

Europe Between Dream and Reality

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1

When I received the invitation to participate in a session titled “The Muses and Education,” part of a series of seminars organized by the Nexus Institute on behalf of the Dutch EU Presidency under the heading “Europe: A Beautiful Idea?” it was the question-mark that first drew my attention. “A beautiful idea” — that sounds a bit like “a beautiful dream,” suggesting a fantasy that comforts us precisely because at some distance from reality. Kant had good reason to make such distance a defining mark of beauty. In what relationship then does the beautiful idea of Europe stand to an inevitably ill defined, sometimes ugly, and ever evolving European reality, shaped increasingly by utilitarian thinking? Does the question-mark betray fear that reality will disappoint hope for a Union that would be more than an association supported first of all by economic considerations? The heading both expresses and questions a conviction that a high standard of living as measured by quantity of consumption should not be confused with a high quality of life, something far more difficult to measure and therefore to enter into the calculations that so often guide political decision-making. But despite the power of market-oriented thinking and the quantification-obsessed utilitarianism it invites, should the former be allowed to trump the latter? Appeals to the beautiful idea of Europe attempt to ensure that debates in the European Council and Europe’s parliaments not lose sight of that full humanity that instrumental rationality cannot easily enter into its calculations.

2

The force of this question-mark was underscored for me and given a special connotation by the fact that this particular session was to take place in Berlin, not far from a place to which my very earliest memories often return me: a large magical garden in Eichkamp, Zikadenweg 42, inhabited by an emerald lizard that seemed to come right out of some fairytale. Dreamlike memories of many such places, places shadowed by an often not happy history, including nightmarish images of the burning Berlin, glowing red against the night sky, which we children could not help stare at through an attic window; of the hole that was all that remained, after a particularly bad night, of a house across the street — children with whom we had played, like that house, suddenly no longer; of a ditch filled with unripe plums, in which we sought refuge, as the train that was to bring us from war-ravaged Berlin to the comparative safety of the Franconian Königshofen was being strafed; of a small prison camp on the Grosse Gleichberg unto which my brother and I stumbled, having lost our way in the fog, appalled and frightened by the look on the faces of the prisoners that cut into the magical beauty of the surrounding landscape like a knife — but also including images of the glass-clear ice of the Kurische Haff through which we could see the watery world beneath; of the interior of the church in Ipthausen, which was the beginning of a life-long love-affair with the rococo; of a spring walk to the still castle-like holy mountain of Andechs, which led the boy to fantasize about the dukes of Andechs-Meranien, about crossing the Alps, about Italy. Such images have coalesced over time into a spiritual landscape that has provided setting and orientation for all my teaching and writing. Four years in Munich's Maxgymnasium proved especially important in that they led to a deeper awareness of the historical dimension of that landscape, opening it especially to a Greece that at times seemed more like home than the ruined Munich in which we then lived. It is my rootedness in this still expanding half-fictional landscape without clear boundaries that helps to explain why through more than 50 good years in the United States I have nevertheless remained a German and am now a European citizen.

Why did I not follow the example of my parents and four siblings and become a citizen of a country that promised a life less burdened by so many ambiguous memories? I have often wrestled with that decision. Milan Kundera suggested that a European today

is just “somebody nostalgic for Europe.” And it is indeed nostalgia that binds me to a Europe that is first of all a very personal ill-defined and ever evolving spiritual construct, from which issues an obscure imperative, rather than a present reality. But I would challenge those who all too quickly use the term “nostalgia” to imply criticism: could it be that nostalgia, while it may prevent us from facing the challenge of a necessarily uncertain future, is also a condition of spiritual health? Perhaps it is important to be oriented by idealizing transformations of the familiar, by dreams of a home that we will never find. The power of such dreams can be sufficient to keep us from settling for inevitably less than perfect present conditions without losing our sense of direction. My idea of Europe, whatever else it may be, is first of all such a dream.

