YEHUDA ELKANA

Rethinking the Enlightenment

In this introductory statement, given at the beginning of the Aboagora symposium in Turku in August 2011, Yehuda Elkana highlights the need, in accordance with the title of the conference, to rethink rather than unthink the Enlightenment. Indeed, the Enlightenment remained an unfinished project, but one should never forget that this era formed the basis for the greatest and most important creation of knowledge in all areas for 300 years. Over the last 100 or more years, however, cracks have started to appear in this edifice, Elkana argues: researchers have started to realise that one cannot really distinguish the rational from the irrational and that being contextual does not necessarily mean being relativist.

Elkana also discusses the notion of the New Enlightenment, which he regards as an approach which considers all knowledge, in all areas and always context-dependent. To embrace contradictions does not mean to accept them, Elkana claims. Embracing contradictions means to realise that our knowledge is full of them, and the way to deal with this is not by eliminating the elements that create contradictions, but by embracing them.

Just like Johann Sebastian Bach's great work, *Die Kunst der Fuge* (BWV 1080), the Enlightenment has remained an unfinished project. This will be my topic today. When the Aboagora organisers decided on an Aboagora conference, I fully identified with the plan directly because *Agora* means many things to me. The Agora is a place for the discussion of egalitarian and democratic considerations. It is a place where the majority vote decides on what is true. In other words, the whole idea of an epistemic, Platonic objectivity is the opposite of the idea of the Agora.

The idea of the Agora is that what is true depends on how you formulate your questions; this will dictate what the right answer is. This was the spirit of the law, this was the spirit of poetry and literature and it was the exact opposite of what Plato wanted. Plato really wanted to think away democratic procedures—he wanted to delegate poetry to somewhere else—and that is why he introduced an episteme which was brought to its highest point by Descartes: he introduced Enlightenment as a dogmatic rationality.

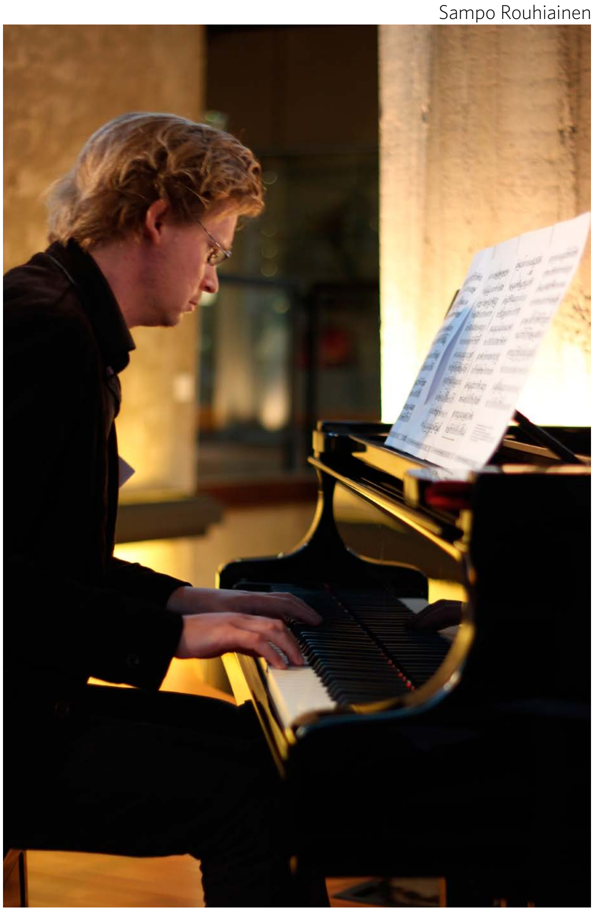
But before we go into this in detail, let me tell you that I seriously embrace the Agora, I seriously embrace the Sophists and I loathe Plato as much as I loathe Descartes. I try as far as possible to understand them, but dislike them thoroughly. A footnote to this point: it is not objective, it is full of emotion and it is also ambiguous. But in response to those who try to convince you that he or she really has absorbed the Cartesian distinction between rationality, emotion, culture and the rest—never, ever trust him or her. Either he or she has never really internalised the implications of such a dichotomy in life, or he or she is trying to deceive you. So, I am not trying to deceive you: I am full of non-objective prejudice and perspectives that I try to explicate with passion. That is the end of the footnote on the Agora.

