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Title

**Metacognition and Philosophy, Metacognition and Dialectic**

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1.

Philosophers usually ignore, but many educationalists and experts in didactics commonly avail of the notion of Metacognitive skills. What I would like to share with you is the idea (something more than a mere suspect) that, contrary to what commonly happens, the very notion of metacognition is worth being taken seriously or very seriously by philosophers too, and studied extensively, entered into specialized dictionaries etc. Or, if you prefer, that philosophers should pay heed to a notion established by educationalists, to 'import' it into their own field, and explore its philosophical potentialities.

To begin with, let me remember what for almost every educationalist is a very familiar idea: pupils learn and learn to learn, i.e. become to know something (or: to know that something is so and so, e.g. that Rhodes is South of Samos) and become to understand why, or to understand how one can come to establish something (e.g. whether Rhodes is South, North, East or West of Samos). This way they set up a distinction, if not an opposition, between the mere grasping of a piece of information and the setting up of a more sustained knowledge, suitable to generate individual pieces of information as well as keep them under control. To set up such a distinction is helpful in order to distinguish between mere superficial factual knowledge and an higher level of understanding of the same notions, between a mere preserving the memory of something and upper levels of elaboration giving rise to the possibility of talking about certain pieces of information, i.e. using them appropriately in various contexts, as well as the ability to avoid banal mistakes in dealing with a given notion.

Something of the kind happens for instance with foreign languages: at the very beginning we only learn to say *kalimera* and *kalispera*, *parakalò* and *efkaristò*, *nè* and *oki*, but then we come to analyse or connect these words, or put in writing appropriately, or even to speak Greek fluently. To be able to speak Greek fluently, whether as one's own native language or as a second, third

language, undoubtedly implies that one is in control of sustained metacognitive skills although the very first steps have been marked by poor cognitive elements as *thelo*, *nerò* or, perhaps, *karpoussi*. For everybody, unless one is affected by serious handicaps, there is a continuous process from mere news (pieces of information, names...) and forms of consciousness and better understanding of what one acknowledges (or presumes) to know. Conversely, most metacognitive structures do involve (or presuppose) whole sets of cognitive units (or contents) but, as we will see in a moment, it may happen that no cognitive content lies behind a metacognitive structure.

Another formulation of the above is as follows. Educationalists use to speak of metacognitive skills at work in every problem-solving practice. These metacognitive skills are aimed at keeping the situation under control. For example they ask: before doing what you have been requested to do, do you weight whether you have already faced comparable difficulties and whether you know how to do such an activity? do you foresee who may help you? what and how many tools are needed to that effect? how much time is available for doing it? in what context you are expected to do it? So you should get yourself organized, identify the problem, establish whether you can/want to work alone or in group, look for helpful tools, outline a time schedule, and even set up criteria for establishing whether the goal has been reached or missed. And, when at work, are you able to say whether you are on the right way, whether your task seems easy or difficult, what to do when you seem unable to progress toward the goal? are you able in distinguishing between what is of no use and what is likely to prove useful during the process? and so on. To keep or not to keep all these variables under control may be taken as evidence of possess (or lack) of metacognitive skills. As it is easy to see, this is the same as having or lacking a method. The above is a way of analyzing what most of us used to call method.

A third way of approaching the very idea of metacognitive skills has to do with a notion established by the American psychologist anthropologist and philosopher Gregory Bateson. Bateson used to distinguish between learning something, learning about the context of something, and learning about the context of the context mentioned a moment ago. He labelled the mere learning as Learning I, the learning of the (immediate) context as Learning II, and the learning of a more comprehensive context as Learning III. All that may well count as a helpful refinement of the concept (of course, we would like to apply the label 'metacognition' to the level Learning III rather than to the level Learning II), but that's all.

So far, the idea may be taken as arisen from everyday experience, with only a rather superficial level of elaboration, isn't it?

I.a. one would question whether the progress from level to level (according to the Bateson model) is taken to imply a continuity or rather a discontinuity. Are you prepared to treat them as the

difference between the portion of landscape suitable to be seen from the second floor and, respectively, from the eleventh floor of the same building? Or would you like to treat them as, rather, a bound up to something else, much as when we first find ourselves unable to understand, and then come to understand what previously escaped or seemed to exceed our intellectual potentialities? A bound up, as when we come to reach a firm and sound conclusion after a long period of seemingly unproductive research? Isn't it, indeed, that every scholar has experienced the impression of floundering in vain, and then the reassuring experience of finding out the key to a certain problem? Well, let me leave the question of continuity or discontinuity open: for the moment, be it enough to have raised the question, a philosophical question about metacognition.

2.

