

# ESSAY

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## THE VALUE OF UNIQUENESS: DISCOURSE AROUND HUMAN NATURE

### Introduction:

Greek philosopher Heraclitus put in evidence in the quotation suggested how people seem to act as if they have their own thought even if the logos between them is in fact the same. He moves from the assumption that human beings are inhabited by the same rationality but fail to recognise this, thus acting in a contradictory way.

In this essay I would like in the first place to question the relation of concession established by Heraclitus between the common nature of logos and the individualistic behaviour of people to replace it with a link cause-effect, arguing that there is no such thing as common logos and that people act as if they have their own thought because they do. In spite of Socrates and stoicists' view on the matter, which supports the idea of a common logos that defines human beings, I will proceed by stating that it is actions that define people rather than a common logos, because the opposite would imply difficult and unsolvable philosophical consequences. I would like to affirm that there is not such a thing as common logos but a massive influence from the social context does exist. I will support this argument through the ideas of Freud on a individual level and the Frankfurt school on a collective level.

Secondly, I will sustain that people seem to have different thoughts and that they do because they are all existentially different and I will enquire the political consequences of that through the point of view of Hannah Arendt. Imagining what the outcomes would be if people were all the same, I will argue that the intrinsic human diversity is actually positive.

Thirdly, I will finish by analysing what the implications of the diversity of thought of human beings are from the point of view of their coexistence on Earth and their aim of building a peaceful environment.

### **A common logos shared by everyone: contradictions**

The idea of a common logos shared by all human individuals goes back as far as Heraclitus, who was convinced of the existence of a pervasive force that made people all in the same condition. This conception was later on inherited by Greek philosopher Socrates who applied it also to the field of morality. He suggested that people can accomplish morally bad actions not because they actively choose to or because they are intrinsically evil, but only because they ignore what the good is and how to distinguish between morally acceptable and unacceptable behaviours. If only they were not ignorant, he thought, would they be able to do good. As a matter of fact he argued that morality as well as rationality are buried within each individual



and that the task of the philosopher is only to drag them out through the maieutic process. Afterwards, even stoicists supported the idea of the logos and defined it as the force of rationality which pervades the world and is shared from humans as much as from nature. The wise is in stoicist terms the person who is able to connect with the logos buried within him and that pursues the state of ataraxia by refusing to be *mancipium sui corporis* (Seneca, Letters to Lucilium).

What seems contradictory though is that this idea of common logos was conceived in a society where people did not share at all the same kind of existence because of identity and social differences, which makes the whole aspect of universality of logos fall apart. Firstly, the cultural binomial beauty-goodness typical of Greek ancient society undermines the universality of logos as automatically what and who is not beautiful is not moral and therefore not rational. This is witnessed in the famous passage of the Iliad of Homer where Tersites tries to make a speech but is silenced because of his incompetence and his ugliness that are one the cause of the other. Secondly, it is hard to imagine a logos that could be shared by the citizens of polis and all the rest of the community, women, slaves, foreigners, who were held in such poor consideration. How could the logos inhabit those who were not even considered capable of participating into the life of the community?

Moreover this idea of a shared logos implies that humans are in some ways linked by a common philosophical and ontological DNA which defines their existence and their actions: in the way that it is formulated the concept appears to be as binding as possible. If I am part of the logos, firstly I will not be able to act in an ontologically different way from the others, because we share the same rationality, secondly all of my actions and my behaviours will not be able to go far from what is established within the logos. If I accomplish an action A then said action A is part of the logos, of the human nature, and attributable to it. The issue is that this does not explain how and why people act in very different ways and have very different views on things if they share the same logos. Either at least some of them is excluded from it, but it is difficult to say on what grounds, considering that the logos ought to have been common by definition, either there is no such logos to share.

Furthermore, at least in the way stoicists intended it, the logos ought to be shared not only by humans but also by the rest of nature. If we accept this, then there is no philosophical distinction between the human and natural rationality, which is paradoxical as human beings pretend to say that their behaviour is rational precisely in contrast with natural events that take place outside of their sphere of control and without an evident logical reason which they thus label as irrational.

Lastly, the most difficult implication of the idea of a common logos shared by all is that it means that whatever action I accomplish or somebody else accomplishes is in some way part of the logos and part of human nature. This means that even the most evil and catastrophic events that took place in human history, even what Arendt has called the *unpunishable and unforgivable crime*, that is the Holocaust, are part of human nature, thus rational and repeatable. The idea of a common logos justifies every event as part of a major order of things, thus depriving the person of the only thing he disposes of, that it is freedom to choose.

No such thing as a common logos can be philosophically accepted without generating contradictions because this concept fails to consider the uniqueness of the human within the natural world and the diversity of action between the individuals. Moreover, it deprives people



of their freedom of choice thus justifying all of their actions, even the ones that it is not possible to do.

One cannot negate, though, that people can be influenced by the context they live in, but in a way not as binding as the one implied by the hypothetical existence of the logos. Individuals live together, share experiences, know the world together and are thus influenced by one another and by those who lived before them through the study of literature and history. No man can pretend to live totally autonomously and pretend that their choices and actions are only theirs without any influence. No man can even pretend to survive without the others, as it has also been demonstrated by the scientific observation that, for example, newborns tend to experience health issues if they are deprived of physical and emotional contact with other human beings. But this kind of influence between people is more similar to what in Freudian terms is called the *superego* rather than the common logos, as it is not totally binding and it still explains the difference between the individuals and the freedom of action. Everybody experiences the influence of the superego, the group of moral, social, cultural rules that are accepted in a society and confused at least in the first place with natural obligations, even if they are a product of the social evolution. Philosophers from the school of Frankfurt even argued that this is true also on a collective level and that societies themselves resent from the influence of cultural hidden factors and tendencies that lie underneath them. But everyone, somebody more and somebody less, disposes of the means to look critically towards the superego, understand its historical and contextual origins, and then decide freely how to act. The superego does exist for everybody but it is a far more realistic concept than the common logos as it does not pretend to be an undefeated force but is rather approachable with a critical attitude.

