

# EPISTEMIC CONNECTION BETWEEN HUMANISTIC FORMATION AND UNIVERSITY PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION

## La conexión epistémica entre formación humanista y educación profesional universitaria

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### Abstract

The conception of an education with humanistic approach has been an omnipresent subject in professional university education. Both in institutional statements and in more specific formative purposes, the relevance of accomplishing an education guided by humanistic foundations seems to appear frequently. The latter, regardless of the debate related to the implications of conceiving the human being as a superior entity in the universe. This paper examines humanistic education from a scarcely thematized but, to our judgement, especially relevant perspective: the epistemic dimension. Accordingly, even though this topic is addressed from a singular theoretical perspective, a hegemonic interpretation of Humanism is not attempted, in contrast with a more classical approach of value orientation. With this background, three domains are proposed to focus the theoretical analysis, namely the practical epistemic, the disciplinary epistemic, and the epistemically human. Thus, it is argued that professional university education based on contemporary Humanism should educationally contribute to develop a comprehension of epistemic problems integrated to the professional performance. This last statement entails, at least, a broad notion of rationality, aware of its limits and scopes, as well as a strict commitment with the inherent complexity of personal and social problems, and ultimately, with the own meaning of professional condition.

### Keywords

University education, humanistic education, professional, epistemology of practice, critical humanism, philosophy of education.

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### Resumen

La concepción de una formación de carácter humanista ha sido un tema multipresente en la educación profesional universitaria. Tanto en declaraciones institucionales, como en propósitos formativos más particularizados, aparece con frecuencia la importancia de alcanzar una educación orientada por principios de inspiración humanista. Esto último, con independencia del debate actual referente a las implicancias de una concepción de hombre como entidad superior en el universo. Este artículo examina el asunto de la formación humanista desde una arista poco tematizada, pero a nuestro juicio especialmente relevante: la dimensión epistémica. En ese sentido, aunque se trata el tema a partir de una perspectiva teórica singular, no se pretende presionar en dirección de una lectura hegemónica del Humanismo, en oposición con un enfoque más clásico de orientación valórica. Con estos antecedentes, se plantean tres dominios para enfocar el análisis teórico, que se nombran como: el epistémico práctico, el epistémico disciplinar y el epistémicamente humano. Así, en este trabajo se arguye que una formación profesional con base en un Humanismo contemporáneo, debe contribuir educativamente a desarrollar una comprensión de los problemas epistémicos integrados a la actuación profesional. Esto supone, al menos, una noción amplia de racionalidad, consciente de sus límites y alcances, así como un compromiso con la complejidad inherente de los problemas individuales y sociales; y con el mismo significado de la condición profesional.

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### Palabras clave

Educación universitaria, formación humanista, profesional, epistemología de la práctica, humanismo crítico, filosofía de la educación.

## Introduction

By definition, a professional is a person institutionally enabled to utilize knowledge, with the purpose of performing a task or facing certain problems. Frequently, this knowledge is developed outside of the professional universe, particularly from the world of scientific research and university activity, that later are interiorized and transformed into tools for the search of concrete solutions. Settled on bases of disciplinary nature, professional activity rotates around the realizations and the execution in a practical and public sphere (Forman, 2012, pp. 60-61).

In professional practice, the appropriation and application of knowledge is a core fact, given that its action tends to the generation of solutions in a bounded framework and in precise timings. Correlatively, a professional is always, in some way, a professional of something. That said, it is always positive to remember that professional education cannot be reduced to obtain knowledge and techniques. It does not consist of just accumulating facts, tools, references and theories: a good professional must have an answer; but also, a way of thinking, a sensibility and a way of situating himself/herself in the world that, articulately and in a special manner, are emancipatory.

Therefore, considering that simultaneously the knowledge in his/her hands (of the professional) has diverse facets, because any action in this plane along with involving philosophical, scientific and technological aspects, implies ethical, economic, legal and social aspects in their broad extension.

In an epistemological plane, besides, it is evident that professional education depends on the generation of knowledge. On one hand, it is obvious that the development of knowledge represents a multitude of new opportunities for the professional sector. On the other hand, its own evolution causes that professions lose actuality with growing speed, forcing to maintain continuous education processes. Consequently, an essential condition of university education will demand the generation of attitudes to learn, unlearn and relearn.

Hence, the dynamics of knowledge is simultaneously an opportunity, a risk and a challenge for professions and educational institutions. It is not a simple task for a university institution to maintain a high update standard. Especially, because to accomplish it, it is required a collective effort, defined institutional policies, aimed at establishing appropriate exchanges with the environment; and a structure of internal interactions capable of promoting reciprocal learning. This cannot be seen as problem of individual nature, that may be adequately solved by simply adding-up well-meaning endeavors. In summary, this is a matter that concerns the constitution of a broad academic community (García, 2012, pp. 182-189).

