

**“To live, as much as possible, according to
precepts of philosophical thinking means
to live by the law of the measure of things”.**
An interview with Prof. Ion Irimie

At his 90 years of age, Professor Ion Irimie may be rightly called a witness, based on what he’s lived through and what he’s written about difficult and interesting times. He grew up and was educated in the spirit of the Romanian interbellum school and then he chose an academic career, and succeeded in reaching the highest didactic rank: university professor. All his life he worked for only one employer: Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca. Since 1990 Professor Ion Irimie has been living in Germany with his family. Here he had the respite to develop his ideas - previously published in national journals - and to propose new ones. He wrote about reflection, information, causality, alienation, entropy, about Socrates and Jesus, and so on. He always did have a firm attitude, affirming and reaffirming his convictions frankly. This interview shows how a philosopher “cast into the world” in peaceful times that soon turned utterly unstable, sees life.

Reporter: How have you experienced, subjectively speaking, your 90th birthday?

Ion Irimie: I would say that I’ve experienced it normally. I have experienced the mood that anyone has on such anniversary days. I felt both joy and sadness. I was happy that my holy seed has kept me alive to this age, which I did not foresee and hope for during my youth. I remember that I was about six years old, when after writing on a writing slate¹ all the years from 1937 till 1999 and after my grandmother showed me how to write the years further, I pondered and wondered if I would live until the year 2000. This question was my way to set a kind of life expectancy. I am surprised that I outlived my expectations by 21 years considering that I was sickly in my youth and childhood. I’m happy and surprised even more that I have outlived my ninth decade. Mixed in with feelings of joy and accomplishment, whether I liked it or not, were sadness and projects. Here, my subjectivity lingered a bit more. I thought a lot that, from now on, my exit from the world can occur any time; that, from now

¹ Many school children, especially in the country side, did not have note books during the interbellum. Writing slates were used.



on, I cannot plan too much. From now on I am at the life stage where you can have only one more project, the only project I can still afford, the project of being; the project of being able to say, again and again, *Good morning!* to a new morning.

Reporter: How does life seem after nine decades? How is it looking back?

Ion Irimie: How else, but beautiful, beautiful! Too bad it's too short! It is beautiful to be in the world. It is beautiful to always have a past, present and future with you. It's beautiful to witness how three time fragments with all their content meet and collide within you. The result of their encounter and collision is what you do today and what you plan for tomorrow. This collision of all the geneses and the projects leads to your life's accomplishments and failures, your joys and moments of sadness, your highs and your lows, your love and unlove. To put everything in a nutshell, your happiness and your unhappiness emerge. It's not only beautiful, but also terribly interesting to witness how Prometheus or the Promethean and Sisyphus or the Sisyphian encounter within yourself. It's terribly interesting to witness their game.

Although, psychologically I have been and I still am a melancholic, epistemologically and socially I've remained an incorrigible optimist. This is why I have said and will continue to say that life is beautiful. Its ugly moments have always been overpowered by its beautiful, beautiful ones. Moreover, I would dare to say that even the not-at-all beautiful moments of life are part of its beauty.

Reporter: Looking back at your life, could you point to something specific, something very personal? Could there be something essential, some essence of Ion Irimie's life?

Ion Irimie: In some sense, yes, I think so. In a different sense, I think not. In some sense, I consider that my whole life went on according to the good rules of the general-human. I've lived according to the rules - good and bad ones - by which any man who is and who will be lives. I have been a man amongst men. In a different sense, everything has been specific and personal; it has been as with nobody else. It has been different from anyone else. Here you can find the unrepeatability, of individuality. My life has been my own and nobody else's. I have individualized like no one else the pieces of the general-human. To the human being, as a human being, I've given a strictly personal outlook. My life is one of a kind. No one else has been, is, or will be Ion Irimie. No one else has carried within themselves my storyline, with its particular and general features. We're all different from the others while being, at the same time, like others. Although the relationships between yourself and the others are very complicated, eventually, these relationships become very simple. An

essential aspect of the general-human gets embodied in an essential aspect of the individual and/or the personal. In this way, the question leads to a simple and always complicated philosophical thesis: the essential and the phenomenal are always and always together; as the dialectic says.

Reporter: How would you envision and describe the impact of contemporary scientific knowledge on philosophical thinking?

