

Akademiniai maršrutai

NEGYVENTAS GYVENIMAS NEVERTAS TYRINĖJIMO

Lietuvoje viešėjusį Pensilvanijos profesorių, mūsų žurnalo redaktorių kolegijos narį Alphonso Lingį kalbina Kristupas Sabolius

KS. According to Arvydas Šliogeris, after Jean Baudrillard’s death you are the last remaining true and authentic philosopher. What is your opinion on the situation in philosophy today?

AL. I surely think there was a rich heritage from existential philosophy and it should not simply be forgotten. Now it seems that everywhere in the world there is a kind of pause in philosophy, there is not much happening in France or Germany or Scandinavia or Britain or the United States or Japan. But, on the one hand, I think that there are such big problems now that our humanity and our culture are facing and it seems to me that philosophers have huge tasks to address. For the first time in philosophy we are taking account of the ecological environment in which humanity evolved and exists, and we are becoming aware of great dangers to our planet. One reason that these dangers have developed is our ideas about our place and work in the world and our relationship to other animals and to nature. And I think there in the past philosophers have been very deficient. It seems to me that some of the disastrous attitudes and ideas toward nature and our environment were generated by philosophers. This idea of unending progress, of unending wealth, production and so on was much promoted by philosophers. So it seems that philosophers have a special

responsibility in this area. After the end of the hopes and projects that Marxism had inspired, we are very confused, both economically and politically. One of the most disturbing facts is that in every developed country the gap between the rich and poor has been increasing. And it seems that Brazil is the only country where there is a political consciousness of this and which in recent years has succeeded in somewhat reducing this gap, while everywhere else this gap is continuing. I don’t know if people really understand, why this is so. And what kind of economic and political changes we could do to reduce this gap. So there is a very specific concept of justice that is necessary today, and a new understanding of justice and new work to do it. It is strange that with different histories, either capitalist or colonial or communist, when they enter the contemporary political and economic situation it’s always this gap between rich and poor that increases. It’s puzzling me.

KS. You travelled all over the world and you saw different understandings of justice in different countries. So what do you mean by saying that we need a new concept of it? I don’t know what concept of justice African people could propose to Japanese people.

AL. I think we need a new thinking about justice, a new understanding of the problems of injustice in this developing contemporary world. But I also have recently become much more aware of different notions of justice. It seems to me that these war crimes' courts set up, for example, in Cambodia are imposing a very specific Western notion of justice. So it seems to me that the International Criminal Court and these war crimes' courts are setting up some kind of idea of a universal justice at a certain level, of the certain kinds of crimes. We can ask, whether this is not a specifically western attributive notion of justice.

I have become very aware when thinking about these issues, of a difference between retributive justice, the justice that seeks to compensate or to punish the wrongdoers and what is now being called restorative justice, for example, in South Africa – the effort to create reconciliation between very diverse people that were never very much in conflict. And it seems to me, we only start thinking of how we restore a community that has been broken. We understand that in many of the older societies there were practices, I mean, societies that didn't have jails, that didn't even have fines or capital punishment but had systems where wrongdoers and their victims would be brought together and an effort made to integrate both the wrongdoer and the community together. So I think we are beginning to understand that there are many forms of justice that perhaps are very important to discuss today.

KS. Turning our discussion in a different way, what do you know about Lithuanian philosophy? Or – can we talk about local philosophies these days, having faced all these changes of global science and philosophy?

AL. From Lithuanian philosophy, of course, I especially know Emanuel Levinas.

I don't know to what degree you can say he is specifically Lithuanian. But it's a strange fact that there are still all these national philosophies. Even today there is a German philosophy and there is a French philosophy. And they don't communicate, they have different traditions.

KS. Do you think that national tradition has a real impact these days on philosophy?