## A key to interpret human nature: uniqueness

After having questioned the existence of the common logos and proposed the Freudian concept of superego as a more realistic alternative which still guarantees the freedom of individuals, I will now analyse the singularity of people's thoughts that is attributable to the singularity of people themselves.

The very reason why people have different thoughts is that they are unequivocally different. It is true that humans experience the same events, and thus are likely to end up forming opinions similar to one another that can be at least grouped into categories alike. But at the end of the day no one can form the exact opinion of someone else because such opinion is based on objective factors, that can be in common, but also subjective factors, which are unique. People are intrinsically all different as they are only defined by their choices. From an existentialist point of view, humans are not pre-determined, and precisely their faculty of choice is what makes them free and what defines them. Jean-Paul Sartre said that the existence comes before the essence, intending that people develop their essence, their nature, during their life by making their choices. These are totally up to them, which means that the person is free but also responsible for his own choices, which cannot be attributed to any major force driving humans against their will. This is why Sartre could say that existentialism is a humanism, because it empowers people to be fabricants of their own lives by defining themselves. No logos is conceived as a force hindering people from choosing actively to become one they want to be.



Evidently, as I have already put in evidence in the paragraph above, freedom of choice implies a great deal of responsibility, active participation from each single individual and has serious implications also from the political point of view. Hannah Arendt has enquired such implications in "The human condition" (1958), putting in evidence how the uniqueness of individuals is the fundament of the concept of political responsibility. Firstly, if everybody is different, this means that no one can delegate its political role to somebody else. So the existential difference between individuals immediately implies within its own definition that a political and institutional layout aiming to respect the features of people needs to take into account their element of uniqueness and thus needs to come up with a way in which everybody can play its political role. Secondly, if everyone is different, probably everyone has different needs, ideas, aspirations, so the political relationship between them will inevitably be characterised by conflict and disagreement. This may also be an helpful indicator to understand if everybody is given the possibility to be politically active: a collective political situation should be characterised by disagreement and disputes. If none of that is present then probably not everyone is playing his political role. But this should happen, because each individual's diversity means that everyone is equal in their diversity and should have the right to express that.

Furthermore it is interesting to notice how this uniqueness that characterises humans has in fact its benefits. In particular, if it were not for such diversity, the political and more in general the relational dimension of humans would not be characterised by the conflict that Arendt describes as the product of the uniqueness. This would imply a reduction if not an elimination of the possibilities of growth and improvement of social assets. In fact, dialectically speaking, there can be no growth and change without opposition, which, if conducted peacefully and rationally, is the only way to make a situation evolve, hopefully for the best. If people were all the same, all their needs would automatically coincide, they would not be pushed to find ways to communicate them to others.

## **Diversity of opinions: implications**

Finally, it is worth enquiring what implications and consequences the diversity between individuals implies once it has been considered as a real phenomenon. The very recognition of this uniqueness is what lies at the fundament of the concept of democracy. This appears as a possible way to preserve people's diversity. Democracy can be defined as a collective process of decision-making. The very fact that people are all different implies that there should not be wills predominant over others because each will is different, so the only way to preserve all of them is to preserve the collective one.

Some could argue that people having their own thoughts means that they will never look out for anything but their interests. But being unique does not necessarily means being selfish and failing to consider others' identity. Philosophers have argued over the nature of humans, considering whether we tend to associate and live together because it is in our nature, or if we are only like the hedgehogs used metaphorically by Schopenhauer, who stay together only driven by the fear of natural forces but end up keeping some distance between one another to shield from their instinct of hurting. But if we accept the existentialist point of view, none of these two views matter, because instead of having to behave a certain way imposed by our human nature, we can choose how to act according to what we have seen is convenient and we want through experience. No matter what their supposed nature is, human beings can

consciously decide to work together towards the construction of a democratic society if this is what they feel is the best option. For instance the 16th Sustainable development goal of the Agenda 2030 clearly states that one of the aims of the global community is to create by 2030 peaceful and inclusive societies and build accountable and solid institutions. This objective is totally doable if we move from the assumption that single choices are what form the context in which we live, which is not predetermined and depends on our will to accomplish it. Obviously this reasoning calls for the concept of responsibility: if one cannot attribute the happening of things to external causes or to his own's presumed nature, then face to the failure of his projects one must admit the reason for this is him and him only. This means that collective changes can exist only as a summary of individual changes, which are the only one we can actually control.

The different ways in which everyone can express its diversity thus responding to the call for his political participation which lies in his own existence are still a subject of debate. For instance, even the concept of democracy itself has been an object of philosophical discussion between those who believe in a more formal layout of democracy based exclusively on the association one person-one vote, and others who have suggested a more practical and total participation to political life. Jeffrey Green in "The eyes of people: democracy in the age of spectatorship" has even suggested that in contemporary societies it would be best to replace the vocal conception of the population, which would imply a more radical participation, with the ocular one, far more realistic for this structure of modern governments and layouts of states.

## Conclusion

After having analysed the logical structure of Heraclitus's sentence and questioned the concept of common logos, we have come to analyse the concept of the individual uniqueness and its political implications. This lies at the fundament of the concept of democracy which can do well at preserving people's right to express their diversity and allowing humans to build peaceful and inclusive societies.