On the other hand, under all evidence, it has occurred a formidable increase in the volume of knowledge, a growing and rapid accumulation. Nonetheless, this does not consequently guarantee a shared conscience about the statute of such knowledge. In particular, with respect to its epistemological equivalence, to its complementarity, to its relations of interdependence and hierarchy.

At the same time, hybrid epistemic spaces have arisen, gathering diverse interdisciplinary areas and/or thematic fields conceptually intertwined. This, however, has established barriers for the transposition of the knowledge involved, ranging from methodological dissents to a significant type of incommensurability between languages and practices of different disciplines. Incidentally, this intervenes in a substantial manner at the moment of defining educational projects.

Despite validating the exponential increase in available knowledge, some questions that remain in the contemporary academic space still have not been dissipated; for instance: What does it mean that there are



more scientists from the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, compared to all previous history? From this fact: Are we authorized to affirm that the contributions of this broad group of scientists are superior to the contributions of the past? Do they show, in fact, a continuous process of perfecting and progress? (Thom, 2000, p. 54).

Certainly, and even though it can be pointed out that the increase in the volume of knowledge is effective, this does not say much about its epistemic merit, its complementarity and synthesis; and, especially, about its applicability. The experimental inflation, verifiable from the perspective of modernity, has provoked a considerable production of information and data, but this is not followed by a linear scientific progress of the same magnitude. Knowledge does not develop by simple accumulation. This is a fact that has been discussed many times in critical literature, ancient and recent (Finnur, 2016, pp. 75-76).

The transformations of knowledge force careful choices in the educational plane. No knowledge has a guaranteed value, so rote learnings and discrete applications are doomed to infertility. The need to incorporate a conception of open rationality, with attitudes favorable toward decision making under uncertain evidence, or the possibility of deploying multiple courses of action, surfaces as an unavoidable alternative to any educational project.

In the middle of this complexity, humanistic education has a place indicated, particularly given its broad and integrating nature. In fact, a good portion of higher education institutions worldwide, show to be favorable to recognize the positive benefits brought by an educational model with these features.

Alternatively, humanism brings to view an extensive hermeneutic, not only traceable from a historical analysis of the concept, but also from its own critical reflection. In fact, an unequivocal panorama will be very hardly found in the hundreds of pages that have been written to reconfigure it. In this sense, the study of humanistic thinking by academic community has given rise to a wide variety of interpretations, understanding that each one of them brings a new comprehension horizon to the original ideas (Chatelier, 2016, pp. 1-2; Said, 2004, pp. 53-80).

From a methodological point of view, this work corresponds to a philosophical-conceptual research. In other words, it is equivalent to a model of intellectual work that starts with an exhaustive selection and bibliographic review (documentary), and is deployed interpreting, contextualizing and projecting critically the elements selected, according to criteria coherent with the definition of a problematic core, as is the epis-



temic link between humanistic and professional university education. Fundamentally, their purpose, development and conclusion, framed in a conceptual environment, focus on handling a specific problem, that by definition allows multiple approaches, and presents varied opportunities to propose derivations and theoretical relations.

Concretely, this paper examines the epistemic dimension of humanistic education, and the possibility of its coherent articulation with contemporary professional education. The discussions and debates that have occurred around the matter of value are ultimately avoided, without pressing for an incompatible interpretation. Under this assumption, and integrating the ideas of critical Humanism, it is stated that a professional university education guided by the standards of current Humanism may be reconstructed through a broad understanding of rationality and professional knowledge<sup>1</sup>.

Then, it will be attempted to show that a humanist education, under no circumstances, can be analyzed under a unique type of scientific rationality. Especially when the latter, inside an epistemic domain, appears permeated by irreducible factors to an exclusively instrumental sense. Guided by this motive, the argument integrates historical-critical notions committed to the meaning of Humanism, with an approximation to university education, understood as an intellectual and educational task.

Shortly, the paper will try to respond to the articulation of these humanist ideals, especially those associated to the epistemic critics, when it is attempted that they take part of a project of university education. Furthermore, and without invoking an argumentative reductionism, it will be express the unfinished nature of an unambiguous theoretical integration of the humanist project.

Section (1) shows a brief historical vision of Humanism. Some considerations about its classical origin are made, and simultaneously, meeting points between them and the demands for a professional university education are suggested. With the lens of Humanism, and based on the exercise of criticism as its praxis, three dimensions for the analysis of the epistemic point of view of contemporary university education are proposed, whose sections correspond to: the practical epistemic domain (2), the disciplinary epistemic (3), and the epistemically human (4). In each of these realms, arguments regarding the way in which a humanist education broadens the comprehension of educational processes are offered, and at the same time, how the exercise of criticism as an expression of humanist thinking should influence current professional university education.