But what binds me to Europe is more than just such a dream: that dream has its roots in a past that has made me what I am even as it includes much that one might want to excise and forget. I remember being challenged by a letter in *Die Zeit* (April 1961, No. 17, p. 38) in which a young woman rejected the guilt of the fathers as a burden that she as a German had to bear: “It was the overbearing national consciousness of our parents that drove them blindly into the arms of the Nazis. And they not only burdened themselves with guilt, they also bear the burden of shame, of disgrace, and of severe punishment. But it would be unjust and stupid, and even backward, for us, the heirs of this guilt, to be ashamed of these atrocities as Germans. (Only because we happened to have been born in Central Europe.) Our relationship to these matters is far more human, a deep agonizing compassion with the victims of the Nazis, and also horror and shame before the deeds of which human beings are capable.” The young woman felt shame, but as a human being, not as a German. But if she chose not to see herself ashamed as a German, she did so only by choosing to see herself as accidental: “only because we happened to have been born in Central Europe.” If this is experienced as an accident, everything that makes me this particular person becomes accidental. I betray myself when I do not acknowledge that I owe what I have become to a particular history and landscape that includes the burning Berlin and Auschwitz and all they signify. Given this past, it is tempting to want to shed this burden, to seek refuge from what is German and European in the human. But what I am today I owe in large measure to my German and European past, which includes so much that is horrible, but even more that continues to sustain me.

My dream of Europe defines itself from and against this past, which renders indecent all talk, thinking, and action that reduces human beings to mere material, as we do when we speak of the death of innocent children killed by some stray bomb as collateral damage. Precisely because it includes much that is anything but beautiful, it demands that we attempt to wrest from this so ambiguous blood-soaked soil a Europe that will deserve to be called beautiful.

3

I must not forget the special concerns communicated by the titles of my session, “The Muses and Education,” and of this particular conference, “Living European Values: Arts and Education.” But what do the muses still matter? Are we not expecting too much of art when we expect it to play a decisive part in establishing the beautiful idea of Europe? Did Hegel not have a point when he proclaimed 180 years ago that for us moderns art can no longer have the importance it possessed in ancient Greece, that it still had in the Middle Ages and, we can add, retained in much of Europe as late as the eighteenth century? Has not art today become first of all a source of entertainment, in some cases a very elevated, esoteric entertainment, catering to a small cultural elite, but entertainment nonetheless? And should this development be mourned? Should it not rather be welcomed as an inevitable consequence of the progress of both freedom and reason? No doubt, many will continue to enjoy and even to dedicate their lives to art. But have such enjoyment and dedication today not become fundamentally private affairs? What is the argument showing that there should be public support for the arts? What is a democratic state’s interest in supporting art that appears to matter only to a small cultural elite? Is art still a value that deserves to be placed next to those values of which the treaty establishing the European Union speaks: respect for human dignity, liberty, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and respect for human rights?

George Steiner deplored in his Nexus lecture the fact that “young Englishmen choose to rank David Beckham high above Shakespeare and Darwin in their list of national treasures,” that “learned institutions, bookstores, concert halls and theatres are struggling for survival in a Europe which is fundamentally prosperous, where wealth has never spoken more loudly.” “The fault,” he charged, “is very simply ours.” But just

what is our fault here? And who are “we”? Does this “we” include those young Englishmen who care little about Shakespeare and Darwin? Are we to blame them or are they victims of their society and more fundamentally of this modern age? Should we blame ourselves for not insisting that our governments spend more on art and culture, even if that should mean higher taxes? But just what is the important value that here is being violated? The question: what does art matter? is not answered by the considerable sums that, such lamentations notwithstanding, continue to be spent today on art, both by the public and the private sector. It is not answered either by the fact that there still seems to be widespread agreement that it is important to continue to support the arts, to support artists, to preserve our artistic heritage, to support institutions such as opera houses and museums. Is such agreement more than an expression of cultural inertia? Why not leave the future of art, like that of other forms of entertainment, to be determined by market forces, as some have urged?

The word “museum” especially invites reflection: do we not put into museums what we still treasure as part of our heritage, consider part of what has made us who we are, but which nevertheless no longer has a central place in our lives, somewhat in the way we hate to throw away the teddy-bear that comforted us long ago? That Hegel proclaimed the death of art in its highest sense just at the time when the Altes Museum was rising not far from where he was lecturing is no mere coincidence. And it would seem to be not only art in what was once its highest sense that today seems to have its proper place in a museum: must something similar not be said, not just about all that deserves to be called “culture,” but even about “nature,” which increasingly needs to be protected from our modern world in the form of nature parks and preserves, they too museums of a sort? And what about that beautiful idea of Europe, its traces lovingly preserved in cities and landscapes, some of them honored by UNESCO as part of the world’s cultural heritage? Does this beautiful idea, too, like everything beautiful, today belong into a museum?

