; inequalities, famine and poverty have increased; we have not resolved major health problems afflicting most of the world's population. Technical knowledge has separated us from our souls, made us sterile and impersonal, incapable of true human relations and the profound sentiments of love and joy. Unless, that is, these are linked to the sole satisfaction of material and fleeting pleasures. We have imprisoned thought, disintegrated family bonds and forced youngsters to roam the streets without hope. All of us have made this mistake, given that responsibilities are always personal, even if at different levels. This modern age needs rethinking if we are not to find ourselves once more facing chaos [13].

The first step we must take is to ask ourselves if all this talk about the economy being the cause of the crisis of these times is true. Can we continue to think that all the misfortunes mentioned previously are the result of the malfunctioning of rules governing the economy? Or should we admit that a cultural model which has produced the opposite results to those intended has collapsed? Our lack of a social and spiritual life, of creative and intuitive thought, the drabness of an existence in which we are no longer capable of questioning the meaning of life itself – can all of this depend on a malfunctioning of the economy? Is economy social science or positive science? We urgently need to review our recent history [14]. We must question the role we have assigned to the economic sciences and methods of study these have been based on for the past thirty years. Methods effectively founded based on the fundamental idea that economic sciences and the underlying choices and decisions involved are "totally" independent from human nature. So, this means our emotions have no bearing on these choices and decisions. The assumption has therefore been that given equal conditions and information the results will always be the same, thereby endorsing a rational approach that cannot be questioned.

### **The New "Leviathan" Is Finance as an Unconventional Weapon: The End of Real Economy and Human Spirit. History 'S Evolution**

Instead the technical-rational culture applied to a social science like economics has produced a non-science. Friedrich von

Hayek already warned us of this in his speech on accepting the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences in 1974: 'It seems to me that this failure of the economists to guide policy more successfully is closely connected with their propensity to imitate as closely as possible the procedures of the brilliantly successful physical sciences – an attempt which in our field may lead to outright error. [...] This brings me to the crucial issue. Unlike the position that exists in the physical sciences, in economics and other disciplines that deal with essentially complex phenomena, the aspects of the events to be accounted for about which we can get quantitative data are necessarily limited and may not include the important ones.

Hayek's warnings didn't manage to halt the diffusion of a model that we could define as "the mirage of rationality". Today we find ourselves having to face the failure of a model that has separated the nature of people from the results of their activity. We have ignored six thousand years of history with an arrogance that can only have been inspired by the hubris of technical science and interests that the latter ought to have legitimated. The inseparable bond between the technical culture and economics, as recognized and studied, leaves the door wide open to humanity's ancestral greed. A limitless hunger for profit realizable only through material goods. It creates the very system we are prisoners of today and is the source of a deadly risk. The risk of a society in which we become objectivised and lose all sense of ourselves, of our life, our feelings and creative ability [15-18].

It is artistic masterpieces that show how our most intimate being is rooted in a sense of creative spirituality as opposed to being concerned exclusively with an obtuse rationality for its own sake. So today the time has come to again make economics a tool and not an end. A process must be launched to humanize it, abandoning the absoluteness of a rational approach that repudiates history. Rethinking our role and the sense of our life is the real challenge we must face all together, for ourselves and for future generations [19]. In this context, some declarations on the non-role of the humanistic (classical) school and culture provide evidence of shallowness, a limited real culture, falling into dangerous demagoguery because in the long run, despite all the good intentions of this world, the lesson that history teaches go unlearnt. In this sense, among the "good" reforms - adjectives do not replace content and must be defined with respect to the ends (good for what?) - the purely technical school certainly has some positive aspects but the debate on the humanistic school and on the uselessness of dead languages explains better than any other argument the aforementioned perception of the incorrect understanding of the real historical moment we are living. The judgement of the futility of dead languages is a dangerous cultural drift of the debate on the best type of school in the world - the classical (in this author's opinion) - precisely today that humanism is the path to take to overcome the era of barbarians, as Vico defined the extreme limit of the social and moral degradation that marks "the courses and recourses" of a cyclical history. The great G.B.

Vico who wrote "New Science" in 1725 had had a stroke of genius on the cyclical nature of history because the nature of its actor has never changed and history is dictated by the emotional nature of man perennially struggling between the path of aggression and that of solidarity - Eros and Thanatos in ancient Greek - which the genius Freud, profound scholar of Greek and Latin, had analysed drawing on the psychic structure of human nature [20-22].

Historical periods alternate according to the prevalence of one or other social model tending to greater or lesser solidarity or aggressiveness, in this case, the conflicting socio-cultural context contributes to enhancing the aggressive part of the human soul, ending up in the pains of war. The pain of confrontation between men then leads to wisdom as the great Aeschylus and the Greek tragedians - Sophocles and Euripides - had foreseen; 2000 years passed before another great tragedian such as Shakespeare joined their ranks. Man is not naturally good, otherwise religions would not state as the first commandment "love thy neighbor Fas thyself". Vico evidenced the changing of the time of the gods, heroes and barbarous men representing the worst period from which man must try to return to the time of the gods [23].

