

Negotiating options as the aim of exercises of thought?

Fiore, Fabio/ Morrone, Giuseppe (2019): *Esercizi di pensiero. Fare filosofia con gli EAS*, Brescia: Scholé.

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In this review, I will present and discuss the approach recently delineated by Fabio Fiore and Giuseppe Morrone regarding the role of thinking exercises in teaching philosophy. In doing so, I will ask what the purpose of thinking exercises might become. After presenting the architecture of the publication and the approach followed by the authors, I will focus on what is considered to be a “competence” of any philosopher -conceptual negotiation- and finally try to highlight the authors’ proposal. The discussion of this work from Italy is intended to help illuminate one of many controversial questions about the teaching of philosophy and make it accessible to an international discussion involving a process of thinking about how the diversity of research approaches can offer a stimulus and be a source of debate about philosophical didactics.

The text considered is “**Esercizi di pensiero. Fare filosofia con gli EAS**” (Exercises of thought. Doing Philosophy with ESLs, 2019). Under the expression *exercises of situated learning* (ESL) several aspects are aligned, on the one hand a certain “didactics of thought” (Ch. 1), on the other hand a mediator of content and activity (Ch. 2), and to these two aspects are added “philosophical styles” (Ch. 3) through which a certain “reinterpretation” of didactical aspects takes place. ESL is not a concept developed by the authors, but is borrowed from general didactics as elaborated by Pier Cesare Rivoltella. It is presented by Rivoltella as a device for the “professional organization” of teaching and a mediation between a philosophy of didactics and didactics of philosophy, as well as an attempt to move away from history through a teaching that breaks linearity and proceeds by “jumps” and “holes”, while at the time proving to be effective. It would have the function of mediating between historical and systematic approaches through a “laboratory of ideas” and is shaped as a response to the still relevant debate in Italy in past decades between teaching “by history” or “by problems”.¹ The result is a dual vocation,

¹ At the end of the book, we find a “lesson a posteriori” by Pier Cesare Rivoltella who explains ESL as a “dispositive” capable of “giving order to the world,” as a device of thought to be operated in a didactic, epistemological and metatheoretical direction or a kind of “philosophy of didactics”. In terms of the didactic aspect, a mediation is to be sought between a historically oriented teaching of philosophy and a thematic and theoretical focus. For the epistemological aspect, there is the desire to translate the disciplinary status of philosophy (“teaching to think”) through three stages: preparatory, operational, and restructuring (see below). According to Rivoltella, ESL “is” philosophy, it is used to organize philosophical thinking. Finally, for the metatheoretical aspect, it is about “giving order to thinking that gives order to the world” (Fiore/Morrone 2019: 173-174). The authors themselves provide their understanding of ESL (Fiore/Morrone 2019: 67-69). These are didactic procedures. The preparatory phase takes place partly at home and partly in the classroom. The teacher prepares the lesson based on the assigned task and “prepares in advance a conceptual framework” to clarify and fix concepts and principles (problem-solving). In this way, the student is prepared for what he or she is asked to produce in the next phase. In the operational phase, learning occurs through the creation of an artifact

that of teaching how to think and that of how to order the world, which “duplicates the operation”. However, it is also a “creative reading” that highlights the philosophical reflections behind this research about the teaching of philosophy. The ESLs become, in the authors’ perspective, a philosophy of didactics, that is, a questioning of what didactics has in terms of value for human education, and a didactic of philosophy, understood as “substantial didactics” (Fiore/Morrone 2019: 13). That is, it involves the ability to bring together of two attributes (philosophy as content, philosophy as activity) of the same substance (philosophy as didactical object). It can be said that initially we are faced with a “didactics-philosophy” and a “philosophy-didactics” that are mediated by a substantial lesson on the notional level.