To be sure, a shared culture still establishes some sense of regional, national, and European identity. But are we not becoming ever more mobile, literally and spiritually — just think of the impact the internet — and by the same token less and less bound by regional identities. The formation of the European Union can be understood as a

welcome step in this development, not because it promises us a new cultural identity, but because it re-enforces a thinking that takes the establishment of such identities to be a private matter and renders old boundaries and divisions increasingly obsolete. Are appeals to such a cultural identity more than a bit of nostalgia that refuses to let go of something that really no longer has a place in our modern world? Did Milan Kundera not have a point when he observed that, “Today it is culture’s turn to move aside,” that it has indeed “already moved aside.” Some of us will lament such developments. But many will welcome them as a release from a cultural prison somewhat in the way Arthur Danto invites us to understand the death of what Hegel considered art in its highest sense as a liberation. Is the death of culture perhaps part of humanity’s coming of age? Part of the progress of freedom?

4

But what values will bind the freedom of those thus come of age and render it responsible? The pursuit of ever more freedom? Of an ever higher standard of living, measured in economic terms? Of happiness? But does a high quality of life not have to include a robust sense of community? Is any utilitarian calculus sufficient to establish the shared commitment necessary to support genuine community?

The question is whether that modern world, which has been given its shape by a distinctively European self-assertion that has brought us a long undreamed-of increase in freedom and promises to make us the masters and possessors of nature, is not demanding a price that we should not pay as thoughtlessly as Peter Schlemihl in Adalbert von Chamisso’s story traded his shadow for untold wealth. At issue is that opposition of which Milan Kundera has this to say in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*: “The only certainty is: the lightness/weight opposition is the most mysterious, most ambiguous of all.” That opposition returns in contrasting visions of a future shaped by dreams of freedom, of dancing, of flying, a future thought in the image of Rem Koolhaas’s delirious New York, and another that would allow us to experience ourselves once again as members of a genuine community, a future, say, thought in the image of old Prague and its specific *genius loci*. That opposition will not be evaded.

The phrase “Europe: A Beautiful Idea” gestures towards the possibility that Europe might become more than an association born of considerations how the welfare of the citizens of the member states might be enhanced by integration, where integration means first of all economic integration, which inevitably will lead to other forms of integration, including increased respect for others. So understood the “European Union” is first of all another construct in the image of Hobbes’s Leviathan, born of human selfishness as a remedy to some of the negative consequences of that very same selfishness. We have been taught painfully how important it is to our welfare to consider the welfare of others. And are material welfare, security, and mutual respect, even if supported only by enlightened selfishness, not enough? Many thus have become suspicious of the “beautiful ideas” that have presided over national and religious communities. Instead they would have us reaffirm the link between freedom, reason, science, technology, and progress and welcome the impossible to predict challenges and opportunities such progress will bring.

I think it important to throw some sand into the wheels of this development. What should be the measure of progress? The link between technology and progress is far more problematic than such optimism suggests and I think it perhaps the most important task of art and more especially of architecture today to preserve the tension between an idea of progress inseparably linked to technology and a utopian idea of progress that refuses to let go of nostalgia.

5

Following Kundera we can speak of the unbearable lightness of much in our environment, especially in our built environment, our architecture. Such lightness inevitably diminishes our sense of our own reality. Let me try to clarify. In the *Critique of Judgment* Kant wonders how it would affect us to learn that, what we thought the call of a nightingale, was in fact produced by a boy an innkeeper had hired some beautiful summer evening to heighten the enjoyment of his guests. Once we learn of the deception, Kant suggests, what we hear loses its charm. The song of the real nightingale possesses an aura not possessed by its simulacrum. That also holds for art and architecture: true beauty possesses an aura not possessed by its simulacrum.

But is such an understanding of the aura of the beautiful compatible with the understanding of reality that is a presupposition of our modern world, governed as that world is by reason, science, and technology? Has Walter Benjamin not taught us to understand our age as the age of the mechanical reproducibility of works of art? What room does this leave for the aura possessed by what is unique and original? And must what is said here of works of art not also be said of products of nature? Why still bother to visit some tropical beach when its simulacrum awaits you in a former airship hangar, only an hour's drive from Berlin? And, most importantly, what in principle distinguishes a human being from its mechanical simulacrum, say from a robot with a complicated computer brain? — a question posed already by E.T. A. Hoffmann's Olympia in *Der Sandmann*. Can science give us an adequate answer?

Ethics presupposes that we are able to experience others as persons deserving respect. It does not generally call such experience into question. But for such experience to be possible the other must present him- or herself as free spirit incarnated in matter. Science, however, presupposes an understanding of reality that has no room for spirit so understood. Ethics thus demands an altogether different experience of reality. In this connection Kant appeals to aesthetic experience: appreciation of the beauty in nature, he claims, presupposes an openness to meaning of which we are not the authors and which in principle eludes our concepts and therefore also science. Kant also recognizes that such an experience of reality as transcending the reach of our concepts is a necessary condition of ethical behavior. Ethical considerations call for an environmental aesthetics.