AL. I guess so. That's the only explanation. That philosophers are nonetheless speaking out of their cultural experience and national experience. And I also think that the literature in a country affects the philosophy, the style of writing of someone. And, of course, the traditions, academic traditions. In universities now most philosophers are academics and, of course, that was not the case in the past. But necessarily philosophers are influenced by the forms of language in a certain tradition, in a certain institution, and in the history of philosophy. But also, I suppose, by the language outside, the forms of language, of discourse. This is just a very quick example. It seems like the French discourse, and the whole culture, not only in philosophy but in literature, in politics, in sociology, is all the same influenced by certain themes of *fraternité*, *égalité*, and the revolution, and these concepts. So it seems that philosophers are certainly affected by the general discourse of the culture.

KS. But to what extent philosophical tradition is important to you personally as a philosopher and as a thinker?

AL. I think that without any doubt the literature of philosophy from the beginning is so rich in important thoughts that nobody who tries to understand it today would want to slight it in any way. But it is equally im-

portant to address literature outside of philosophy. All the great philosophers did that – Leibniz, Schopenhauer, Kant was very interested and very knowledgeable about what was happening in sciences and anthropology and so on. Also the great generation that just finished – Merleau-Ponty and Sartre and people like that. They were very aware of structuralism, of linguistics, of anthropology of Lévi-Strauss, of political thinking. So I think philosophy is enriched in roots by its own history and by an open relationship and dialogue with the thinkers in other fields.

KS. So you also feel enrooted in this kind of multiplex flow of knowledge which is happening these days?

AL. Yes.

KS. Yesterday we talked a little about thought as gratitude and denken is danken – the line that came in to your mind while standing in Hagia Sophia. You came there after having read Heidegger’s “The Origin of the Work of Art” and you felt to understand more deeply your experience. And it seems that your recent work is very much in tune of late Heidegger’s thinking.

AL. Yes, I suppose, yes... It’s awkward and embarrassing to try to identify myself but for a number of years I don’t feel loyalty to any particular tradition or any thinker. So I guess what I’m interested in when trying to think of a certain issue – very often certain particular texts, particular thinkers are very exciting. But I guess often I’m more inclined not to criticize for the sake of criticizing but for the sake of trying to find something else to say or something else to see. You know, I translated two of the most important works of Levinas and so many people always ask me to talk about Levinas. But what I’m in-

terested in is things that he doesn’t say or doesn’t say well. And with Heidegger it’s the same way. Certainly Heidegger was a great teacher for me, without any doubt. But I don’t feel any particular loyalty to him.

KS. In your ‘Dangerous Emotions’, you invert Socrates’ invocation that the unexamined life is not worth living into a new credo: “the un-lived life is not worth examining”. Is it a call for a new type philosophical practice – abandoning academic institutions and going to search for your own authentic experience?

AL. Yes, it certainly seems to me that philosophy was too enclosed in this academic institution. It’s a little embarrassing to formulate these things... But Nietzsche ridiculed people who withdrew into their ivory tower and into their own mind in order to judge the worth and value of human life and all things. He said one should have to have lived many lives, good ones and evil ones too, in order to speak of the value of human life and meaning and value of all things. Of course, throughout philosophy, when you think of a person like Descartes or Leibniz... Leibniz was a diplomat and a traveller, Descartes was a traveller, and Nietzsche, of course. But I also think of someone as recent as Foucault who had a life. It’s amazing to me how much he did not only in his intellectual life, it’s incredible, the directions that he opened up. But also in his personal life – he was a militant for the insane, he was an activist for the prisoners and so on. When I read his biography, I was so impressed. And when he died, there was a book published in France of his friends. And one of his very close friends said... As you know, he didn’t know he had AIDS for a long time because it was so new and he didn’t understand how gravely ill he was. But he had decided that when he

finished the publishing of those two books of “The History of Sexuality” he would go and spend two years as a medic, would be trained as a medic, in a third world country. And this man who held the highest academic position in France, at the Collège de France, and was wanted by all the universities, such as Berkeley, had the idea of going to some former French colony. He had seriously decided to take two years and go away from all this academic life completely and work in an entirely different way. So I think there are thinkers who still live and don’t simply turn the pages of books in a university.