Ion Irimie: The question's scope is fairly broad and very complicated. I'm not sure I can provide a decent and complete response. It is broad in the sense that there have already been a multitude of contemporary scientific discoveries which have been assimilated and overcome in several levels of philosophical knowledge. As a recent example, I could mention the New Atheism. Some of the works by R. Dawkins, M. Onfray or P. Odifreddi could be used as arguments. These researchers are considered the leaders of this trend. Many of the major notions of our scientific and technical age have ended up supporting ideas or positions of today's philosophy. I'm thinking of the way in which the big ideas of cybernetics and genetics - information, programming, code, encoding etc. - have ended up supporting philosophical theories about universal information or the programming of universal development. In spite of some debatable caveats, these theories are efforts to philosophise on scientific knowledge and extend it. A bit late, the scientific concept of entropy also got philosophical echoes. From its philosophical extrapolation and from the law with the same name, the philosophical school of entropism developed. This trend tries to take the law of entropy seriously and philosophize it exhaustively.

Despite all the extant philosophizing, I would dare to claim that, in comparison with the advancement of today's scientific knowledge, philosophical thought is one big step behind. There are many scientific challenges which philosophical thinking hasn't even hovered on. There are many, many things to do in the philosophy of nature. There are also schools of thought, essentially philosophical schools, which have turned their back on scientific knowledge. One such school is postmodernism. For postmodernism, scientific knowledge doesn't really exist, and if it does, it doesn't really matter. It can't even produce staunch cognitive pieces. Even its truths must be subjected to relativity.

I will finish what has been said and unsaid about this problem by bringing up a meta-philosophical thought by D.D. Roşca: *"Philosophical knowledge cannot overlook science. When it's serious (emphasis added by Ion Irimie), it must borrow from the knowledge of the most controlled, most verified, most certain, and most objective form of knowledge, and this is science."*

Reporter: You claim that scientific knowledge has a strong influence on the processes of philosophical thinking. Can we talk about a development of philosophy from within and for within? Is there a school of thought on internal causality?

Ion Irimie: Not only is it possible, but it's necessary. And this is because of its relative independence from any other area of our spiritual life.

From the very beginning, philosophy has also evolved thanks to its built-in engines; it has evolved from philosopher to philosopher or from philosophy to philosophy. Socrates criticized the Presocratics to make room for his own ideas; Plato continued Socrates' work intentionally. Aristotle's philosophy was born mostly as a critique of Plato. In the modern age, rationalism was born as a response to the vulnerabilities of empiricism; just like the Kantian critique was born with the intention to overcome all these. Spinoza's monism was born as a critique of Cartesian dualism. Closer to our time, Neopositivism appeared as an effort to complete the theses of Positivism, and critical rationalism relied on the minute critique of the theses of Neopositivism. And all this immanent evolution didn't happen only in order to go beyond philosophy to the domains of unphilosophy and unphilosophizing - science, politics, art, morality etc.

Reporter: Which philosopher has influenced your own philosophical outlook the most?

Ion Irimie: I couldn't speak of just a single philosopher's writings. In one way or another, all the philosophy books I've read, great or minor, have influenced me. If I were to pinpoint a direct influence, then I would name D.D. Roșca. He was my professor. I got from him and his books philosophical ideas and theses, and especially meta-philosophical ideas and theses. I borrowed from him especially his way of thinking philosophically, his way of doing philosophy. I borrowed his creed that philosophy can be "serious" only and only if it's done, as I mentioned above, by extending and developing cognitive products of scientific knowledge. I borrowed all his ideas regarding the relationship between the cognitive and the attitudinal, between learning philosophically and living philosophically. I liked D.D. Roșca's way of seeing and considering "the tragic" and "the heroic" from the specific-human realm or realms. I see my original thinking within his way of considering such approaches.

Despite all D.D. Roșca's influences, I must add, once again, that philosophically I grew up under the influence of many other great names and many other philosophy books.

Reporter: If you were to make a top 5 list of major philosophers, whom would you choose? Whom would you nominate?

Ion Irimie: I wouldn't dare make a top 5 list, but I would try a top 10 list: Plato, Aristotle, Bacon, Hume, Descartes, Spinoza, Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, and Popper. I've unjustly left out many, but I can't help it. If we were to imagine the history of philosophical thinking as a mountain range, I'd dare to say that these are its peaks. Of course, someone else could make a different list, but not much different than mine. If we had more room, I could argue in favour of my list. Comparatively, I could show why I nominated X instead of Y.

Reporter: Earlier, you mentioned a possible evaluation. Among your writings, which would be the most valuable "pieces"?