I will not follow the structural organization provided by the authors, i.e., the organization of a “*philosophia ordine geometrico or spinoziano demonstrata*” (Fiore/Morrone 2019: 30) with a view to the formation, or rather the “training” of the competent student but will limit myself to some conceptual issues that emerge from the first three chapters. In the transformation of teaching-tools into philosophical ones, we can read out the need for philosophical education to “create” concepts that involve an embrace of its disciplinary field of reflection, which the authors describe as a “didactics of thought.” Of the four central “competences” that a philosopher seems to need (problematizing, conceptualizing, arguing), central and constant is the reference to the fourth philosopher’s “competence”, which Roberto Casati (2011) has outlined as “negotiating conceptually” (as a contribution to conceptual engineering). Philosophy contains many conceptual tensions, and didactic is one of the fields of philosophy where the tensions make themselves clearly felt. It is for me not possible to teach philosophy if conceptual choices have not been made first, and this is where didactics comes in. The conceptual negotiator “competence” is important because in philosophy (and particularly in relation to philosophical didactics) we must educate ourselves to think about diversity that comes from differences of opinion and assumptions, which can give rise to misunderstandings. Learning to take account of these conceptual tensions, means being able to negotiate among finite philosophical perspectives: “focusing on problems, identifying and distinguishing viable paths from those that might lead to a dead end” and “comparing different proposed conceptual definitions, identifying their contradictions, similarities, and distinctions” (Fiore/Morrone 2019: 28). Negotiation arises when we encounter “critical cases” that do not allow for canonical solutions, such as dialogues between different cultures, transitions that are not automatic and painless and personal and social transformations.

“To think is natural, to philosophize is not” (Fiore/Morrone 2019: 33) seems to be a good starting point for thinking about the exercise of philosophy as training “embodied” in a professional ethos. This is in a similar manner to how the art of theatrical acting is embodied in the characters who from time to time appear on stage. Only for philosophy this would be connected – so the authors following Deleuze - with “conceptual characters” that enable a

“representing the reaction to the stimulus and task proposed by the teacher” (learning by doing). In the reconstructing phase, artifacts are critically analyzed, and processes are reflected upon (reflective learning), but this involves a final phase in which the teacher conducts a concluding frontal lecture.

dramatization of thought (“the goal is not to dramatize the teacher but to dramatize teaching”, Fiore/Morrone 2019: 36)². That is, to act in our thinking in order to express it. However, what would be the advantage of this dramatization? The author’s idea seems to be to rise above disciplinary procedures in order to grasp the related teachings more quickly through lower energy demands, something like a catalysis. My question is whether this is enough for the conception of genuine philosophical didactics or whether the didactics are limited to “offering the possibility of even better assimilation of lecture content” (Fiore/Morrone 2019: 41), which is very close to traditional general didactics. This is akin to asking what the function of “mediation” is understood: a process of assimilating and reworking what on another plane is already essential? And to oscillate between a transposition and a translation? Or to proceed to a transformation and mutation? It is not clear why the teacher has always to give a “lesson a posteriori”, because this seems to contradict the character of the teaching of philosophy, i.e., the open outcome of learning.

The six “philosophical reference styles” of a “philosophy of situated learning episodes” are: exercise, craft (it. *mestiere*), negotiation, experiment, action, and creation (Ch. 3). These have a counterpart in the “tools for thinking” or “thinking tools” (Ch.5): mental experiments, examples and counterexamples, conceptual definitions, philosophical actions, analogies, and translations. Let us consider just one example, involving “philosophy as action” (Fiore/Morrone 2019: 57-58) and “philosophical actions” (Fiore/Morrone 2019: 132-136). The thought of philosophy as action is based on the consideration that actions can illuminate concepts when language fails to do so. This seems particularly salient in relation to philosophy education. Thought procedures can get stuck, where sophisticated language becomes a trap for thought. Contrastingly, another option emerges, that is, to break out of a conceptual impasse, to unblock thought, to undergo a cathartic or therapeutic action that makes use of “gestures” (or embodiment, somatic mark according to the authors, that is the use of body experience to illustrate philosophical ideas). For example, the embarrassment as a symptom of the antagonism between neurons and freedom can be reproduced in the class. Students can be invited to embrace other students like in theatrical training, creating an estrangement effect. (However, I

² The book presents four ELSs as concerned with questions of teaching and learning of philosophy. One of them is described here as an example: “Descartes’ Error” (Fiore, Morrone 2019: 98-106). The following elements are explained as the “ingredients”: the problem, the concepts focused on, the philosophical fields traversed, the philosophical authors involved, the competences trained, the tools used, the plan traced, and the character invented. This process can be considered an attempt to make thought didactics immanent in teaching. After the ingredients comes the “recipe”: 1) preparatory phase: reading Descartes’ Treatise on Method on the separation of mind and body, and an episode of “Black Mirror” about the love story of two women in old age tormented by life. The two women decide to continue life in virtual reality through their respective avatars through transmigration of the soul and annihilation of the body. The students must write a review and elaborate on the Cartesian position. In the classroom the steps are: conceptual framing through reading students’ examples, illustration of *Cartesian Dualism*, graphic understanding of dualism, exposition of philosophical theories of mind-body connection, reflection on an everyday situation, body theater experience to understand that mind and body are mutual expressions. 2) Operational phase: thought experiments on mind modification as a consequence of body modification; graphic representation of their view of the mind-body connection. 3) Restructuring phase: presentation of graphic products, identification of significant mind changes and connection with Spinoza’s philosophical position, teacher’s a posteriori lesson on Descartes’ error and Spinoza’s theory of parallelism and double aspects; writing a philosophical review of a Marcel Proust’s text.

