

# Making Thinking Fertile

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The paper focuses on the demand for an *exercise of thinking* – within the present historical contingency/conjuncture – meant as a sort of claim for cultural awareness, a competence empowerment to elaborate reality and mediate upon it as political actors. Considering some insights from the French philosopher François Jullien, it is explored how to rethink social interactions by applying the concepts of *écart* and *entre*. Further stress is on the analysis of theoretical and practical instances introduced by intercultural dialogue that, applied to the educational setting at large, can promote critical and responsible skills to face social challenges within contemporary scenarios.

*Keywords:* Education, Philosophy, Complexity, Intercultural Dialogue, Awareness.

## *Rendere fertile il pensiero*

Il saggio afferma l'esigenza di esercitare un pensiero inteso come consapevolezza culturale e come sviluppo della capacità di progettare la realtà e di attuarvi delle mediazioni in qualità di attori politici, specie nelle circostanze dell'attuale contingenza storica. A partire da alcune considerazioni del filosofo francese François Jullien, il contributo esplorerà i modi in cui è possibile ripensare alle interazioni sociali mediante i concetti di *écart* e di *entre*. Inoltre, ricorrendo all'analisi di esempi teoretici e pratici pertinenti al dialogo interculturale, si mostrerà come questi, se applicati alle strutture educative in senso lato, possono incoraggiare lo sviluppo della responsabi-

lità e delle capacità critiche necessarie ad affrontare le sfide sociali poste in essere nel panorama contemporaneo.

*Parole-chiave:* educazione, filosofia, complessità, dialogo interculturale, consapevolezza.

*However, somebody killed something: that's clear, at any rate--'But oh!' thought Alice, suddenly jumping up, 'if I don't make haste I shall have to go back through the Looking-glass, before I've seen what the rest of the house is like! Let's have a look at the garden first!' She was out of the room in a moment, and ran down stairs--or, at least, it wasn't exactly running, but a new invention of hers for getting down stairs quickly and easily as Alice said to herself.*

Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*

### *Complexity and Openness*

We live in a world where time contracts: continuously connected to the network for every need, hyper-stimulated, in a visual and cognitive frenzy that causes a super activity of the brain. In our time of complexity, the network and speed of information are limiting the possibility to process knowledge, raising issues within spaces of inclusion, communication and understanding. Technological globalization emphasized direct information by inducing a paradoxical solitude in which individuals are clogged and saturated by network connections, compelled to navigate through symbols and codes yet estranged from knowledge intermediation processes. Technology more and more intertwines two faces: hope and fear by producing both bio-cultural threat and the expectations of its overcoming, along with the projections in post-human expressions and the reconstruction of subjectivity within the most advanced devices. The issue opens up vast spaces for reflection that are linked to the epistemological nature of complexity which implies generation of innovation and, therefore, has an implicit or explicit epistemology. The notion of complexity exploded in the mid-eighties as a new cultural paradigm, as a transversal model – in and between knowledge – as an innovative epistemological frontier, under the impulse both of a revision of the logic of science (more problematic and sophisticated and

interactive) and of a transformation of society (complicated by techniques, re-articulated in groups and classes, variegated in objectives, and then plural, flexible, open, interconnected) (Benkirane, 2007; Bertuglia, 2005). Over the decades various models of complexity readings were elaborated referring to structures such as the system, the network, along with the catastrophe, the rhizome, the labyrinth. These are mostly mathematical models yet equipped with strong analogical value and, therefore, applicable to different realms of knowledge, in which they allow to identify processes, to make them formally defined and cognitively controllable. Almost forty years later we can affirm that the paradigm of complexity governs all fields of experience, emerging as the paradigm of the human condition, understood both in the biological and in the cultural sense, attaining an ontological value in the *hominization* of nature and of the species *homo sapiens*.

The articulation of complexity involves the whole life system and generates a situation of imbalance determined by the tension between a state of hyper-subjectivity – centered on the feelings and brittleness of the individual – and one of hyper-objectivity – expressed in the contexts of economic, political and legal reality. The affirmation of subjectivity, attested by the increasing claims of rights, produced strong thrusts of individualistic manifestations linked to redefinitions of personal dignity. Post-modern culture emphasized the subject's urge to regain a multidimensional-self, a *self*-filled with differences, contradictions, paradoxes. The statute of the subject is multifold, prioritizing the categories of existence within the space of freedom. Individuals solicited to a constant openness should rely on learning and reflectiveness as values to be pursued to favor unconventional solutions for a life form, for a social configuration.