Ion Irimie: From the list of books I wrote, I would start with: "*Scrisori despre informație*" (*Letters about Information*). Its topic and themes made me work the most. I also worked a lot on finding what information is - as information, and then its relationships with the substance and the energy. In order to find these relationships I had to find an existential background where information could be born and function in its specific ways. This is how I got to the Hegelian concept of reflection and, through it and with it, could get to my truly personal idea, maybe even original, of "the reflection of the reflection". Nobody else has ever thought of using the universal phenomenon of reflection in order to discover what information is as a biological, psychological, and then epistemological phenomenon. If now, when I am 90 years old, I may brag about something in the area of coining philosophical concepts, then that something would be "the reflection of the reflection".

A sequel to those "*Letters about Information*" would be "*Legea entropiei – lege a drumului în jos*" (*The Law of Entropy: A Law of Downward Movement*). As I was racking my mind about information, I got to entropy; I reached the second "piece" in the chain, the piece that is the foundation of the concept of "entropism". This concept is meant to show that the philosophical challenges entailed by the law of entropy must be taken seriously. I would also mention "*Socrate și Isus*" (*Socrates and Jesus*), a book written in a burst, among all the other books. Much has been written on this topic, but it seems that this is the only book written from a clearly atheist perspective.

Reporter: Life is full of ideas, people, things. For you, what would be your most cherished things, your closest people, and your most beloved ideas?

Ion Irimie: As far as things are concerned, maybe it's worth mentioning that I've only cared about the things necessary for a decent life. A decent life with sufficient food, shelter, and sex. I have eaten and drunk but did not turn these activities into a life purpose. Getting drunk, I only got drunk three times, and I've spent very few evenings in restaurants.

Regarding people, it would be very common to say that my dearest ones have been and are my family. My extended family and my close family. From the close family, unfortunately, I can only speak of Anca, Sergiu, and Radu – my daughter, my grandson, and my son-in-law. Beyond family, I've experienced many moments of collegiality and friendship. And to all these I can add a few love affairs, whether requited or not, I keep them dearly in my box with memories. As for ideas, there is, perhaps, more to tell. All the ideas I got at school, at the university, and the ideas I got practicing with honour the profession life gave me, they all have been valuable to me. Unfortunately, I can't get into details. In order to shorten our discussion and make a strict selection, I think I could say that I have lived under the dome of a great and very great philosophical idea - the idea of the measure of things. It has fascinated me since I came upon it in ancient philosophy and it has followed me day by day, all my life, for 90 years, up to this age. In this idea I have seen a sort of quintessence of philosophical wisdom, a grand life principle. I was also fascinated by the way in which Hegel converted this idea, an idea of huge moral scope into a great ontological concept. I was fascinated by the discovery that the "measure" is some sort of concept of concepts or the idea of ideas in dialectical thinking.

Finally, to make a long story short, I would emphasize that to live, as much as possible, according to philosophical tenets, means to live by the law of the measure of things. Sometimes this idea looks like a background, other times it looks like the dome of a life that is specifically human.

Reporter: Isn't life subjected to liberty or to some destiny or some fatalism?

Ion Irimie: That is a complicated question, I'm not sure I can give it an answer. I put aside any discussion about liberty and its conditions. Let's put aside all the relationships of liberty with the major and definitive aspects of human experience - knowledge, purpose, will. I will take the question only in its most direct scope, the intention behind the concepts of "destiny" and "fatalism". In this sense, I would simply say that each individual's life is neither destiny nor fatalism, nor complete liberty.

People's life is not and does not follow any destiny because it doesn't follow any type of pre-established programme. Nowhere is it written that we have to be born and follow a certain life path. Birth - since this is where everyone's life starts - is the result of a game of nature, of its necessities and incidents. In the name of some game of nature, we are thrown into the world. Without knowing or willing, nature makes us be. This isn't destiny, it's a primary fatality. The fatality to be a product of some laws of nature! After this primary and great fatality or, better said, necessity, here comes the "fatality" of history. As we haven't chosen our birthdate and birthplace, nor can we choose the time and space circumstances where our liberty is unleashed. I mean the circumstances of history, the laws of its unfolding. As history has its own necessities and happenings, the freedom to choose ourselves, to make ourselves, to accomplish ourselves, cannot escape from the wider or narrower frames of a given history.

In short, our freedom does exist, it exists as a grand circumstance of being, but it can only act within the confines imposed by nature and the given frames of a certain history. Anyone's life, be they a person or a personality, is constructed from the unity of three diverse types of factors: nature's games, history's games, and freedom's games.

Reporter: Which do you think is the happiest part of life?