The above should be enough for acknowledging that every domain of research and every area of competence are in need of cognitive as well as metacognitive skills, and that a greater competence can only imply a sustained second and third level competence as well as a very large body of direct knowledge. The same should happen whichever the field, whether we speak of a baker or of an ophthalmologist, of a police officer or of a shipping agent, of a mathematician or of an historian. But how to deny that metacognition is to an higher degree the very specialization of philosophers? Philosophers are used to study precisely what is behind, what is presupposed, what is basic or structural; in a word: what is "meta".

So the indifference of most philosophers in face of so pertinent, so enlightening a word can only surprise us. For qualifying features of what we all take to be philosophy are involved in the field of metacognitivity, to the point that we cannot evade the question about how philosophy and metacognitivity are interconnected. A very special relationship seems in fact to be at work in this case.

3.

Now let me focus on quite another side of the story. This time I'll begin with some widespread ways of interpreting the great philosophers of our tradition and especially some ancient Greek philosophers. Scholars, historians use to say: Aristotle held that. In our universities, a student of ancient Greek philosophy presumes he or she will be requested to show his/her ability in establishing what precisely Aristotle held on a certain topic. The underlying assumption is that Aristotle is Aristotle because of his theories and teachings, plus the network of reasons at work in

order to make most of his theories worth of attention, if not actually true. Another underlying assumption is that excellence in the study of Aristotle is normally shown when somebody comes to establish a point of doctrine held by this author more precisely and more firmly than other students. Now to establish that Aristotle held exactly this or that point no doubt is likely to involve a high degree of competence, a specialised research, arguments, and therefore a number of metacognitive skills, however the output is cognitive, rather than metacognitive.

A step further. If we try to explore Plato's thought, we may feel ourselves disturbed by the fact that to single out his doctrines is so demanding a task. For only a minority of his dialogues has the privilege of making such a task rather easy to be accomplished, while a greater number of dialogues are by far less helpful in view of the supreme aim of establishing which theories Plato wanted to hold and teach by means of them. As a consequence, should we value more a dialogue endowed with a body of well identifiable theories (e.g. the *Timaeus*, the *Laws*) or the dialogues where no definite teaching seems to surface? A dialogue by Aristotle where there is a pretty well identified teaching seems much more palatable than a Platonic dialogue, since in the latter there is perhaps too much, but hardly a definite line of thought prevails or comes out clearly. Once more, this way we are reasoning much as if teachings, theories, *doxai* were the only important things in philosophy, while every other feature risks to be labelled as mere literature, void of philosophical import. And it is worth being mentioned what a reputed Plato scholar dared to write in 1988:

If we wanted to, we could rewrite Berkeley's *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, eliminating its two characters, and the result would be a less dramatic presentation of the same ideas and arguments. The content of the work could easily be preserved through this stylistic transformation, and its presentation in the form of a conversation is therefore peripheral.

Could we do the same for any of Plato's dialogues? ... For some readers the fact that Books 2-10 of the *Republic* retain the form of a conversation can safely be ignored ... (We must) ask ourselves what would happen if we tried to transform that particular work into a straightforward treatise. ... There may be some dialogues that could not possibly survive such dedramatization, and others that could. [R. Kraut, 'Reply to Clifford Orwin', in C. L. Griswold (ed.), *Platonic Writings Platonic Readings*, New York & London, Routledge, p. 177 f.]

The above is surprising exactly because Professor Kraut seems to assume that only statements are of interest for him. But, how poor, how violated and distorted, how depleted, and finally how sterile would prove a fully dedramatized Plato!

Besides, is it conceivable to imagine that an aporetic dialogue (e.g. the *Euthyphro*) would be interesting if instructive, i.e. in case a scholar would discover the right definition Plato would have

avoided to make explicit? Surely not. These dialogues are interesting because of the process of thought they outline, not because of the rather disappointing outcome or of the supposedly discoverable right definition of, say, piety; thus because of its metacognitive values much more than because of its (supposed) cognitive contents.

A further step backwards: Socrates. In the case of Socrates the scholarly community, esp. if rooted in the Anglo-American tradition, seems to want to single out some theories of his at every price, for otherwise Socrates should be (or would risk to be) expelled from the philosophical community as a respectable person who, to our regret, has nothing to teach to us. Nothing, i.e. no doctrine, no statement, no cognitive content, no Learning I. Is it really conceivable? Isn't it that such an attitude depends on a mistaken attitude at identifying a philosopher with the theories (s)he had to offer?