The long waves that run through the times of history show the drama of human life from the Greek thought whose ancient language is not commonly spoken today but the content has contributed and still contributes to the development of Western civilization and represents its cultural matrix. Is it better to have living languages but dead thought or dead languages but living thought? We are at the end of a socio-cultural model that has raised technical and instrumental knowledge to incontrovertible truth by attributing it purposeful and metaphysical value that it does not have, and so the questions we had asked of philosophy, religion and mythology, today we ask of medicine and the measurable science. The single technical-rational thought has removed from our lives the fundamental rights written in 1948 with the blood of two devastating wars, stifling creative and intuitive thinking. We have returned to a type of Alexandrian, industrious, scientific culture dedicated only to the facts but without the ability to make real and important discoveries for the profound life of man and incapable of creating a single true value [24].

The deification of technology and the principle of utility have as their "nemesi" the increasing aridity in the field of artistic, philosophical, religious and even scientific achievements. Technique becomes an end and man the means. At least since Keynes, a profound scholar of classical studies, no general theory has been produced and precisely in the "The End of Laissez-Faire" he wrote, "A study of the history of opinion is preliminary to the emancipation of the mind. I do not know which makes a man more conservative - to know nothing but the present, or nothing but the past" [25]. In the end, history vindicated him and disavowed the foundations of the Chicago School who helped deify finance. After Keynes, economics and finance took on the role of the philosopher's stone that solves the problems of life, and economics from a moral and social science has been unnaturally turned into

an exact science. This is the great deception of a science devoid of scientific foundations whose deviated nature was first condemned by Aristotle in "Politica", which students today should read, and not only those in classical schools [26].

Economics - *oikia nomos* - was born as and remains a social science, only the interested can consider it exact and only in order to use it as a monetary weapon with the power to destabilize social systems. Only a return to the convertibility of money into a real asset -the gold exchange standard -can remove it from the mythological context in which it was falsely issued and return it to a means of exchange and not a value. Today we are in a profound anthropological crisis, a kind of transition between the late Roman Empire and the Middle Ages, as Vico wrote, "historia se repetit". We do not yet understand the roots of our problems, so we continue to worsen the state of things.

Every single day we see all types of devastation and continue talking about the economic crisis and not the real crisis of man as a person who has given up thinking, leaving us at the mercy of ancient ghost that seemed to have vanished after two devastating world wars but duly reappeared in a global age as the biblical damnation. "... The educational system, which is first and foremost a training school devoted to 'useful knowledge' and the crafts. Its chief business is to prepare successful businessmen, craftsmen, engineers and technicians, lawyers, doctors, teachers, preachers and so on. Mastery is sought in such arts as amassing a fortune, farming, home cooking, barbering, the invention of machines, research work, teaching and preaching. Elementary, high-school and college education – all are oriented principally in the same direction, paying scant attention, if any, to the forgotten purpose of real knowledge and wisdom: the nature of true reality and true values" wrote Pitirim Sorokin in 1941 in his work "The Crisis of our Age", which would seem to have been written in the future [27].

### The Role of Humanistic Culture

The humanities school (this from someone who went to a scientific school, yet with great attention to classical studies; but at the time, the school closest to home was chosen) was introduced by Giovanni Gentile in his last book "Genesis and the Structure of Society" where he theorized the humanism of work, anticipating the problems of today and noting that classical culture was crucial to develop thinking and creativity, qualities which today have withered. The history of man shows that knowledge and thought are fundamental to carry society forward over time.

The a priori forms of prevention are harmful and short-term, classical studies marked the lives of many who carried the world forward: Fermi, Rita Levi Montalcini, Maiorana, Dulbecco, only in the sciences in Italy but also Pirandello, Carducci ... But if we look at history, we have Keynes, Hayek, von Mises, Freud, Bertrand Russell, Einstein, Marx, Leibnitz, Heisenberg. Bernard Shaw said, " Napoleon and other great men were makers of empires, but these eight men whom I am about to mention were makers

of universes and their hands were not stained with the blood of their fellow men. I go back 2,500 years and how many can I count in that period? I can count them on the fingers of my two hands. Pythagoras, Ptolemy, Kepler, Copernicus, Aristotle, Galileo, Newton and Einstein -- and I still have two fingers left vacant", all with the same classical culture as inspiration.