Since I think that in a way the Enlightenment died an unfinished project, like Bach's counterpoint, we should never forget that before cracks started to appear, the Enlightenment formed the basis for the greatest and most important creation of knowledge in all areas for 300 years. This is important to remember even if you criticise the Enlightenment, and therefore I always strongly emphasise the need not to *unthink* the Enlightenment, but to *rethink* it. In other words, a revival needs to take place.

But before that, just to indicate the context for the whole thing, I find it critical to take a look at Decartes' intellectual predecessors such as Francis Bacon, William Shakespeare, François Rabelais, Michel de Montaigne—they are much closer to what is going on in the twenty-first century, which I will call the New Enlightenment, than to the Enlightenment.

Actually, their scepticism, as against the Cartesian dogmatic scepticism, was a very easygoing, *laissez-faire* type of scepticism and symbolically, it can be explained by this wonderful saying by Michel de Montaigne (1533–92), which I think fundamentally is his motto: *Que sçay-je?,* What do I know? I say these things and I say those things—but what do I know? This, I think, is very deep. Then there is another saying which I always stick to, which I think they internalised. It is the famous saying of Terence (195/185–159 BC): *Homo sum, humani nil a me alienum puto*—I am human, I consider nothing human alien to me.

Sampo Rouhiainen



Emil Holmström performing Johan Sebastian Bach's *Die Kunst der Fuge* (BWV 1080), which remained an unfinished composition, breaking off abruptly in the middle of the third section. Just like this piece of music, Yehuda Elkana argued in his opening speach, the Enlightenment remained unfinished.

These were the two principles that guided our pre-Cartesian contemporaries. The post-Cartesian contemporaries started emerging when the cracks in the rational, dogmatic, universalistic structure of the Enlightenment started to break down, as early as the nineteenth century. And these contemporaries include William James, first of all—I cannot say Charles Sanders Peirce, because I do not understand half of what he writes—but I refer also to John Dewey and the other pragmatists. And then, in our time, we have philosophers such as Stephen Toulmin, Richard Rorty and a few others.

Now, what is this Enlightenment like that I would like to rethink? The idea of the creation of knowledge that was advanced by the Enlightenment was unbelievably successful. It was unprecedented. Never in the history of mankind had such a systematic collection of knowledge been developed, in the natural sciences, the social sciences and the Humanities—in every area. We should remember this background before we criticise the Enlightenment. But how was this knowledge created? This knowledge was created by a very clever strategy. The very wise philosophers, and whatever else they were, from the late seventeenth century and onwards, which is to say Descartes and onwards, they knew very well that the world is complex and messy. But they decided to create knowledge, the essence of which was to treat the world as if it would not be complex and messy. Therefore, they created knowledge based on the principles of a rational, universal, context-independent science, avoiding contradictions. All studies, regardless of what they studied, were carried out in this spirit.

What has been happening in the last 100 or more years is that cracks in this wall have started to develop. We realise that we cannot really distinguish the rational from the irrational, that in order *not* to fall into irrationality, we need the concept of reasonableness. We need it in order not to become relativists, and do not misread me here—I am very much not a relativist, I am a contextualist. This is the realisation that knowledge must be understood in the context of its historical emergence and also in its social and political context.

We started to realise that in history, for example, developments such as the creation of scientific revolution, which goes back to a group of scholars in Oxford and London in the seventeenth century, actually was a conscious political decision. In a Europe which had lost one third of its population in the wars of religion there was a need to create a web of knowledge which did not depend on religion. It was a conscious political decision: we must create a knowledge that is independent of this.

In the same way, we started to realise that Plato's epistemic revolution, with its brilliant formulations of success, was actually a political decision to fight the democracy of the *polis*, to fight *metis*, to fight poetry and indeed to fight law. Plato held that, independent of the context, the law will tell you what is right and what is wrong—to the extent that the law thinks about right and wrong at all. It is actually one of the things that we must begin to understand today: that we cannot educate the law faculty students with the idea that legal theory is independent of justice and that law is not about that. The law *should* be about that. And after the current financial crisis I think we will have to rethink our curriculum in law also—but that is a footnote.

Consequently, what we began to realise in all these areas was that we must introduce emotions, we must verbalise them and not hide them under the carpet; to see the context from which it emerges together with reasonableness—not arid rationality. The kinds of things I call arid rationality are, for example, the excessive reliance on game theory and rational choice theory. And this arid rationality is related very closely to the successes of the Enlightenment. We have to attune our New Enlightenment, not only to realise that the world *is* messy and complex—we have to teach it as messy and complex too. This means a total revolution of the curriculum, which I will come to in a second.