Ion Irimie: To avoid getting into arguments about happiness, I would just say that all the stages of life are periods of happiness. Childhood is happy in its naiveté, adulthood in its achievements, and old age in its evaluations and memories.

Reporter: From your perspective, what is the meaning of life?

Ion Irimie: This question appears in all minds and quivers on all lips. Everyone wants to know if they were born for something, to fulfil some purpose or to reach some target. Although the question seems complicated, in a primary and broad sense, in my opinion, the answer is very simple: the meaning of life is life itself. We were only born in order to live, to fill the time between birth, namely when we were cast into this world, and death, namely the moment when we are cast out of this world. These two moments are works of nature as nature, as something that does something without knowing it or wanting it. It simply lets its own laws work out. It places no purpose in us and fulfils no plan. Its only purpose is that we be, fight in order to be, struggle in order to be able to say to every morning: "Good morning!".

The meaning of life is to fully enjoy all our good days, get sad during the bad days, live fully both our successes, and our failures, happiness and unhappiness, our love

and unlove. Life is made from all these small bits. They make the meaning of life, the meaning of being.

Besides this general and essential meaning, anyone's meaning, we could also talk about a narrower meaning - the meaning of each life. That meaning would be to leave something after you: a child, a tree, a house, a poem, a song, an idea, a book, a work of art. To leave something which, but for you, wouldn't be there at all. This would be a way for every one of us to have purposes and fight to fulfil them. This would mean that you continue yourself in what you leave behind.

Reporter: In your opinion, which are the most important in life: things or values?

Ion Irimie: If I understood the question right, I have to start with the premise that things and values are different realities. I have to skip the complications arising from the fact that things are or can be values and that values are or can be things, as well. In this sense, I would say that things, as objects, are energy-substance entities that intervene essentially in providing three essential conditions for life: food, water, and shelter. All foods are things, all drinks are things, all houses, whether big or small, are made of various units of substance and energy.

Because of their existential state, values are different, they are moods. They are ways for us to relate appreciatively to things, to our fellows, to ideas, and to actions. We project ourselves in and through values; we risk our own measures in relationship with the measures of a given reality.

It is difficult to say whether things or values are more important for us. We live between these two dimensions of reality and it's hard to rank them. They are together and they always function together. We may talk of very relative ranking within the field of the area of values if we take values in their essence and in their pale independence. In this way and talking at a very general level, we could talk about a certain priority of moral values. These ones might be placed before scientific, artistic, juridical values, or political values. Perhaps it's not accidental that Plato put the good even above the truth.

Reporter: Speaking broadly and not exclusively from a religious perspective, is faith a necessity? Is it intrinsic to human existence?

Ion Irimie: It's an open question if there's any other type of faith except the religious one. In the strict sense of the term, I would say that faith can only be religious. And then it cannot be a necessity. If it were a necessity, the world wouldn't have such a

variety of religions and such a mass of nonbelievers. Religion isn't born with the individual, it's not hereditary. It's an educational or cultural phenomenon. The content of religious ideas is, primarily, a product of imaginative subjectivity, of sacralization, deification, or godification. These ideas do not demand to be founded on levels of the real or on rational argumentation. They rely exclusively on the act of faith. In this sense, religion is faith by definition, exactly as faith is religion and only religion, also by definition.

Taking into account what I have already said so far, it's improper, even comical, to talk about scientific faith. Science does not produce faith, it produces knowledge, in the most proper sense of the word. It produces truths, it discovers causes, it formulates laws. All these must be very well tested through experiments and in the logical-mathematical way. Neither can we truly talk about philosophical faith. But we can talk about convictions. Convictions based on ideas and concepts produced rationally, based on ideas that have always been open to the critical spirit. In the political, the juridical, and the moral conscience, we can talk about beliefs. It's very normal to talk about your political, moral, or aesthetical belief, but not about your moral, political, aesthetical faith.

Turning the verb "to believe" into the noun "belief" has no connection with the noun "faith".

Reporter: After three decades of life "outside" of Romania, where is home? In Germany or in Romania?

Ion Irimie: In many ways, I feel at home both in Romania and in Germany. I have family in Germany: a daughter, a grandson, a son-in-law, who make me feel at home every day. They make me feel I am with them and belong to them, and only together can we feel at home.

In a different and broader sense, mostly in a social way, I feel more "at home" in Cluj.

Maria SÂNGEORZAN
Independent researcher

Translation: Prof. Univ. Dr. Mihaela Mudure