The historical transition/transformation to which we bear witness calls for new ways of interaction, cooperation, empathy in nature and culture, so the search moves along a double path: epistemological/methodological and metacognitive/dialogic. The paradigms originated within postmodernity innovated the concept of culture which assumes anthropological characteristics intersecting all sectors of human thinking and acting. Every cultural reflection today moves in the space of a true antinomy between practical reason and theoretical reason, due to the feature to aggregate positions that are even ideologically distant from each other, due the plural axiological connotation which, within a globalized and multi-ethnic, gathers diversified proposals of public ethics and political participation (Crowder, 2004; 2019). Such dispo-

sition to the manipulation of reality – that once was described as *ontologically founded* – reaches its highest expression within an epistemological scenario no more centered on totalizing notions of truth. The assertion that there is no absolute point of view to look at phenomena, is not an implicit admission of ethical relativism, but an admission of onto-ethic relativity, as well as of intellectual honesty, since knowledge always presupposes a somatic-chronologic-topologic situation. As Hans-Georg Gadamer observes no one is without prejudice, since we all require some kind of prejudices to represent the horizon of our views (Gadamer, 1975). The acceptance of the notion of truth as practicability of ideas (Pragmatism), generates a constant socio-political process of fluctuations among levels of conflict/toleration/recognition.

Hence, takes on significant social value the ability/competence to critically process the effects of complexity and hyper-technology: an attitude that should be prefigured as fundamental in any educational experience. Philosophy of education, as well as philosophy itself, are not, and could never be, merely teaching matters, since they are knowledge tools to preserve and support human awareness, in order to empower individual self-consciousness. The need for critical thinking should be fulfilled by educational programs at all levels to give historical sense to private and collective biographies, to strengthen bonds and roles within communities, in order not to be overwhelmed by triviality (Nussbaum, 2012). Philosophy knowledge, in its pedagogical declination, can facilitate the practicing commitment toward an interdisciplinary educational transition which can provide the breeding ground for a better public culture responsiveness to changing life needs, over entrenched patterns.

### *Thinking otherwise*

The propensity to openness led human sciences to elaborate a dialogical rapprochement to plurality – cultural, political religious and economic – to clarify how national identities always arise in interaction with one another. The area of philosophical studies provided a hermeneutical counseling, defined as inter-culturality, to deconstruct the concept of diversity. This prefix *inter* calls for specific *formae mentis*, mental attitudes to ensure dynamics of cooperation and trust among cultures, even when interests are conflicting. In the European context interculturality often designates a central concept

in a general philosophy of subjectivity or in the philosophy of education. To practice interculturality means to let the otherness break into the course of habits in which one recognizes – or to whom one is subordinated – to suspend repetitive behavior, to introduce a wise uncertainty into one's own *Weltanschauung* so to confront the world in which one lives as the space for the historical factuality of the connection between distance and mediation. Interculturality stimulates radical query, it questions one's own genealogical matrices without estranging them, leading to reject every dogmatic and oppressive ethnocentrism (Fornet-Betancourt, 2001, 2008). We are facing a multiverse that challenges cognitive and ethical domains, along with anthropological and spiritual spheres, stressing on the reconfiguring identity and difference as related and presupposing each other.

In this direction part of the latest European philosophical debate is enriched by the reflection of François Jullien, a French scholar who has woven philosophical practice to the study of Chinese culture in an unprecedented way, building an intense dialogue between the traditions of thought of Europe and China in name of a radical search to decentralize the vision of reality. Jullien, for whom “to philosophize is to think otherwise”, exploits the heuristic value of an indirect, oblique reading of the Western philosophical tradition, passing through the deviation, the *détour* offered by the encounter with the externality of China. The practice of thinking differences in a static way should be replaced with a research approach that considers differences in a continuous and sinuous movement, that integrates them into the dynamics of historical attraction that accrue in the social fabrics. The new theoretical paradigm, provided by Francois Jullien explores the concept of *écart*/discrepancy, distance/deviation, pointing out how the notion difference establishes a distinction and remains on the level of description, whereas deviation/*écart* proceeds from a distance and is productive. Unlike the traditional philosophical couple identity/difference, this distance/deviation arises as a disturbing and non-ordering figure, which does not make identity appear as fruitfulness but as generating a productive tension. The *écart*, unlike the difference, does not ascertain a distinction, which always presupposes an imaginary originality, but by proceeding from a distance produces action, puts in tension the parts of a given encounter (Jullien, 2012).