think this is highly problematic as a pedagogical resource as well as an intellectual resource, an empathic embrace may be sufficient. I'm not very sure that we have to embrace someone for thinking this embarrassment). These proceed to the next steps: figuring out viable options, attempting something new by staging it and trying to understand it. As a result, one must therefore consider "patterns." The estrangement effect leads us to mutate our thinking. Texts and lessons can be used to bring forth concepts without having to express them with language, for the authors a philosophical action consists of the "attitude of suspension of reality and the consequent reflection we impose on ourselves" (Fiore/Morrone 2019: 132). Therefore, a "displacement" occurs from current lines of thought, which has the virtue of unlocking thought, disorienting, and redirecting it, by bringing it to a plane other than actuality through a process of questioning its intellectual conduct and, with regard to teaching, of questioning its own lesson.

I come now to the heart of the book that seeks to make the lessons of the ESLs intelligible (Ch.4). What emerges seems to be a double-fixed structure with some amount of situationality, involving three phases (preparatory, operative, restructuring) and six sequential moments (I. defining the philosophical problem from a teaching problem; II. focusing on the main concept of the philosophical problem that has been defined; III. identifying content related to the focused concept; IV. activating one or more competences through the identified content; V. mapping out a plan on which to situate the activated competences; VI. inventing a character with which to populate the mapped-out plan). However, the question whether this creates space for options that are not tied to a linear and genetic actuality, which could be used to answer the question: "how should I do it?" We find ourselves here having to virtually meditate the intellectual options by oscillating from a delineating to an implementative plane, from the exhibition to the reflection, both of which affect the didactics. Lessons and ESL are reread as two didactic modes (one of technical organization and one of the organization of thinking) that must act and influence each other (Fiore/Morrone 2019: 158). What then is the formative potential of these didactics? It is an attempt to reconfigure teaching in order to undo the usual formative expectations by proceeding to concern deep formative needs neglected by traditional didactics (Fiore/Morrone 2019: 152). Perhaps this is the simulated secret truth of teaching that is being sought (Fiore/Morrone 2019: 163), the virtualization of a thought that must unfold. Thus, it is not a matter of taking didactics away from pedagogues, but of returning its character to philosophy and the current employment of thought (and particularly philosophical thought), of sketching out sincere philosophical didactics. Consequently, it seems the expression of a need for change regarding the way of doing lessons, of offering illustrations of concepts, and a personal self that sets out in an atmosphere marked by directives, such as those that generally guide the teaching of philosophy.

The book is very rich in information and contains an articulate architecture of the aim of developing philosophical intelligence. Many of the points raised by the authors in Chapters 6 (Evaluation is a continuation of didactics by other means) and 7 (In Praise of the Lesson) are auspicious for the development of philosophical teaching and its development in relation to

conventional conceptions of didactics. The lesson I have drawn from my reading of this approach is that disciplinary knowledge and teaching can sometimes appear to be composed and fused together but are not actually distinct in the figure of the “Philosopher-Teacher” or “Teacher-Philosopher.” An accurate distinction can preserve us from forgetting to consider other intellectual options. The book is intended to offer a proposal for professional training of the philosophy teacher. The authors state a conception of philosophy as a “spiritual exercise” and of the philosopher as being an “artisan.” The ESL is conceived of as teaching method and philosophy, and the “exercises of thought” as a didactic of philosophy and lessons. Philosophical didactics for me should not inevitably lead to the delineated didactics of thought and should be used to innovate the question of the research about the teaching of philosophy. We must try to make our options more intelligible, distinguishing the different planes in a non-dualistic way and reconfiguring the didactic in a more critical way. Most notions in philosophy are controversial, and training ourselves to have a clear picture of the conduct of what we think through examining options always will be very important and can help the discussion as well to evaluate other options for the reconfiguration of philosophical thinking and circumvent an actualistic comprehension of the notions.

References

Casati, Roberto (2011), *Prima lezione di filosofia*. Bari/Rome: Laterza.