## Humanism: preliminary considerations

Humanism is a term full of history, with plenty of meanings and enormous current resonance. Polysemic by excellence, it is initially associated to a Renaissance spiritual stream that contemplates a high assessment of the human being, and of humanity as a supreme value. In a defined sense, it is applied to a movement that emerged in Italy towards the end of the fourteenth century, and then extended to other European countries during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Apart from this origin, and even when it has been called the “philosophy of the Renaissance”, Humanism has experienced a broad deployment that surpasses these limits, reaching our days with a significant vitality (Aloni, 2003).

A general conception of life is called this way, contemplating all of its aspects, founded on the conviction of the superiority of the human condition. It is rooted on a firm belief on the resources that human beings possess to assume their development, drive their searches and reach their plenitude. With a strong emphasis on the values of creativity, freedom, and happiness, as well as universal human rights (López Pérez & Saavedra, 2020, pp. 2-6).

Careful of his wording, philosopher Jorge Millas asks himself: and what is this? His answer is brief: “Simply, the superlative interest and appreciation of mankind in itself” (1960, p. 43). Human beings are a microcosm, a totality in themselves: in the world and open to it, permanently in the process of being, as a possibility. Hence, two extremes will historically be in conflict: the emphasis on personal autonomy and the search for a broad conception of universal humanity (Veügelers, 2011, pp. 1-7).

If something differentiates Humanism as a timeless quality, it is an evident unrest that results from the multiple attempts of understanding it. In its genesis, it derives from *humanitas* (humanity), word that gave rise to *studia humanitas* (teacher of humanities), individual that initially taught disciplines such as grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history and moral philosophy. These expressions were used in Rome before our time, and were maintained by the medieval educational system, integrating the so called seven liberal arts. At least since the twelfth century, medieval university recognized at least seven arts, grouped in two unequal categories: the secrets of language and the secrets of nature. The first included the Trivium (rhetoric, grammar and logic), and the second the Cuadrivium (music, arithmetic, geometry and astronomy). Medicine was later incorporated to this second group (Moller, 2019, p. 221).

Fundamentally, they referred to a genuinely human form of education. It was much later, in the nineteenth century, when these expres-



sions were resumed with the purpose of highlighting the educational value of the Greek and Latin classics. In this manner, it was attempted to relieve the unit of thinking and the action centered on a specific human ideal, characterized by its creative potential. The encounter of an active and a contemplative life, an articulation between the transforming action and the intellectual and ethical education, between politics and its study.

As it has been already highlighted, unambiguously reformulating the meaning of Humanism would prove endless. Nonetheless, it is possible to differentiate at most two theoretical paths: a trail of Germanic origin, where a profuse connection with the idea of *bildung* (education) is found; and another more traditional branch, whose lines can be appreciated as a product of the different historical, sociocultural and political movements that took place in the rest of Europe and America. The latter is the branch that this paper intends to explore (Zovko & Dillon, 2018, pp. 555-557).

Among the highlighted classifying tasks, widely recognized today, it is included the work by the Israeli philosopher Nmrod Aloni (2003), in his famous book *Enhancing Humanities. The Philosophical Foundations of Humanistic Education*. Aloni's work not only stands out because of its descriptive richness, but also because of the heuristic that he proposes to approach a term as dilemmatic as Humanism. Concretely, and after a comprehensible exam as a historic rationality, he presents a classification of Humanism from four paradigmatic periods, namely: classic-cultural, naturalistic-romantic, existential and, finally, critical-radical. It escapes from the purposes of this article to focus on each one of these periods, however, a deserved attention to some ideas seems to be required when Humanism converges as the basis of institutional educational projects.

At the beginning, for the classical conception of Humanism, the main function of education had a civilizing nature, an invitation to cultivate beauty, virtue and righteousness, from the most human expression: the use of rational faculties. The beauty of forms, justice, prudence, balance and good, would be found in the proportion in which cognitive resources provided by reason guided man to his encounter. The shape of good would only be reached through the metaphysical/normative notion of knowledge, and the latter was the Socratic means to goodness. In this regard, it is necessary to consider Plato, particularly the *Republic* and *Laws* dialogues. Certainly, with the passing of time, this classical conception has been discussed and subject to extensive debates. There is a questioning of the western way to conceive rationality, accusing it of forming a type of Europeanizing control on the rest of civilizations worldwide.



Through it, only one type of intellectual orientation would prevail, an exclusive condition of knowledge, and finally, a unique idea of world and progress (Chatelier, 2016, pp. 4-5). Similarly, it produced certain aristocratic or intellectually elitist behaviors, because only the social groups of the nobility would access the literature in their mother tongues.