With Kant I want to insist on the rift between what we can capture in the net of our concepts and things, most importantly persons. To be sure, words open us human beings to reality. There is no experience that is not mediated by concepts. Yet concepts conceal even as they reveal. Whenever this essential concealment is forgotten, objectifying thought cannot but replace reality with its simulacra. Whatever it is that gives the real nightingale or a real person their special aura, it is this that gives them their special weight, and at the same time gives weight to our own existence. Beauty so understood opens windows in the house objectifying reason has built, windows to a

reality that transcends the reach of our concepts, and that includes freedom, nature, and genuine community. Responsible dwelling and building demands such windows.

6

I sketched the beginning of an argument showing the ethical significance of aesthetic experience, more specifically of beauty. But such an argument does not show that we need beautiful ideas? When it is a matter of ideas, is reason not enough?

The Enlightenment was confident that reason alone was sufficient to bind freedom and to found and support a healthy common sense. Such confidence is part of European history. But notwithstanding the power reason has given us over nature, including our own nature, in this reason has failed us. This failure, too, is part of European history. And such failure is not just a sad, but contingent fact of history, which would leave us the hope that more rigorous reliance on reason might yet allow the Enlightenment to triumph. Rather it has its foundation in the very nature of reason and freedom. The nineteenth century shattered faith in the power of reason alone to bind freedom. Freedom, we have learned, is free to refuse the authority of whatever would bind it, be it religion, nature, or some inherited common sense, free even to refuse the rule of reason, which left to itself lacks the content and affective power necessary to bind freedom, as Kant suspected with his doctrine of radical evil, as Kierkegaard recognized when he opposed the freedom of increasingly self-absorbed, introverted individuals to Hegel's reason, as Dostoevsky showed, when he has his man from the underground call $2+2=5$ sometimes a good thing, too. The progress of freedom has brought in its wake the still progressing privatization of religion, art, and even of ethics, a privatization of which the separation of church and state is but a first expression. But such privatization has to threaten a robust common sense, has to transform genuine community into a mass of increasingly self-preoccupied individuals.

Freedom remains a living value that we must defend and preserve. But freedom must be bound by responsibility if it is not to become anarchic and lose all sense of direction. If not reason, what today can offer the necessary orientation? The title of this particular Summit Seminar points to "Ethics, Art, and Education." In this formulation art holds the middle between ethics and education. I welcome that placement. As Kant

came to recognize, we must turn to aesthetics to bridge the gulf between ethics and science. I am convinced that we need art to nourish that common sense without which no political construction can flourish in the long run. But I am also aware of how easily art, ethics, and education are abused to construct a false common sense that supports only the simulacrum of genuine community. Following Hermann Broch I would seek the essence of kitsch in such construction and attribute to kitsch an enormous and disturbing political significance. What distinguishes the genuine work of art from its kitsch counterpart is that the latter communicates a finite content that is readily grasped and easily reproduced, while the content communicated by the former exceeds comprehension and for that very reason remains an inexhaustible challenge. Kant thus came to understand all beauty as the expression of “aesthetic ideas,” by which he understood products of the imagination that, while tied to particular concepts, yet remain “inexplicable,” that is to say, exceed the reach of our concepts. Even while many true things can be said of such an expression, no description will ever be adequate to it. So understood, every expression of an aesthetic idea communicates an infinite content.

Kant was thinking first of all of nature. But our experience of an individual as this unique person is also the experience of an aesthetic idea. Our experience of a computer-driven doll is different in that such a doll is understood as an automaton that can in principle be reproduced. That is one reason why especially in this age of the electronic revolution we continue to need an aesthetic education. At stake is nothing less than our humanity. We need art to help preserve an ideal of humanity that is threatened on the one hand by kitsch and on the other by that objectifying reason that supports our science and technology. To be sure, it would be irresponsible not to recognize the legitimacy of that reason and the very real progress it has brought us. But we also need to recognize its limits. Recognition of both the legitimacy and the limits of objectifying reason should shape our commitment to and investment in education and art.

