BEYOND THE CAVE: IN DIALOGUE WITH THOUGHT FOR SUSTAINABLE ACTION

OLTRE LA CAVERNA: IN DIALOGO CON IL PENSIERO PER UN AGIRE SOSTENIBILE

Giulia Mauti[a1]

ᵃ Department of Human Sciences, Society, and Health, University of Cassino and Southern Lazio, Italy

giulia.mauti@unicas.it

Abstract

This paper reflects on the link between thought and language and on the connotative function of words (Cosentino), through which it is possible to begin the search for shared meanings (Lipman), capable of provoking sustainable action (Mortari, Malavasi). Starting from Dewey's considerations on the processes of attribution of value and on the criterion of experience, we intend to validate the philosophical dialogical practice of community, which allows the recognition of the *fallibility* of beliefs (Peirce) and affective attitudes, as well as the assumption of the criterion of sociality as a privileged cognitive and moral criterion. In this way, it would seem possible to exit the cave of Platonic memory, to face the current challenges between presence and distance, above all the environmental one. The solution could be identified in a recovery of the ethically-oriented dialogical dimension, which could reveal scenarios of light, capable of eliciting sustainable action through the activity of thinking.

Il contributo riflette sul legame tra pensiero e linguaggio e sulla funzione connotativa delle parole (Cosentino), attraverso cui è possibile avviare la ricerca di significazioni condivise (Lipman), in grado di pro-vocare un agire sostenibile (Mortari, Malavasi). A partire dalle considerazioni di Dewey, sui processi di attribuzione di valore e sul criterio dell'esperienza, si intende avvalorare la pratica dialogica filosofica di comunità, che permette il riconoscimento della *fallibilità* delle credenze (Peirce) e delle attitudini affettive, nonché l'assunzione del criterio di socialità come parametro cognitivo e valoriale privilegiato. Parrebbe possibile uscire, in questo modo, dalla caverna di memoria platonica, per far fronte, sia in presenza sia a distanza, alle sfide attuali, *in primis* quella ecologica. La soluzione potrebbe essere individuata in un recupero della dimensione dialogica eticamente orientata, la quale dischiuderebbe scenari di luce, in grado di elicitare, attraverso l'attività del pensiero, un agire sostenibile.

---

[1] Giulia Mauti is a PhD candidate in *Educational models and contexts: Sport, Inclusion and Technologies* (XXXVIII cycle) and a subject expert concerning the chairs of *Philosophy of early childhood education, History of childhood education and Literature* (L-19), *Epistemology of Education* (LM-85) – University of Cassino and Southern Lazio. Among her heuristic interests: education to complex thinking, ethics of care, social responsibility, phenomenology of environmental education.

1. Anti-ecological premises of thought

Greenhouse effect, deforestation, thinning of the ozone layer, air and soil pollution, extinction of some animal and plant species are the symptoms of an environmental crisis which, in devastating the planet, demonstrates «the human world's improper relationship with nature» (Mortari, 2020, p. V). If these events are the result of human actions on the environment, there is an educational imperative to investigate the motivations that underlie such actions, in particular with reference to ideas that legitimize such unsustainable conduct. «Errors of acting are based on errors of thinking, on anti-ecological premises of thought» (*ibid*, p. VIII), observes Mortari, and «when we act on the basis of false premises, we introduce errors into the wider system of thinking that involves nature» (*ibidem*). Also according to Bateson, the transformation of thinking attitudes is necessary for the reversal of the anti-environmental process (Bateson, 1976, p. 512).

By framing the issue in a systemic, constructivist and relational epistemological framework, there seems to be an obvious need to proceed with an investigation of the cognitive devices used in the processes of elaboration of the criteria, which direct the individual's action in the world (Lipman, 2005).

> It is necessary to think of cognition as an activity that implies a dimension of passivity [in which] the Western subject is passively *subjectus* to that noological environment which he himself helps to build, through the processes of social interaction within which he defines his very identity. [...] The activity of thinking, socratically understood as a broad and deep questioning, is the way to follow to be relieved from the power that the atmosphere tends to exert on individual consciences. [...] If ideas [...] define the space of the mind, [...] through which the criteria for inhabiting the earth are decided, it is fundamental in everyone's life to once again cultivate and practice the theoretical attitude which is at the origin of philosophizing (Mortari, 1998, p. 174).