In this same manner, classical Humanism was accused of transmitting a kind of exaggerated confidence in the reaches of rational faculties, noticing that behaviors exclusively oriented to that idealization end up causing the collapse of other dimensions of the individual that only emerge as a product of the subjectivation of existence. The critics made by Heidegger and Sartre on this respect are classic. For example, Sartre (2012) out:

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Man is the only one that not only is as he conceives himself, but also as he wants himself. Man is no other thing than what he does to himself. (...) Man begins to exist, i.e., begins to be something that is directed to a future, and is conscious of projecting himself to the future (pp. 138-39)

Presented in this manner, the role of Humanism is both complex and difficult, moreover, it is responsible for making a contribution to the education of human beings that is irreplaceable. Additionally, it is almost mandatory that it accomplishes a task that is pending, which consists in completing these ancient conceptions with more recent approaches and demands. Today, we need to perceptively add contents that were not considered in other eras. In a critical relationship, it is mandatory to take charge of the need to integrate the cultural elements that come from non-occidental ways of being, incorporate post-human positions, the statements made from gender perspectives, and incidentally the ecologic view, which relativize the super hegemonic nature of the man, situating him in a more harmonious relationship with nature. Edward Said (2004), for example, expresses:

As I currently understand its relevance, humanism is not a way of consolidating and affirming what 'we' always have known and felt, but instead a medium to question, refute and reformulate most of what is presented to us as certainties already merchandized, bottled, incontrovertible and uncritically coded, including the ones contained in the masterpieces grouped under the rubric of classics (p. 49).

Said's citation is illuminating and expresses with clarity, on one hand, the critical sphere of humanist thinking, placing it as a dynamic intellectual position and in permanent change and, on the other hand,

noticing the possible deficit in historical understanding, which to his judgment has closed the reconstructions of human reason. Likewise, in the core of humanist thinking, criticism will be found as praxis. In fact, the author himself will point out:

Humanism is not related with distancing from reality nor exclusion. Instead, on the contrary: its purpose consists in subjecting to critical scrutiny more topics, like the product of human doing, human energies orientated to emancipation and illustration or to, which is equally important, the erroneous human interpretations of the collective past and present (pp. 42-43).

## Practical epistemic dimension

At present, professional education proposes a challenging scenario. First, in what is related to determining the theoretical and methodological foundations aimed at guiding this task.

Relative to the latter, the mastery of the practical in the professional field of action presents particular characteristics that must be considered when designing educational proposals. Subsequently, and in varied occasions, the practical realm will be invaded by epistemic conditions of indeterminacy. Because of that, the factors determining the events will often be impossible to control and determine in its entirety—as opposed to experimental scenarios—, all of them will simultaneously come together, rendering the judgments of agents always incomplete, whether due to insufficient information obtained, or by an inappropriate selection. Due to this, the behavior of the professional will have a relevant quota of uncertainty (Schön, 1983).

Let us think of a current example: let us imagine the practical scenario that health professionals face in the middle of the current COVID-19 pandemics. Consider the quantity of undetermined variables (even by contemporary epidemiology) related to the behavior of the virus in the guests (patients), the clinical manifestations, the interaction with other comorbidities, the clinical evolution, the associated functional deterioration, etc. All of these put professionals in a scenario of very high uncertainty. Their behavior, as a result, will be governed by little precedents and highly insufficient predictive information.

Another epistemic element of the practical sphere could be named as the condition of *incompleteness*. Together with the above mentioned, the courses of action and judgments of agents will not always report the



desired results and, even more, the subjects will not be in conditions of recognizing the factor or factors that prevented the goal to be met. In this sense, the professionals will have to fight with a significant sensation of dissatisfaction and vagueness with the final product of their determinations. Dewey (1916)<sup>2</sup>, for example, will propose the path of reflection to remedy this epistemic limitation.

Facing a panorama as the one described, there is no doubt that formative processes committed with practice are required, in which the development of reflective thought is an essential objective. The multiple dimension of practical mastery is not reducible to a productive technique; there are no methods outside of the conditions of agency of the subject. Now, how to treat this elusive nature of practice from a humanist education?

Within the foundations of contemporary Humanism, it is admitted with relative naturalness the condition of cognitive finitude of the individual. To a large extent, the latter recognizes the unavoidable limitations of epistemic access that individuals possess when attempting to learn and act in the world. Since classical times, humanist education highlights the incompleteness of thinking and human reason. Even the Kantian conception of pedagogy, which could be understood as an idealization of the normativity of reason, admits and advocates that idea of finitude of rational thought. In fact, seated on these same principles of criticism, Kant states that the conduction of understanding and judgment are always constrained by the possibilities of apprehension of the object. It is not possible to act beyond what our daily sensible experience offers us at a sensory level (Kant, 1960; Chatelier, 2015, pp. 83-84).

