

# *Esprit de géométrie* , or *de finesse*, or *de bénéfice*? We need a sustainable balance!

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In the XVIIth century Blaise Pascal introduced the very famous dichotomy between the *Esprit de géométrie* and the *Esprit de finesse*, namely between the two constitutional tendencies of the humans towards the measuring and understanding of external reality on one side and, on the other side, the longing for something internal and spiritual. In the modern parlance of psychology one might say the dichotomy between the rational sphere of one's mind and the emotional sphere of the same. At the collective level of the development of human civilizations, the same dichotomy appears as that between Natural Sciences and Humanities. A historical process that can be traced back to the Industrial Revolution, but has come to maturity only in the last few decades, has turned the dichotomy into a trichotomy, with the dominance of the world-wide scene by a third actor that, following the French phrasing of the first two ones, we might name *l'Esprit de bénéfice*, id est the *Spirit of Profit*. Legitimate and indispensable propellant of any economic development, corner stone for the development of private companies, competing on the free market, that has become more and more global, *Profit* can hardly be traced back to any positive interior tendency of the human mind, as it is the case for the *Esprit de géométrie* and the *Esprit de finesse*, rather it shares its roots with the instincts of aggression and overpowering, possibly related with the gene of war conjectured by the geneticists. We are authorized to talk about the Spirit of Profit, by the same logic that enables us to talk about the *Esprit des Lois*, as it was done by Montesquieu. Indeed, in any society, the laws foresee punishments for their breakers and establish the monopoly of the use violence detained by a collective body, named the State. The goal is that of suppressing individual violence and counteract the instincts of aggression of the human beings. The Spirit of the Laws is inherent to the effort of polishing the bad aspects of human behavior, promoting, through control and harmony, the expansion of the Spirit of Knowledge and of that of the Arts. The word Economy is a composite neologism made out of the ancient greek words *Oikos* (οἶκος), for house, and *Nomos* (νόμος), for law: hence the engine of economy, namely profit, can be endowed with a spiritual dimension only as far as it is strongly regulated and pursued with the goal of *bonum commune*, not *per se*. The trichotomy is a recent development since one of the many perverse consequences of globalization that, on the other hand, has many quite positive aspects, is the following: the issue of profit has been liberated to an anomalous extent and it is pursued *per se* above the Spirit of Laws, still confined to individual countries, or federations of countries. Profit has also influenced in a perverse direction the internal equilibrium of the components of Scientific Knowledge, namely the Episteme (ἐπιστήμη), id est Pure Science and the *Techne* (τέχνη) id est Applied Science, whose distinction was clear already to the Ancients and, in particular to the skeptical philosopher Sextus Empiricus who, in the second century a.c., wrote: <<every *τέχνη* is a system of knowledges organized in such a way as to pursue a practical goal, useful for the needs of life>> as opposed to ἐπιστήμη as described by Plutarch in reference to Archimedes' main achievements by stating << He placed all his passion and ambitions in those purest speculations where no reference is made to the vulgar material needs of life.>> The overwhelming and pernicious role of the *Esprit de bénéfice* caused, in the last two decades, a distinctive world-wide unbalance in financing resources in favor of applied sciences and pure technology with respect to purely theoretical sciences, in particular of their backbone, namely pure mathematics. Such a policy is self-defeating, since there will be no new applied science of tomorrow without the pure science of today. However pure science is such if and only if it is freely pursued without any reference to its future technological transfer as a motivation. Here comes the issue sustainability that is the main focus of SEED.

<<Ensure the satisfaction of the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to realize theirs>> is the currently accepted definition of sustainability. Yet the key point is the proper estimate of such needs. They cannot be only material, their list should include also those pertaining to the *Esprit de géométrie* and to *Esprit de finesse*. For instance, is it so obvious that future generations should renounce, in the name of economic sustainable development, the possibility of making dignified academic careers in pure sciences and not only in applied ones, or of supporting themselves as producers of quality cultural goods, bending to produce those dictated by a globalized Internet market that privileges garbage in literature and other sectors of artistic creativity? As Raymond Williams masterfully theorized in the essay "*Culture and Society 1780-1950*", the Bourgeois Revolution allowed the liberation of intellectuals from patronage and led to the possibility of living from liberal professions such as that of writer, essayist, composer, artist, scientist. That living space that has nurtured the free thought and freedom of all, as well as the technological progress that nourishes industrial technology and economic progress, is dangerously shrinking, just as we place sustainability as the ideal goal to be pursued. Clearly we need a new better balance among the three *Esprits de géométrie, de finesse et de bénéfice*.