As Mortari also points out, in environmental formation, the practice of thinking assumes a fundamental role, understood as an educational experience with the aim of learning to *take care of one's thoughts* (*ibidem*). In other words, it is necessary to start from an education to reflective thinking, which allows the formation of action plans in accordance with the intentions of which one is aware, that is, the transformation of thought into intelligent action. At this point, it seems clear that, in order to trigger a trend reversal regarding the current environmental crisis, it is necessary to intervene on the *pollution of the noological environment* (*ibid*, p. 175).

In addition to a critical-deconstructive function, thinking also performs a constructive action, which aims to design new horizons of ideas, within which a new description of the world takes shape: «at the same time, a new way of being in the world is also possible. Cultural changes consist above all in changes in vocabulary, that is, in the circulation of new versions of the world» (*ibid*, p. 181). It therefore becomes essential to open up to an exchange of different interpretative horizons, capable of enhancing the noological fabric, in order to guarantee this plurality. «Genuine communication involves a contagion: its name should not be taken in vain by terming communication that which produces no community of thought between the child and the race of which he is the heir» (Dewey, 2019, p. 227). Socially shared reasoning plays an important role in this sense, in order to create fertile humus, in which ethical and sustainable thinking practices can be cultivated.

2. Between thought and language: the construction of meanings

«It is our ability to build worlds through language that offers us the possibility to be reborn into new worlds» (Mortari, 1998, p. 216). Closely related to thinking is speech; this relationship is also confirmed by going back to the etymology of *logos*, which means, at the same time, language and thought, word and reason. «Linguistic form is the condition of transmissibility of thought but also and above all the condition for its accomplishment» (Benveniste, 2009, p. 77). However, even in this case we are faced with a problematic issue. According to Dewey, the common statement that language is the expression of thought conveys only «a half-truth that is likely to result in positive error» (Dewey, 2019, p. 227). It seems that language can express thought «but not primarily, nor, at first, even consciously» (*ibidem*). Therefore, following Dewey, language is not thought. Nevertheless, it is necessary both for thought and for the communication of thought (*ibid*, p. 219), because it includes much more than the simple oral and written speech. To say that language is necessary for thinking means that thinking deals with linguistic signs, that is, with meanings. Language selects, preserves, and applies specific meanings. Its employment as a conscious vehicle of thought and knowledge is just one of its many possible ways of being. This contrast is

well brought out by Locke, according to whom words have a double use: civil and philosophical. On the one hand, there is a communication linked to the informative need of the message, as a mere transmission of data and news, which, while satisfying the requirement of informing or entertaining, proves to be inadequate with respect to the orientation of precise existential planning. On the other hand, «communication as a relational potential, as openness to the other and the search for meaning, which delves into the deepest and most complex layers of subjectivity, following a karst itinerary with often unpredictable results» (Broccoli, 2008, p. 13). Words also form sentences in which meanings are organized into mutual relations. Such sentences bear the same relation to judgments that distinct words bear to meanings of concepts, and just as words imply a sentence, so a sentence implies a broader universe of discourse into which it fits.

By following Cosentino who, in dealing with philosophical dialogue, conducts a study on communication, distinguishing between the semantic, syntactic and pragmatic dimension of dialogue (Cosentino, 2021, pp. 122-138), it is possible to observe that, from a semantic point of view, meanings, in an authentic dialogical context, «cannot be understood as shared definitions that function within a certain language. To open the dialogue it is necessary to go beyond the denoting function of words, that for which in a horizon of pure conventionality, a linguistic sign corresponds to a certain meaning» (*ibid*, p. 132). Instead, it is necessary to focus on the connotative function of language by which significance includes subjective qualitative aspects and less defined outlines. The connotation ensures that the dialogue takes the form of open research, «in which each of the participants is called to implement his view, to compare it with that of others in a common *logos*, within which meanings are constantly deconstructed and reconstructed» (*ibid*, p. 133). In this way, dialogue, as a logical-semantic figure based on the criterion of sociality as a privileged cognitive and moral criterion, takes the form of a guarantor of the recognition of both the *fallibility* of the beliefs of an individual and affective attitudes. According to Calcaterra, it is possible to consider dialogue as «a possibility of self-reflection in the light of other people's contributions, that is to say a possibility of conscious access to the whole of our own cognitive and affective habits through interpersonal and intercultural confrontation» (Calcaterra, 2016, p. 163).