The “beautiful idea” of Europe, too, is most fundamentally such an aesthetic idea, a product of the imagination that by its very nature eludes all attempts to give it binding verbal expression. Such an idea must remain ever open to continuing interpretation. There is thus no reason why our conceptions of Europe should not be different. As long as these different conceptions are understood as variations on the same unknown theme,

as inevitably inadequate attempts to give voice to what lets us experience Europe as a whole, such conceptions have the power to gather Europeans in a single conversation. The goal of this conversation cannot be to capture that beautiful idea in the net of our concepts. Every attempt to nail it down once and for all with definite descriptions and rules risks transforming what was beautiful and therefore infinite into its finite simulacrum, i.e. into kitsch.

7

The question mark that follows the phrase “Europe: a Beautiful Idea” also raises what I find perhaps the most difficult question to answer: How can we justify commitment to an idea that is less than universal? Are the values of “respect for human dignity, liberty, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights,” of which article 2 of the Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe speaks, not universal values? Is it not humanity that should matter and a commitment to Europe only to the extent that it advances the cause of the mentioned values? What need then is there for the beautiful idea of Europe? Why invoke “Europe” rather than “humanity”? Why not speak simply of “living values”? Are the values that should gather Europeans together not universal values? Is the fact that it is the European Union that commits itself to values that have asserted themselves ever more forcefully in the long course of Europe’s troubled history sufficient to speak of European values?

Talk of European values invites thoughts of a Europe bound together by values that are not so much universal, as they are tied to a particular region and history, much as the nation-states that are so much part of Europe’s past were supported by supposed national values. But do the true, the good, and the beautiful not belong to all human beings? Have we not learned to be suspicious of all national or regional values? Does every true value not transcend such divisions — divisions that should not be allowed to obscure more genuinely human values? How then are we to understand “European values”? What room does our modern world leave for values that are not either personal and private or universal and global?

Or is there a need for values tied to communities that mediate between the individual and the universal? Is there a sense in which our twofold commitment to the

private and the universal must be supplemented with a commitment to the regional? And if so, is a deliberately ill-defined Europe the right sort of region? Why not Spain or Poland? Or smaller regions such as Flanders or Bavaria? Or smaller regions still, such as town, neighborhood, house? When I speak of a robust common sense as a necessary condition of genuine community, what community am I thinking of? — But why speak in the singular of one community? Does our spiritual health not perhaps require membership in quite a variety of communities of very different scope, stretching from the home to the globe?

But let me return to “the beautiful idea of Europe.” What special contribution does this idea have to make to the world today, as opposed to, say “the beautiful idea of America,” an idea less burdened by history and more fully supported by the Enlightenment ideal of freedom bound only by reason. It is a thought to which Goethe kept returning, contrasting our old continent, burdened by decaying ruins and inner unrest, by useless memories and vain strife, with an America less burdened by the past. I like to imagine a conversation between Goethe and his contemporary Jefferson. Visiting the University of Virginia, responding to the ethos that found such convincing expression in Jefferson’s architecture, Goethe might well have repeated: America, you have it better. Freedom here was less bound by the past and less limited by the scarcity of land. But today we have to consider that such an extroverted expansive trust in freedom presupposed an understanding of the earth as a limitless resource, as wilderness to be tamed, transformed, and exploited in ways that have become untenable. Sublime wilderness was to give way to beautiful civilization, but that dream, too, now belongs to a past that cannot be recovered. How small this earth has become!

Technological progress, the population explosion, and the pressures both have placed on the environment, have changed and are changing our relationship to this earth. And our understanding of this relationship will have to continue to change if we are to leave our children and grandchildren a livable environment. We need to learn to look at this earth as more than just a resource to be used and abused as we see fit. To repeat: needed is an aesthetic appreciation of the environment. Such appreciation calls for an aesthetic education that requires the cooperation of different disciplines.

Kant thought an appreciation of the beauty of nature a mark of true humanity. And just in this respect our old continent, despite its history of inner unrest and vain strife, perhaps because it has had to live with that history and has been taught through many centuries to respect the land as more than mute material, perhaps because of this often painful past, may be able to project and be guided by the beautiful idea of a society where human beings have learned to embrace science and technology and their gift of freedom without losing their shadows, as was the fate of Chamisso's unhappy Peter Schlemihl. This is the beautiful idea of a society where freedom is bound by respect for the whole individual, who is who he is only because of an inevitably particular history that binds every one of us to specific places and landscapes, binds us also to concrete others. Full self-affirmation requires that we affirm ourselves not as disembodied free spirits, but as embodied situated selves, and that means today as inevitably multiply located, rooted in multiple ways, loyal to different communities, while yet remaining open to a spirit and a space that tolerates no boundaries.

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