The capacity to recognize difference does not create other than itself, while the notion of *écart* generates *l'entre*, which has nothing of its own but always refers to another from itself. It is precisely this in-between which

brings out the Other, who is not only an imaginary projection of ourselves, but is really the Other with whom to dwell the space for *dia-logue*, by virtue of the two elements: *dia*, which can be translated as the *écart*, and *logos* which is the intelligible. While in the scope of difference, once the distinction is acknowledged, each of the two terms neglects the other one and remains closed in its own specificity, in the *écart* the distance keeps the two terms in tension leaving open the richness of the comparison. The *écart* is an adventurous figure, it disturbs and gives new impetus to the thought, it allows to explore and to bring out glimpses of unexpected possibilities; this is because it makes visible a space that allows to the two terms to remain turned towards each other (*ivi*, p. 57). The understanding of this notion, on the methodological level, promotes a cultural sharing of contents, decisions, structures, which can favor inter and multi-disciplinary conjectures to guide praxis on issues of contemporary relevance. Hence, the commitment to decontextualize and re-contextualize reality within new frameworks of imagination and intuition. At the research level the task is to encounter and preserve, rather than systematize, what is alive by building a plastic perspective that requires a full immersion in what seems distant, divergent and conflictual.

### *A systematic renewal*

Any social discourse driven by intercultural thinking doesn't exhaust itself at the level – yet important – of geopolitical and economic analysis. Interculturality brings into play a profound change and renewal of knowledge – crucial within an educational process aiming at awareness – both in its normative profile and in the one of its applicability. In this respect, the possibility of configuring new social *ethoses* is necessarily placed in the critical space of intermediation, which represents the prior category of education, because knowledge experience can't be channeled into the predictable tracks of information/description. Educational relation is the enriching interaction in which is constantly confirmed the constitutive potential of human beings to grow within a horizon of ulteriority, producing a fertile dilation of one's own boundaries, proceeding in an unusual way, shifting away from what is expected and conventional. Personal destinies are situated on constant triggers of friction with time / history, therefore, it becomes essential to affirm a *Bildung* that allows individuals to cross multiple trajectories.

Some contemporary educational approaches, traced by intercultural philosophy, stress on the value of inter-relation, producing remarkable outcomes on teaching methodologies and practice, as well as on social policies and juridical resolutions. Social innovations or regulations, conflicts or mediations, can be professionally addressed when a dialogue takes place as a form of responsible commitment to the historical contingency. Queries and debates activated through cognitive openness constitutes a powerful antidote to the intrusive phenomenology of unilateral thinking that increasingly organizes, manages and controls human-relational architecture. Thinking is continually evolving from within, therefore, coherently connected with a form of political education where individuals are agents of continuous learning and cooperation, developing a willingness to wonder about who they are in themselves.

Individuals motivated by critical mindset can experience the universality of the cognitive experience, focusing on and learning about favoring the search for links connecting formative experiences to everything that exists, and to opting for a holistic model of knowledge, aimed at overcoming the traditional disjunctions produced by a strictly disciplinary thinking. This research approach reckons space and time form different configurations, opening to a profound harmony with the horizon of meaning of one's own era, accepting to relate also to the dark sides of human experience, in the awareness that influences and perturbing factors burst into them. Cognitive openness challenges thinking and acting when grounded on obviousness: where life experiences are visualized as visible facts that, understood or misunderstood, are simply commented upon. Much of what happens in human action cannot be explained, but has to be appreciated. Large portion of human potential lies in creative details, in vertigo of suffering, in the intertwining of objectives, desires and expectations. Trough an internal dialogue one can become aware on uncritical or unwarranted assumptions. The methodological principles of a contemporary critical scholarship are concretized precisely in the of hermeneutics of contexts and pre-figuration of an evolution. These two principles give rise to the coordination of insights such as learn to welcome light and criticism, ascertain how behavioral oscillations are exposed to fallibilism, give value to the incongruencies through which mankind combines and disrupts existence. In this exercise of thinking from diversity – and not about diversity – lies the plastic force that can guide expansion in creative areas of learning to enable change become the object of care out of the engagement in a

common responsibility. The educational effort must be truly interdisciplinary and interpersonal, involving not only the traditional fields of academia but the whole community of human beings that by facing practical and immediate problems can thrive out of them. The task is to risk new solutions, since – as Jullien further observes – to exist is to de-coincide: to make the new happen constantly, it is necessary to detach oneself from the previous state, to de-sympathize with its coherence, and not perpetuate it (Jullien, 2017). De-coincidence opposes to adaptation and is the driving of existence. Conscientiousness, as crucial human conceptual resource, always longs to de-coincide and to dismantle any temptation of settling in the spirit of closure.

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