It is the sense of a problem to be mastered, of a purpose to be achieved, that forces the mind to review the past, to discover what the question means and how it may be dealt with (Dewey, 2019, p. 255). It is therefore a matter of *learning to inhabit the question*, so that reflective thinking can generate *transformative*, socially shared *learning*, capable of coloring the politics of existence with ethical nuances. «Every intersubjective relationship lives and is nourished by communicative exchanges» (Spina, 2018,

p. 5): speech forms are our carriers, «the easy-running vehicles by which meanings are transported from experiences that no longer concern us to those that are yet dark and dubious» (Dewey, 2019, p. 223). According to Peirce the latter give rise to a state of irritation and lead to a struggle to attain a state of belief. If belief is symbolized by the image of a boat with folded sails in the harbor, doubt is the act of leaving the harbor to undertake a search in the open sea (Peirce, 1984, p. 246). If it is true that «language establishes subjectivity» (Benveniste, 2009, p. 113), this basis lies in the exercise of language, which allows every speaker to designate himself as I (*ibid*, p. 114). Therefore, communication, its terrain and its implications, as interesting areas for philosophical exercise (Manara, 2004, p. 143), represent the medium through which the journey of research can be expressed.

3. Dialogue for an independent exit, each from his own cave

«Shadowy, ghostly and unreal, full of darkness, confusion and disillusion, is the world of appearances inhabited by human beings every day: believing they are out-doors while instead they are in an underground cave» (Cavarero, 1999, p. 217). The myth of Plato's cave represents an emblematic example of human existence, constantly marked by a frenetic pace, which leaves no room for thinking and, at times, communication, in the sense outlined above. Cavarero observes that in the world of the cave «this is what is precisely forbidden: the possibility of any kind of relationship. (…) It is a prohibition that concerns first of all looking at each other, *seeing* the other (…) prisoners, therefore, speak. But they don't talk to each other» (*ibid*, p. 222). In order to restore a noological environment, as a guarantee of free expression through language, in a horizon of shared negotiation of meanings, it appears that everyone must be held «responsible for working out mentally every suggested principle, so as to show what he means by it, how it bears upon the facts at hand, and how the facts bear upon it» (Dewey, 2019, p. 257). Everyone should be made responsible for developing on his own account the *reasonableness* of the guess he puts forth, he should feel the sensation of «an intellectual hunger and thirst» (*ibid*, p. 258). If it is true that it is «the food material of the environment, whether it is directly at your fingertips or obtained through the search for what ultimately determines what to eat, (…) which decides on the direction that the appetite should take at present, thus the external stimulus, in particular that which occurs in a social situation, comes to decide the further movement of the intellectual impulse» (*ibid*, pp. 249-250). The dialogic exchange should therefore be imbued with critical thinking, but also creative and caring, in a fruitful exchange that allows issues to be framed with *reasonableness*, in the manner hypothesized by Lipman (2005, p. 112), so that «intellectual profit» (Dewey, 2019, p. 244) can be drawn. Indeed, the experience of an object reaches an intensely high

degree of value when the mind deeply appreciates it. There is no inherent opposition between thought, knowledge and appreciation. There is a definite opposition between an idea or a fact grasped merely intellectually and the idea or fact «which is emotionally colored because it is felt to be connected with the needs and satisfactions of the whole personality. In the latter case it has immediate value; that is, it is appreciated» (*ibid*, p. 263). Starting from subjective meanings, it would be possible, through sharing, to create new processes for the construction of meanings: «bricks to be put together with a view to building a new house» (Cosentino, 2021, p. 133). This implies:

> entering into dialogue with our sources of construction of social and cultural meaning, by virtue of an enhanced reflective and critical capacity, reinterpreting our personal and professional paths, taking care of and cultivating the capacity for mediation, negotiation, mitigation of social aggressiveness, in order to revive the narration of our personal and professional history. This results in strategic attention to be paid in order to help and support subjects in carrying out a reflective dialogue with the situations they face, in addition to the suggestion to consider that the quality of the knowledge acquired also depends on the willingness of the actors to view the situations in multiple and unusual ways, to create possible worlds, even when aspects of temporariness and uncertainty are encountered (Scaratti, 2006, p. XXXV).

The reference to the current challenges (primarily the environmental one) is obvious, and these deserve to be addressed, both in person and remotely (also taking into account the new methods imposed by the pandemic emergency) through a recovery of the ethically-oriented dialogical dimension. The latter, combined with a fruitful interpersonal exchange, capable of launching that intellectual impulse from the environmental material, would be able to trace a research path towards a greater awareness of the issues dealt with, as a result of the mental operation of the attribution of value. «The availability of creative heritage allows us to measure up to our past and turn to the future, facing the changing environmental situations and conditions of reference imposed by the relationship with the present» (*ibidem*). As we take more responsibility for our future on larger and larger scales, it becomes more imperative that we reflect on the perspectives that inform the individual's activities in the world: it is about becoming reflective with regard to discourses of learning and their effects on the ways we design (Wenger, 2006, p. 16). In these terms, philosophizing in a re-

search community would therefore be a possible road to follow in order to reverse anti-environmental trends and build noological facilities, capable of ethically guiding action, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (*Brundtland* Report). Environmental education, in the aim of rediscovering nature as an «interlocutor and partner of human formation, a maieutic principle and horizon of meaning» (Malavasi, 2007, p. 47), does not appear to be able to develop further without a dialogical confrontation with the other, through which we can re-discover the willingness to listen, which makes it possible to conceive the relationship with the other in a living reciprocity (Buber, 1993, p. 63). Learning is inherent in human nature, it is first and foremost the ability to negotiate new meanings, it is fundamentally social and experiential, it transforms one's identity, it constitutes trajectories of participation, it involves managing boundaries, it concerns social energy and power, it implies commitment, imagination and interaction between the local and the global (Wenger, 2006, pp. 253-254). However, «one can design visions but one cannot design the allegiance necessary to align energy behind those visions» (*ibid*, p. 255). Insisting on the need for constant *dialogue with thought*, to be implemented in a fruitful communicative exchange between the participants of a community, could prove to be a precious resource to inspire sustainable ethical action even in a digital environment, according to the principles of *netiquette*[2].

> In the life-giving power of mutuality lies (…) the secret to the generational encounter, the key to the creation of connections across boundaries of practice: a fragile bridge across the abyss (…) - it is almost a theorem of love that we can open our practices, our communities to others … invite them into our own identities of participation, let them be what they are not, and thus start what cannot be started (Wenger, 2006, p. 308).

Sustainable action, also with reference to virtual learning communities and the new frontiers of the metaverse, could therefore launch innovation, provided that the individual's responsibility and commitment is always exercised in wanting to maintain fruitful the dialogue with his own thought and with the gaze of the other, in order to ensure that everyone plans existing horizons, beyond the cave. The *mediamorphosis*, in part already underway with leisure and virtual realities (Accoto, 2022, p. 122), captured

---

[2] Noun composed of net(work) and (e)tiquette. In the language of the Internet, it indicates the set of rules of conduct, of an informal nature, which regulate the access of individual users to telematic networks. In 1995 the *Internet Engineering Task Force*, an international organization concerned with the technical and technological evolution of the Internet, drafted an official document RFC 1855 (https://www.rfc-editor.org/rfc/rfc1855), which establishes official rules regarding *netiquette*.