KS. For me as your reader and as your audience it seems that travelling is almost a way of philosophizing, is almost a way to perceive... Is it kind of a new philosophy when you have to perform an act of something in order to understand, in order to think? Or maybe it’s just your hobby that helps you to set examples?

AL. If I could just go back, one step. One could say that Heidegger was outside academia. He had his whole life in the mountains. Of course, that was very important to him. At one point, I think, he was invited to come to Berlin and he actually wrote why he didn’t want to go to Berlin – because he wanted to live in the Black Forest. So you can see that even Heidegger is a person who had more than a simple intellectual activity. It seems to me that I went to as many places as I had time for in my life for a very simple reason – because I just found the world so interesting and I never got tired of it. And every time I go I keep thinking I would like to go over there next time. But it does seem to me that in our time, in our global time philosophers are just thinkers in general who don’t have an experience of other lands and other cultures and will be more and more ir-

relevant. So I think that it’s inevitable that philosophers will begin to understand that there is a rich and deep thinking, perhaps not under the name of philosophy, in China, in Africa, in Muslim world and so on. So it does seem to me that in the future philosophers will see more of the world, encounter other places and other people more than they have in the past. I hope so.

KS. But maybe this will mean the end of philosophy as such, as a great thinking of a certain type?

AL. Yes, yes.

KS. It definitely will, you mean?

AL. Yes.

KS. You’ve mentioned you did not feel very much influenced by the authors you translated and examined. Nevertheless, in your thoughts, even in your relationship with those who you encounter I feel very much of Levinas’ concept of the Other – the other as an imperative, as a demand that you have to face. And do you find the confirmation of Levinas’ ethics in your travel practice?

AL. Yes, Levinas was very very important for me for a very long time. So I think it’s not only this very original description of what it means to face somebody, it’s a completely original contribution to philosophy, and important one. Because for him it’s the ethical experience and the more I thought about that the more I was convinced that there is such a thing as an ethical experience. We don’t just have to create arguments for ethical behaviour, there’s such a thing as an ethical experience. And there is so much more in Levinas that I find so interesting. The phenomenological descriptions he did about the home, about the elements, about things and so on, that are often directed in some

way against Heidegger and that are very rich. I guess there are two things in Levinas' ethics that I find more and more distant from. The one is that he only recognizes an ethical relationship with individuals of the human species and he doesn't recognize ethical relations with other species. And secondly – that he has this religious dimension that I have actually theoretical problems with. For him the idea of a human being facing me which opens unending demands was very special and very important. And this experience of a never ending demand is for him the dimension of God. I have many objections to that. So that's the part of Levinas that I don't like at all. He says things like – I am responsible for the other, always and for all his needs and wants and for his responsibility and his irresponsibility. Well, this is to conceive of human relations in terms of dependency. But if you just take a simple example – clearly, I experience and accept my responsibility for the needs of my child. But at a certain point my child wants to be independent and live for himself or herself. And to think all my life that I have to take care of his needs is a kind of, what's the word, that's almost a kind of possession of the child. The child doesn't want all his needs to be cared for by someone else. Here I think is the thought that I found in Nietzsche and Bataille and Deleuze – the idea that every organism produces excess energy, more than it needs, that it must discharge these excesses of energy. So Levinas is still conceiving a human life in terms of need and want, and that's a very ancient tradition in philosophy. To me it should be opposed with this thinking from Nietzsche and Bataille and Deleuze that every life has excess energies, energies that burn are just thrown away. Every creature does this.