What is the New Enlightenment? The New Enlightenment is the realization that all knowledge is contextual. It is a particular process and a political decision that we want to create knowledge which is context-dependent and embracing of contradictions. To embrace contradictions does not mean to accept them. Embracing contradictions means to realise that our knowledge is full of them, and the way to deal with this is not by eliminating the part that creates the contradiction; that is what good, classical social and natural scientists used to do. We never had a complete one-paradigmatic theory, in which Thomas Kuhn so eagerly believed. There have always been, and will always be, competing paradigms: some were louder and some more quiet, but there was always a competition. These competing paradigms fought each other. And therefore, the idea that you solve the contradiction simply by eliminating or sorting out one element, deciding that this is a minor side effect, is not a solution.

Albert Einstein taught us a very good lesson, because until Einstein came, everybody knew the problems of calculating the perihelion of Mercury. But the idea that this is a central problem, not just a sideline, but a central point for attention, was something totally new. So what is the centre and what is periphery? This is a decision made by the group of scholars working in that area. And it is not a simple decision; it emerges not by eliminating the periphery, but by studying the periphery. That is why I refer to an embracing of contradictions.

And context-dependence means that we need to concentrate on questions such as: what is the context of the knowledge? Where does it come from? What should we, as a scientific collective look at? These are locally decided, contextual matters, depending on social decisions and the reasoning of groups of people who make up the scientific community. Now, are we able to embrace it? This is theme of our conference on Rethinking the Enlightenment.

I intend to spend the next two or three years working on curriculum reform and I think that this kind of New Enlightenment thinking must be introduced in an introductory form in all curricula in all scientific areas: the natural sciences, social sciences, humanities and also in professional schools such as medicine, engineering and law. Law is a very interesting example; for a long time, it was the last bastion where a kind of non-emotional rationality ruled supreme. Recently András Sajó, a great scholar who is now at the International Court of Human Rights, wrote a book called *Constitutional Sentiments* (2010). For me, it is a veritable breakthrough, because it presents the introduction of emotional elements into the creation of various constitutions. That is the direction in which we are going.

Another example is medicine. Almost nowhere in the world has the study of medicine been connected to evolutionary theory; the theory of evolution has not been part of the curriculum. A few years ago, however, a group of scholars was convened at the Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin, headed by Randolph Nesse, who was researching an evolutionary approach to medicine. It developed into a discipline, actually, with two important journals and ten medical schools adopting it, so one can regard it as important. Their thesis is that the only way you can understand infectious diseases is to study the interaction between the evolution of the parasites and humans.

But there is one even more important point. In medicine they always talk about something that to me is an oxymoron: evidence-based medicine. But what they really mean by evidence-based medicine is that part of the diagnosis which comes in the form of numbers, as supplied by machines. Fine. But this makes sense only if on your medical curriculum you learn to co-ordinate this highly important information, coming in the form of numbers (supplied by machines/appliances), with the medical experience of the doctor and with the narrative of the patient. This training in coordination is sorely neglected in most medical schools.

Narrative is a very interesting aspect of this New Enlightenment thinking. The great psychologist Jerome Bruner, in his Jerusalem lectures, which were later published in a little book called *Acts of Meaning* (1990), made the following formulation: 'Psychology has neglected meaning; meaning is socially constructed.' Now, how can this be translated into a research problem in psychology, or in other areas? He decided that he wanted to translate this issue into studies of narrative. He is now over 90 years old, teaching narrative approaches to law at NYU Law School and he has even succeeded in convincing Columbia Medical School to have a department of Narrative Medicine. Narrative Medicine is not just an encouragement to be nice to the patients; it is about how to make the narrative of the patient an integral part of the diagnosis.

So the narrative is an interesting story here, and I think it should be a central approach in our rethinking of the Enlightenment. For me, curriculum reform is a central theme for the coming two or three years. ■

Introductory statement of Aboagora, presented on 16 August 2011. Transcribed by Ruth Illman, edited by Yehuda Elkana.

Yehuda Elkana is a President and Rector Emeritus of the Central European University in Budapest and a previous Permanent Fellow of the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin. He has studied physics, mathematics and the history of science, and received his PhD in 1968 at Brandeis University. Yehuda Elkana has a wide teaching experience in various universities. He is an author of several books and numerous articles. He is also a member of the advisory board of Aboagora. E-mail: yehudaelkana(at)gmail.com.

References

Bruner, Jerome 1990. *Acts of Meaning*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Sajó, András 2010. *Constitutional Sentiments*. New Haven: Yale University Press.