Humanity over centuries has sent little men to appear for us at the edge of the abyss on which the Earth travels, the suns blazes and light parades. All great politicians who extended the Commonwealth studied at Oxford and Cambridge, where the basic subjects were classical from Greek and Latin, they absorbed a more integral vision of human nature and the way in which history evolves. Since the technical-rational cultural model has prevailed, we have lost touch with the flow of history because we only look at the future as a guarantee of success. Thus, "homo sapiens", as we presume to call ourselves, while seemingly very attentive to understanding the causes and effects of physical ills is no longer able to understand the relationship between cause and effect in his history. He behaves as if the past had never existed and as if history had never shown similar situations to those, he now finds himself before, pushed to a form of repetitive coercion.

The consequences of this historical blindness are before our eyes every day, seeing the disasters of US foreign policy dominated by the idea of technical power and unable to understand history because its ruling class has lost touch with it and has forgotten the cultural lesson of the founding fathers who were accustomed to speaking in Latin and Greek. A cultural model that is also experiencing a dramatic moment of social instability due to poverty, unemployment, inequality, devastating social pathologies, but continuously hidden and masked by the media mystifying reality.

If the principle of utility is the only principle applied, then only that which is useful or instrumental serves, and life itself becomes a means to achieving short-term material desires. If this principle is invoked to denounce classical studies as non-vocational, the ancient languages have died but the thought that lies beneath them shines more than ever, and the study of their structure helps to develop the most important thing that man can do but seems to have unlearned by only studying technical subjects, namely, "thought". We have lost the ability to think, because thinking takes effort, time, does not pay right away and is dangerous, as Bertrand Russell said, "Men fear thought as they fear nothing else on earth – more than ruin, more even than death [28].

Thought is subversive and revolutionary, destructive and terrible; thought is merciless to privilege, established institutions, and comfortable habits; thought is anarchic and lawless, indifferent to authority, careless of the well-learned wisdom of the ages. Thought looks into the pit of hell and is not afraid... Thought is great and swift and free, the light of the world, and the chief glory of man .... But if the thought is to be held by many, not the privileged few, we must deal with fear. It is fear which stops the

man, lest their cherished beliefs are not going to be illusions, fear that the institutions with which they live will not be harmful, fear that they themselves will not be less worthy of respect would have assumed”.

Given what has been said previously it seems we need to rethink our way of being a society. The desire to give space to humanity's sense of omnipotence again seems to have whisked it back in history – to the myths of Prometheus, of Icarus – and force it once more to face the eternal dilemma of human destiny. A more social vision of life will be needed in order to re-pacify people with themselves, one in terms of relationships and not as single individuals, and to redefine the priorities of their needs. This doesn't mean curtailing progress but conceiving it in a different way. In this sense the priority becomes to refocus on people's spiritual dimension, today subordinated to the physical one, which determines choices and priorities of their needs. The spiritual and religious dimension are not closely bound to a religious belief because the ability to “feel” is within each one of us, it is innate. Today it is dormant but not lost, our task is to recover it, starting from each single moment of every day of our life, in relationships that bind us to others.

We need to return to a relationship with the natural world that the real economy can help reconstruct. Contact with this facilitates growth of the social dimension, not only considered as a series of mere chemical but also emotional reactions, which must once more become the subject of economics and other social sciences. All of this doesn't mean renouncing the vital contribution of sciences in our life, but the acceptance of evidence that they cannot be absolute values, they cannot be considered moral knowledge to the point that we are induced to consider only the material dimension of our life. The return to a more spiritual dimension is a course to follow because it is written in the agenda of our history that, as European philosophy has attempted to describe, seems to follow a continual alternation over time of the predominance of material decadence and spiritual revival. In fact, we cannot renounce our spiritual dimension without renouncing living: we have a permanent nostalgia for our own being beyond material aspects, a nostalgia that is alive in us like embers that lie dormant under ashes.

In his work *Homo creatus est* written in 1986, Hans Urs von Balthasar speaks of “man's nostalgia”, reminding us that this need for a spiritual dimension is an innate feeling, first mentioned in Greek philosophy that aimed to explain the sense of harmony of life. Starting from Plato's *Symposium*, in which all the participants discuss Eros who has nostalgia and flies off towards the supreme and divine beauty, to Plotinus' key concept of conversion (*epistrophé*) and of nostalgia that hastens towards the return (*hormé*), all of Greek philosophy only considered the issue of the true nobility of man. Man, who must not be content with fleeting pleasures and joys unless he wants to renounce satisfying his aspiration to happiness. The focus of this search for wisdom (*philosophia*) is always the blissful life as being man's aim

and his ultimate essential form, towards which he tends after his conversion from mere earthly captivity (think of Plato's allegory of the cave). Given that, as we have said, the difference between the natural and supernatural was unknown in Greek philosophy, it was expressed in the fall of the human soul from the divine heights from which, however, man brings a spark that forces him to feel nostalgia for what was once his country, the paradise lost.

