

Weber says philosophy creates stable, adaptable societies

By H. Kaji and J. Heirannia

TEHRAN — Professor Eric Thomas Weber believes that philosophy and freedom are very important in creating and sustaining "stable and adaptable societies."

"Philosophy and freedom have shown their remarkable value. They help to create and sustain stable and adaptable societies," Weber, an assistant professor of public policy leadership at the University of Mississippi, told the Mehr News Agency.

Following is the text of the interview:

Q: Humanities does not have advantages of natural sciences in our era? So why have you chosen humanities for your specialty?

A: Today when we look at the sciences, we see exponential growth. We can imagine unlimited development and technologies that build from earlier knowledge and progress. In that context, it can seem natural that the most advantageous specialties of our age would be in science or engineering. A powerful country today that falls behind in these fields will likely experience negative results from that trend.

The picture I have painted here has value, but does not recognize how incredibly important cultural education is today, how important the humanities are. Given the immense military power that science and engineering have created, it is more important than ever before that societies be educated, knowledgeable about the world, and morally conscious and tolerant of others. In the military conflicts we see today, consider the importance of training in foreign languages for citizens and for soldiers. Languages and cultural understanding are taught in the humanities. Consider also the importance of history and geography for awareness about the problems that arise in international relations. Those too are subjects

covered in the humanities.

Fundamentally, the humanities are subjects in which people study values and culture. These crucial human disciplines are the source of our reasons for needing engineers and scientists. How we understand ourselves, our neighbors, and our world has never before been as important as it increasingly appears to be today.

Often the sciences and engineering produce knowledge and tools that amazingly enhance human capabilities. The humanities are the fields in which we study, plan, and evaluate how we should use these new tools. We do not want to lose what is of incredible value for our cultures. At the same time, we can envision new methods for bringing about social good that were not available a generation ago. The sciences give us abilities. The humanities guide us in their use and value.

Q: What were your reasons for choosing this discipline?

A: Throughout much of my education, I wondered a great deal about what would make the best life. There are so many ways to live and so many paths that one can take. As I explored the many choices before me, what fascinated me most were the reasons people give for what they choose in life. It seemed to me that the worst choices were typically those that came about through great force or emergencies, rather than in relation to personal inclination, interest, or passion. What I found over and over again was that the reasoning people used for choosing between valued options in life were the most interesting things to me. So, this led me to read philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, Nietzsche, and John Stuart Mill.

In thinking about how best to live, I found myself doing philosophy and falling in love with the life of inquiry.

What interested me most was



American Professor Eric Thomas Weber

the fact that philosophy offered the richest answers about why one might live one way or another. In that sense, then, philosophy never seemed to me to be abstract or divorced from value for everyday life. That fact has guided me in my study of philosophy to the areas in the field in which practical application and value are taken to be of central importance. So, values and ethics are the things that most interest me in philosophy. Philosophy sounds impractical or of questionable value. What rarely seems to be questioned, however, is the value of ethics and justice. These things are of obvious centrality for the good of society. Philosophy intrigues me because it is the freest discipline. It is at the heart of all others. After all, Aristotle was a scientist and a mathematician, but he understood full well that the pursuit of knowledge in any field is at bottom grounded in philosophy.

Any search for wisdom starts by valuing the knowledge we seek and doing so for the right reasons. As a field of study, philosophy has captured my interest in many ways.

Among the most important has been its demonstration of the value of freedom for inquiry. If any society truly seeks truth and justice, it must allow all of its citizens to speak freely, to participate in that search, so that no contributions to knowledge are ignored. The price of that freedom will be a loss for some elements of culture. Over and over again, however, philosophy and freedom have shown their remarkable value. They help to create and sustain stable and adaptable societies. They grow in knowledge exponentially as well as the power and effectiveness of intelligent social action.

Eric Thomas Weber is assistant professor of public policy leadership at the University of Mississippi, USA. He has published in human studies, review of policy research, Skepsis, William James Studies, Contemporary Pragmatism, and Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society. He is the author of Rawls, Dewey, and Constructivism (Continuum, 2010). His second book, Morality, Leadership, and Public Policy, will be published in the future.