Let me spend a word more on this kind of remarks: Pre-Socratic philosophers held a number of theories, while Socrates and the Sophists had much less to offer. Esp. the Sophists proved to be, rather, authors of witty short writings, writers, speakers, entertainers, not exactly Professors or Teachers endowed with a great learning and many teachings of their own. Protagoras, for instance, is said to have had a skilled pupil, Euathlus, who asked him the permission to attend a course of his without paying immediately. More precisely, against the engagement at refunding the money once he would have gained his very first process as a logographer. Protagoras accepts, Euathlus attends his lessons and proves to be a gifted pupil, but the he does not work as a logographer, does not win processes and therefore abstains from paying Protagoras for the lessons. After some time, Protagoras request money and argues: if prosecuted, you would pay in every case, for either you will be condemned (and condemned to pay), or you will win your first process, and then you will be kept to pay according to our agreement. But the bright pupil counter-argues: no, for if acquitted the judges would order me not to pay, and, if condemned, I would not pay according to our mutual agreement. Clearly no conclusion, no way out is envisaged. So no Learning I is likely to stem from this story, but only a perplexity provided with metacognitive value. Now, many short writings of the Sophistic period, not unlike a greater number of tragic and comic plays of the same period, offer the portrayal of comparable situations where what surfaces is a controversy not easy to settle, i.e. a situation suitable to raise new thoughts and a metacognitive awareness not equipped with a body of first order statements suitable to be taken for reliable.

I could continue. There is already enough, I presume, to conclude that we have been educated to look for first order statements and to overlook a number of second or third order forms of competence and understanding, i.e. of metacognitive values. As a matter of fact, it happens too often that philosophers want to get pieces of information about what Plato or Socrates held, while

putting aside what is not a mere piece of information, not a mere cognitive content, but something less definite, having to do with basic attitudes, forms of pre-comprehension, categories etc. This is against the holistic theorem according to which a part is a part of a whole, and it is the whole which grants the possibility of treating something as that part. After all, it is not by chance that our computers need a software in order to perform an order of us, even the most simple one, i.e. to be able to attach a pertinent meaning to our click or digit. It is thanks to several third level assumptions that second level reasons can be shown to support a given theory or teaching unit, i.e. a Learning I. Therefore, it may not be enough to claim that we want to single out a teaching unit *plus* the grounds for maintaining such a teaching unit. For the grounds are likely to function as Learning II, and this way our third level (Learning III) risks to remain out of scope.

A further input may prove helpful in order to capture the exchanges between knowing that *p* (= Learning I) and metaknowledge (= Learning II or III). What I have in mind is Niklas Luhmann's theory of Komplexitätsreduktion (Reduction of Complexity). The need of clarity, the reassuring experience of knowing exactly who, when, where, why and how much, and conversely the sense of dissatisfaction until you fail to attain such a standard speak not only of your rationality, but also of your impatience to be reassured by the impression of being in full control of your topic. But we know that sometimes it may be safer to acknowledge that not everything is clear, i.e. not everything is such as to be settled, qualified, quantified, explained, understood. Therefore, impatience may well prove to be a bad counsellor, responsible for important forms of oversimplification of complex topics and a hindrance towards a careful assessment of the evidence. To be careful or insightful may mean to dare to admit that we do not have (or do not have yet attained) a clear idea of what is the case, much as when judges acknowledge a lack of evidence which is cogent enough.

Besides, philosophers are specialists in what seriously risks to escape our attention, in structures and meta-structures of thought, in principles and basic assumptions, in ideas about the context of whole sets of contexts, to the point that while most experts are specialists (say in the surgery of hand fingers, or in a particular antivirus technology such as the detection of Trojan viruses), philosophers are, rather, generalists, and it is precisely for this reason that there is a permanent quest of philosophy among almost every sort of people – including those gathering in this place almost at every Saturday evening. Moreover, if dialectic is the best resource of philosophy because of its ability in establishing a bridge event when two topics seem to have nothing in common, and recovering a certain unity of thought despite the most spectacular differences, could we say something about it without getting metacognition and metacognitive skills involved?

So, perhaps, we should rediscover the metacognitive constituents of our philosophical tradition, and even downgrade a lot of cognitive contents accordingly. Not that a philosopher is entitled to be

an ignorant, or that philosophy should turn again to be a sort of popular and superficial wisdom, but rather in that we should be careful in avoiding identifying philosophy with particular doctrines or theories since its identity lies rather elsewhere, at a third level, at a further remove. So, while most sustained books and papers in contemporary philosophy usually pay due attention to assumptions and contexts, it is rather the history of philosophy, thus the work of historians of philosophy, that shows a potentially misleading penchant for identifying a philosopher with his own theories. Perhaps we should rewrite many parts of such a history in order to account not only for individual doctrines of the “Learning I” type, but also for the metacognitive structures (complex communication units, situations, ways of hinting at without immediately accounting for) suitable to be classified as tokens of “Learning II and III”. At least we should treat these elements as, comparatively, not less meaningful, not less qualifying elements of the whole, but from time to time we should be prepared to acknowledge that certain philosophers have more to say at a metacognitive than at a cognitive level.