I remember I had found in the garden outside my door a nest from quail with about twelve eggs. And mother flew away and so I watched if she would come back and she didn't come back, she thought it was unsafe. So I took these eggs and I put them in an incubator. One day I came back from class and they were hatched. So I had all these baby birds in the incubator. These birds, they were very little. And when I opened the incubator to look at them, they all jumped out and they ran all over the room. And to see this, to see them just born (they were a few hours old), and they had so much energy – to me it was a kind of a revelation. And I think that when we look at human beings, we just don't see needs and wants. This is what advertising wants us to think. The advertising industry wants us to think that each of us have unending needs for commodities, for gadgets, for products and so on. But I think that what's wonderful to look at in human beings is that you see that they spend so much time just on liberating, releasing excess energies – going for a walk, going for a mountain climb or dancing all night. I noticed in these cold days in Vilnius old people who want to go for a walk, up in the street and when they meet one another, they just want to talk and this talk has no utility, they are not asking for something but they are telling stories, they are using one another, they are expressing affection for one another. What I don't like in Levinas is his idea (sort of negative notion) that our relationship to other people is to be responsible for their needs.

KS. There is a chapter in your newest book published in Lithuanian, where you comment Žižek's thoughts on phantasy. I'll quote: "visions and phantasies have to be envisioned dynamically in the activity

of intensifying events and intensifying ones feelings”. Do you think that namely the phenomenon of phantasy and, in broader sense – the imagination, is an important way, although forgotten by the philosophical tradition, to conceive the general system of reality? Imagination is also energy. The excess of energy which can be intensified, the reality that can be intensified – does not all that mean we can’t conceive reality without imagination?

AL. Yes, I think that in the tradition of Freud and Lacan this was also conceived negatively. Freud has this basic idea that we dream of drinking glass of water to spare ourselves a trouble of waking up and getting a glass of water. So it’s a kind of poor substitute for a real action. And Lacan too... It’s a negative concept, notion of lack in Lacan. It seems to me that the other experience of intensifying visions and emotions is very essential in imagination. A couple of years ago I was thinking about the visionaries. Not only the great myths but also James Joyce, and William Blake, and Milton – visionaries like that. Blake was especially extraordinary because he not only wrote but he also drew these magnificent visionary images. So it seemed to me that when we think of our relationship with these works, the works of visionaries, of James Joyce or of Blake or we can think of many artists – they intensify our experiences. Certainly of Blake, it’s an intensified experience of light. There’s this great sense of illumination in his work. I just remember, years ago when I was a kid, just discovering Van Gogh. If you’re discovering Van Gogh, it gives you a more intense experience of colour. You look at the starry night and the trees, the thrifty trees in a more intensified way. So if that is the work of these writers and painters... I think Freud said also

that each of us is a mythmaker and a poet in our dreams. And so when we think of it in that way, I would like to think of the imagination, of the dreams and nocturnal imagination and also the day imagination, the conscious imagination in that way – expanding and intensifying the sensory experience and also the emotions.

KS. Yesterday we experienced in your lecture a small piece of theatre – you worked a lot with lights and music and with your voice. So what you did was creating certain circumstances, trying to evoke certain experience or intensify it. Philosophers these days – like Žižek who is very much in cinema and Deleuze as well, both obsessed by the idea of time image, of cinematic time – are trying not only to verbalize their thoughts but to express them polyphonically, to find new ways of expression. Is it a new perspective for philosophy?

AL. I think it’s not so new in philosophy. Well, in a certain way some of these things are new. Of course, Plato wrote dialogues but then Voltaire wrote novels and Sartre wrote theatre and so on. So I think that was for quite a long time. Even Berkeley wrote dialogues. So this idea that the proper way to write philosophy is a journal article – that’s what is artificial. I guess I had a very simple idea and for a long time I didn’t want to say it to students because I didn’t want to give sermon: that students learn to write in this terrible academic jargon and some of these dissertations are almost impossible to read – you had to stop at every sentence and figure out what he could mean. And one day in my own mind I thought: you think these ideas are important because you have decided to spend your whole life on these ideas, so don’t you think it’s important for others and therefore don’t