For humanist education, this approximation to the perceptible highlights the need to handle a sensation of being devoted to an experience which is unfinished and endless by definition. For this reason, it will always be precise to warn about the need of refining the look, as well as returning out attention to the learning of thinking itself, developing comprehension and creativity. Knowledge expires, but thinking will prevail.

On the other hand, involving Humanism as a core axis for an educational project implies valuing certain intellectual dispositions that have a direct relation with the dilemma of practice. Then, it should be admitted that professional exercise does not simply consist of having at disposal mere partitioned knowledge and specific techniques: a professional must provide an answer, but also a way of thinking, a sensitivity, and a way of placing himself/herself in the world, that articulately and in some special manner, is emancipatory and projects an identity. This dialectic sense (projective and stationary) of action, at the time that it makes vis-



ible a defined position of the subject, manifests a way of being, denoting that the behaviors taken by the professional vivify his/her own identity construction, which further promotes the development of professional drift (Copson, 2015, pp. 9-14; Tubbs, 2013, pp. 480-483).

In these terms, the humanist task in university education demands careful definitions. First, any educational process tends to surpass the limits of its direct programmatic objectives, given that it unavoidably links itself with all the dimensions of the existence of the individual. Not only the behaviors of the professional are expressed in such intentionally declared educational matters, but also the significations and subjectivations themselves are presented, along with their permanent relationship with life experience (Kincheloe, 2017, pp. 95-96).

An educational project founded on the bases of Humanism, by its own nature, must then necessarily problematize about the temporality of action, seeking to fill it with purpose. In other words, humanist education is oriented both to conservation and change; to the past, present and future; it supports itself both in epistemic and non-epistemic recent values; it places itself in a concrete reality and in another imagined. In this context, it must be capable of preserving and transmitting the past; those who assume the educational labor should select what matters of the past, with the purpose of thinking about the present and projecting the future. The educational labor, as emphasized by Hanna Arendt (2016), unequivocally has a preserving function, that is easily shadowed in the name of some future purpose; but it is precisely to guarantee evolution and progress, to generate the best conditions of personal and social update, that has to handle the historical element.

This last point can be also examined from a different perspective, though not dissociated from the core matter. In a sense, there is a coincidence in the theoretical understanding of education as a phenomenon of intracultural transmission and replication. Thus, professionals tend to reproduce and legitimate their practical knowledge throughout time, having as guide and model their own peers. There is a kind of communion of the senses in action. This enables to comprehend how an epistemic dimension of practice lies on processes of temporary preservation of actions to the inside of communities. So much so that the professional field will manifest acts of ritualization, consecration and ontologization of some behaviors, problems, answers and knowledge, which will tend to be perpetuated (Latour, 1984; Abbott, 2001, pp. 121-153).

The previous demands an educational task crucial to Humanism: emphasizing the fact that in the realm of practical knowledge in the pro-



fessional domain; a conception of open rationality<sup>3</sup> will be better prepared to assume, through individual decisions and collective efforts, the epistemological problems that are stated each time with more urgency in practice. As it has been pointed out, the attributes of practical episteme, using Foucauldian jargon, given that they admit nonlinear causalities, supervenience relationships, recursiveness relationships and epistemic circularity, do not have a prefigured path and cannot be understood by a closed system of thinking.

For this reason, humanist education will have to relieve the notion of knowing to think, that is, being capable of recurring with autonomy to the resources typical of thinking, in presence of problems, challenges or opportunities, conscious of a concept as vague as that of limit. Consistent with that, it should be deployed in contexts and situations of permanent conflict, for example: How to develop a global and complex vision, from the fertile speculation of humanities, the fragmentation of scientific culture and the technification of professions? How to gather the reflexivity of humanist culture, to articulate it with the objectivity of scientific culture? How to satisfy the aspiration for a genuine knowledge, considering that practical knowledge presents an indissoluble relationship with human agency? How to surpass the limits of specialization, without falling in imprecise theoretical generalizations, guaranteeing a competent action?

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## The disciplinary epistemic

For various centuries, scientific knowledge has occupied a place of prestige in contemporary societies. In parallel, it can be also verified that as it has evolved, the specialization, specification and atomizing of knowledge areas generate knowledge increasingly elaborated. From this perspective, the disciplinary development has become the natural result of the sophistication and deepening processes of scientific knowledge. Thus, once knowledge is organized through a discipline, a series of event occur in its internal logic, whether ways of production, replication or legitimation of knowledge. In the same way, when knowledge takes part of such disciplinary structure, it will often constitute an effort to systematically describe, understand and/or explain the reality from multiple aspects, but always from differing emphases (Becher, 1994, pp. 151-153; Turner, 2000, pp. 46-55).

