

ACCADEMIA NAZIONALE DEI LINCEI

«CONFERENZE ISTITUZIONALI»

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ACADEMIES - VALUES AND CHALLENGES

Venerdì 19 aprile 2024, ore 11

In his work “Ethics” Aristotle clarifies that the life of contemplation is the superior good. In academia such life exists in a group, rather than independently. A university is based on two essential components: a life of contemplation and a learning community.

The model of western university originated in the late Middle Ages in Bologna. In the disintegrated, conflicted and multi-cultural world of pre-Renaissance Europe, the universities constituted global organizations, which crossed boundaries of language, culture and political entities. The world of global knowledge that was detached from culture and place, was transformed with the establishment of the nation state, a process which reached its peak in the 19th century.

The current university model is compatible with the basic values of liberal democracy, and is far more abundant than the former model. As knowledge knows no boundaries, universities have affiliation with each other. However, the current model is fraught with tensions which did not exist in the past. The state takes an increasing interest in education in general and in universities in particular. Our world is characterized by cultural conflicts, each culture claiming recognition, at times supremacy, and these tensions infiltrate into the campus.

The tensions are reflected in the subjects of instruction, and may be reflected in the topics of research, mainly in the fields of Humanities and social science, but not only in these areas.

What should be the foundation of knowledge that we wish to impart to our students? To what extent should we emphasize the local, as opposed to the universal? To what extent should we limit access to material that contains harmful content? What is the proper balance between shared knowledge, which will guarantee the core values (when some of these core values are being questioned), and diversity of ideas? Should we put limit on research due to moral considerations?

These are the challenges we are facing and the question is whether we can offer satisfactory answers which are in line with the basic values that the university relies upon.

The founding principle of the university is the aspiration for knowledge and quest for truth. The values of freedom, tolerance and excellence serve this primary principle. Through a brief presentation of these values, I shall address the question of their limits, their compatibility with each other and their resilience in current political situation.

Finally, I shall relate to the risks embedded in science and technology, to the need to be aware of them, and the doubts involved in our ultimate quest for knowledge.