you think it's important to communicate them? And I think in a lot of academic writing the writer is concerned to give the impression that he is very serious and that he has read half of the library, and with thousands of footnotes and references, and to write in a very complicated way so that it looks very difficult. That's a kind of false motive. But I think the important thing is to communicate your ideas if you think that they are interesting and important. The literary writers, writers of novels and essays, they have mastered all the vocabulary, rhetoric and all the forms of language, and I think we can learn from them. For a long time it was really important to me to write well. I thought there is no reason to write badly, it's that simple, so I could try to write as well as I can. And when you attend a lecture, for a long time the professor just stands on the podium and just reads his papers. Why do we have to look at that? We could look at other things. Maybe we could look at images or maybe we could just darken the room. I've been doing this for so long that I don't remember when I started. For a while I just used to put a little of music beforehand or just after it because I felt that it got people in the right frame of mind. Sometimes if you want to be meditative, that helps – to play some meditative music. And then I thought, on radio and television there's always music, in the background. It is not distracting but it could actually be helpful. I think we can communicate our philosophy with several dimensions and not simply read a text.

KS. Maybe somebody blamed you for not being enough academical?

AL. Yes, I suppose. But they don't tell me to my face.

KS. So there is no official reaction?

AL. Right.

KS. That already shows your importance.

AL. Or maybe they think it's hopeless... that I'm incorrigible.

KS. You talk a lot about the problem of violence which is also related to the problem of ethics in general and with religion as such. René Girard's, who was interested in this issue, describes the situation where two individuals desire the same object and this is the situation where violence arises. And Christianity, according to Girard, solves this problem by the figure of Christ who is a victim himself. Is violence in the core of every religion?

AL. I think I'm quite puzzled and ignorant. I reread René Girard about a year ago and thought about it again. But he has this idea that the human community is somehow intrinsically violent and that they had to expel this violence on a scapegoat in order to maintain the community. And I know there are some thinkers who think that way. Sometimes when I travel, I'm baffled at how bellicose humans are. When you go to Spain, every little town has a wall around it, it's crazy. You have the impression that human beings are always just fighting one another. But that's not the view of pagan anthropologists. Long ago I heard a talk by Leakey in Africa. And his argument... some specialists of nomadic societies have argued that these nomadic societies and these very ancient original groupings of humans were hunter-gatherers, and so they had very close cooperation with one another, they depended on one another, and that in a certain sense within the group it was extremely moral, and they didn't fight other groups, they avoided other groups. For example, in the Amazon today there are many such groups but a few are living from hunting and gathering.

You don't want to go into a territory when somebody else has already been there, you avoid the other group. And that seems to me to make a lot of sense. Some of these thinkers have argued that war really begins with sedentary civilization and agriculture, where they are storing-up the wealth and that therefore the outside groups would have interest in attacking it. Also his argument about religion – that religion has this essential relation to violence. I don't have a clear idea about that. Because it seems to me that there are so many other essential things. Can you say this about Buddhism?

It seems to me that there's so much about religion that is about ceremony, about visions, about trance and transfiguration, vision of, you could call, mythical or magical or splendid. One year some friends of mine invited me for Christmas to go to monastery in Normandy, in France. It was an old monastery, a very beautiful place. And I thought the ritual was so wonderful – the Gregorian chant in this ancient monastery on the night of Christmas. It was so wonderful that I decided that everywhere I go, when there's a high feast, I would like to try to participate. So it seems to me that when you travel in Europe and you experience high mass in the cathedral it's wonderful in so many different dimensions. It gives you a sense of loftiness, of nobility, of sublimity, the sense of community, the sense of glory and grandeur, of so many things. So it seems to me that to connect religion in some fundamental, essential and universal way with violence is too simple, it's a simple-minded idea. I'm so struck that religions are always destroying other religions. Like Catholicism, they destroyed the mosques, sacred places of the Native Americans or the European pagans.