On the other hand, the disciplinary system, understood as a group of epistemic practices, that hold certain epistemic values, represents a model for the production of discourses and narratives and, more im-

portantly, sets rules and specifies theoretical limits. This regulates in an invisible manner what type of relationships, methods, assumptions, procedures, problems, among others, can be solved inside the scientific community (Donald, 2002, pp. 7-30; Politi, 2018, pp.130-132).

Conceiving the nature of disciplinary knowledge as a human product, humanist education must open horizons of understanding, insert critical questionings and reflections there where the confidence on disciplines lies comfortably. There is no discrepancy in which an ethically responsible professional exhibits a level of epistemic justification to back up his/her judgments and decisions, many of them housed inside disciplinary narratives. Very different is, however, who notices a type of reason founded on only one justificatory notion. That said, a humanist education is oriented to show that there where theoretical reflection does not exist, disciplinary knowledge is simply a collection of archives, data and statistical numbers and, besides, its results will presumably become unapplicable in specific and local scenarios. The great scientific advances are not only a result of finding new facts, but new ways of thinking and interpreting known facts. Scientific progress does not occur exclusively through formalization and abstraction processes, but instead by the ability to contextualize, reinterpret and relate previously theorized facts.

Considering such epistemic task of humanist education, its purpose will be to develop a kind of intellectual orientation for the subjects to be aware of their own assumptions and implications, as well as the reasons and evidences that back up their conclusions. Capable of examining their methodologies, procedures, and points of view; preparing professionals to identify the factors that lead to partiality, prejudice, and self-deception; stimulating the reflection about cognitive processes in the same way that the object is thought about. Favoring the appearance of a rational capacity to problematize practice with a criterion of viability, and with organizing principles that can articulate knowledge and confer them with purpose, warning to face unavoidable uncertainties and educating for human understanding. Only in this way it will be possible to learn the value of knowledge, its scopes and restrictions. Only in this way it will be possible to educate professionals that essentially may notice the difference between having knowledge and being capable of access it, when necessary, between possessing a competence and applying it to their advantage; between knowing methods and techniques, and knowing when, where, how and why to utilize them. Moreover, only through this will it be possible to transcend instrumental thinking, moving away from the meager relationship between means and purposes, and incorpo-



rating in the process what is not subject to calculations or measurements; those aspects such as suffering, dignity, and the tissue of intersubjective interactions.

Another critical consideration that humanist education has in mind for professional education is problematizing the statute of the scientific method and of the evidence. As it is known, from many decades ago it is resounding in education a quasi-apology to infallibility of empirical research, in particular, to the related with promoting a dedicated search for evidence of this sort. Apparently, the understanding that knowledge is only the result of an exclusive type of processes to form epistemically justified beliefs, has taken control of the narrative and built an imaginary of indisputable verisimilitude. Of course, a narrow conception of what is evidence has been enthroned, without it being assessed rationally. In fact, and even when it is known that his writings are of candid interpretation to us, Wittgenstein (1999) already noticed it in the paragraph 5.1363 of the *Tractatus* “If from the fact that a proposition is obvious to us is not followed that it is true, then evidence is neither a justification for our belief in its truth” (p. 39).

Likewise, German thinker Gert Biesta (2010) has systematically questioned the idea of education being an endeavor whose core theoretical attribute is disciplinary ideological neutrality. His critics are directed at the renowned project of “Education based on evidence”. On this respect he states:

The project of practice based on evidence needs, because of this, to urgently be thought in ways that take into consideration the limits of knowledge, the nature of social interaction, the ways in which things work, the processes of power that are involved in them and, more importantly, the normative values and orientations that constitute social practices such as education<sup>4</sup> (p. 201).

To humanist contemporary education, the current reconstruction of the evidentialist discourse produces an impoverishment of diverse key formative realms for university education: value-wise, ethical, affective, democratic, among others. In these conditions, only a deficient vision of science would reduce the multiple dimensions of knowledge to a programmatic activity or to a productive technique. There is no method outside of the conditions of the subject that researches in his/her discipline. Theoretical cores that are admitted and others that are excluded will always exist, there will always be some anomaly that the discipline itself does not explain. Likewise, (the method) cannot present itself as a



closed resource, prior to experience, because in its genuine sense it only emerges as part of the search, and just finishes configuring itself at the end of the journey. Any method, conceived as such, remains available for new inquiries.

The task of humanist education is not boxed, and it neither subscribes only to the inherited categories, and as such it admits that an improvised path, an exploration which is free and not without risks, will be part of the scientific task. The latter can be expressed with essayistic, genealogical and ethnographic approaches, which have to be incorporated as legitimate and necessary aspects for professional education. In the same way, it disputes heavily with the so called “method centrism”. The belief that certain predetermined methods are conditioning factors of the validity and importance of the quality of educational research. In this line of thought, it does not discard the possibilities of accomplishing a humanist praxis understood as a critical and dialogical intellectual exercise of the disciplinary limits (Biesta, 2007, pp. 18-20; Weaver & Snaza, 2016).