with a philosophical look, appears as a challenge to build new meanings [which implies] an earthquake and terraforming (*ibid*, p. 160) the world again. Nevertheless, there is still a need for a dialogical awareness, to support the subject's construction of cognitive and affective scaffolding, the guarantor «of plural thinking, capable of grasping the hybridizing links with otherness and capable, therefore, of seeking the relationships and the inter-feedback between each phenomenon and its context, between the whole and the parts. In this light, the possibility for the subject to acquire a global perspective involves training activities that help him, from an early age, to build a thought capable of recognizing and appreciating differences, discovering, beyond the differences (...), the common "structure that connects"» (Pinto Minerva, 2011). In such a framework, «the educator/philosopher/facilitator, then, is one who doesn't go back to the cave to tell about his personal journey towards the light but keeps it to himself, looking for ways to facilitate an autonomous exit even for others, each from his own cave» (Cosentino, 2021, p. 149).

References

Accoto, C. (2022). *Il mondo in sintesi. Cinque brevi lezioni di filosofia della simulazione*. Milano: Egea.

Bateson, G. (1972). *Steps to an ecology of mind*. Chandler publishing company (trad. it. Verso un'ecologia della mente, Adelphi, Milano 1976).

Benveniste, E. (2009). *Essere di parola* (P. Fabbri [Ed.]). Milano: Mondadori.

Broccoli, A. (2008). *Educazione e comunicazione. Per un'etica del discorso pedagogico*. Brescia: La Scuola.

Buber, M. (1984). *Das dialogische Prinzip*. Heildelberg: Lambertb Schneider (trad. it. Il principio dialogico e altri saggi, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo 1993).

Calcaterra, R. (2016) *Teoria della contingenza le sfide di Richard Rorty*. Genova: Marietti.

Cavarero, A. (1999). *Note arendtiane sulla caverna di Platone*. In Forti, S. (Ed.). *Hannah Arendt* (pp. 205-225). Milano: Mondadori.

Cosentino, A. (2021). *Socrate dopo tutto*. Milano: Mursia.

Dewey, J. (1986). *How we think*. Southern Illinois University: Board of Trustees (trad. it. Come pensiamo, Raffaello Cortina, Milano, 2019).

Lipman, M. (2003). *Thinking in Education*. Cambridge: Press Syndicate of the university of Cambridge (trad. it. Educare al pensiero, Vita e Pensiero, Milano, 2005).

Malavasi, P. (2007). *Pedagogia e formazione delle risorse umane*. Milano: Vita e pensiero.

Manara, F.C. (2004). *Comunità di ricerca e iniziazione al filosofare*. Milano: Lampi di stampa.

Mortari, L. (1998). *Ecologicamente pensando*. Milano: Unicopli.

Mortari, L. (2020). *Educazione ecologica*. Bari-Roma: Laterza.

Peirce, C.S. (1955). *The fixation of belief*. In J. Butchler (ed.), *Philosophical Writings of Peirce* (pp. 5-22), New York: Dover (trad. it. Il fissarsi della credenza, Bompiani, Milano, 1984).

Pinto Minerva, F. (2011). L'ibridazione tra nuovo umanesimo e utopia pedagogica, *MeTis. Mondi educativi. Temi indagini suggestioni*, 1, (http://www.metisjournal.it/metis/anno-i-numero-1-dicembre-2011-ibridazioni-temi/35-saggi/132-lib ridazione-tra-nuovo-umanesimo-e-utopiapedagogica.html).

Scaratti, G. (2006). *Prefazione*. In Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice, learning, meaning and identity*. Cambridge University Press (trad. it. Comunità di pratica. Apprendimento, significato e identità, Raffaello Cortina, Milano 2006).

Spina, C. (2018). *Ascoltare l'educazione*. Brescia: ELS-La Scuola.

United Nations (1987). *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development. Our Common Future. Brundtland Report*. United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development.

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice, learning, meaning and identity*. Cambridge University Press (trad. it. Comunità di pratica. Apprendimento, significato e identità, Raffaello Cortina, Milano 2006).