When Cortez went to Mexico, at first he brought a bishop and that bishop set out to completely destroy the pagan learning and set out to burn all the books. And he succeeded so well that the writing of the Mayas was completely lost. You remember the bishop who destroyed the library of Alexandria. This idea that religions have been so destructive of one another, it's so puzzling and so strange. But of course, again that's also not universally true because it's not true in India where the different sects and different traditions coexist. As you know, Ghandi was very fond of the Bible and Jesus and saw no reason to exclude Jesus from his favourite sacred beings.

It seems to me there is a kind of anthropological dimension – that an essential function of the culture is to give the people some distinct identity. So it seems like every culture is aware of other cultures and in some way borrows from them but all the same develops a distinct identity. And religion is part of constructing something distinctive about oneself.

KS. You think it shouldn't be that distinctive? We shouldn't try to define our identities so clearly, should we?

AL. I think we have this problem today with multiculturalism. We have both sides – we want to be open and tolerant to all the other cultures but at the same time we want to have our own cultural identity. And that's a difficult problem. I think it's difficult theoretically and also in practice today. The other fact that occurred to me some years ago and made such a big impression on me is that all the great cities in history had been cosmopolitan – every great city you can think of, including the cities of the Mongols.

Vilnius was founded by Gediminas inviting everybody from every corner of Europe,

including the Jews. But I think that's true of Alexandria, of Cairo, of all the great cities, of China... There were foreign populations. And these people respected one another and coexisted. In Istanbul until the First War there were big colonies of Greeks, of Italians, and so on. It seems to me that in this kind of situation people, instead of being anonymous in a big city, developed their own ethnic and cultural particularity. And that kind of development of distinctiveness is not necessarily aggressive – just develop your own songs, your own traditions, your own clothing, perhaps your own religion eventually. So I think that violence is not the whole story...

KS. Do you believe political correctness could solve all these problems?

AL. No, I think political correctness is not a solution – just to be inoffensive and be careful and never to offend anybody. I have a great admiration for drag queens. In places like Brazil they are often great entertainers. So these are people with strange bodies and strange sex. And often they exaggerate it. You have a man who dresses as a woman but as a big fat woman, vulgar and so on. And what people try to do is – you laugh at them, you say some witty joke to humiliate them. But they answer you and they are more clever than you and they make everybody laugh. And finally you have to laugh at how cleverly they have ridiculed you. And I think it's so triumphant. There are people who just have unfortunate bodies, they are unattractive and so on. And either they can just stay quietly in the background or... we get to a public place and there are some people who we see, they have such strange bodies that we just think they are ridiculous, either

they are completely obese or badly shaped or whatever. So we are told to be politically correct and never to say anything, never to mention it. But of course, we think it, nonetheless. So a drag queen who dresses in the opposite sex, and at first we think – this is a freak, this is somebody really strange and we are very inclined to laugh at such a person. But instead of that person running away in the corner and hiding or being offended, they develop a skill of being so clever, so witty, so funny that they can answer every insult you would throw at them. Naturally everybody can deal with insults that way but it's a very strong way to deal with insults.

KS. Irony is better than political correctness, isn't it?

AL. It's stronger. It's a stronger way. Sometimes I think that – oh, we have to be so careful, we can't say anything to offend black people or gay people... But these people are not so weak, so easily hurt. They can answer us. Certainly in the United States black people can answer all the insults we throw at them. I'm not saying that's what we *should* do, but they are not so weak. I think it's a kind of very weak view of people – that we have to police our language so strictly. It's the same way with Jews. I'm not Jewish but you can talk to any Jew and you know that they tell more jokes about Jews than we could ever invent. And they have jokes about Auschwitz and so on, so they are not so weak. There was a Jewish friend of mine who told me this terrible joke. We never dare to say this, only a Jew would say it. Why do Jews have such big noses? Because air is free. It's a terrible joke but that's what a Jewish friend told me.