Knowledge that gains meaning, that appears equipped with sense and integrated in a duty or in a perspective, is always and everywhere a result that contains and fulfills its own process (Mure, 1998). There is no other path, because thinking is necessarily a circular process. Any procedure, centered in fragmentation, no matter how didactic it may be, it will cause the loss of unity once more. Developing a conscience of objects, without simultaneously and parallelly developing a conscience of itself, would be below the educational needs that should be promoted (Dewey, 1916).

Finally, it does not seem like a simple literary sense, the one that leads Edgar Morin (2001) to state that the biggest contribution of knowledge in the twentieth century has been the knowledge of the limits of knowledge; it leads Pascal to hold that the two biggest excesses are excluding reason and not admitting more than reason, and it leads Paul Valéry (cited in López, 2009) to notice that the two dangers that incessantly threaten the world are order and disorder.

## The epistemically human

The educational task of humanist education, if it is accepted its emancipatory nature as its core idea, is not defined to write the future of people or to impose a destiny, but to pursue that everyone may discover and obtain the best for himself/herself, both as individual and at a social level. Between that swinging, the drift of the professional is also constructed.



As it happens in the journey of Odysseus: each human being has the inalienable task of finding the concordance with himself/herself; and, above all, his/her own place in the world. No matter how many gods there are in the conscience, at the end determination and personal effort always matter. The sinuous, rough and uncertain path of Odysseus, according to the narrative of Homer, is one the most potent metaphors in western literature, in its ultimate sense puts into play a practical wisdom. It refers to a project that is never given (not revealed), because it is not presented as an imposition or a gift, but as a personal construction. It is about a life that accepts its finitude and precariousness, but bets for a realized existence in harmony with itself and with others (López, 2010, pp.167-174).

Such encounter between the search for autonomy (agency) and the gregarious impulse toward a universal humanity, constitutes one of the pillars of contemporary humanist education. In this link certain historical challenges are also represented, for example: how the individual—the self-definition and self-realization of personal projects— does not end undermining the possibilities for coexistence and fraternity with peers?

For questions such as the previous, a critical humanist education does not elude or disregard the intellectual orientation provided by human reason. Simply, it moderates its reaches and evaluates its limitations, being aware of its finitude and imperfection.

As opposed to common opinion, the development of general intellectual abilities enables a better performance of particular or specialized competences. The more powerful the thought, in its broadest sense, better its ability to address bounded and positioned problems. Thinking is an endless resource and with a wide range of applicability, both in instrumental and reflective terms. It does not deplete or vanish with time nor with use: the more it is used, the more it is perfected and stays available linked to all the aspects of experience. Emphasizing artificial dichotomies, like the pretended contrast between thought and emotion, for example, lacks foundation. Thinking is a resource of enormous potentiality to produce all types of learning and addressing matters as diverse as problem solution, coexistence, self-knowledge, formation of attitudes, decision making and expression of feelings. Simultaneously, the potentiality of thinking collaboratively admits the integration of the otherness and the development of a sense of epistemic humility according to the noble value of empathy as propulsor of understanding and reflecting orientation (Damasio, 2006).

Historically, there has been an opposition between two ways of using reason in human dilemmas, that can be traced throughout philosophy. On one hand, a closed rationality, where reason is confused with



logic, and that inevitably results in auto-sufficient, coherent and consistent systems, but without relationship with life and the immensity of human agreements and disagreements. And, in contrast, an open rationality, where logic is important but it does not become the only penalizing element during the course of thought and, especially, its desires of understanding. The latter surpasses the singular fact and projects it towards the past and its future, and in all directions of the present, attempting to maintain the cultural heritage, the loyalty to roots; searching for a way of living that does not deny of a functional nature, but adds a profound human component (Cordua, 2013, pp. 14-17).

Morin (2001), though not identified as a humanist thinker, states the urgent need for a reform of thinking in this direction, from which the disjunctive and reductive approaches are overcome, advancing to a way of knowing from distinction and conjunction. A thinking equipped with a general aptitude to state and address problems, and of organizational principles aimed at joining knowledge, giving sense to them. His proposition encompasses, precisely, the historic, cultural and social nature of human knowledge, adding to it a powerful concept: the chance. Even though everything that is reachable is systematically and justifiably planned, the unexpected will always be present, whether in favor or in opposition.

From an educational point of view, then, the matter of how to guide and lead the aforementioned processes, with the purpose that they are recognized and integrated in a model of thinking, imposes an enormous educational challenge. Nonetheless, some potential ideas could be outlined, namely: its development cannot be an isolated act nor an independent process. There can only be learning of thought when people value what they do, mobilize favorable dispositions regarding learning to think, with a desirable capacity and of broad possibilities. One thing is to have disposition and another, to have the ability to use it and develop it. The development of isolated intellectual abilities is not useful in itself, unless a disposition is cultivated in parallel to think in contexts where doing so acquires a sense. The rational dispositions govern the development of thought and are really transformed in the core of every good thought (Parfit, 2011).