### Conclusion

#### Begin Again from People, The Sense of Humanistic Culture

Sixty-five years have passed since various premonitory considerations were made by Europe's philosophers. During this period the facts have borne out their intuitions as to the danger of relying on a technical culture alone to provide guidance for society. Today it would seem that the role of feelings is making headway in people's hearts – appropriate answers and conduct in the face of change can no longer be postponed. It is time for people to realize what happens to a society when it fails to invest in social relations and the need imposed by history to again make social capital the focus of our interests. We must understand that social capital cannot be replaced by economic capital. A good society is always the precondition for growth of economic values and empirical evidence would seem to confirm this thesis.

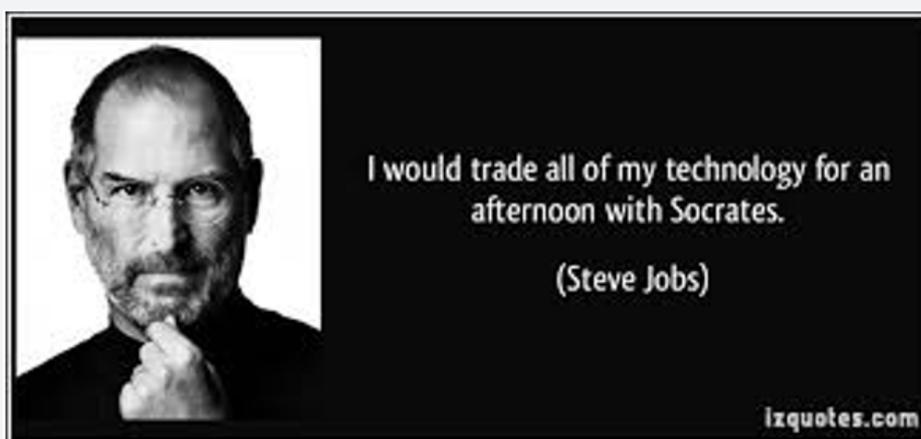
But the question is whether we will manage in time to dominate this current, limitless greed and aggressiveness in favour of a greater focus on a sense of fraternity and solidarity expressed by love for others. *Homo sapiens* really does seem to be rather stubborn as regards understanding its own errors. A species that seems to be very attentive as regards learning the causes and effects of physical ills but that has not yet managed to correlate causes and effects in its history. Conceptually, similar situations to those we find ourselves having to face today have occurred before. Perhaps this explains why history is ignored, as if by doing so erects a kind of barrier to the fear of having to face suffering. Whether *Homo sapiens* will manage to deserve this appellation is difficult to say, time will tell if intelligence will turn out to be a benefit or a curse. Should it turn out to be a curse, this will only be because of a failure to use a truly precious gift, namely, our “humanity”, in an intelligent way.

The past few centuries have seen revolutions, wars and other tragic events that have ended, even in recent times, with solemn declarations of peace and democracy. But unfortunately, in the brief course of one generation they seem to disappear. And so, the history of progress of civilizations continues a course filled with doubts. Answers to the needs of an increasingly global society represented by a culture that relies on a single philosophy – technical knowledge as an end in itself – is showing it has reached the end of the line with the collapse of society and the very essence of humanity.

The time has come to rethink economic studies, making a move away from the technical-rational paradigm that has proved

inappropriate for the aim assigned to it, to a different one capable of broadening the field of studies to include human nature as a decisive variable. An approach that considers human beings as “individuals” in an integral sense in order to provide a complete and constructive contribution towards the development of society. Absolute faith in scientific progress has ended up by creating an exaggerated sense of omnipotence that in the end has turned against us, because our ability to govern this tumultuous growth has not kept pace with it. Humanity has become so infatuated with its conquests that people have lost sight of themselves, ending up by considering their very own lives as if they were just another consumer good. As Guardini said, people must again find the ability to bring the excess of power that has been created over their lives under control by returning to an order of things capable of restoring harmony within themselves and the world

‘In a context of uncertainty unparalleled in history, one that in no way compares to developments in our ability to dominate nature, people now aspire to a valid order that can remain under their power. An order that is both useful and promotes human progress, capable of reconciling humanity with the extent of its scientific knowledge, which today is perceived as an absolute value, placing it at the service of the search for a more widespread common good’ [9]. Now, perhaps, the boundary of the enigma and this hope seem better defined and can therefore lead to a clearer answer for everyone, while remaining fully aware, however, that responsibilities are always an individual concern. Let us hope that in the middle of all this confusion and uncertainty we manage to see the light and find the right path to follow. A path that humanity must find in order to fulfil its destiny and its unique and creative mission on this Earth (Figure 2).



**Figure 2:** A path that humanity must find in order to fulfil its destiny and its unique and creative mission on this Earth.

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