WORLD PHILOSOPHY DAY
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Philosophy as a Way of Life and the Future of Cultural Heritage

Professor Stavros Katsios
UNESCO Chair – Laboratory of Geocultural Analyses (GEOLAB)
Hellenic Center for Sinology – Ionian University

I. Address and Introduction

I would like to express my warm thanks to the General State Archives – Historical Archive of Epirus and the I.A.M.H. for the invitation to today's event. I am especially grateful for the opportunity to participate in such a significant event in my home region of Epirus, held on the occasion of World Philosophy Day and in honor of the distinguished Professor Emeritus of Philosophy, Panagiotis Noutsos.

Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues,
Distinguished President of the Hellenic UNESCO National Commission,

UNESCO established World Philosophy Day not as a celebration of an academic discipline, but as a reminder of a public good: the capacity to think critically, to engage in dialogue, and to exercise judgment. It is no coincidence that the Organization's founding Act proclaims that, since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed. This phrase—often recited in a ritualistic manner—is, if read with care, a philosophical proposition and, at the same time, an agenda for cultural heritage.

In my capacity as the UNESCO Chairholder on Threats to Cultural Heritage at the Ionian University, I have chosen to speak today about philosophy as a way of life and about the future of our heritage.

What is the connection between the two? And why should one seek it out in an era when heritage is threatened by war, illicit trafficking, the climate crisis, and indifferent consumption? My position is simple to state but demanding to implement: cultural heritage will not be preserved solely through laws, technologies, and inventories. It will be preserved when caring for it becomes a way of life.

II. Philosophy as a Way of Life

Pierre Hadot (in "Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique" [1981] and "Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?" [1995]) reminded us that, for the ancients, philosophy was not primarily a construct of theories; it was a practice. It consisted of a set of "spiritual exercises"—attention, self-examination, dialogue, the contemplation of death—that transformed the way an individual perceives the world and lives within it. Discourse was not an end in itself; it was the means toward a transformation of one's life. Socrates expressed this in an unsurpassed manner in Plato's "*Apology*" (38a): "the unexamined life is not worth living"—a life that is not subjected to examination is not worth living. The Socratic "care for the self" ("*epimeleia heautou*") was not narcissism; it was a care for the soul that, by necessity, extended to the care of the "*polis*" (the city-state). The Stoics provided this form of care with a method – "attention", understood as an

unceasing vigilance regarding matters within our own control—and a horizon: the entire world as a common homeland, with the human being as a *"cosmopolitan"*.

What do we take from this tradition? Not a doctrine, but an attitude—or, as Aristotle might term it, a "disposition" (*"hexis"*). I believe that philosophy, conceived as a way of life, cultivates three things: the capacity for critical examination, a sense of proportion, and a sense of responsibility toward the whole. I would argue that these very three elements remain essential requirements today in our engagement with cultural heritage.

III. Heritage as a Living Practice

In Thucydides' "*Funeral Oration*" (Thucydides 1.22.4—"*ktēma es aiei*" ["a possession for all time"]—and 2.40.1 - "philokaloumen te…"), Pericles describes Athens using a phrase that bears directly upon our subject: "*We cultivate the beautiful with economy, and we pursue wisdom without becoming soft."* Here, the love for the beautiful and the love for wisdom are not presented as mere private preferences, but as integral components of a shared way of life within the *"polis"*.
Over the last few decades, international cultural heritage law has followed a similar trajectory. The 1972 UNESCO Convention focused on monuments and sites of outstanding universal value. The 2003 Convention recognized intangible heritage as something living—transmitted from generation to generation and constantly recreated by communities. The Council of Europe's Faro Framework Convention (2005) introduced the concepts of "heritage communities" and the right to participate in cultural life.
There is a clear shift: from the object to the relationship, and from possession to practice. In Corfu, we understand this from the inside. The Old Town is not a museum exhibit; it is a living organism—a place where people reside, conduct commerce, and celebrate. Furthermore, the Ionian University inherits the vision of the 1824 Ionian Academy, in which education was conceived as a cultural mission.
Heritage, therefore, is not merely what we have inherited, but how we live with what we have inherited. And this, precisely, is an undeniably philosophical question.

IV. Threats as a Philosophical Problem

The UNESCO Chair that I head examines threats to cultural heritage through the lens of human security. My experience with this research has convinced me that such threats are not merely material; at their core, they are ethical and epistemological.

Consider the illicit trafficking of cultural property. A stolen or looted object passes through a chain of intermediaries, forged provenance documentation, and financial flows - often intertwined with money laundering. Yet, at the end of this chain, there is always someone who makes a purchase without asking questions or verifying the object's origins. What does an object without provenance signify? And what does it mean for a collector, an auction house, or a museum to deliberately avoid such scrutiny? It is, quite literally, the negation of Socratic inquiry: the unexamined acquisition. Let us consider, furthermore, the phenomenon of overtourism - the consumption of a place merely as an image, the act of visiting without genuine attention, and the emptying of a city of its residents only to fill it with visitors. Here, too, the underlying deficiency has a name: the loss of a sense of proportion.

And let us consider, finally, the deliberate act of destruction—from the Buddhas of Bamiyan to Palmyra and the mausoleums of Timbuktu. The 2016 conviction of Al Mahdi in Mali by the International Criminal Court (ICC) – *"Prosecutor v. Ahmad Al Faqi Al Mahdi"*, judgment of

September 27, 2016—marked the first instance in which an attack on cultural heritage was prosecuted as a war crime. This ruling provided a legal confirmation of what philosophy had long understood: that the destruction of a people's memory constitutes an assault on humanity itself. Thus, every threat corresponds to a failure of virtue.

V. Three Virtues for the Future of Heritage

If these threats represent failures of virtue, then the future of heritage clearly depends upon the cultivation of virtues. Three come to mind:

First, inquiry: Due diligence in the art market, the documentation of provenance, and transparency in transactions are not merely regulatory obligations; they are the institutional manifestation of the Socratic question. A culture that asks, "Where does this come from?" protects heritage even before the Law intervenes.

Second, moderation: The Delphic maxim "nothing in excess" ("*mēden agan*") is perhaps the most contemporary principle of sustainability we possess. It calls upon us to visit without exhausting, to utilize without altering, and to develop without uprooting the communities that keep a place alive.

Third, responsibility: Stoic cosmopolitanism teaches us that the heritage of Palmyra or Timbuktu is not *"foreign".* Hans Jonas, in *"The Imperative of Responsibility"* ("*Das Prinzip Verantwortung*", 1979), extended our ethical scope to include generations yet unborn. We are custodians, not owners.

These virtues cannot be taught through circulars. They are cultivated - as the ancients knew - through practice: in the lecture hall, in the laboratory, through fieldwork, and through collaboration with local communities. This is why education in heritage conservation is, at its core, a philosophical education.

VI. Epilogue

Thucydides wrote his history as a "*ktēma es aiei*" - an acquisition for all time. Yet, cultural heritage does not automatically become an acquisition for all time; it only becomes so when each generation acquires it anew.

Goethe expressed this precisely in "*Faust*" (Part I, "Night"): *"Was du von deinen Vätern ererbt hast, erwirb es, um es zu besitzen"*- what you have inherited from your forefathers, acquire it, so that you may truly possess it.

In practice, this act of re-acquisition constitutes philosophy as a way of life:

- to examine what we have received,
- to live it with moderation, and
- to pass it on with a sense of responsibility.

Thank you for your attention.

Stavros Katsios