

Open Doors Open Minds Conference: Welcome Speech

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Good morning everyone, and thank you for joining us, either in person or virtually, through Zoom. I also wish to thank all the entities involved in our conference (starting with the Gabinetto Vieusseux, which is hosting us today) and express my deepest gratitude to Athena Kritikou and Spyro Kogkas (directors of SKEP and Imagine Heritage, respectively), with whom I have been working on this project for several months.

As for the venue, Palazzo Strozzi is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of the most prestigious buildings in Florence. Florence (“Firenze”), as we all know, is universally regarded as one of the so-called “capitals of the Renaissance”. For this reason, there is one notion I'd like to stress, though briefly. It is something all Renaissance philosophers insist on. It's the idea of human dignity (“*dignitas hominis*”, in Latin, which is the language they mostly used). Those with a smattering of Latin know that the formula *dignitas hominis* comprises both men and women, like the word “*ánthropos*” in Greek.

In 1949 the French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir published an important book: *The Second Sex*. In it you can find the following, famous statement: “A woman is not born a woman. She becomes one”. It's a strong, assertive statement; even fascinating, in a sense. More importantly, I find it to be true. In fact, I think it's true of all people. As most Renaissance philosophers wrote, we are born with the potential of becoming fully human, that is, human also from a moral, intellectual and emotional point of view, not just biologically. It's up to us to fulfill this process, thus attaining what they call “human dignity”. Therefore, human dignity should not be considered something we are born with, it is not a given (like the human rights that the beautiful, famous UN Declaration outlines). Like all forms of education, human dignity is a possibility, a project, if you will, a life-long endeavor. To reach that level of human (and therefore humane) development -- which is based on ethics, reason, and empathy -- we must work hard and overcome many obstacles, various sorts of barriers and misconceptions. Among them is the misleading conviction (as some put it) that “It all comes down to money”. Money is important, yes; but it is only an instrument, a tool. So, I'd like to reverse that expression and say: “It all must go up to values”. I'm speaking of values like the ones we are about to discuss in this conference; values whose consequences and benefits cannot be expressed in euros or dollars, for the simple reason that they are priceless. Likewise, the goals we are going to outline today are priceless, because they all have to do with humane education and human dignity. Thank you!