To think and think about a conception of rationality arranged to critically examine the extended belief that transforms a type of science (empirical) in the highest degree of knowledge possible; and in a privileged discourse of universal truth. This normative scientism, direct heritage of modernity and illuminism, is increasingly difficult to sustain; and not only in social sciences, but also in physics or biology, including, by the way, all practical domains of professional action (Cartwright, 1999).

Consequently, a humanist education will always raise its hand and ask: Can we, really, keep stating that science is equivalent to a unified ensemble of knowledge, expressed rigorously in formal languages? Can we accept that scientific activity does not have limits and can be extended to every corner of nature and to all realms of experience and human life? Can we sidestep that science does not have epistemic assumptions? Can we repeat that the methods that guide scientific labor guarantee the universal nature of their results? Can we trust that there is no more criterion for truth than correspondence? An important task of humanist education is not, of course, to promote an anti-scientism discourse or a scientific denial, that would be so little humanist as the object of its criticism itself. But, indeed, to warn, show and discuss its limits, whereas science is a cultural product typical of constitutively imperfect beings (Aloni, 2003; Joyce & Cartwright, 2020, pp. 1068-1071).

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Joined to this narrative and founded on a critical humanist praxis, it is also evident to recognize the incubation of a “new post metaphysical and post Nietzschean humanism”, as expressed by Luc Ferry (2008, p.105), who does not place the epistemic values (true, rationality, evidence, validity, etc.) in a superior plane of ideal nature, separated and finally in conflict with life. In this new approximation, many people, young and old, quit conceding importance to sacrificial entities placed above concrete experience. This transgresses and attacks all major discourses of professional university education; rules, authorities, demands, values, strategies, etc; will be challenged, if they do not connect with the subject in multiple existential dimensions.

## Conclusions

All the above represents a rather broad picture as to now reduce it to simple affirmations. In principle, and in terms of coherence, the following axes are postulated to guide the university humanist educational efforts:

Constitute an maintain academic community, understood as a fundamental key to respond to the need of generating a humanist culture, with wide disposition to dialogue and capacity to contribute to production, divulgation and application of knowledge. A self-conscious and active academic community, where all the debates and disagreements typical of university life are included, transformed in depository of the responsibility of maintaining an intense and permanently critical view of its educational plan.

Recognize and share a plural and complex conception of the entire universe of knowledge. Plurality focused both on stimulating a complex and multidisciplinary thinking, and on addressing epistemological, theoretical and methodological aspects and all their educational implications; as a way to meet the demands presented by the context of contemporary knowledge, passed by dilemmas and debates of noticeable complexity. Admitting a complex conception that in its core sense rejects the dichotomous representations of reality, that often assume an ingenuous realism, and certain explanatory formats strictly based on a linear correlation or causality. We postulate the idea of current knowledge as equivalent to a tissue of heterogeneous elements, with high levels of differentiation and dispersion, that render infertile the scholastic resources centered in the construction of reductionist hierarchies, simple taxonomies and artificial organizations.

Establish an option regarding a pluralist education in the theoretical, epistemological and methodological, with the purpose of developing in future professional competences aimed at recognizing, facing and articulating the polarities, discontinuities and tensions that characterize current knowledge and by extension professional practice. An education centered in the objective of favoring the development of an autonomous subject, prepared to contextualize, materialize and understand the complexity of the human being and his/her environment. Capable of taking charge of his own development and of the community he belongs to, with ethical and social sense.



## Notes

- 1 This practical-epistemic realm (professional knowledge) where professionals act, can be traced back from Schön (1983) as “Epistemology of practice”, Foucault (1966) as “Episteme”, Polyani (1958) as “Tacit knowledge” and Anscombe (1957) as “Intention knowledge”
- 2 Naturally, commenting on the notion of reflection in Dewey as guidance to action, exceeds the purposes of this paper. All left to say is that, for Dewey, the link between knowing and reflecting is epistemically constitutive.
- 3 The notion of rationality employed here assumes a substantive nature, and consistent with what was pointed out by Scanlon (1998); the reasons are considerations that count in favor of a  $\emptyset$ . Where  $\emptyset$  is referred to as a verb in infinitive form.
- 4 “Therefore, the ‘project’ of evidence-based practice urgently needs to be rethought in ways that take into consideration the limits of knowledge, the nature of social interaction, the ways in which things can work, the processes of power that are involved in this and, most importantly, the values and normative orientations that constitute social practices such as education”.

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